

Teenage Boys: Non-readers to Reading Enthusiasts

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "E. M. Dalton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "E".

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Abstract:

Boys enjoy reading less and are less skilled in language ability than are their female peers. This division in reading ability is reversible, but needs to be addressed while the boy is still young—before or during middle-school age—to be most effective. One useful genre of book to combat this problem is literature of the American West, since many boys are interested in historical information as well as the means of storytelling western writers use, such as adventure, humor, and young protagonists. Librarians have a key role in helping boys to enjoy reading through the programs they offer and the organization and collections in their libraries. In this paper I discuss the problem of boys not enjoying reading and address how to solve the problem with western literature and the help of a library and its librarian.

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Introduction

On November 29, 2003, I delivered my first child, a son named Silas. My husband and I learned that he was male less than halfway through my pregnancy, so I then began to think about raising a son. The enjoyment of reading is a high priority for our family, so I began to wonder how I could enhance Silas's learning and enjoyment of literature. Thus, I decided to do my senior Honors thesis on research for helping all boys enjoy reading, particularly those boys who are middle school age, since that is the time that both of my brothers began to dislike reading.

I wanted to learn what the differences actually are between boys' and girls' reading ability and then learn how to best remedy any deficiencies. I am interested in becoming a librarian after my children are grown, so I decided to research how to attract boys to a library as well as find out how librarians can encourage reading in boys. I had ideas of my own before beginning this project and the research helped solidify how I want to raise my son and educate others when I become a librarian.

To narrow my focus I thought about what topics I felt boys would find particularly interesting. I realized that western literature included most of the topics that I could think of, such as adventure, non-fiction, historical fiction, and action. My father and brothers also influenced my decision for a focus since they all enjoy western literature; my father will read nothing else, a habit he has had since he was a young boy. By concentrating on western literature I can best discuss how a library can help boys as well as recommend timeless literature that middle school aged boys would enjoy.

Another way I decided to narrow my topic was to focus on small libraries since I anticipate living in a small town when I become a librarian. I also think that small

libraries often need more help than do larger ones since they have fewer employees to help to attract young readers. I toured the Parker City Library, a library run by the Parker City chapter of the Psi Iota Xi sorority without a trained librarian on staff. By using this library as my framework, I could make recommendations to the sorority and help the sorority members to see new ways to attract boys to their library even with a limited budget and a staff of volunteers. I presented my findings to the sorority November 4, 2003.

Outlining Gender-Based Reading Problems

The ability to read is arguably the most important skill learned in a school environment since reading is involved in virtually all aspects of life, from driving to cooking to researching. While most students learn to read, many do not enjoy reading—especially males. The type of reading that males prefer is not encouraged by teachers or librarians, and without being able to read something they enjoy, boys often refuse to read. The enjoyment of reading is also important to reading continuation. If a student does not enjoy reading, he or she will not retain knowledge from a book and may even choose not to read other literature.

My eleven-year-old twin brother and sister are prime examples of how a reading program in a library fails for the male gender while succeeding for the female gender. The program that Indian Creek Intermediate School uses is called “Reading Counts.” Many books in the library have a tag on the spine indicating what level they are for the test that the students must take after reading the book. The test is multiple choice and the students must correctly answer eight out of ten questions to pass and then be awarded the points for that book, which they can trade for prizes.

While this may seem like a good way to encourage reading, books that boys like, such as informational texts, are not tested, and the tests may even be written in such a way as to focus on points that interest females. When Shane was asked about this program he said, “Reading Counts makes me want to read because of the prizes but I can’t ever pass the tests so I get mad. And if I don’t have enough points, the librarians won’t let me check out what I want to read like the Guinness Book of World Records.” The scores that the twins have acquired also speak volumes of how the test is written; at

the time of the interview Shane had only eighteen points while Kalee had eighty-seven. When tested in other ways, the twins are not so far apart in intellectual ability as they seem to be from these scores. Kalee chose books that awarded her more points, since those are the type that she enjoys and Shane tended to pick books below his level that he is not at all interested in merely to try to get points so that he is able to read what he would like to read in his spare time.

Generally males, such as my brother, enjoy reading less than do females of comparable age. This is especially true for middle school-aged boys, who tend not to read much for pleasure. However, there are many tactics that can aid the appreciation of reading. Since learning begins at home, a parent can have a great deal of influence on his or her son in many ways. Today's teenagers do not spend all of their time at home, and are also influenced by teachers and librarians; there are many tactics that those parties can use to accelerate the love of reading in boys.

