Abstract: In this piece, I reflect on superhero comic books I read in my childhood and adolescence, noting that as I collected and read stories featuring the character known as the Silver Surfer, I slowly began to realize that the character’s traits, as established in the first comic in which he appeared, seemed to change in comics published later. In searching for explanations for these changes, I began to pay attention to a comic’s credits, recognizing that different writers and artists understood the character in different ways and often felt no obligation to maintain a consistent approach. I eventually realized that a comic’s credits sometimes misrepresented the labor invested by each of the story’s creators. This long process led to an ongoing interest—in both my writing and teaching—in the ways that our interpretation of a story and its characters can be enriched by understanding the conditions under which it was produced.

Keywords: comic books, editorial control, masculinity, production, serial storytelling

My work on nineteenth-century American culture explores how authors conceived of boyhood as a crucial time for the formation of a boy’s masculinity and the disciplinary methods they believed were necessary to bring it about. Looking at children’s and adult literature, as well as pedagogical writing, I explore what authors told boys about who they were and the kind of men they needed to become. Some of my essays in academic journals and a chapter in my book Boys at Home: Discipline, Masculinity, and “The Boy-Problem” in Nineteenth-Century American Literature focus on reading as a form of discipline, exploring cultural codes of boyhood mas-
culinity and adult masculinity as presented in short stories, novels, poems, and advice manuals.

As a young reader, almost all the stories I read came from the pages of comic books. The character I most admired was a superhero named the Silver Surfer. He first appeared in the Marvel comic *Fantastic Four* #48 (Lee and Kirby 1966), the first issue of a three-part story that would come to be known as “The Galactus Trilogy.” I didn’t learn about him until well over a decade later, when I bought a *Fantastic Four* issue that also featured the character. Finding him interesting in a way other male superheroes were not, I decided to collect all his appearances, eventually buying “The Galactus Trilogy” issues in the early 1980s.

Though I could not then have put it in these terms, the character, especially as he appeared in “The Trilogy,” seemed to embody a compelling kind of manhood, perhaps even its ideal form. He was powerful, heroic, and troubled, and something about his strange, almost featureless face suggested an appealing unreadability, a sense that he could not be fully understood by others. Though willing to help those in need, he seemed stoically above it all. Unlike the many superheroes who joked with supervillains during battles or bickered with fellow superheroes, he maintained the noble distance of a pulpy Byronic hero.

As I acquired other Marvel comics featuring the Silver Surfer, I compared their portrayal of the character to that in “The Trilogy.” Although his appearance didn’t change, he sometimes acted or spoke differently. In his first solo series, which ran from 1968 to 1970, he lost some of the aura of unknowability that I had first found attractive. After reading several later comics in which he teamed up with other superheroes, I was again puzzled. His portrayal in “The Galactus Trilogy” made him seem like someone who needed to operate alone. But working within the demands of a team comic, he became just another generic male adventure hero. Because of these shifts, I began paying attention to something that would affect the way I’ve read ever since. When looking at a story’s depiction of male characters and gender, I want to understand who made it, when it was produced, and under what conditions.

The first page of a Marvel comic seems to answer these questions definitively; it lists the creators and the role each played, such as writer, artist, letterer, or editor. But the reality is far more complicated. The writing in the Silver Surfer’s early *Fantastic Four* appearances is credited to Stan Lee, who was then Marvel’s editor, and the art is credited to Jack Kirby. The fact that Kirby created the character and co-plotted the story with Lee goes
unacknowledged. Once I began reading interviews with comics creators, and the Silver Surfer’s creators specifically, I learned that credits for “The Trilogy” were not accurate. Comic book credits were typically written by editors like Lee, and those in this era’s Marvel comic books misrepresented the labor contributed by a story’s creators. For many years, I thought Lee was the sole creator and writer of the character I admired, and I undervalued Kirby’s central role.

Though Lee also wrote the character’s first solo series, Kirby was not involved. He was, I later learned, unhappy about this, convinced that Lee would weaken the character by making him less godlike and more like the typical Marvel hero. When I went back and read the comics in publication order, I saw that as the character moved further away from Kirby’s hand, it became less like the Silver Surfer of “The Trilogy,” the unusual character who first interested me. I slowly, imperceptibly at first, began to see comic book characters not so much as “people”—who, even as they change, seem to possess some kind of “essential” nature—but as something more like “properties,” malleable artistic concepts whose traits can be changed in any way a comic’s editor sees fit. Mainstream comics like those released by Marvel are often an “editorial creation” as much as (or more than) the creation of an artist or writer; the company and the editor control the characters, their traits, and the direction their narratives will take.

