

It's a Guy Thing

Boys and books. It's easy to put these two words together on paper. However, it's often harder to do in our classrooms, the library, or the couch at home.

My friend Michael Smith and I have recently completed an extensive study researching the literacy of boys, and I'll share here some of what we found out about boys and books, particularly about the features of texts that excited their interest and the literacy contexts that engaged their thinking.¹

We spent several months following 49 boys from very different backgrounds and levels of academic achievement. We observed them inside and outside of school, interviewed them about daily activity and literacy logs, and used a variety of different instruments and interviews to get at several distinct questions including the following: What were their interests and passions (and how might these be related to literacy)? What were their contextualized attitudes toward different ways of embracing and resisting literate behaviors? How did they practice different literacies at school and at home? How did they read and respond to different kinds of texts and the features of those texts?

I'd like to focus here on that last question and to conclude by highlighting some texts my own male students have found engaging.

What Makes Guys Read

We found that the boys we studied were more different than alike, and this was true in general as well as in the case of reading tastes. Though it is comforting to think in generalizations, our study calls into question much of the conventional wis-

dom about boys' reading preferences. I'm guessing this is because most studies on preferences depend on statistics that lose sight of individual differences, whereas we attended closely to individual boys, personally interviewing them about every log and research activity. We think this gave us a view more helpful to the complex world of teaching. For example, quantitative data clearly indicates that boys like to play video games, and that they play and enjoy such games much more so than girls do. However, this does not mean that all boys like video games (nor does it mean that all girls do not); in fact, we found that this was decidedly not the case. Another caution is that current research has found that teachers tend to use conventional wisdom to reinforce traditional notions of gender and gender preferences, thereby denying boys wider choices and chances to expand their tastes (Millard, 1997; Telford, 1999).

This came home to me in a recent teacher discussion group. After several enthusiastic booktalks, the teacher was observing a reluctant reader hovering around the bookcart the librarian had left in the classroom. The teacher decided to provide some encouraging guidance and asked, "I know you like surfing! How about this great new book written by a surfer?" The boy hemmed and hawed a bit and said, "Well, OK, but I was just thinking that I might read that one written by the girl with anorexia." This was exactly what we found in our study: it seemed that teachers tended to perpetuate stereotypes, and often underestimated the boys' desire to read about new ideas and substantive issues, and to be challenged by both texts and the ideas these texts communicated. The importance of attending to individual students, to listen hard to them, to noodle around getting to know them,

and to offer them new challenges versus reinforcing established tastes resounded in our data.

We also found that boys were less motivated by the content and features of particular texts than by the features of social contexts in which literacy was used, e.g., they welcomed the chance to negotiate and share meaning together, something they reported rarely having the chance to do.

This is not to say that the boys did not want their preexisting interests to be addressed by curricula and assigned reading—they did, and this fed their engagement and willingness to read. But the situation is not that simple. Very particular conditions in the social context before, during, and after reading were more important than their interests, and the boys were willing to try to develop new interests through their reading if these conditions were present. These conditions could be summarized as: having an appropriate level of challenge and assistance for meeting it; a sense of choice, control, and the chance to exercise and display competence; clear goals and immediate feedback; a focus on immediate experience; and the opportunity to be social and to export or use what they had learned.

That being said, we did find that the boys in our study tended to be engaged by certain features of texts and for similar reasons. Our boys tended to prefer short texts, or those written in short sections, for the reason that these texts gave them fairly immediate and visible signs of accomplishment that longer texts did not. They privileged highly visual texts (both those that had visuals and those that stimulated visual thinking), and those that offered humor, a new perspective, and interesting facts because these features were not only stimulating but were exportable, i.e., they could be easily shared in social situations. Though they often mined texts for interesting facts and understandings, they preferred for these facts to be offered in a storied way. For this reason, the boys universally rejected the use of textbooks. Our informant Geo had this to say about textbooks: “I would read like a person’s story about slavery and how they got through. Yeah, that sounds pretty good, but I don’t want to read about like the whole

