

Transcript: [The Secret Lives of Men](#) on BlogTalkRadio

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[Rick Belden - Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#)

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Host:

Dr. Chris Blazina, author of *The Secret Lives of Men: What Men Want You to Know About Love, Sex, and Relationships*

Guests:

- Rick Belden, author of *Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*
- Dr. Ryan McKelley, Assistant Professor of Clinical/Counseling Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

ANNOUNCER: It is time to explore the often misunderstood world of men, as we discover more about the secret lives of men. Your host is psychologist, professor, and researcher Dr. Chris Blazina, the author of the book *The Secret Lives of Men*. Here's Chris.

DR. CHRIS BLAZINA: Welcome to *The Secret Lives of Men*. I'm your host, Chris Blazina. Glad you could join us today. We've got another important area to discuss.

A lot of times on the show we take different perspectives on how to approach the topic of psychology of men, men's issues, men and masculinity, all those different topics. Sometimes we have psychologists or mental health workers with us and they talk about their work and how they approach working with men in therapy. Sometimes we have academicians on and they talk about their research, about the psychology of men. And then sometimes we're fortunate enough to have artists with us.

A few weeks ago, we had a documentarian photographer join us, Nancy Bruno, and today we have Rick Belden, who is a poet joining us to share a little bit about his work that influences, definitely, people who are impacted by the psychology of men and masculinity. So without further ado, I want to bring Rick on board.

Rick is the author of *Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*. And just to give a little background on the book, I'll read just a bit, "The author embarks upon a healing odyssey regarding the father-son relationship." And the book, *Iron Man Family Outing*, is used widely by therapists and counselors and men's groups to help men explore what's referred to as a more conscious notion of manhood. We can discuss more about that with Rick in a moment, but it likely refers to a more choiceful notion of how you are going to be as a man. So Rick, I want to bring you on board and I want to welcome you to the show, Rick Belden.

RICK BELDEN: Hi, Chris. Thanks for having me on.

BLAZINA: It's my pleasure. I want to talk about your powerful collection of poetry today, *Iron Man Family Outing*. One of the things, we were touching base in virtual reality a minute ago, and I think one of the things that really comes together nicely about your book, the poetry is very provocative, and with that you have a number of different graphic images of Iron Man. And so the notion of that *Iron Man Family Outing* comes together really well in the way the book is put together. And I was hoping that you could maybe touch base with the people that are listening today about what is it about Iron Man that feels like a particularly strong image for you? How did you feel drawn to that in terms of shaping this work?

BELDEN: Well, Chris, I had a great affinity for a lot of comic book superheroes when I was a child. I grew up in a home where I had a dad who was very angry and very abusive, and I felt very powerless. And on the other hand, I had a very powerful imagination, so it was very easy for me to spend time in fantasy, and that felt like a safe place for me to be. And of all the many characters that I was drawn to, the Iron Man character was the one that really seemed to light me up the most as a child. And I think, although I wasn't completely conscious of this, of course, as a kid, I liked the armor. I liked the armor, I liked the secret identity aspect of it, I liked the fact that by armoring himself up and basically inventing and creating this armor for himself with all these weapons, it gave him a way to, not only to protect himself, but to be powerful in the world.

And the other aspect of the character that I'm sure I wasn't conscious of as a child was that the reason that he develops the armor is because of a very serious injury to his heart. And so he actually builds this electronic chest plate with some sort of device in it that keeps his heart beating and keeps the shrapnel that wounded his heart from driving all the way to the center of it and killing him. So those are all some of the aspects of it that are a part of that archetype, if you will, and again, as a child, I'm not conscious of all this, but I believe those are the sorts of things that drew me to that character in the beginning.

BLAZINA: That's a very powerful image, and for those who are not entirely familiar with the comic book character of Iron Man, he is a character who is completely clad in armor. Rick, could you maybe just describe what Iron Man looks like some more for some folks who might not be familiar with him?

BELDEN: Okay. Well, fortunately now we have the luxury of the movie a couple of years ago, which helps a lot. When I did this work, the character was very obscure and so it was really necessary to lay this stuff out. He has a helmet on which covers his entire head and his face. He has a very heavy chest plate and armor around his shoulders and his back. He has iron gauntlets on his hands and on his feet, and he has jets or some kind of propulsion device in his boots. He has these things called repulsor rays in the palms of his hands that are, they're not quite lasers, they're like little concentrated force fields that he can use to keep people away.

