The celebrated Australian trait of mateship is very much on display in the third season of Channel 10’s The Bachelorette. But this is not always to the benefit of the protagonist, Bachelorette Sophie Monk.

This emphasis on male bonds can be seen in the parting words of two bachelors. Professional polo player Bingham Fitz-Henry’s concern about leaving the show had little to do with missing out on time with Monk:

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I’m enjoying my time hanging out with the boys and the experience I’m having is second to none and if it was to end now I’d be devastated.

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Another departing bachelor, restaurant manager Harry Farran, also spoke gushingly of his new-found male companions:
These group of guys have become my friends over the last few weeks and I honestly believe that you will fall in love cause I have.

While it is gratifying that male friendship is alive and well, such examples of “bromance” sit awkwardly alongside the show’s defining narrative of heterosexual romance. Conceived originally as a bond between men, mateship’s traditional exclusion of women potentially undermines their desire and identity.

Further reading: How The Bachelor turns women into misogynists

A glimpse of this was seen in the relationship between Bachelorette contestants Sam Cochrane, a voice over artist, and Blake Colman, an entrepreneur, whose mutual affection led to each pledging support for the other in winning the game. The glaring question of Monk’s desire was irrelevant.

The Bachelorette might appear to be a progressive alternative to The Bachelor, but it is actually doing nothing for women when male bonds are central to its drama. And there is a dark side to mateship that popular television shows such as this tend to gloss over.

Mateship’s darkness

The significance of mateship in Australian culture can in part be attributed to Russell Ward’s influential The Australian Legend, which identifies it as a great social equaliser and defining national trait. The cultural embrace of mateship has continued into the modern era, such as when John Howard tried unsuccessfully to include the term in a new preamble to the Australian Constitution.

However, mateship has not always fostered equality between all. This is deftly dramatised in a number of classic Australian films where women in particular experience it as a negative social force.
For example, Bruce Beresford’s cinematic adaption of the David Williamson play *Don’s Party* (1976) depicts drunken larrikins bonding at an election night party, to the general detriment of their female companions. Neil Rattigan’s book *Images of Australia* suggests that rather than “promoting a sense of bonding and community”, the film highlights a hostile social system where barely concealed feelings of “envy, jealousy, and aggression” underlie the surface humour.

The undervalued Australian film *Shame* (1988), starring Deborra-Lee Furness, foregrounds another ominous dimension of mateship. Here, a male ocker-style pack mentality leaves young women endangered and ultimately violated.

But nowhere has the dark side of mateship been better explored than in *Wake in Fright*, Ted Kotcheff’s devastating 1971 film adaptation of the Kenneth Cook novella. A new version of *Wake in Fright* recently screened on Channel 10 as a *miniseries*. While the TV series covers aspects of the film, it fails to rediscover the dark power of Kotcheff’s original.

It is interesting that it took the vision of a British author (Cook) and Canadian director (Kotcheff) to successfully expose mateship’s malevolent character, including continual scenes of debauchery, excessive drinking, heedless gambling and bloody roo-hunting expeditions. After appearing in Kotcheff’s film, Jack Thompson admitted that the depiction of mateship was “embarrassingly accurate”.

The only woman of any note in *Wake in Fright*, Janette Hynes (Sylvia Kay), is reduced to being a “good sheila” who cooks, serves alcohol and provides the men with a point of sexual arousal. The incorporation of more female characters into the 2017 television remake only downplayed the original story’s disturbing chronicle of chauvinism.

**Exclusive club**

Gender studies theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that *male bonds* are developed through women’s exclusion. Although American, her ideas resonate perhaps even more in an Australian context, where white, male heterosexual bonding has also traditionally excluded non-white and non-heterosexual men.

As I have argued previously, while the Bachelorette and Bachelor both promote competition, the conflict between the women in *The Bachelor* far outstrips men’s rivalry in *The Bachelorette*. In the 2016 season of *The Bachelor*, the personal nature of the women’s clashes was at times sexist and even in some cases misogynistic.

The very different dynamic going on in the male and female versions of this reality TV franchise should give us pause to reflect upon whether this mirrors real life relationships between men and women. In a show that is supposedly about Sophie Monk’s quest for love, bromance often steals the spotlight.
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