The difference in literary abilities is not as widely known as the perceived gap between the genders in mathematics. However, "the Educational Testing Service reports that the gap in writing between eighth-grade males and females is more than six times greater than the differences in mathematical reasoning" (Cole qtd. in Smith and Wilhelm 1). There has been an emphasis in education in recent years to attempt to persuade girls to pursue careers in science and mathematics, fields that are generally disregarded by females. Yet if there is a much more significant gap in knowledge between boys and girls in the field of language arts, this is an area that needs to be focused on as well. It is much easier to find research on the disadvantages girls face in education and other disciplines, yet the sad fact is that boys are being ignored. If the goal for education is

equality, both sexes should be helped to flourish in areas in which they struggle; for boys this is in the field of reading.

Most people would accept that boys, especially once they reach the middle-school age, tend to read less than their female counterparts, but do not realize when this gap begins. According to two former high school teachers and current university professors, “A variety of research shows that boys learn to read later than girls and never catch up” (Smith and Wilhelm xix). This shows that there has been a gap in reading ability or desire from the time that children learn to read, as early as age four or five, and continues throughout their lives. This places a great challenge on parents, librarians, and teachers to address this problem and make a special effort to encourage reading in boys through any effective means, since proficiency in reading aids development and helps the individual to function well in society.

The gap in language arts extends beyond reading abilities alone; there is also a wide gap in writing ability. “In 1985, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement investigated writing achievement across fourteen countries and found that ‘gender by itself or in combination with certain home variables was the most powerful predictor of performance’” and the differences “generally increased with age” (Purves qtd. in Smith and Wilhelm 2). Language arts problems in boys is obviously a world-wide issue, and since the differences increase with age, they need to be addressed while boys are young.

Furthermore, boys “trail girls on almost every literacy measure in every country and culture from which data is available. They are particularly behind when it comes to reading novels and extended forms of narrative fiction—the kind of reading that counts in

most language arts classes” (Smith and Wilhelm xix). If this is the case, and all research seems to agree including research that Elaine Millard, a lecturer in education at the University of Sheffield and former secondary school teacher, cites of “an Australian survey of 194 16-year-old students [which] found that 41.6 per cent of the boys chose not to read fiction, as compared with 19.3 per cent of the girls,” (13), boys are at a distinct disadvantage, one that should be addressed quickly to help boys to reach the standard that girls have set in literacy. This survey dictates that teachers should offer other types of literature in the classroom that appeal more to boys.

Since it is narrative fiction, particularly the novel, that is challenging to boys, educators and librarians must find what boys will appreciate and encourage them to read what they enjoy, eventually progressing to reading extended fiction. Another option that could be attempted is to change what is being taught. A teacher would not have to completely change his or her reading list, but add what is interesting to boys, particularly non-fiction, to promote reading enjoyment in boys. While this may seem like a daunting task, it is actually quite easy to find non-fiction, or even short fiction for boys to read.

Other scholars report numerous findings that hinder boys’ enjoyment of reading by boys. Michael Smith, a high school and university level award-winning teacher, gathered research regarding trends found in boys’ reading and briefly summarized his results. Some of these include the fact that “boys don’t comprehend narrative (fiction) as well as girls, boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls, boys tend to think they are bad readers, and, if reading is perceived as feminized, then boys will go to great lengths to avoid it” (Smith and Wilhelm 10-11). Each of these findings shows how difficult it may be to get boys to enjoy reading, and even to comprehend as girls do in the

case of narrative fiction. With much patience and creative thinking, however, these obstacles can be overcome to create readers from boys who would otherwise avoid reading. For instance, if boys think that they are bad readers, once they are shown that they are not—perhaps by reading aloud with a trusted friend or adult—they will change their perceptions about themselves, helping them to begin to read, which allows other challenges to be addressed.

Once a boy begins to think of himself as a reader he might be deterred by other false assumptions of reading. Sadly, more research agrees that reading is perceived as feminine. “The OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) report ‘Boys and English’ 1993 suggests that this early feminizing influence can result in the formation of unhelpful or damaging attitudes towards English in adolescent boys” (Lucey and Walkerdine 39). If a boy thinks that his newfound enjoyment of reading is seen as feminine by his peers he will be more likely to once again reject reading, this time due to others’ perceptions rather than his own.