When I teach prose fiction and comics, we often talk about character types and gender conventions, keeping in mind questions of editorial and publishing practices employed at the time the work was released. Tracing the ever-shifting treatment of characters like the Silver Surfer in serial formats like comic books lets readers explore the ways that different teams of editors, writers, and artists present and revise them, sometimes subtly and often dramatically, in response to changing notions of masculinity in the culture at large. Reading and rereading “The Galactus Trilogy” in conjunction with other comics set in motion habits of interpretation that continue to help me (and my students) look at stories and representations of masculinity in productive ways.

References


Books of the Heart

Kenneth Kidd

Abstract: What might reflecting on favorite books from our childhood tell us about our past and current selves? This short meditation on that question first considers reading memoirs and experiments in rereading, and then reviews some favorite books from the author’s own childhood, speculating on their appeal and potential significance for identity consolidation.

Keywords: childhood books, memory, reading, rereading

What might we learn by revisiting favorite stories from childhood? And what does it mean to think of them later as formative? These questions, posed to members of the editorial board of Boyhood Studies, come up peri-
odically in my area of research, children’s literature studies, which has seen a number of recent experiments in rereading. What we read in childhood, even texts that aren’t children’s books, can seem influential in the life arc and in what Alison Waller (2019: 53) calls the ongoing “reading scene,” “the lab in which memories can be sorted, developed, and retouched.”

Memoirs, very popular these days, often present the self as an assemblage of texts, the sum of what we read and especially the reading that we love. Eric Jager (2000) tells us that this book-self idea dates at least to the Middle Ages and its metaphor of the “book of the heart,” modeled on the codex itself. The notion that we are the books we take to heart is also the legacy of modern developmental theory gentled by more spatial or synchronic ideas about time and play. Rereading, then, becomes an exercise in personal excavation. In *The Child That Books Built*, for example, Francis Spufford (2002) revisits his favorite books from childhood and adolescence in the hopes that such an experiment might yield insight into the adult who grew from the book-built child. In Spufford’s case, he realizes that obsessive childhood reading was a way to navigate the family pain around the mortal illness of his sister, and he makes observations about why he was attracted to some books more than others. Another interesting venture in rereading is Laura Miller’s (2008) *The Magician’s Book*, which focuses on the Narnia chronicles of C. S. Lewis (and in a fun coincidence, Spufford has written Narnia fan fiction). Miller loved the series as a child, but felt betrayed when she later grasped its Christian allegorical frame. Miller rereads to find alternative ways into Lewis’s series, emphasizing non-Christian aspects of the books that align with her identity as a nonbeliever. Here, rereading is less about adult self-discovery and more about remaking the text of memory.

Such accounts of rereading have been on my mind since I was asked to think about memorable books from my youth. I’m skeptical when it comes to self-knowledge in general, maybe because my memory feels so faulty (or because my unconscious seems such an effective repression machine). Even the most detailed and conscientious exercise in rereading points to the slipperiness of memory and the difficulty of self-understanding. Margaret Mackey (2016) underscores those points in her magisterial “auto-bibliography” *One Child Reading*. I think, too, of Erica Rand’s (1995) *Barbie’s Queer Accessories*, which notes that queer-identified adults can be eager to recollect queer Barbie play in childhood, only to bump up against a memory archive of heteronormative play. And then there’s Pierre Bayard’s (2007) hilarious *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read*, reminding us that even when we have read something, we typically misremember it (when we don’t forget it...
entirely). That's why rereading can be so uncomfortable, unless we reread the same book(s) across the years, perpetually recalibrating book and self.

Having expressed a typically academic skepticism in the form of a lit review, then, what books did I love, and do they tell me anything about myself? I adored The Great Brain series by John Dennis Fitzgerald, set in Utah at the end of the nineteenth century, about a smart and mischievous boy who routinely outwits the adults around him, told from the perspective of his admiring if exasperated younger brother. In terms of boys’ series, I also liked the Alfred Hitchcock & the Three Investigators series, its principal attraction being the secret lair of our young investigators, a camper with secret entrances hidden inside a junkyard. It seems I favored stories about smart boys, boy scientists, detectives, and inventors, such as the Danny Dunn series and the Encyclopedia Brown books. (There were no books featuring boy scholars or literary critics.) A stand-alone favorite was Andy Buckram’s Tin Men by Carol Ryrie Brink (1966), about a very inventive boy who builds four robots from spare parts around his family’s farm. The farm floods during a storm, but the robots are electrified and come fully alive, helping Andy rescue creatures from the flood.