So really, the whole mechanism and the whole structure is around building distance, and keeping distance around himself and being able to get away. And it also protects, because his face is completely covered in this iron mask, nobody knows who he is, and that's how he wants it.

BLAZINA: It seems like from the pictures that I've seen, even the graphics in your book of poetry, that there's a little bit of a menacing look in terms of the mask that he takes on.

BELDEN: Yeah, I would agree with that. I would certainly agree with that. I think that, you know this is one of the things I was pondering as I was thinking about the show and reading back through some of the material, I think that the Iron Man that I fell in love with as a child had a little bit lighter tone and a little friendlier aspect to it, whereas the Iron Man that I explored as an adult did develop a bit more menace and it was a little bit more of the shadow side of that character because at that point in my life as an adult it had really turned into something that wasn't helpful to me.

BLAZINA: And again, you talk about in the introduction to your book that this, your use of the character, it's a powerful symbol, it's a symbol that maybe as a child you have a different relationship to, but as you try to move into your own conscious version of manhood, that you utilize the symbol again, the character, in a different way.

BELDEN: Right, and it was something that I didn't choose. It was actually something I resisted quite a lot. What happened was when I went into my first experience in counseling, the gentleman that I was working with used some very dynamic emotional release techniques, and it just opened up a whole lot of passageways in me that had been closed down for a long time.

And one of the things that started to happen was I started just dreaming prolifically. That was unexpected, and what was even more unexpected was that I had recurring dreams involving the Iron Man character that I liked so much as a child. So that really called my attention to it, and it actually went beyond calling my attention to it, it became, it started to feel like sort of a demand. Like, I need to pay attention to this.

So in addition to working with the dreams, I actually found myself drawn to go out and find the old comic books I had when I was a kid. I tried to find some action figures. I did a lot of artwork, a lot of collages on my own. I worked with that image and that mythology and that character in every way that I could. And I finally reached a point where I was extremely frustrated with it, and I just felt, "Where is the end of this? Am I just going off the deep end here or what?" And that's when I had the big breakthrough that really kind of opened the way for me to do the book.

BLAZINA: That's a great story. So it's almost as if the image, it's been present with you for a number of years then, it would be fair to say. Different versions of the image, the image even coming to visit with you, and maybe repeated dream sequences. You know, I'm preaching to the choir here, but you know these are the kinds of dreams that you pay attention to, when it keeps coming back in very provocative ways.

BELDEN: And I probably had a hundred of them (Iron Man dreams). Eleven of the dreams are written up as poems in the book, and then there are bits and pieces that appear in other parts of the book. I have never counted, but I wouldn't be surprised if I had a hundred of these (Iron Man dreams).

The other part of the genesis of the book was not just the Iron Man dreams, but having so many dreams and trying to journal and trying to keep up with them. It just started to feel impossible. And I got this idea that maybe I could write these (dreams) as poems

instead of trying to write them down narratively, because when I dream I have tons of detail. It's just immense.

It happened at that time that a fellow I knew was actually going to do a poetry workshop for men, so I thought, "Well, this might be a good opportunity to develop a shorthand for working with these dreams." And the first night of the workshop he said, "Bring anything you've got." And I thought, "Well, I don't have anything," and so I wrote up one of the dreams I'd had as a poem, brought it in, and that's how that part of the creation of the book started. It really started out as a way to try to cope with all the dreams I was having.

BLAZINA: That's great. Well, that might be a good segue to maybe read one of the poems today.

BELDEN: Sure. I think I'd like to read the very first poem in the book, since we've been talking about the Iron Man character and that dynamic and that process.

In many ways, this poem is about the situation I just described, where I'd made collages, I'd gone and bought the comic books, I'd spent all the time with this stuff, I'd played with action figures, and I just reached a point where I was at the end of my rope, and I really decided, "I've had enough of this!" And I actually tried to destroy some of the action figures and destroy some of the artwork I'd done, and in the process of doing that, I found that I wasn't actually able to do it, and as a result of that, I had the breakthrough that I describe in the poem here.

So, this poem is the poem that opens the book. It's called ["little iron man."](#)

angry eyes burn behind cold metal mask
muscles tensed for fight in flight
repulsor rays boot jets armor
he is iron man.

all-powerful controller master of his fate
vengeful righteous realist almighty godlike hero
protector judge destroyer martyr
invincible impervious inhuman.

mechanical masculinity lover of the machine
better safe than sorry greedy me-first hoarder
dark doomy death dealer
self-satisfying soul stealer
childhood's chosen champion.

his armor
once glistening once wonderful
now binds and holds in place
battle-scarred time-tarnished too small
pitted scorched outdated in the way
barrier to growth and love and life.