The media also contributes to the feminization of reading. In 1994, M.R. Cherland, a writer and researcher of gender-based reading styles, studied images of reading presented in various media, including library and reading campaigns, and found that the images were almost entirely of females reading in private situations or with other females (Smith and Wilhelm 12). This seems an easy deterrent to fix, and attempts have been made to make males more of a focus in library posters. A librarian should “buy every ALA Read poster featuring a male” (Jones 3). Teachers and librarians should make sure to post these pictures of boys reading to passively change common perceptions that reading is a feminine task. If such posters cannot be found, the teacher or librarian

should make sure to provide living illustrations of boys or men reading, by making examples of teachers, coaches, or students. This will allow other students to see that a male enjoying reading is not odd, nor is it something only girls do.

A national survey conducted as part of Young Adult Library Services Association's (YALSA) 2001 Teen Read Week celebration netted more evidence about what boys see as obstacles to reading. One question on the survey asked, "If you don't read much or don't like reading, why?" The top three responses in order were: "boring/not fun" 39.3 percent, "no time/too busy" 29.8 percent, and "like other activities better" 11.1 percent. (qtd. in Jones and Fiorelli 2). Once teens are shown that reading is not boring and can be quite fun, the largest deterrent is gone. Teens can be shown that reading is fun when an adult shows interest in a particular book and then begins to read with the teen, asking for opinions from the teen about the book. "Sometimes the reading will hook, sometimes not, but discussion at the end of the reading will reveal clearly whether to go ahead or to try a different book" (Kropp 150).

While it is obvious that boys are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to reading, there is hope. In many cases, a particular boy may not dislike reading in general, even if he thinks he does; he may only dislike the types of reading that he has been asked to do. He may be disappointed in reading that focuses on character sketches or glimpses into someone's life, since boys seem to desire to learn something practical while reading. Many boys will immerse themselves in a video game magazine that will teach them to win the particular game or to build their own video game system. This type of reading is not encouraged by most teachers, and so a boy will read these things outside of class,

thinking that he is not really “reading” because the type of reading that he is doing has never been shown to him as legitimate.

Another type of reading that boys seem to prefer is informational reading. Millard cites the case of a boy who suddenly stopped choosing fiction at age ten and began to read exclusively from the farm journals that his father read. When he had to read fiction again he began to respond differently because of his new orientation toward “finding out” and “gathering information” which he had adopted from his father (qtd. in Smith and Wilhelm 12). This focus by many boys may explain what boys expect from reading. In the case of this particular boy, he was able to apply his newfound love of gathering information to fiction reading. When their most-enjoyed focus can be transferred into fiction, they will begin to enjoy that genre as well. However, a teacher or librarian should encourage and allow informational reading to be enjoyed on its own.

The same is true for technologically-based computer literacy. Many boys, as well as girls, are extremely adept at computers and will sit in front of a monitor for hours. Though they think that they are merely “surfing the net” rather than doing anything literary, they are truly reading. Alloway and Gilbert, writing in 1997, argue that many boys have literacy skills which are not recognized in the classroom, but are ones that are potentially powerful in the communication technologies of the future (qtd. in Lucey and Walkerdine 40). These skills are necessary for the increasingly technological age in which humankind lives. Boys do not realize that they are learning necessary skills while sitting in front of a computer. They may begin to view other literary tasks as more interesting if they realize that they are essentially reading whatever appears on the screen. This reading may be in a different format than they are used to, since it includes colorful

graphics and interesting fonts, but they are reading as surely as someone sitting next to them with a novel in his or her hands.

How Western Literature Can Help Solve the Problems

Since boys lag in reading ability, teachers, parents, and librarians need to find what types of books boys do enjoy. Types of literature that male teenagers will read include realistic young-adult literature and nonfiction, including biographies as well as books on their interests (Kropp 133). Through the genre of the American West, some of these requirements can be met to interest boys, since much of western literature is historical, either in fiction or nonfiction format, and most is adventurous, another feature that appeals to boys.

