Boys and Storytelling,
Guest Editors’ Introduction

Jonathan A. Allan and Cliff Leek

A boy's story is the best that is ever told.
—Charles Dickens

This special issue of Boyhood Studies takes two terms—boys and storytelling—and positions them alongside one another. In some ways, we take seriously Charles Dickens’s oft-quoted notion that “A boy’s story is the best that is ever told.” What does it mean to take the stories of boys and boys’ stories seriously? Are they really among the “best that [are] ever told”? In the space of education, and with declining literacy rates among boys, what does it mean to study storytelling? Or, what might it mean, to borrow a phrase from Carol Mavor (2008), to “read boyishly”? In this special issue, we hoped to bring together scholars working on the relationship between boys and storytelling, to consider the kinds of stories that boys are told, and to also consider the stories that they are not told. Our goal was to consider the importance of storytelling in boys’ lives as well as the importance of the storytelling of boys’ lives. That is, we were interested in boys as both real and embodied, as well as in the fictional boys that populate the literary universe. The issue presented here brings together a host of perspectives that all work to explore and expand the literary and cultural study of boys and storytelling.

On the one hand, it is easy to admit that boys are all over the literary universe: Huck Finn, Tom Swift, Jim Hawkins, and Piggy to name but a few. But, on the other hand, the stories that are told can be limiting. For instance, two in five boys aged 14 to 19 believe that society expects them to be aggressive or violent, and three in four report feeling pressured to appear strong (Plan International 2018). This should come as no surprise given even a cursory review of what we know about children’s media. Media consumed by boys represents boys and men as having less emotional range, engaging in more risky behaviors, doing less parenting, and both perpetrating and experiencing more violence than their female peers (Geena Davis Institute 2020). And the stories that are missing are just as important. The TV shows that are most watched by boys have virtually no representa-
tion of characters with disabilities or LGBTQIA+ characters (ibid.). James Smith, an author in this issue, takes on an intersection of these dynamics by drawing attention to the reality that even in LGBTQIA+-inclusive picture books, the messaging around masculinity is limited and normative.

In some cases, such as that of Harry Potter, readers can “grow” with the boys, while in others, the boys hardly seem to grow at all, as is the case of Frank and Joe Hardy, or they quite literally refuse to grow up, like Peter Pan. Boys become interesting characters through which to consider how children become men or refuse to become men; additionally, they can be studied for the ways in which they learn and embody masculinity, so often tied to their bodies by authors writing from the vantage of adulthood. Indeed, these books, in which readers grow with the heroes, become important books in the life of the boy becoming a man. Some grown readers may have increasing discomfort with the stories they loved as boys, so how then does one make sense of those books in adulthood? Does one abandon them or still cherish them? These questions are attended to by members of the editorial board in the Commentary Pieces on formative books of their own childhoods.

Many of the authors in this issue take on the question of whose stories are told and how. In Heather Moore Roberson’s “Cocoabsent? Representations of Race and Boyhood in Infant and Toddler Media,” readers are invited to consider a children’s literature that is not always obvious or recognized, namely, media for the youngest of children, infants and toddlers. In this article, the popular program *Cocomelon* is considered and readers are invited to think about how race is working (or not) in this program. In another framing of the question of whose stories are told and how, in “Beyond (Hyper)Masculinity: Images of Boyhood in Croatian Young Adult Novels in English Translation,” Marija Todorova calls our attention to novels from outside the Anglo-American context, with a focus on language and boyhood. Todorova specifically addresses how translation can shape, or even transform, the meaning and impact of stories told to and about boys.

Meanwhile, Jennifer Dubose rightly calls attention to bodies, corporeality, and fatness in “Fat Boys in Gym Class: An Examination of Athleticism in Young Adult Novels Featuring Fat, Cisgender Male Protagonists.” It is easy to think of boys as athletic, rough and tumble, sporty, but what of the fat boy? Drawing on critical fat studies and ideas of boyhood, Dubose carefully charts new territory for scholars working on boyhood, athleticism, and bodies. Jeana Moody provides a critique of the popular film *Mune: Guardian of the Moon*, which attends to the ways in which the film replicates the normative, rather than challenging those norms.
In the next article, Jennifer Helgren turns attention to girls’ series fiction and focuses on how authors construct and represent boyhoods in books that are ostensibly written for girls. How might a girl reading these books imagine and understand boyhood as seen in these novels? What each of these articles does—and the same is true of all the articles—is call attention to the figure of the reader. Who is reading these stories? In some cases, parents might read these books to children, and in other cases, young readers might read the stories. Regardless, however, there is an active readership that does not take the distanced position of a scholar, but that of an actual reader. Too often, perhaps, we forget the role of real readers—neither ideal nor implied readers, but real, actual readers. The readers for whom these books were written.