Thinking further back, my favorite picture book is also a story about boyish heroics during a flood, Alexander and the Magic Mouse, written by Martha Sanders (1969) and illustrated by Philippe Fix. The story features the Old Lady who lives at the top of a hill with a menagerie of animals: a Brindle London Squatting Cat, a Yak, and the two titular creatures, an alligator named Alexander and the Magic Mouse (“a strange household, but they got on very well”). One day the Mouse prophesizes that it will soon rain for thirty days and thirty nights, and the town below will flood if its riverbank isn’t fortified. The rain begins. The Old Lady wants to send a written message of warning, but the only resident of her household who can navigate the rising waters and reach town is Alexander. However, everyone he approaches with the message (safely stored in his mouth) flees in terror, and he cries big (crocodile?) tears in the rain. Finally, a little boy accepts the message—accepts Alexander—and the town is saved after frantic sandbagging. Following a near brush with death, because apparently alligators can catch cold in the rain (who knew?), Alexander rallies to a hero’s welcome. Alexander and the Magic Mouse does seem tailor-made for little queer, animal-loving, Florida-destined Kenneth. I loved the interspecies family, misunderstood Alexander, and the scenario of living away from other people. Was the book formative? It’s hard to say, the usual chicken and
egg question, but it certainly resonated. At the least, I can say it affirmed certain personality tendencies and preferences.

I had other favorite books across the years, some of which seem now to point to a queer boy reading self, and when I eventually discovered gay realistic fiction that correlation felt clearer. On balance, I do believe that childhood narrative encounters help shape who we become, and that in rereading we can get some clues into the continuities and divergences of subjectivity. That may be even truer for bookish people who wind up in academia. At the same time, self-knowledge can be a fickle thing, and it seems wise to respect as much as solve the mysteries of how and why we love the books we do.

Kenneth Kidd is Professor of English at the University of Florida. He is the author of three books, most recently Theory for Beginners: Children's Literature as Critical Thought, and coeditor of four essay volumes, most recently Queer as Camp: Essays on Summer, Style, and Sexuality.

References

The Fantasy of the Boy Scout Handbook

Jay Mechling

Abstract: Born and raised in Miami Beach, Florida, I opened my new Boy Scouts of America Handbook for Boys in the summer of 1956, at age 11, in anticipation of moving from the Cub Scouts to the Boy Scouts that fall. I found in those pages a fantasy that moved me deeply, a romantic fantasy of hiking and camping in the wilderness with a band of boy buddies. That fantasy has deep roots in fiction for boys and in books like the Handbook, appealing to the boy’s desire to escape the surveillance and control of adults and to fashion a community of “lost boys” in a wilderness setting ideal for strong male bonding in friendship.

Keywords: Boy Scouts, friendship, primitivism, romance, wilderness

I remember when I first opened my new copy of the Boy Scouts of America Handbook for Boys (1948) in the summer of 1956, when I had just turned 11. I had loved being a Cub Scout for three years and was more than ready to become a Boy Scout. Cub Scouts was fun, but mainly we did crafts projects and field trips—no hikes or campouts. I was ready for the next step.

You must understand that my anticipatory excitement stemmed in large part from the fact that I grew up in Miami Beach, Florida, a place about as unlike my imagined wilderness adventures as could be, though a true wilderness, the Everglades, lay just 20 miles or so west of my home. So I hunkered down in my bed the evening of the summer day I bought the Handbook, opened the inch-thick paperback, and began reading. Actually, the cover art on that edition of the Handbook already began my reverie. Three young men in Scout uniforms are sitting around a campfire chatting, and looming above them in the rising smoke from the campfire is the figure of a bare-chested Native American in a feathered headdress, looking solemn and, well, magical.

As I opened the Handbook, the text on the first page immediately grabbed my imagination:

Have you ever dreamed of hiking the wilderness trails that were worn down under the moccasin feet hundreds of years ago? Do you hear in your imagination the almost noiseless dip-dip of canoe paddles in that stream where you fish today?

Have you ever stopped to think of the pioneer wagons whose great wheels cut the tracks for our present roads?