The western genre is a type of book that will interest most boys for many different reasons. Some boys will like them because they help the reader to find their identity through the protagonists' struggles, or because they can identify with a young assertive narrator, a characteristic many westerns have. Other boys may like the violence and the use of humor. Westerns also define what it means to be male, particularly the heroic male, and female, which helps with the readers' search for identity. The action involved as well as the historical aspect in fiction and non-fiction will attract boys. Whatever reason these boys become interested in westerns, their interest should be cultivated and encouraged.

An objection some educators may have when thinking of westerns is the lack of currency of classic westerns. However, a survey of students in grades six through eight conducted by Kathleen Isaacs shows that teens do not care about publication dates when choosing a book to read and listing the books they preferred. "Perhaps the most astonishing results...was the age of the books these students read most often. Over half their top twenty...were books published before 1980" (qtd. in Jones 103). Since most

westerns were written before 1980, some even one hundred years prior, this survey result calms any fears that one may have of teens not being interested in westerns because of the age of the book.

There are many classical western writers whose work is appropriate and enjoyable for teenage boys. One such author is Louis Lamour, one of the most widely read authors in contemporary times. He wrote many books, including the popular Sackett series, and even had collections of stories published posthumously. Larry McMurtry is another author that teen boys can enjoy. He wrote many books such as Boone's Lick and several series books. He has books that have young characters as well as more advanced novels, such as Lonesome Dove, that teens can progress to as they age. Zane Grey is a very popular author of western literature that boys enjoy. There are many more authors that boys can read for enjoyment, but these three are accessible to teens and each has many titles so a teen can continue to read an author in which he takes pleasure.

One especially appropriate collection of westerns for teens is Long Ride Home by Louis Lamour. Beginning with the very first story, "The Cactus Kid Pays a Debt," one can see how appropriate this collection is for middle-school aged boys. The first attraction will be Cactus Kid's age; though it is never told exactly, there are many indications that he is quite young. He is referred to by several people as "young man" and the physical description of him paints him as a short, compact fellow who most think is younger than he is. They look down on him for his age, thinking that he can be no threat if he is young. This is something that middle-school boys can identify with. Middle school is an age at which boys are typically shorter than girls and many adults treat them as children, though they are close to becoming adults.

Through the example of the Cactus Kid, boys see that they can outsmart older people and gain respect, even though the Cactus Kid seems boyish. The Cactus Kid discerns who is cheating him at poker simply by looking at their eyes. He proceeds to stack the deck for himself when he is dealing to take the money and admiration of the villains. While this may not be an honest example for boys to follow, they enjoy seeing that young people can be wiser than their elders. Also, if the readers become fond of the Cactus Kid in this collection, they may choose to read other Lamour collections, since most of his other short story collections contain a story about this character.

Most of the other Lamour stories have young protagonists, so that the reader sees the mistakes they make at first and then can see the maturation of the characters into respected western heroes. One such man is Shandy in "Shandy Takes the Hook." At the beginning of the story, Shandy is propositioned by a man called Nichols to assist him in a cattle buying and selling expedition. Shandy tells him he has little money, but Nichols sees that he has a large roll when Shandy pays for his room. Shandy has not yet learned to keep his money hidden and when Nichols asks for one thousand dollars, Shandy tells him that he has only five hundred, not knowing who Nichols is or if he can be trusted. Nichols steals his money and then Shandy learns his partner is actually named Abel, not Nichols. Shandy eventually finds Nichols and gets his money back, learning how to act in the West in the meantime. These types of mistakes are similar to any mistake a boy might make as he is growing up, and reading about a character who makes the same kinds of mistakes will encourage him that he too can learn from his mistakes so he will not be duped twice.

Just as Nichols is not who he pretends to be, many other characters in Long Ride Home have changed their identities to suit their purposes. Sometimes another character will know the true identity of a character, but many times the other person will not. The men that change their identities, do so by merely changing their names. This may not be so easy for a middle grade boy to do, but he can, as many do, experiment with nicknames. However, even with the new name the characters are many times discovered by another character. One man in the short story “That Triggernometry Tenderfoot” by Lamour, changed his name and even his profession from rodeo clown to teacher, but was still recognized by his riding style. Middle school is a time when boys first start searching for their identities. According to the Palo Alto Medical Society, “Preteens and teens begin to form their identity by exploring different clothes, hairstyles, friends, music, and hobbies” (“Teenage Growth” n. pg.). In the coming years they will most likely try out several personalities before claiming one as their own. These examples of men who successfully become someone else for a time show the readers that it is normal to search for an identity, but that eventually who they really are will catch up to them and then they can be the people that they can be to the world.