Two articles in this special issue focus specifically on issues of sexuality, with a particular focus on queerness, and they both challenge the assumption that simply representing queer stories is enough. Emma Salt-Raper’s article, “‘I’m Going to Be Straight, Just Like How My Father Would’ve Wanted’: Adolescent Male Sexuality, Shame, and Symptoms of Mental Illness in Adam Silvera’s *More Happy than Not* and John Corey Whaley’s *Highly Illogical Behavior*,” demonstrates how certain stories can simultaneously empower and marginalize queer boys. Meanwhile, in James Smith’s “But the Boys Are Still Bullies: A Typology of Supporting Characters in Queer-Themed Picture Books,” there is a focus on the reality that while the books may be progressive in terms of representation, they still maintain ideas of masculinity that are well established. Boys are often still bullies in ostensibly progressive or inclusive works.

While it does not focus squarely on sexuality, there are some resonances to be found between the above articles and Brian Frehner’s “‘Hand-Me-Down Habitats’: Bicycles, Youth, and Open Space in the 1970s,” which brings together boys, bicycles, and both the natural and built environments. One of the many things that Frehner’s work does is illustrate the roles that boys can play in shaping their own stories through performance and risk.

Some authors discuss the relationship between storytelling to and about boys and contemporary theories of masculinity. In “Making Men out of Boys: Revisiting Connell through Twenty-First-Century Indian Picture Books,” Sridipa Dandapat and Priyanka Tripathi rely on Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity to analyze contemporary Indian picture books that challenge traditional representations of masculinity. “The Paradox of Gender Performativity in *Winnie-the-Pooh*” by Krishnapriya Kamalakshan takes a new perspective on the classic tales of Winnie-the-Pooh by recogniz-
ing them as both stories consumed by boys and, as they are inspired by the real-life play of A. A. Milne’s son, as stories about a boy as well. Kamalakshan’s work uses Butler’s notion of gender performativity to make sense of both the story being told and the boy who inspired it.

This special issue of Boyhood Studies is neither the first word nor the last on the subject of boyhood and stories. Boyhood Studies only five years ago considered this theme with a special issue titled “Contemporary Boys’ Literacies and Boys’ Literatures,” edited by Garth Stahl and Cynthia Brock. Their approach was certainly more focused on the intersection between boys, literacy, and schooling, but what unites these issues is a general concern for the relationship between boys and literature. Helping boys to become more literate has “remained elusive,” Stahl and Brock wrote in their introduction (2017: 3).

In our issue, we move toward a focus on the texts themselves and especially the relationship between a reader and the text. Of course, much work remains to be researched and written, and thus we end by admitting that our special issue is incomplete. But this should not be read as a failure. Instead, the field requires further research, and we hope to see that research appear in future issues of Boyhood Studies. There is much that remains to be written about boys and fiction, including close literary readings of canonical texts, such as some of those considered by members of the editorial board in the closing pages of this special issue, where authors consider texts like the Boy Scouts Handbook. But also, and importantly, the field will need to continue to recognize the plurality of boyhoods that exist in the worlds of literature and film—not just able-bodied, cisgender boyhoods, but also those that push at the boundaries, those that challenge normative ideas—as well as recognizing the importance of cross-cultural, comparative, and global studies of boyhood. Moreover, the study of boyhoods, broadly understood and in the particular space of storytelling, may well benefit from an expansive theoretical approach, one that brings together not only the insights of critical studies of men and masculinities, with its feminist origins, but also affect theory, psychoanalysis, queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial and decolonial theories. Simply put, if we genuinely believe, as most scholars of masculinities do, that we ought to be thinking in the plural, perhaps so too should our theoretical approaches, our methods and methodologies. We end this special issue with members of the Boyhood Studies editorial board commenting on and reflecting on influential texts from their own childhoods and on how these texts played a part in their personal or professional lives.
Cliff Leek, PhD, is a Program Manager in the Equity & Inclusion Division of the Oregon Health Authority. His background is as an educator and researcher with over 10 years of experience developing and leading programs related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizational settings. In the past he has published, consulted, and developed training curricula on masculinity, whiteness, workplace inequalities, and gender-based violence. He has previously served as a Prevention Specialist with the Oregon Attorney General’s Sexual Assault Task Force, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Northern Colorado, President of the American Men’s Studies Association, and a Trainer/Organizational Development Consultant with Oregon Health & Science University. Dr. Leek holds a BA in U.S. Race and Gender Studies from Willamette University and an MA and a PhD in Sociology from Stony Brook University. He is also the author of Boy Oh Boy, a children’s book that encourages a reimagining of stereotypes about what it means to be a man.

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References


