

## Manhood / John Wain

*John Wain was born in 1925 in Stoke-on-Trent the industrial Midlands and studied at Oxford. He was a university lecturer before he became a full-time writer. His books include novels, short stories and literary criticism. He is usually placed the group of post-war critics of English society called The Angry Young Men.*

*His best-known book is: Hurry on Down (1953).*

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Swiftly free-wheeling, their breath coming easily, the man and the boy steered their bicycles down the short dip which led them from woodland into open country. Then they looked ahead and saw that the road began to climb.

"Now, Rob," said Mr Willison, settling his plump haunches firmly on the saddle, "just up that rise and we'll get off and have a good rest."

"Can't we rest now?" the boy asked. "My legs feel all funny. As if they're turning to water."

"Rest at the top," said Mr Willison firmly. "Remember what I told you? The first thing any athlete has to learn is to break the fatigue barrier."

"I've broken it already. I was feeling tired when we were going along the main road and I -"

"When fatigue sets in, the thing to do is to keep going until it wears off. Then you get your second wind and your second endurance."

"I've already done that."

"Up we go," said Mr Willison, "and at the top we'll have a good rest."

He panted slightly and stood on his pedals, causing his machine to sway from side to side in a laboured manner. Rob, falling silent, pushed doggedly at his pedals. Slowly, the pair wavered up the straight road to the top. Once there, Mr. Willison dismounted with exaggerated steadiness, laid his bicycle carefully

its side, and spread his jacket on the ground before sinking down to rest. Rob slid hastily from the saddle and flung himself full-length on the grass.

"Don't lie there," said his father. "You'll catch cold."

"I'm all right. I'm warm."

"Come and sit on this. When you're over-heated, that's just when you're prone to-"

"I'm all *right*, Dad. I want to lie here, my back aches."

"Your back needs strengthening, that's why it aches. It's a pity we don't live near a river where you could get some rowing."

The boy did not answer, and Mr Willison, aware that he was beginning to sound like a nagging, over-anxious parent, allowed himself to be defeated and did not press the suggestion about Rob's coming to sit on his jacket. Instead,

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he waited a moment and then glanced at his watch.  
"Twenty to twelve. We must get going in a minute."

"What? I thought we were going to have a rest."

"Well, we're having one, aren't we?" said Mr Willison reasonably.

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"I've got my breath back, so surely you must have."

"My back still aches. I want to lie here a bit."

"Sorry," said Mr Willison, getting up and moving over to his bicycle.

"We've got at least twelve miles to do and lunch is at one."

"Dad, why did we have to come so far if we've got to get back for one

15

o'clock? I know, let's find a telephone box and ring up Mum and tell her we -"

"Nothing doing. There's no reason why two fit men shouldn't cycle twelve miles in an hour and ten minutes."

"But we've already done about a million miles."

"We've done about fourteen, by my estimation," said Mr Willison stiffly.

20

"What's the good of going for a bike ride if you don't cover a bit of distance?"

He picked up his bicycle and stood waiting. Rob, with his hand over his eyes, lay motionless on the grass. His legs looked thin and white among the rich grass.

"Come on, Rob."

25

The boy showed no sign of having heard. Mr Willison got on to his bicycle and began to ride slowly away. "Rob," he called over his shoulder, "I'm going."

Rob lay like a sullen corpse by the roadside. He looked horribly like the victim of an accident, unmarked but dead from internal injuries. Mr Willison

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cycled fifty yards, then a hundred, then turned in a short, irritable circle and came back to where his son lay.

"Rob, is there something the matter or are you just being awkward?"

The boy removed his hand and looked up into his father's face. His eyes were surprisingly mild: there was no fire of rebellion in them.

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"I'm tired and my back aches. I can't go on yet."

"Look, Rob," said Mr Willison gently, "I wasn't going to tell you this, because I meant it to be a surprise, but when you get home you'll find a

present waiting for you."

"What kind of present?"