The man who passed himself off as a school teacher in “That Triggernometry Tenderfoot” can also be an example to boys in that he is scholarly even though he is ridiculed for being so. So that the other characters would not know that he used to be a rodeo clown, he acts like a newcomer to the West, doing such stupid things as wanting to pet a longhorn, which earns him much ridicule. Though he is a tough man, he looks bookish, something that boys who read can see as an example of a man who is strong and yet enjoys reading. It also does not hurt that Brady receives respect in the end, by

revealing who he used to be, marrying the girl in the story, and outwitting those who attempt to steal his land.

Boys enjoy laughing and having fun, and humor can be found readily in most western literature. Larry McMurtry, an author that teens can keep reading into adulthood since he writes books for younger and older audiences, writes humorously. He wrote a comic relief character, named Grandpa Crackenthorpe in Boone's Lick. Almost anything that Grandpa says or does is funny. For instance, he has been arrested more times than he can count for urinating in public because he cannot get to an outhouse. Whenever the situation gets tense in the novel, he says he needs to go hunt panthers, though neither of the two boys in the story has ever seen a panther in their lives. There are also humorous comments made by other characters, such as when the sheriff comments that he does not want the two boys he takes on his posse to be killed because he does not want to be on their ma's bad side. One of the boys, Shay, says that he'd rather not be dead. This humor adds to the story by making it more interesting to readers, especially boys who enjoy being entertained by their reading.

This novel also illustrates the violence that is inherent in westerns and important to boy readers. While on the hunt for the bad characters in the book, the protagonists are ambushed. They will not shoot to kill, even though they could justify the killing; they only shoot the horses out from under the riders to scare them off. This is sufficiently violent, especially since the bad people are hurt when their horses go down, but is not overly violent, with respect to most other violence boys are exposed to daily. By including violence, boy readers are appeased. Michael Smith interviewed a young man named Barnabas about why he enjoyed reading about violence. He said, that if there was

no violence in a text it would not be fun. He compares literature to wrestling, concluding that the WWF would be remiss, not to mention boring, to leave out all violence (qtd. in Smith and Wilhelm 156). This teen shows that violence is a major component in other areas of interest in their lives—in this case wrestling but also in many video games that boys enjoy. Westerns provide violence, yet there is always a reason for it—as long as it is done by the protagonist—and this will provide an acceptable way for boys to view violence while having a clear example of what is an appropriate time to use their knowledge of violence. The cowboy code, inherent in westerns, says that cowboys will never harm a woman or animal, and will only harm a man if their own life or someone else's life is in danger. This code is also moral: a cowboy must never shoot someone in the back, and the victim must have the opportunity to fight back and must be aware that the other person is willing to fight.

One surprising advantage that western novels can have is a built-in example of male reading. Owen Wister wrote the classic The Virginian, which praises male education and enjoyment of reading. It even exposes some preferences that male readers have. When he was given a book by George Eliot he complained that he did not enjoy the book because the characters talked too much and did not get things done as he would have liked. When he liked a book, which was most of the time after his preferences were made known, he carried the book with him for a long period, bringing the characters into most conversations that he had. Another example can be found in Louis Lamour's Daybreakers. Both main characters, Tyrel and Orrin, decide that reading is important and they must be educated to succeed. Tyrel enjoys his reading so much that he stays up late when he should not to learn more. He speaks of paperbacks that were given to cowboys

and that were so popular that “many a cowhand had read all three hundred sixty of them” (Lamour 129).

Masculinity is an important issue for all western literature. The cowboys fit the description of a heroic character, a tradition that can be traced to the most ancient of texts. A teacher should use westerns in a classroom since “the point of their inclusion would be to show how masculinity is constructed by the narratives, rather than a simple acceptance of the ‘heroic’ image” (Millard 161). Perhaps publishers have reached the same conclusion, since Oxford UP has produced a new range of old popular literature, including Zane Grey’s Riders of the Purple Sage. “The heroes of the powerful myths and legends that have sustained literature and whose fragments litter the narratives of the comics, cartoons, and video games as well as the stories of the great adventurers, are rich sources of images of masculinity” (Millard 161). The definition of a hero is something that can be admired by boys since they see other examples in their day to day lives on television, video games, and comics. This masculine characteristic of heroism can be dissected by a classroom or group of boys to see if the goal is attainable, and even if not if they should try to reach for some of the characteristics they can find, such as chivalry, honesty, and fairness to all in their own lives.