I tried to forget him
but he came to me in dreams
I tried to kill him
but he was stronger than I am
I tried to banish him
but he wouldn't leave me
so I pulled off his grim metal mask.

a child's face my face revealed at last
frustrated frightened familiar hopeful
little boy with wounded heart
scared of the body he can't control
afraid to come outside it hurts to be with people
a quarter century in an armor shell
waiting for mommy and daddy to make it right.

BLAZINA: That's powerful stuff. How is it to read that on air?

BELDEN: It's exciting.

BLAZINA: Is it?

BELDEN: Yeah, it is. You know, I haven't ... I'll be honest with you, I'm kind of shy about reading my stuff. I'm comfortable writing and composing and getting it just the way I want it and then having somebody else read it somewhere, but I haven't read this stuff aloud to other people very much. I read all of it aloud myself as I'm developing it because I want to be able to read it in my natural voice.

But yeah, it's very satisfying to read this, and as I was saying earlier, as I was looking over this material, I really began to see something that you brought up and we touched on earlier, which is that I was at a point with this Iron Man archetype where I was just really kind of sick of it. You know, I wanted to find out what it was all about, and I could also see that sometimes things start out well and then as time goes by, they sort of drift off into being kind of negative. And I think in reading this, I can see that there is a little bit of struggle in terms of presenting it (my relationship with the Iron Man). In some ways, I'm seeing it as something positive, something I was drawn to as a kid. In other ways, I'm seeing that it's really not doing me any good at that point.

BLAZINA: Well, I tell you I was so struck listening to the poem. It certainly may carry personal meaning, but it also, I think, describes a lot of the men who might be listening, a lot of the men who wrestle with their issues of trying to armor up against vulnerability and the idea of potentially someday pulling back the armor. Maybe not totally taking it off, but developing a new relationship with how they armor up. Not that they need to go out into the world and be totally vulnerable, but to armor up in a different way where it's somehow permeable, where you let the world in and you can sense the world, because I think the tough part with any kind of impermeable armor is it ends up operating both as kind of a womb and a tomb for folks.

BELDEN: Right.

BLAZINA: It ends up being a place that feels safe, but also ends up isolating you from other folks.

BELDEN: Right. And again, I think one the points that I hopefully bring out in the poem is that this is a structure that I built for myself as a child that is not large enough, not adequate, and really completely outdated for me as an adult.

BLAZINA: And that's a great point, that somehow you, in the poem, you outgrow the armor. It doesn't fit anymore.

BELDEN: Right. But it's not a matter of just throwing it away and forgetting about it. There's something of value there.

BLAZINA: That's right. The idea that you would totally make yourself vulnerable to the world may not be what either men or women are really after. Maybe it's more trying to negotiate a relationship that you feel safe enough to reach out, but also able to reach out.

BELDEN: Right.

BLAZINA: If you're just joining me today, my guest is Rick Belden. He's the author of *Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*. We're going to take a quick break here for a moment, then we'll be back more with Rick.

ANNOUNCER: Dr. Chris Blazina is a licensed psychologist, researcher, and associate professor who has dedicated his career to studying the psychology of men. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles on the topic, and the academic text *The Cultural Myth of Masculinity*. Dr. Blazina's second book, *The Secret Lives of Men: What Men Want You to Know about Sex, Love, and Relationships*, is a self-help book aimed at helping make sense of the often misunderstood world of men. The book is written for both men and women, explaining the occurrences that shape men's lives, from growing up to growing old. *Publisher's Weekly* notes, "Blazina, a male psychology expert, is a compassionate guide, making enlightening suggestions to help the notorious Peter Pan become an adult, and providing examples of how women, often unwittingly, emotionally castrate the men in their lives. Mars and Venus are nowhere in sight as Blazina embraces commonalities between the sexes in this respectful and deeply healing book." You can blog about the show, read more about Dr. Blazina's books, and contact him at his website, thesecretlivesofmen.com.

BLAZINA: Well, we're back. More with Rick Belden and his book of poetry, *Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*. If you're just joining us, Rick and I have been talking about this powerful symbol that's been with him in different ways, in his poetry, in his dreams, in his own personal journey. This powerful symbol of Iron Man, and what that means to him, and potentially other men who may feel a sense of connection to Iron Man and those type of characters.