You can follow those trails, those streams, and tracks! You can have your share of that adventure. (Boy Scouts of America 1948: 1).
The author then goes on to paint a picture of your own hiking and camping trip, armed with the wilderness skills—from building a shelter and cooking fire to reading the sky for the oncoming weather and reading the animal tracks along the hike—that you will learn as a Scout. In my imagination I was no longer lying in my bed in Miami Beach; I was out in the wilderness pictured in the words and line drawings page after page in that Handbook. I could hardly wait for the school year to begin that fall, when I would join my new Boy Scout troop and begin “the adventure.”

I did get to live the fantasy in subsequent years in my troop and at the South Florida Council Boy Scout camp in Sebring, first as a camper and then as a camp counselor. I became an Eagle Scout (the highest earned rank by a Boy Scout) in 1959 and was inducted into the Order of the Arrow, the elite camping fraternity within the Boy Scouts of America, in the fall of 1961. By then we were using a newer Boy Scout Handbook (1959), and while that later edition preserved some of the romantic rhetoric of that 1948 Handbook of my earliest years in the Scouts, it seemed to me to work too hard at being modern for the coming 1960s and what the authors thought were the reading skills of teenage boys then.

That was a loss, a misreading of boys’ nature and of their second nature, for you grab a boy’s heart and mind by weaving a fantasy story about a band of brothers away from civilization and away from the surveillance of adults (ignore the Scoutmaster in the fantasy!). That powerful fantasy pervades the fiction written by adults for boys. The roots of that formula narrative lie in Johann David Wyss’s The Swiss Family Robinson (1812)—which I had read at age eight or so—and, for Americans, it was given memorable energy by Mark Twain and the fantasies of Tom Sawyer and, especially, of Huck Finn, as Huck and Jim (the escaped slave) evade surveillance on their raft. By the late nineteenth century syndicate novelists were cranking out stories about Rover Boys and other fictional bands of boy brothers having adventures away from the cities and away from adult supervision and adult judgment. In 1910, the establishment of the Boy Scouts of America (the BSA) opened up a whole new audience for the novels, which very soon began featuring Boy Scouts as the central characters having adventures, solving mysteries, and so on. That 1948 Handbook tapped a long history of boys’ fantasies about being on their own in the wilderness (see Kidd 2004).

The fantasy of a band of boy brothers in the wilderness describes the escape not as an individual’s but, importantly, as a group’s, for what many pubescent and early adolescent boys need to find in the literature they read, if not in their everyday lives, is the experience of strong male bonding in
the friendship group. The fantasy is of boys in the wilderness, stripped of
the material culture of modern civilization, evoking the primitivism that
seemed to Americans late in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth
a more “authentic” existence than that found in modern life. The appeal
of a primitive life fueled the “American Indian crafts and lore” hobby be-
gun at the turn of the century, when real Native Americans had finally
been killed or restricted to reservations and imaginary, romantic views of
American Indians could populate popular culture in the United States and
in Europe (Mechling 1980b). “Indian Lore” was an element of the BSA
since its founding in 1910. Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946), one of
the founders of the BSA, had formed a youth movement, the Woodcraft
Indians, in 1902 and launched that movement with the success of his novel
Two Little Savages (1903). Seton wrote much of the first Handbook (1911)
and that same year published Rolf in the Woods: The Adventures of a Boy
Scout with Indian Quonab and Little Dog Skookum (1911). In another nov-
el, Boy Scouts in the Wilderness (Scoville 1920), two Boy Scouts—one white
and the other half-Native American—literally “strip” themselves of Western
clothing and live for a winter month naked in the wilderness to test the
survival skills they learned in the Scouts and from Native Americans.

And beyond the appeal of imagining belonging to a “tribe” of boys
living a primitive life in the wilderness, the Handbook and related stories
promised magic, promised experiences of ecstasy that would take the boy
out of the consciousness of everyday life into a transcendental consciousness
invoked by the wilderness itself and by the magic of the campfire (Mechling
1980a). My actual experience in Scouting, which I loved, pretty much de-

divered something like the fantasy promised by the Handbook.

