

Deconstructing the “Books for Boys” Discourse

BRAVERMAN ESSAY 2014

Literacy rates are dropping! We’re failing our boys! We must get them reading! This is a battle cry all too often heard in both the popular media and the education and library science literature. It is inspired by numerous research studies that document boys’ apparent disinterest in reading and the resultant gap in boys’ and girls’ literacy rates. What comes out of that research, and the subsequent panic, is what is referred to as the “Books for Boys” discourse, which outlines what boys like to read (content and format), why they are not reading, and ways to encourage them to read more. This paper will provide a critical analysis of the “Books for Boys” discourse and deconstruct some of the gendered assumptions that the discourse relies upon and reinforces.

While I will critique aspects of this discourse, it is not my intention to contradict the widely cited statistics about the gap in literacy rates. Nor do I wish to diminish the importance of literacy, or argue against encouraging boys and young men to read; rather, I seek to provide some alternate perspectives and practices so that we might encourage and support *all* children in their reading practices, regardless of their biological sex or their gender identity. The paper will begin with an introduction to the “Books for Boys” discourse before moving into a discussion of the ways that the discourse obscures multiple forms of masculinity and reinforces sexist and misogynistic attitudes. From there I will address the need to expand definitions of reading and literacy, and the role that the “Books for Boys” discourse plays in this conversation. Finally, the

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■ KEYWORDS: YA readers advisory; Books for boys; Literacy.

paper will conclude with an analysis of the impact of the “Books for Boys” discourse on girls.

The “Books for Boys” Basics

The “Books for Boys” discourse is not a new phenomenon. In fact, concern about boys’ reading practices and literacy skills, as expressed in LIS literature, dates back almost to the beginning of the public librarianship profession. Stauffer traces this history from the concerns about fiction reading in the early 1900s, to the comic book bans of the 1940s and 50s, through to the proliferation of literacy statistics and research in the 1990s. Her historical overview demonstrates that not only has the general panic about boys and reading not changed significantly in over one hundred years, but neither has the practices suggested for addressing this issue. These often include promoting books about boys’ interests, boys-only or boy-centric programming, and using adult men as mentors or role models. Even a cursory review of contemporary articles on boys’ literacy will demonstrate that these are still very much the recommended best practices for encouraging boys to read (Ford; Henry et al.; Jones and Fiorelli). In addition to literacy statistics, LIS and education literature draws heavily on personal anecdotes of successful experiences of promoting reading to boys by adapting or creating programs that better fit their needs and interests. Unfortunately, many of these sources are very repetitive and formulaic. As a result, few seem to contribute anything new to the conversation. They also frequently discuss boys as a homogenous category and rely on very narrow stereotypes and assumptions about boys and masculinities, as will be discussed throughout this paper.

Constructing and Erasing Masculinities

The cornerstone of the “Books for Boys” discourse is, of course, the books themselves. There are numerous reading lists of books intended to appeal to boys. Much like the articles on boys’ reading practices, there is very little to differentiate one book list from the next; the titles themselves may vary but the subject matter tends to remain the same. Most of these lists include books, fiction and non-fiction, about sports, the military, reptiles, historical figures, comics, horror, and science fiction (Ford 19). The books are often mysteries or adventures, and focus more on plot than character development. They also do not usually include a prominent relationship- or romance-based narrative. While I do not take issue with the creation of reading lists in general, I do disagree with practice of labeling lists specifically “for boys.” Olson, who brings a feminist perspective to classification theory, argues that “naming... is not simply representation of information, but also the construction of that

information” (6). Reading lists for boys therefore not only represent the types of books that interest boys, but they also actively participate in the reification of the types of books that boys are supposed to like. The lists are as prescriptive as they are descriptive.

With a few exceptions, the majority of the sources cited throughout this paper treat boys as a homogenous category. Parkhurst, one of the exceptions, acknowledges that “adolescent boys are, of course, a diverse group, with widely varied interests, so it is a mistake to assume that all would be interested in the same types of reading material” (16). This diversity is rarely represented in the book lists, despite the fact that it would be very easy to do so. For example, a list of sports books could include a book about a male athlete in a predominately female sport, such as dance or figure skating. While it is likely that this book might not appeal to the majority of young men, it sends an important message to a select population that they can still be “one of the guys” if they want to be, and that their particular embodiment of masculinity is no less valuable and valid than that of a football player or skateboarder. This type of minor change could mean a great deal to a minority group of boys and takes nothing away from the majority.