Rick, I just thought you might want to share with us ... I think we have a couple minutes left today. Wonder if you would like to share another poem with us. I think we have enough time to do one more if you'd like.

BELDEN: Well, I'd love to do that, but I think that there are a couple other points I'd like

to make instead, if that's alright.

BLAZINA: Sure. We'll go another way.

BELDEN: Yeah, I think it's important to talk just a little bit about the reasons why I felt that it was important to put this material out.

The book is basically structured as a progression through a series of different experiences and emotional and psychological states. And so there is, in some sense, there's a flow from beginning to end there, and I think that when people read (the book) they see it. It might be a little different than other poetry books, in that really the poems actually are very interrelated, and they work with one another to tell the story.

And for me, it's the story of a period in my life that was highly transformational. And I had the sense, as I began to pull this all together, that this might actually be useful to other men as a pattern or a template or a map to kind of go into their own processes a little bit more deeply, and to give them some reference points in terms of feeling, in terms of developing a relationship where they get information from their bodies and their dreams, and to really give other people, men in particular, permission to open up to this stuff and share it with other people, at least with people that they're close to, that they feel safe with.

I was really moved to do a lot of this because I'd been in men's groups and I'd seen men talk about things in ways that I'd never seen men talk before. I had close friends, we never talked like that, we never shared our emotions with one another. It wasn't safe to do it. So I was really inspired by that, and my first purpose in doing this book was to open a window into my own process and complete the process for myself, but the larger purpose is to give the opportunity, the permission, and as I said, maybe a pattern or a template or a map for other men that feel ready to go a little deeper into themselves and find out what's there.

BLAZINA: Uh-huh. Absolutely. For people who are listening, could you maybe map out that developmental process? What happens? I mean, we started today's talk with you sharing the poem about little Iron Man. Where do you move in the developmental process along this journey, giving people kind of an idea?

BELDEN: Well, I'll say one thing. The sequence that the poems appear in the book is not the same sequence that they were written. I did a lot of writing at that point.

Really, I guess what I would say is that, in probably the most elemental way, the book is about progressing toward, not so much a resolution ... it's not a how-to book ... it's more about progressing toward a greater understanding, a greater awareness.

One of the major themes in the book is that I start out sharing, at a very basic level, what my experience was like with my dad as a child, as an adult, how I felt about that. I don't hold anything back on that, and in the early parts of the book I share information and experiences about women, sex, work, all kinds of stuff, and just let it out, you know, just let it go.

And as the book moves, the center part of the book is the eleven Iron Man dreams that I included, and it begins to progress out of a place that I would say is very angry and very

frustrated into a place that's a little bit more open, a little bit softer. And by the end of the book, I would say that the tone has changed so that the Iron Man has pretty much dissipated at that point and it leaves me in a state where I know I need to do more, but I'm certainly not in that jammed-up place where I started.

BLAZINA: Uh-huh. And I think that that's an important point to make note of, that Iron Man is still there, but maybe in a different way. It's kind of integrating a different kind of relationship with that important image.

BELDEN: The dreams really fell off, too, as I finished the book, the dreams just fell off. I almost never have an Iron Man dream now.

BLAZINA: Well, you'll have to call back and let us know if Iron Man comes to visit tonight after you've shared some of your work today. We're going to need to part ways here in a second so I wonder if you'd like to share with people maybe some contact info in case they'd like to get in touch with you.

BELDEN: Yes, I have a website. It is rickbelden.com. That's r-i-c-k-b-e-l-d-e-n.com and if you go to the contact page on the site, you'll be able to send me a note through the contact page. There's also an email address for me there. And I also have a blog. It is blog.rickbelden.com.

BLAZINA: Okay. Well, my guest today has been Rick Belden, author of *Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*. Rick, I want to thank you for coming by to visit with us today.

BELDEN: Thank you, Chris. Thanks for the opportunity.

BLAZINA: Sure. When we come back after this break, we will come and visit with Ryan McKelley, and we'll be at the round table. Stay tuned, just a second.

[music]

BLAZINA: And we're back. Ryan, how are you doing today?

DR. RYAN MCKELLEY: I'm doing well. How about yourself, Chris?

BLAZINA: Doing pretty good. What have you got for us today? Any thoughts?

MCKELLEY: I've got lots of thoughts.

BLAZINA: Oh yeah? Okay.

MCKELLEY: Lots of reactions.

BLAZINA: Alright.