Along with a deep sense of masculinity, Riders of the Purple Sage also offers an example for how women are treated in western novels or film. Women must be upstanding citizens, pure in every way, unless they are unspeakably evil. The two women characters in Grey’s work are Jane and Bess. Throughout the novel, Jane is a marvelous person. Although her religion, Mormonism, is ridiculed, she is the one

upstanding woman who will help anyone that she can and trusts in the goodness of all, even those that are reputed to kill all Mormons.

Bess fits into the other category at first, since the reader sees her as a “masked rider” for the worst rustler in town. At this point the reader can compare the two women and see how wonderful Jane is and how terrible Bess is, until Bess is revealed as an innocent later in the book and then she, too, is a pure woman; “not only was she not bad, but good, pure, innocent above all innocence in the world—the innocence of a lonely girlhood” (Grey 217). This might show boys that girls have problems with their identities, too, and will surely show them that women have ideals to live up to that are impossible to reach, even if the characters can attain them.

Another type of western literature that boys enjoy besides fiction is western non-fiction. Non-fiction alone interests boys, particularly if it is recreational, informational (such as about changing bodies and lives), or educational (Jones 133). Boys will often read informational texts when they will not read anything else, and will want to use the time that they are reading to learn about something that they are interested in. Since history is a fascinating topic to many boys, western non-fiction can satisfy their enjoyment for educational texts. Boys will not read all non-fiction; to appeal to boys a book must be current, organized well (straightforward with charts and graphs), and have a format that is not childish (Jones 138). Many western non-fiction books can fulfill these requirements set by boys.

For those students who enjoy true history written in an enjoyable style, Landon Y. Jones has edited the journals of Lewis and Clark to make The Essential Lewis and Clark. This slim account of the journey of the Corps of Discovery focuses more on the human

side of the trip, but it does include frequent discussions of the scenery as well as interesting animals that the expedition discovered. The phonetic spellings will intrigue some boys, since most people would not think that two such noble characters of history would spell “watermelon” as “watermillion” or “mosquito” as “muskeetor”.

Once the spelling can be enjoyed or overlooked, the story of the travel is amazing to read first-hand from the two leaders. Indians are met and placated with trinkets, tough trails are forged, and impossible feats are accomplished, such as falling over a cliff and yet somehow grabbing a root and holding on so that life was spared. The account of Lewis being shot by one of his own men is humorous as written because it is treated so succinctly and matter-of-factly by Lewis himself. Many of the other entries are humorous, yet all of the account is remarkable to read. These men were amazing for surviving such harsh conditions with no worse injuries than Lewis’s bullet in the upper thigh.

Other non-fiction material that boys will enjoy includes historical books of the west, books about certain locations in the West, or books that are about a topic that boys find interesting such as cowboys. A book that has pictures to enjoy and offers actual history, is Beyond the Mythic West by Stuart Udall. The book The Modern Cowboy by John Erickson is a small book, that might interest boys just beginning to enjoy reading; it is told in diary format and also includes pictures of what it is like to be a contemporary cowboy. Another book on cowboys is The Negro Cowboy by Phillip Durham which would interest African American students in particular. If a reader is interested in a certain state, there are books on cowboys in most western states such as The Roll Away

Saloon : Cowboy Tales of the Arizona Strip so that a boy could learn about being a cowboy as well as about the state that interests them.

Creating a Boy-Friendly Library

A place to find westerns, and receive guidance in selection of materials is in a library. Librarians work hard to interest teens in reading. Unfortunately, many of the tactics that they use are counterproductive for boys. A library must switch the focus from prizes to enjoyment for itself, since using gimmicks, such as a party for the students who read the most or tangible rewards for reading vast quantities, “that reduces reading to merely a task” (Kropp 154). Even students that seem to be thriving under such a program may only be reading for the prize and not for the enjoyment of reading. Fortunately there are many things that a librarian can do to encourage reading without a gimmick.