40 "Something very special I've bought for you. The man's coming this  
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morning to fix it up. That's one reason why I suggested a bike ride this  
morning. He'll have done it by now."

"What is it?"

"Aha! It's a surprise. Come on, get on your bike and let's go home and see."

5 Rob sat up, then slowly clambered to his feet. "Isn't there a short cut  
home?"

"I'm afraid not. It's only twelve miles."

Rob said nothing.

10 "And a lot of that's downhill," Mr Willison added brightly. His own legs  
were tired and his muscles fluttered unpleasantly. In addition, he suddenly  
realized he was very thirsty. Rob, still without speaking, picked up his bicycle,  
and they pedalled away.

Where is he?" Mrs Willison asked, coming into the garage.

15 "Gone up to his room," said Mr Willison. He doubled his fist and gave the  
punch-ball a thudding blow. "Seems to have fixed it pretty firmly. You gave  
him the instructions, I suppose."

"What's he doing up in his room? It's lunch-time."

"He said he wanted to rest a bit."

20 "I hope you're satisfied," said Mrs Willison. "A lad of thirteen, nearly  
fourteen years of age, just when he should have a really big appetite, and when  
the lunch is put on the table he's *resting* -"

'Now look, I know what I'm -"

"Lying down in his room, resting, too tired to eat because you've dragged  
him up hill and down dale on one of your -"

25 "'We did nothing that couldn't be reasonably expected of a boy of his age."

'How do you know?" Mrs Willison demanded. "You never did anything  
that kind when you were a boy. How do you know what can be  
reasonably -"

30 "Now look," said Mr Willison again. "When I was a boy, it was study, study,  
study all the time, with the fear of unemployment and insecurity in  
everybody's mind. I was never even given a bicycle. I never boxed, I never  
rowed, I never did anything to develop my physique. It was just work, work,  
work, pass this exam, get that certificate. Well, I did it and now I'm qualified

and in a secure job. But you know as well as I do that they let me down.

35 Nobody encouraged me to build myself up."

"Well, what does it matter? You're all right-"

"Grace!" Mr Willison interrupted sharply. "I am not all right and you know it. I am under average height, my chest is flat and I'm -"

"What nonsense. You're taller than I am and I'm -"

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"No son of mine is going to grow up with the same wretched physical heritage that I -"

"No, he'll just have heart disease through overtaxing his strength, because you haven't got the common sense to -"

5 "His heart is one hundred per cent all right. Not three weeks have gone by since the doctor looked at him."

"Well, why does he get so over-tired if he's all right? Why is he lying down now instead of coming to the table, a boy of his age?"

A slender shadow blocked part of the dazzling sun in the doorway. Looking up simultaneously, the Willisons greeted their son.

10 "Lunch ready, Mum? I'm hungry."

"Ready when you are," Grace Willison beamed. "Just wash your hands and come to the table."

"Look, Rob," said Mr Willison. "If you hit it with your left hand and then catch it on the rebound with your right, it's excellent ring training." He dealt the punch-ball two amateurish blows. "That's what they call a right cross," he said. "I think it's fine. I'll have some fun with it," said Rob. He watched mildly as his father peeled off the padded mittens.

20 "Here, slip these on," said Mr Willison. "They're just training gloves. They harden your fists. Of course, we can get a pair of proper gloves later. But these are specially for use with the ball."

"Lunch," called Mrs Willison from the house.

"Take a punch at it," Mr Willison urged.

25 "Let's go and eat."

"Go on. One punch before you go in. I haven't seen you hit it yet."

Rob took the gloves, put on the right-hand one, and gave the punch-ball one conscientious blow, aiming at the exact centre.

"Now let's go in," he said.

30 "Lunch!"

"All right. We're coming ..."

"Five feet eight, Rob," said Mr Willison, folding up the wooden ruler.

"You're taller than I am. This is a great landmark."

"Only *just* taller."

35 "But you're growing all the time. Now all you have to do is to start growing outwards as well as upwards. We'll have you in the middle of that scrum. The heaviest forward in the pack."