As I write this reflection I find it difficult to express in words the strong
emotional experience I had upon my first reading of that new Handbook.
Pulling the Handbook from my bookshelves in preparation for writing this
piece and leafing through the pages, I understood intellectually the cultur-
al contexts that created that book, the history of the formula genre that
the book taps, and the social and historical contexts that led Americans in
1910 to seek a more “authentic” existence. I was not prepared, though, for
the feelings that the book evoked while looking through it again. Ameri-
can culture created the collective, public “meanings” of that Handbook, but
the book’s meaning to the pubescent or adolescent boy reading it also has
a personal, private, individual meaning. The feminist sociologist and psy-
choanalyst Nancy J. Chodorow urges us to describe and analyze both the
individual and cultural meanings of an experience, and for the individual,
that includes the “multiple emotional and cognitive meanings” of our experiences. Chodorow privileges the emotional meanings over the cognitive ones, emotional meanings we can discover in the “unconscious fantasies” that we absorb from our experiences (introjection) and that we project onto the external world (Chodorow 1999: 21; see also Mechling 2019).

I realize now that it all began for me with that *Handbook* cover art.

I had male friends at age 11, but the three Boy Scouts on the cover, sitting around a glowing campfire with the imposing image of a bare-chested American Indian rising in the smoke, triggered the fantasy that the words in the pages of the open book went on to describe. Those three young men were (in my imagination) experiencing a strong bond of male friendship of the sort I craved and expected to experience camping with friends in the wilderness. In retrospect I also see in that cover art a suggestion of the non-sexual but nonetheless homoerotic dimension of adolescent male friendship, a topic I have explored elsewhere when writing about male friendship (Mechling 2016, 2021).

As Stephen King writes in his novella *The Body* (1982), as fine an account of adolescent male friendship as you will find in the literature, “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, did you?” At age 16 I began to drift away from Scouting, and to this day I grieve for the loss of the male friendship I experienced around the campfire when I was an adolescent.

---

**Jay Mechling** is Professor Emeritus of American Studies at the University of California, Davis, and has published widely on the folk cultures of children, especially of boys and young men, as represented by his books *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (University of Chicago Press, 2001) and *Soldier Snapshots: Masculinity, Play and Friendship in the Everyday Photographs of Men in the American Military* (University Press of Kansas, 2021).  

---

**References**


“I Never Had Any Friends Later on Like the Ones I Had When I Was Twelve. Jesus, Does Anyone?”

Reflections on Learning about Boyhood through Stand by Me

Victoria Cann

Abstract: This piece offers reflections on the 1986 movie Stand by Me, drawing on some of the main themes and contextualizing them in relation to my own childhood as a girl growing up in the 1990s. I reflect on how in my rewatch of the movie, I was struck by the ways that the class positions of the boys echoed my own experiences of transition and liberation through education. I also reflect on the significance of seeing boys cry and be scared—feelings that the boys at my school were policed out of performing in public.

Keywords: boyhood, film, masculinity, representation, working-class
Stand by Me (Rob Reiner, 1986) is a story about friendship, growing up, grief, and bravery, but perhaps most importantly it is a story of boyhood. Released in the year of my birth, 1986, it was also a story that was ever-present in the household in which I grew up, and popular catchphrases from the film like “I don’t shut up. I grow up,” “when I look at you, I throw up,” and “that’s so funny I forgot to laugh” were often uttered as sardonic responses by one of my two sisters or by myself. In this reflective piece I work through my own responses to the film Stand by Me, and how, as a cisgender girl growing up in an all-female household, the movie offered an important site for the representation of boyhood. In fact, in reengaging with the text now as an adult, I am struck by how significant this representation must have been for me as a child; the movie was perhaps the first time I had really seen the fullness of boys’ emotional capacity—boys were just like us, they cried, they laughed, they had soft and sharp edges, and they too choreographed dance routines and sang songs.

For those unfamiliar with the text, Stand by Me is a movie adapted from the 1982 novella The Body by Stephen King. Released in 1986 but set in 1959, the story follows four 12-year-old white boys (Vern, Chris, Gordie, and Teddy) from the small town of “Castle Rock,” Oregon, USA. As is common with coming-of-age movies (see Cann and Horton 2015), this is the boys’ last summer before they transition to different schools; the middle-class Gordie is expected to attend an academic institution, while the working-class Vern, Chris, and Teddy are expected to take a “shop” course in an institution more vocationally oriented. Despite being removed from these boys in a number of ways—gender, geography, time period, and family circumstance—I still related a lot to them. I was poor, I lived close to the countryside and often went out to play with friends, I had experienced familial loss, I liked to tell stories and go on adventures, and I too had anxieties for the future. And so what I want to do in this piece is reflect on the story that is told in Stand by Me, and offer a sense of how it brought with it a fuller understanding of what it meant (and means) to be a boy—especially for me as a girl growing up in the 1990s.