If a certain teen is not interested in reading altogether, there are many other options to interest him in reading. A great idea is to plan a library program designed to encourage boys' attendance. This program could be a reading discussion group, but something to attract non-readers would be to have a program that on the surface does not involve reading. Patrick Jones, librarian and writer of many how-to books on library organization as well interesting boys in reading, suggests, for example, “a martial arts demonstration and workshop, but make sure on every chair in the meeting room is a book or magazine about the subject” (3). He also suggests Kirsten Edwards' Teen Library Events and RoseMary Honnold's 101+ Teen Programs That Work. Planning a program for boys is not difficult to do, and is a great way to reach many boys at one time, and hopefully will interest several in reading about the topic presented, and then reading other books as well.

Since most teens love movies, a program that would attract teenagers would be a movie night. Any type of movie that can be connected to a book or genre would be

worth the program, but there are specific examples that would work for western literature. Old television shows, such as Hopalong Cassidy or The Lone Ranger are humorous and should attract reading in the western genre. A tip from my father, Larry Abel, an avid reader of western literature and viewer of western films, for such shows is to read short passages from the book before or after the film so boys can hear the description involved in the writing and will be more inspired to read based on the television program. John Wayne classics would be interesting to teen boys, especially if there are comfortable chairs or beanbags and lots of popcorn. A movie night would be a very cheap program since the library might already own the video, and if not can add it to their collection after viewing.

Another idea for a program that would interest boys would be to teach boys how to lasso or do other rope tricks. This would obviously need to be held outside so weather is a consideration when planning this program. It would not be very difficult to find someone in or near most communities who knows how to use a rope. If not, there are books such as Lots of Knots: Learn How to Tie 10 Cool Knots! by Ian Boyd on the topic. Librarians should be sure to recommend western books that involve roping in some fashion. William Pollack found that one way to help boys share their deeper thoughts and feelings was through “action talk,” which means talking while being engaged in an activity (47). Therefore, the program presenter or mediator should provide some history for the boys while they are learning rope tricks, and should even read some examples of western literature aloud so that they will be inspired to continue to read about what they have just learned.

A librarian can also work on the collection that he or she has to encourage reading. While westerns could fall under many of the genres of books that boys enjoy reading, including action, survival, heroic tales, and historical information, there are other types of books that interest boys. Librarians should make certain they offer programs involving these books as well as filling their collection with material that boys will read. Teenagers will read realistic young-adult fiction, fantasy, science fiction, horror, and primarily nonfiction, including biographies, as well as factual books on their personal interests (Kropp 133). A librarian should focus on these interests that boys have in reading to have a boy-friendly section. He or she should “buy a few less novels and put that money into periodicals: magazines, comic books and newspapers” (Jones 4).

If a young adult section is full of material that will attract boys, they will be more likely to read. Some of this material, primarily westerns and science fiction novels, are located in the adult section. These sections should either be next to the young adult section, or if that is not possible, a few of those books should be moved from the adult section to the young adult section periodically and the librarian should be available to show the boys where the rest of the collection is once they seem interested. Another tactic is to move the material to the place where middle-school aged boys congregate, near the computer section, copiers, and study tables (Jones 4). If the books and magazines are in sight, a boy is more likely to pick them up and enjoy reading.

There is always a strict budget for purchase of materials. The main question that must be asked is that of hardback books versus paperback. The advantages to paperbacks is that this is the preferred format for teens to read due to a number of factors, they are easy to transport, multiple copies can be purchased to meet demand, fad books can be

bought, they are cheaper than hardback, more will fit on a shelf, series fiction is only found in this format, and covers are more exciting (Jones 114). However, hardbacks cannot be completely ignored by librarians because oftentimes this is the only way of getting current nonfiction that will be applicable for students to read. A library should purchase more paperbacks, particularly in the fiction section, but hardbacks must still consist of a portion of the budget.

The location of materials, particularly for small libraries, is an important issue. The optimal situation is to have an entire room devoted to young adults so that they can have a place of retreat to socialize, find materials, read, and do homework. As Jones says,

Not only does having a YA area answer teens' need for independence, but it also can be the place where exciting things happen. Better, from most staff's perspective, a YA area means YAs will congregate there rather than spreading their (potentially disruptive) energy through the entire building (34).

However, this is not an option for many libraries, due to space constraints. In that case, the minimum amount of space that must be provided for young adults is a section of shelving that can be claimed by young adults as "their space," preferably with room for chairs or tables for gathering and working.