One currently popular source for reading recommendations for boys is noted children’s author Jon Scieszka’s website GuysRead.com. Overall, I found Scieszka’s website to be a good resource. There are reading lists for a variety of ages, interests, and reading levels, all compiled by prominent male authors, illustrators, and other members of the literary world, including Gordon Korman, David Yoo, and Mo Willems. Books are grouped into more traditional categories, such as “Historical fiction” and “Biography/Autobiography,” as well as catchy, humorous categories like “People being transformed into animals” or “Outer space, but without aliens.” However, I couldn’t help but wonder: Are there no gay and transgender guys in Scieszka’s world? Do young gay and transgender men not need to be encouraged to read as much as their straight and cisgender peers? Although I did not do an exhaustive search of every title on the site, I was not able to find any of the most commonly cited examples of juvenile or young adult literature with LGBTQ content. It would be very easy to include authors like David Levithan, Alex Sanchez, and Brett Hartinger, all of whom are male authors who write books with gay male protagonists. This exclusion further reinforces the idea that young gay and transgender men are the “Other,” outside the margins of Scieszka’s “guys.” It also implies that (straight) guys would not or should not want to read about their gay and transgender peers.

There are, however, some voices within the literature that do not feel it is necessary to acknowledge the boys on the margins; rather we should be speaking in generalities and addressing an undifferentiated category of “boys” as a whole. In a strongly worded editorial, St. Jarre, a high school teacher from Maine, explains his position:

A disclaimer to head off the most tired and least effective of arguments: ... Yes, there are male students who love the most thoughtful, emotionally impacting sorts of titles. However, we cannot have a discussion like this in the margins; we have to look at greater parts of the student population (15).

In contrast to St. Jarre, I argue that statistically infrequent does not equal insignificant. The boys on the margins are no less deserving of our attention than the boys in the majority. There needs to be a balance between reaching out to the majority of boys without excluding the boys on the margins and without reinforcing narrow, prescriptive definitions of masculinity.

Sexism and Misogyny

In addition to the homogenization of masculinity, there is also an underlying current of sexism and misogyny that pervades much of the “Books for Boys” literature. The most obvious example is the assumption that Tschetter describes in a recent blog post on YALSA’s *The Hub* as the “Boys don’t like books with girl protagonists” adage. She counters this stereotype with anecdotes about several young men who are avidly reading books such as Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*, both of which feature female protagonists, are written from the female perspective, and include prominent romantic and emotionally evocative narratives. Frustrated with the gendering of books, the literary editor of a United Kingdom-based newspaper, *The Independent*, recently announced that the newspaper would no longer be reviewing any book that was specifically targeted at one gender as it is demeaning to all children (Guest). The presumed correlation between reading and femininity is often cited as a barrier to encouraging boys to read (Jones and Fiorelli). Haupt asks, “Are issues of masculinity actively preventing young men from becoming readers?” (19). It is interesting to note, though, that the immediate response is to make reading seem more masculine through male role models and “Books for Boys” reading lists, rather than to question the broader culture that devalues femininity. The misogyny that underlies aspects of the “Books for Boys” discourse is sometimes more overt, as evidenced by the title of St. Jarre’s article *Don’t Blame the Boys: We’re Giving them Girly Books*. Cited above for his lack of concern for diverse masculinities, St. Jarre also asserts that there are too many female teachers who are choosing touchy feely, girl-centric books that will not appeal to male students. Although St. Jarre’s opinion is just one of many, and an extreme one at that, it still represents a certain perspective that can be found throughout the “Books for Boys” discourse.

Sexism and misogyny are sometimes also evident in the recommended books, as well as librarians’ reasons for promoting them to young men. For

example, Parkhurst argues that there is a need for more books with dialogue that actually sounds like boys and young men. There needs to be more slang, more swear words, more contractions and sentence fragments. And I am inclined to agree with him. It is both disappointing and off-putting to read books where the characters sound inauthentic and contrived.

However, I personally find it very hard to accept Parkhurst's inclusion of an excerpt that contains words such as "pussy" and "bitch" (22) as a positive example of the way young men talk. I do not mean to imply that all books should be wholesome and didactic, nor do I think we should be censoring books because of controversial content. That being said, I also do not believe we should be explicitly endorsing blatantly misogynistic language as a positive attribute of a book. Parkhurst seems to dismiss this oppressive language as just something boys do, which is particularly interesting given that, throughout his article, he discusses the ways that language constructs gender. Regardless of the book's literary merit, would we as librarians not be reinforcing misogynistic forms of masculinity by promoting this book for having so-called authentic guy speak?

Expanding Definitions of Reading and Literacy

Although aspects of the "Books for Boys" discourse are problematic, it is not entirely without merit. In fact, one of the central arguments potentially has significant, positive implications for all youth; that is, proponents of the "Books for Boys" discourse argue for expanded definitions of literacy and reading. This argument comes out of numerous research studies that have concluded that boys are in fact reading, they are just not necessarily reading the types of materials found on library shelves or in school curricula (Cox; Henry et al.; Jones and Fiorelli; Kenney). So what are boys reading? According to this research, boys are reading magazines, newspapers, video game manuals, websites, comic books, and more.