Rob picked up his shirt and began uncertainly poking his arms into the sleeves.

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"When do they pick the team?" Mr Willison asked. "I should have thought they'd have done it by now."

"They have done it," said Rob. He bent down to pick up his socks from under a chair.

5 "They have? And you-"

"I wasn't selected," said the boy, looking intently at the socks as if trying to detect minute differences in colour and weave.

Mr Willison opened his mouth, closed it again, and stood for a moment looking out of the window. Then he gently laid his hand on his son's shoulder.

10 "Bad luck," he said quietly.

"I tried hard," said Rob quickly.

"I'm sure you did."

"I played my hardest in the trial games."

"It's just bad luck," said Mr Willison. "It could happen to anybody."

15 There was silence as they both continued with their dressing. A faint smell of frying rose into the air, and they could hear Mrs Willison laying the table for breakfast.

"That's it, then, for this season," said Mr Willison, as if to himself.

20 "I forgot to tell you, though," said Rob. "I was selected for the boxing team,"

"You *were*? I didn't know the school had one."

"It's new. Just formed. They had some trials for it at the end of last term.

I found my punching was better than most people's because I'd been getting plenty of practice with the ball."

25 Mr Willison put out a hand and felt Rob's biceps. "Not bad, not bad at all," he said critically. "But if you're going to be a boxer and represent the school, you'll need more power up there. I tell you what. We'll train together."

"That'll be fun," said Rob. "I'm training at school too."

"What weight do they put you in?"

30 "It isn't weight, it's age. Under fifteen. Then when you get over fifteen you get classified into weights."

"Well," said Mr Willison, tying his tie, "you'll be in a good position for the under-fifteens. You've got six months to play with. And there's no reason why you shouldn't steadily put muscle on all the time. I suppose you'll be entered

35 as a team, for tournaments and things?"

"Yes. There's a big one at the end of next term. I'll be in that."

Confident, joking, they went down to breakfast. "Two eggs for Rob, Mum," said Mr Willison. "He's in training. He's going to be a heavyweight."

"A heavyweight what?" Mrs Willison asked, teapot in hand.

40 "Boxer," Rob smiled.

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Grace Willison put down the teapot, her lips compressed, and looked from one to the other. "*Boxing?*" she repeated.

"Boxing," Mr Willison replied calmly.

5 "Over my dead body," said Mrs Willison. "That's one sport I'm definite that he's never going in for."

"Too late. They've picked him for the under-fifteens. He's had trials and everything."

"Is this true, Rob?" she demanded.

"Yes," said the boy, eating rapidly.

10 "Well, you can just tell them you're dropping it. Baroness Summerskill -"

"To hell with Baroness Summerskill!" her husband shouted. "The first time he gets a chance to do something, the first time he gets picked for a team and given a chance to show what he's made of, and you have to bring up Baroness Summerskill."

15 "But it injures their brains! All those blows on the front of the skull. I've read about it -"

"Injures their brains!" Mr Willison snorted. "Has it injured Ingemar Johansson's brain? Why, he's one of the acutest business men in the world!"

20 "Rob," said Mrs Willison steadily, "when you get to school, go and see the sports master and tell him you're giving up boxing."

"There isn't a sports master. All the masters do bits of it at different times."

"There must be one who's in charge of the boxing. All you have to do is tell him -"

"Are you ready, Rob?" said Mr Willison. "You'll be late for school if you

25 don't go."

"I'm in plenty of time, Dad. I haven't finished my breakfast."

"Never mind, push along, old son. You've had your egg and bacon, that's what matters. I want to talk to your mother."

30 Cramming a piece of dry toast into his mouth, the boy picked up his satchel and wandered from the room. Husband and wife sat back, glaring hot-eyed at each other.

The quarrel began, and continued for many days. In the end it was decided that Rob should continue boxing until he had represented the school at the tournament in March of the following year, and should then give it up.