When young adults have their own area, this space, no matter how small, can be made into an attractive and inviting place for students to gather. An idea for attracting teens to the area would be to decorate according to a theme each month, which could be holiday based, but more preferably genre-based. This could be inspired by some

historical event for that month such as an author's birthday or a famous date of discovery. The theme must be connected to books that are displayed in a prominent area so that students can read about the monthly theme in both fictional and non-fictional formats.

An idea for a monthly theme that can be used to attract boys to reading would be to decorate the section in a western motif, paying attention so as not to be too childish in decorating. Cowboy hats could adorn the walls along with pictures of scenery and historical characters—wanted posters would be especially nice—and rope could be draped between shelves (perhaps rope that has been tied in a demonstration program for boys and ropes). The librarian should adjust the YA section each month to gather the books appropriate for that month's topic and place them in a central, labeled section so that teens can find them easily. Librarians should be nearby to answer any questions and to direct them to certain books if the teen seems interested in a particular scene or poster on the wall.

While having material YAs will prefer is vastly important, another way to get boys to read is for a librarian or teacher to "get into the classroom and booktalk, including lots of nonfiction" since this is what attracts boys most readily (Jones and Fiorelli 3). A librarian should always be prepared to give a short, informal booktalk on books in his or her collection. A booktalk is a way to describe a book in such an interesting manner that the listeners feel compelled to read the book for themselves. The ending to a book must never be given away during a booktalk, but suspense is a good tool to incite reading. The person doing a booktalk can pretend to be a character in the book, can quote passages from the book, do a short plot summary without telling too much, or emphasize a certain characteristic of the book, such as its humor. Each of these methods

is appropriate for different books, but all are helpful tools to interest boys to particular books they would enjoy.

It is a sad fact that few English teachers and librarians will be male, so a boy needs to see examples of men reading to convince him that reading is not a solely feminine activity. A great way to show that males enjoy reading is to recruit the coach of the boys' sports teams for assistance. There are many activities that he could help do "from read-alouds on the bus to away games to having athletes read to younger children" (Jones and Shoemaker 3). These are just a few ways that teachers and librarians can get involved and help inspire boys to read for fun, from showing them interesting books to promoting reading through a male role model.

Once a boy has begun reading, encourage him to continue. Do this by asking about what he has just read. Ask him what happened in the book, rather than if he liked it or not, which will merely produce a one word answer. The opportunity to find out more about the boy will have passed. Once a librarian, parent, or teacher knows why a certain book was enjoyed, or even why it was not, he or she can help suggest more materials that the boy might like to continue his interest in reading. Once a boy has begun reading and is encouraged to continue, he will realize what an entertaining hobby reading can be, and will hopefully continue reading long into his future.

Conclusion

Boys trail girls in literacy, a fact that those who teach boys should be aware of and strive to correct. Boys must be trained to realize that reading can be enjoyable, is not a feminine pastime, and that there are materials that boys like to read—even if those materials are not commonly taught in a classroom. To do this a teacher or librarian must provide examples of male reading and work on the collection of materials offered to boys to make sure that the types of literature they enjoy, such as non-fiction and action tales are available. The literature must be provided in a format that boys will enjoy and should be displayed in the library in a place that boys will access.

Through the research gathered here, a teacher or librarian can see the necessity of helping boys to enjoy reading so that they can succeed in the classroom and in life. Once the necessity is ingrained, the ideas on how to help boys can be employed. Boys need special attention in the area of reading. While boys may read if they are forced to do so, they will not enjoy the task under this circumstance and will not continue. Therefore, a boy must learn to enjoy reading in order to maintain the habit into the future. Western literature is a prime example of a medium to help boys to enjoy reading and the prevalence of such literature will keep them reading for long into their future, a goal that teachers, parents, and librarians have for all of their children.

Since the interview with my brother Shane last school year, he has exemplified even more of these findings. He is now in sixth grade and still does not enjoy novels. He would rather read anything sports-related to gain information about his interests. He reads the sports section in the newspaper almost every day and reads non-fiction accounts of his favorite sports stars from the library. The reading that he enjoys is not taught in

classrooms, and is still not encouraged by his school librarian, but he hopes that they will soon become more aware of the necessity to promote reading that boys enjoy so that other boys can see that their reading habits are valid as he can see that his are.

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