Expanding definitions of literacy and reading challenges the reader vs. non-reader dichotomy. Drawing on research about teens' discussions of libraries and reading, Snowball concludes that even youth who did not consider themselves readers could still describe their personal reading preferences and recount experiences of enjoyable reading. Would Snowball's participants have reconsidered their non-reader identity if they were provided with a broader definition of reading? According to Rennie and Patterson, many students do not consider themselves readers because their "understanding of themselves as readers is based on their experiences of what counts as reading in schools" (54). Definitions of reading have not caught up to the changes in information and communication technologies; as a result, Internet blogs, online newspapers, emails, video game narratives, and text messages are rarely included in analyses

of young people's literacy practices and skills. In response, prominent children's author Gordon Korman observes:

My 14-year-old video game-addicted son is constantly surfing the Internet, searching for “cheats” to help him with his games. I love watching him—he's using the resources at his disposal to find the information he needs to do a better job at the task at hand. There could be no better definition of research (167).

This is an important statement because it not only validates youths' cultural practices, rather than perpetuating a moral panic about violent and/or mind numbing entertainment, but it also positively contributes to a conversation about what literacy and reading looks like in the 21st century.

What about the Girls?

The “Books for Boys” discourse has implications for girls as well. Not only does it tell boys what they *should* be reading, it potentially tells girls what they *shouldn't* read. Moeller, who researched teens and graphic novels, explains that when asked if they read graphic novels, girls frequently replied, “Those are boy books” (477). The “girls read and boys don't” assumption that characterizes the “Books for Boys” discourse, and literature on young people's reading practices more broadly, means that there has been significantly less discussion of what girls are actually reading. Certainly there is less panic about it. The results of studies on boys' and girls' reading practices are generally used to demonstrate that we need to encourage boys to read more, and we specifically need to encourage them to read more fiction. However, what we are not seeing, or at least not nearly as often, is concern about encouraging girls to read more non-fiction and informational literature. Doiron's study of the types of books that boys and girls checked out of libraries revealed that both boys and girls are borrowing fiction but that the vast majority of informational books were borrowed by boys. Similarly, Stauffer observes that the 2006 edition of ALA's Celebrity READ posters depicted a noticeably more diverse variety of male role models than female role models. She explains that “although the majority of all celebrities were either entertainers or athletes, none of the fourteen females represented any other achievement, while males included a firefighter, a conservationist, a chef, a physicist, and multi-billionaire Bill Gates” (416). Where, then, is the concern about the quality and/or diversity of the material girls are reading?

Additionally, the “Books for Boys” discourse is predicated on the belief that we need to encourage boys to read, presumably because they are not already doing so, which creates the automatic association between boys and the term

“reluctant reader.” While it is certainly true that many boys are reluctant readers, treating the two categories—boys and reluctant readers—as synonymous obscures the fact that many girls are also reluctant readers. Korman observes:

We speak of this archetypal guy reader who radiates an almost passive-aggressive challenge to teachers, librarians, and writers who dare to engage him. But in reality, this kid isn’t necessarily male...That could be the ultimate conundrum in addressing the issue of the male reader: Right when you think you’ve got a handle on the problem, you realize that some of those reluctant boys just might be girls (168).

For this reason, it is important that discussions of reluctant readers in general do not automatically presume a male reader. Gruenthal’s description of YALSA’s Quick Picks lists successfully accomplishes this by using terms like “teens” and “kids” rather than gender categories. The article also includes a definition of reluctant readers that clearly includes girls and boys.

Conclusion

I recently had the opportunity to listen to a prominent member of the library community discuss some of his concerns about library services for teens. Throughout this talk, the presenter frequently spoke in gendered absolutes, as if “boy” and “girl” or “masculine” and “feminine” were concrete, homogenous categories and descriptors. At one point in his lecture, he emphatically asserted that libraries need to do more for boys. One of his examples was that there are too many girl magazines and not enough boy magazines. What he meant was there are too many magazines on fashion and celebrities and not enough magazines about video games and extreme sports. I have included this anecdote by way of conclusion for my paper because I believe it is illustrative of my overall concerns about the “Books for Boys” discourse, particularly the ways that the discourse relies upon and reinforces narrow gender stereotypes. However, I have also included the anecdote because it can be used to demonstrate a simple way to shift the highly gendered conversations and still have the same desired effect. By this I mean that the speaker could have described these magazines based on their content, rather than imposing gendered labels, which would have produced the same outcome—a more diverse magazine selection—without reinforcing divisive gender stereotypes. If we are truly going to allow children and youth to self-select their reading material, as many of the sources cited throughout this paper suggest, then we need to move away from the prescriptive gendering of that material.

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