35 "Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, a hundred," Mr Willison counted. "Right, that's it. Now go and take your shower and get into bed."

"I don't feel tired, honestly," Rob protested.

"Who's manager here, you or me?" Mr Willison asked bluffly. "I'm in charge of training and you can't say my methods don't work. Fifteen solid p. 42

weeks and you start questioning my decisions on the very night of the fight."

"It just seems silly to go to bed when I'm not-

5 "My dear Rob, please trust me. No boxer ever went into a big fight without spending an hour or two in bed, resting, just before going to his dressing-room."

"All right. But I bet none of the others are bothering to do all this."

"That's exactly why you're going to be better than the others. Now go and get your shower before you catch cold. Leave the skipping-rope, I'll put it away."

10 After Rob had gone, Mr Willison folded the skipping-rope into a neat ball and packed it away in the case that contained the boy's gloves, silk dressing own, lace-up boxing boots, and trunks with the school badge sewn into the correct position on the right leg. There would be no harm in a little skipping, to limber up and conquer his nervousness while waiting to go on. Humming, 15 he snapped down the catches of the small leather case and went into the house.

Mrs Willison did not lift her eyes from the television set as he entered. "All ready now, Mother," said Mr Willison. "He's going to rest in bed now, and go along at about six o'clock. I'll go with him and wait till the doors open to be sure of a ringside seat." He sat down on the sofa beside his wife, and 20 tried to put his arm round her. "Come on, love," he said coaxingly. "Don't

spoil my big night."

She turned to him and he was startled to see her eyes brimming with angry tears. "What about my big night?" she asked, her voice harsh. "Fourteen years ago, remember? When he came into the world."

25 "Well, what about it?" Mr Willison parried, uneasily aware that the television set was quacking and signalling on the fringe of his attention, turning the scene from clumsy tragedy into a clumsier farce.

"Why didn't you tell me then?" she sobbed. "Why did you let me have a son if all you were interested in was having him punched to death by a lot  
30 of rough bullet-headed louts who -"

"Take a grip on yourself, Grace. A punch on the nose won't hurt him."

"You're an unnatural father," she keened. "I don't know how you can bear send him into that ring to be beaten and thumped - Oh, why can't you stop him now? Keep him at home? There's no *law* compels us to -"

35 "That's where you're wrong, Grace," said Mr Willison sternly. "There is a law. The unalterable law of nature that says that the young males of the species indulge in manly trials of strength. Think of all the other lads who are going into the ring tonight. D'you think their mothers are sitting about crying and kicking up a fuss? No - they're proud to have strong, masculine sons who  
40 can stand up in the ring and take a few punches."

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"Go away, please," said Mrs Willison, sinking back with closed eyes. "Just go right away and don't come near me until it's all over." "Grace!"

"Please. Please leave me alone. I can't bear to look at you and I can't bear  
5 to hear you."

"You're hysterical," said Mr Willison bitterly. Rising, he went out into the hall and called up the stairs. "Are you in bed, Rob?"

There was a slight pause and the Rob's voice called faintly, "Could you come up, Dad?"

10 "Come up? Why? Is something the matter?"

"Could you come up?"

Mr Willison ran up the stairs. "What is it?" he panted. "D'you want something?"

"I think I've got appendicitis," said Rob. He lay squinting among the  
15 pillows, his face suddenly narrow and crafty.

"I don't believe you," said Mr Willison shortly. "I've supervised your training for fifteen weeks and I know you're as fit as a fiddle. You can't



possibly have anything wrong with you."

20 "I've got a terrible pain in my side," said Rob. "Low down on the right-hand side. That's where appendicitis comes, isn't it?"

Mr Willison sat down on the bed. "Listen, Rob," he said. "Don't do this to me. All I'm asking you to do is to go into the ring and have one bout. You've been picked for the school team and everyone's depending on you."

25 "I'll die if you don't get the doctor." Rob suddenly hissed. "Mum!" he shouted.