MCKELLEY: A couple days ago, I had popped on (to Rick's website) and read a couple of the poems, "[god at eleven](#)" and "[body memory](#)." And my reaction was not unlike yours, I think, when Rick read the poem today. It was like this moment of kind of silence and speechlessness. And if you'll permit me this ... slight digression into Indian

mysticism.

So this is what I thought about 'cause Rick was talking about, you know, the poems helping maybe men develop a greater awareness and understanding of themselves, not necessarily making everything concrete, but at least opening things up.

Just by chance, I was driving home last night and listening to *Fresh Air* on NPR, and Terry (Gross) was interviewing the author of *A Case for God*, and this author was talking about these Indian mystics from like the tenth century who would fast and they'd get into this kind of state, and they'd go off together into the woods and talk about the God, or a being of God, and try to describe in their own words and their experience something that's indescribable. These priests would go around and share their stories, and if somebody had a reaction they would then kind of pop in and have a comment. And the way they decided who won that little activity or competition was ... it was total silence, and at that moment they kind of found, you know, the essence of the being.

And I wanted to mention that story 'cause I instantly thought of these poems after I heard that little clip, because I thought about some of the men that I work with and men that I know, and what effect I think, and why this can be a useful tool for men.

Oftentimes in therapy, and even in our relationships, we may sometimes find it hard to describe what it is that we're feeling. And put words ... you know, either it doesn't sound right or it's not graceful enough. But the way he wrote these poems, I was just struck by the way the images, and now that I know that they're coming from dreams, they evoke emotion. And I could just now see this, using it with clients, as a way to connect to this material that maybe before could not put words to. It doesn't have to come out all graceful, and it comes out in these powerful images. That was my gut reaction to this.

BLAZINA: That's great. And I think what Rick was saying was, part of his hope was, there's at least a two-pronged adventure here. Part of it is his own personal journey into sorting out what exactly does this Iron Man character mean to him, but also potentially providing some kind of template for men who, as you say, are searching for a way, some type of model they don't have to exactly adopt.

So people who are listening today may be going, "Oh, that means I have to go and start writing poetry." Not necessarily! For those of us who are not poets, we may kind of approach things a different way. This just may allow you a particular avenue into a layer of your life that you may not feel entirely comfortable with.

MCKELLEY: Uh-huh.

BLAZINA: And this kind of approach, either listening to the poetry or potentially reacting to it, allows you to have access to that part of yourself.

MCKELLEY: Uh-huh. And I think the conversation about archetypes and this idea that there are some images and stuff that we all theoretically share, yet you don't have to be able to write this stuff. I think, just on some of the poems I've looked at, I think they would speak to a lot of men's experiences, and it's just one other way maybe for somebody to say, "I felt that, too," or "That's a great way to kind of describe it," without having to write it.

BLAZINA: And I think that's really important just in terms of saying, "You know what? Other folks experience this." And I think that's one of the most powerful experiences in terms of, "Hey, I'm not alone in this." You know, Rick is taking a courageous step in terms of him talking about his own personal journey. And when other men, and other women, read that, they can connect to it in various ways. So that's really important.

MCKELLEY: Uh-huh. I think there are so many good parallels. When he's talking about this idea of outgrowing that armor, not wanting to throw it away, and it immediately made me think about this idea that we all behave in a way that was adaptable at one time. And at one time in Rick's, and maybe other people's lives, that armor was protective. It needed to be there, it's how you get through those difficult moments.

And then you're an adult, and all of a sudden, it's getting in the way of relationships, getting in the way of work, getting in the way of these other things. But just to acknowledge that that behavior was there for a reason, and it was protective and it's no longer serving its function, so what can I do with it? And I like that Rick said, "You know, I'm not ready to throw it away, but I'm going to talk about it, I'm going to explore it, I'm going to make some meaning out of it. And then maybe figure out other ways to go about being."

BLAZINA: Absolutely. You don't necessarily throw it away, you find a new relationship with that old skill. And I think one of the important things too is to develop a level of self-compassion that there was a reason why you had developed that armor in the first place. So that's really important.

Looks like we're out of time for today. Dr. Ryan McKelley, I want to thank you for stopping by to visit today, as always.

MCKELLEY: Always a pleasure. Thanks.

BLAZINA: Come back and visit us another time. Thanks for stopping by here on *The Secret Lives of Men*. Take care.

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For additional information about Dr. Blazina and his work, please visit his website, theseconlivesofmen.com.

For additional information about Rick Belden and *Iron Man Family Outing*, please visit rickbelden.com and blog.rickbelden.com.