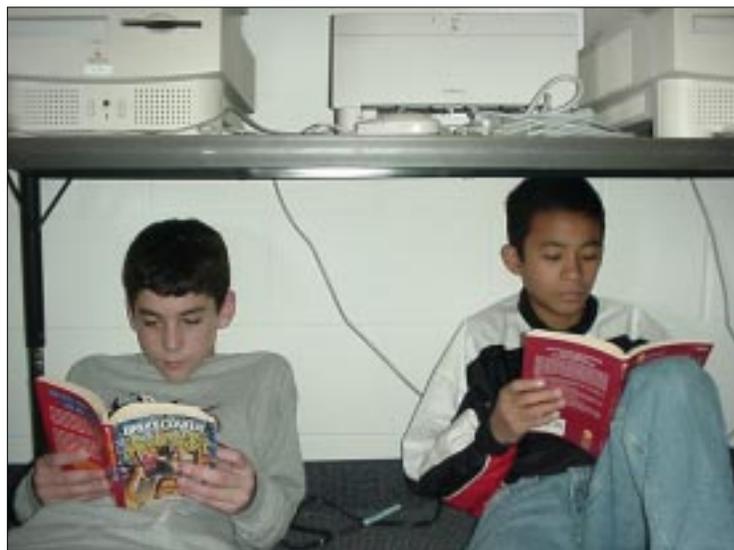
timeline of slavery or the whole timeline of the Holocaust or stuff like that.” And Ian, a top student, concurred: “Give me the information in a story, not a textbook. I am totally against textbooks.”

Again, this desire to read stories, and to use literacy to share and socialize flies in the face of conventional wisdom, yet, we saw it in all of our informants. This data also shows how the texts we use in language arts classes, texts that are longer and that reward nuanced interpretations, work against the boys’ desire for quick accomplishment and finding something to share or use.

Books Guys Like

Let’s turn now to some fairly recent texts that I’ve found to work with a variety of boys. Boys have found them appealing because they offer lots of short text segments, substantive and interesting ideas, and plenty of visual support. As an added bonus, many are from Australia where I am currently working for a semester, but all are readily available in America.

Bloody Moments: And Further Highlights from the Astounding in History of Medicine. Gael Jennings (illus. by Roland Harvey). Firefly, 2000. 77 pp. This one gets high marks on several counts. First of all, it is a visually stimulating text, with humorous but often gruesome pictures and diagrams. It’s



filled with exportable facts about how medical breakthroughs were made in often surprising circumstances. The text also has a hypermedia feature offering choices about what ideas to follow up on with references to ideas like “pain,” “sticky ends,” “bad luck,” “germs die,” or “tummy troubles,” with the page numbers where these ideas can be pursued further. As proof of its exportability, I heard boys referring to it for weeks in the lunchroom. “That reminds me of the guy who tied up his food on a string and puked it up to see how he was digesting it!” You get the idea.

Into Thin Air. Jon Krakauer. Anchor, 1997. 378 pp. I include this book to illustrate an interesting point. Though I’m a great fan of young adult literature, several of the boys in our study rejected young adult literature as a form of what they considered “pandering.” They wanted adult books, and several of them used the reading of adult books as identity markers. Literature written particularly for young adults was too “approved,” and they wanted to be more underground, more renegade, more adult. So I am always on the lookout for adult books that are accessible to my students. This book meets the bill. We have an author worrying about his moral responsibility in the tragedy. We get more unseemly details of greed, in-fighting, rash decisions, and the like.

The Lost Thing. Shaun Tan. Lothian, 2000. 32 pp. Tan steps forward as both author and illustrator in this thought provoking and beautifully illustrated book. This book provides a very provocative look at belonging and what happens when we marginalize others. I’ve found that it rewards reading at all levels, and fulfilled my male students’ need to be visually stimulated and engaged by substantive and morally challenging ideas. I’ve found the *Maus* books, Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust stories told in cartoon format, to appeal for the same reasons.

Man-Eaters of Kumaon. Jim Corbett. Oxford University Press, 1993. 214 pp. This book of short but true tales gives us a glimpse of master hunter

Corbett’s greatest adventures. It hits the reality principle right between the eyes, but also brings up important moral issues regarding the treatment of women, the environment, and other issues.