Mrs Willison came bounding up the stairs. "What is it, my pet?"

"My stomach hurts. Low down on the right-hand side."

"Appendicitis!" She whirled to face Mr Willison. "That's what comes of your foolishness!"

30 "I don't believe it," said Mr Willison. He went out of the bedroom and down the stairs. The television was still jabbering in the living-room, and for fifteen minutes Mr Willison forced himself to sit staring at the strident puppets, glistening in metallic light, as they enacted their Lilliputian rituals. Then he went up to the bedroom again. Mrs Willison was bathing Rob's forehead.

35 "His temperature's normal," she said.

"Of course his temperature's normal," said Mr Willison. "He doesn't want to fight, that's all."

40 "Fetch the doctor," said a voice from under the cold flannel that swathed Rob's face.

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"We will, pet, if you don't get better very soon," said Mrs Willison, darting a murderous glance at her husband.

Mr Willison slowly went downstairs. For a moment he stood looking at the telephone, then picked it up and dialled the number of the grammar school.

5 No one answered. He replaced the receiver, went to the foot of the stairs and called, "What's the name of the master in charge of this tournament?"

"I don't know," Rob called weakly.

"You told me you'd been training with Mr Granger," Mr Willison called.

"Would he know anything about it?"

10 Rob did not answer, so Mr Willison looked up all the Grangers in the telephone book. There were four in the town, but only one was M.A. "That's him," said Mr Willison. With lead in his heart and ice in his fingers, he dialled the number.

Mrs Granger fetched Mr Granger. Yes, he taught at the school. He was the  
15 right man. What could he do for Mr Willison?  
"It's about tonight's boxing tournament."  
"Sorry, what? The line's bad."  
"*Tonight's boxing tournament.*"  
"Have you got the right person?"  
20 "You teach my son, Rob - we've just agreed on that. Well, it's about the  
boxing tournament he's supposed to be taking part in tonight."  
"Where?"  
"Where? At the school, of course. He's representing the under-fifteens."  
There was a pause. "I'm not quite sure what mistake you're making Mr  
25 Willison, but I think you've got hold of the wrong end of at least one stick."  
A hearty, defensive laugh. "If Rob belongs to a boxing club it's certainly news  
to me, but in any case it can't be anything to do with the school. We don't  
go in for boxing."  
"Don't go in for it?"  
30 "We don't offer it. It's not in our curriculum."  
"Oh," said Mr Willison. "Oh. Thank you. I must have - well, thank you."  
"Not at all. I'm glad to answer any queries. Everything's all right, I trust?"  
"Oh, yes," said Mr Willison, "yes, thanks. Everything's all right."  
He put down the telephone, hesitated, then turned and began slowly to  
35 climb the stairs.

### **Discussion points**

1. Mr Willison feels that "he was beginning to sound like a nagging, over-anxious parent", What does he say that is nagging? Do you agree? Are there other things he says and does that are reasonable? Why does he treat his son in this way? How does Rob himself react to his father's, and his mother's, nagging? Do you think Mr Willison is a good father? Is Mrs Willison a good mother? What do you think is worse, parents who over-protect their children. or parents who don't bother about them?
2. Why does Rob tell his father he has been selected for the school boxing team? How does he try to get out of this situation? What do you think his father will say to him after his phone call to the schoolmaster?
3. What is your favourite sport? Do you think all boys, and girls, should be made to play some kind of sport, and take regular physical exercise? Which are the best sports for children and why? What do you think about boxing as a suitable sport for boys and girls?
4. Some of this story is told in the form of dialogue, using normal colloquial English. Look

in particular at the way the auxiliary verbs in the dialogue are written and pronounced. How does the dialogue differ from the rest of the text in this respect?

5. Act out the conversation that Mr and Mrs Willison and Rob have at breakfast about boxing, including the quarrel after Rob has left for school. You could do it in two different ways, one in which Mr Willison wins the argument and one in which Mrs Willison wins.