Monster. Walter Dean Myers. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. 281 pp. This is the story of Steve Harmon who is accused of complicity in a local murder. The story, told through both his journal and his movie script of his trial, makes this book popular with boys. Furthermore, the boys in our study wanted the chance to make their own decisions, construct their own understandings, and voice their own opinions. This book rewarded those desires.

Olympia: Warrior Athletes of Ancient Greece. Dyan Blacklock (illus. by David Kennett). Scholastic, 2000. 48 pp. The illustrations are stunning, and reminded my students of Japanimation. This fast-paced book tells the gory story of how the first Olympics were founded and practiced. Lots of interesting historical detail appeals to boys as it gives them trivia to carry with them from the classroom to the cafeteria, making it highly exportable.

Pagan’s Crusade. Catherine Jinks. Hodder Headline, 1992. 149 pp. This is the first book in a tetralogy about Pagan, an orphan growing up in twelfth-century Jerusalem during the time when it is threatened by the Infidels led by Saladin. At the age of 16, Pagan is assigned to be the squire for Lord Roland, a Templar knight. Pagan has big troubles from his past and his present, but I have to say that he is a very likeable adolescent, always making mistakes, speaking out of turn, and getting into trouble. My male students thought he was hilarious, and so did I. And as readers laugh, they also learn a lot of history (Jinks is an expert on the Middle Ages) that helps illuminate the current situation in the Holy Land. Making connections between a text and current concerns was important to all the boys in our study, and more than a quarter of them indicated an interest in history, something that really surprised us. The other Pagan books in the series are also worth reading.

The Rabbits. John Marsden (illus. by Shaun Tan). Lothian, 1998. 32 pp. John Marsden is the best-selling Australian young adult author of all time, and many of his books are favorites in America. Now, in *The Rabbits*, he's put his storytelling ability into picture book format, a genre I've long advocated using with older readers. In this allegory, both the pictures and text make great use of irony. The text can therefore provide accessible practice with allegory and irony. But more than that, it is a great story with a surprising twist that maps on perfectly to our own problematic history with native peoples and their way of life.

The Roman Record. Paul Dowsell. Usborne, 1997. 32 pp. This newspaper satire, think high-toned *Mad* magazine, tells the history of the Roman Empire in a humorous and original way. "Welcome to your empire building, barbarian bashing, lion feeding *Roman Record*. What we have here is 1200 years of Roman history in 32 pages of entertainment!" My boys are also making their own satirical newspapers with this as their model.

The Watertower. Gary Crew. Lothian, 2000. 32 pp. Gary Crew is a challenging author. A former teacher, Crew writes what are essentially short stories and then works very closely with his illustrators to create organic and visually haunting texts. His books are short, visual, and carefully crafted. They are sophisticated in form and content and require lots of inference-making. He leaves story gaps that force readers to participate and make judgments, which appeals to boys' desire to construct and express their own opinions. I recommend all of his books, but *The Watertower* seems to be the most accessible in the States. We found

that boys enjoy keeping track and figuring things out, something that is required by all of Crew's stimulating picture book stories for the older reader. In this one, readers have to figure out: What *is* the Watertower? On one hot day, Spike and Bubba go for a swim inside, and one of them undergoes a transformation. What happened? There are plenty of clues, so you figure it out!

The Wildlife Detectives: How Forensic Scientists Fight Crimes against Nature. Donna Jackson. Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 48 pp. If your boys are collectors of weird and wonderful information like my male students are, this will be a favorite. This book features crime, stories of expertise, and important environmental issues.

Final Thoughts

Our data indicated that just because one boy liked a book did not mean that all boys would like it. That would be too easy. But our data also showed that if we attend to features of texts and create social situations that appeal to boys when we want them reading and sharing books, then we can better put boys and books together in satisfying and stimulating relationship.

Note

1. *Reading Don't Fix No Chevies: The Role of Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* by Wilhelm and Smith will be published by Heinemann in January, 2002. That book explains in detail the study reported here.

References

Millard, E. (1997). *Differently literate*. London: Falmer.
Telford, L. (1999). A study of boys' reading. *Early Childhood Development and Care* 149: 87-124.

Jeff Wilhelm is associate professor at the University of Maine at Orono.
He can be reached at Jeff_Wilhelm@umit.maine.edu.