When coming to write this piece I rewatched Stand by Me, and despite the old VHS being replaced by a streaming service, the trailers and adverts removed, the crackled bits of the tape where we paused and rewound the film replaced with a neat and tidy copy provided by this digital age, I felt an instant hit of nostalgia. This little town in Oregon thousands of miles away from where I grew up, set in a time of which I had no experience, was still so familiar to me that I could feel it in my chest. Sari Knopp Biklen
(2004: 721) writes that “adults have memories of many events, feelings, and interactions that we bring with us and re-work when we research youth,” and so in my writing here I must be understood as an adult, looking back. For example, there is a sadness in the film that I know I identified at the time of being a girl—but only now can I see with the emotional maturity of being an adult that having lost my father as a preteen allowed me to relate to the pain that Gordie was feeling at the loss of his brother. As an adult, I can now appreciate that while I was not used to boys crying in the films I watched, in the case of Gordie’s pain it was something that I could find completely believable. I also related to the hopelessness that Chris felt at his future already being predetermined for him, and I don’t think it was until I rewatched the movie for this piece that I really appreciated the feeling that education could liberate oneself from a small town. A conversation between Chris and Gordie at the campfire exemplifies such possibilities:

Chris: Junior High. You know what that means. By next June we’ll all be split up.
Gordie: What’re you talking about, why would that happen?
Chris: It’s not gonna be like grammar-school, that’s why. You’re taking your college-courses and me Teddy and Vern will all be in the shop-courses with all the rest of the retards making ashtrays and birdhouses. You gonna meet a lot of new guys. Smart guys.
Gordie: Meet a lot of pussies is what you mean.
Chris: No man. Don’t say that, don’t even think that.
Gordie: Not going to meet a lot of pussies, forget it!
Chris: Well then you’re an asshole!
Gordie: What’s asshole about wanting to be with your friends?
Chris: It’s asshole if your friends drag you down! You hang with us, you’ll be just another wise guy with shit for brains.

There’s a lot going on in this excerpt in terms of masculinity—already one can identify notions of educational success as “compliant and feminine” (see Ward 2014: 709), in some way incompatible with authentic masculinity (as explored by Reay 2002). In addition to this, misogynistic and ableist language provides a discursive framework for policing the parameters of acceptable masculine behavior. However, the film offers hope and possibility for both its young protagonists and its young viewers. It’s not just that in the movie we see that Gordie has achieved much as a writer (this was never really in question, as the film opens with him as the narrator), but also that Chris made it out of the small town as well, transcending his small-town expectations and becoming a lawyer.
Girls don’t feature in the film at all, and on my rewatch I noticed they were mentioned in two contexts—in the first instance, girls are used as an insult for the boys to tease each other, and in the second, girls are positioned as a distraction from the purity and potential of young masculinity. In one scene the voice-over of Gordie reflects, “We talked into the night. The kind of talk that seemed important until you discover girls.” As such the film fails to pass the Bechdel Test, but it nevertheless remains a significant site for the representation of gender. Girl-led stories were not common in my childhood—aside from the Disney princess films that I watched, the vast majority of films I loved when I was a child foregrounded boy protagonists. But what was offered to me in Stand by Me was a picture of boyhood that was complicated, that was soft in places, and contradictory and messy; what I saw in Stand by Me was a group of boys who had all of the same sorts of fears and worries that I had. Everything about boys and masculinity was “alien” to me as a child, and yet through Stand by Me I was able to go on an adventure with them and realize that they weren’t so different from me after all. The freedom of their adventure might have been afforded them because of their gender and their race—it would be a long time before we would see an all-girl cast in this sort of movie (the closest perhaps being 1995’s Now and Then, and even that centered boys within the girls’ story), and only now are representations opening up to folks of color—but this film nevertheless provided me with a depiction of boys that allowed me to see the boys in my own life a little differently.

Dedication

This piece is dedicated to Dionne, my big sister and the person who brought this film into my life.

Dr Victoria Cann (she/her) is an Associate Professor of Humanities in the Interdisciplinary Institute for the Humanities at the University of East Anglia, UK, where she is Course Director of the MA Gender Studies program. Her research explores contemporary youth gender identities and politics in the UK, and she is author of the book Girls Like This: Boys Like That, published by Bloomsbury in 2018. Further work of hers can be found in journals such as Feminist Media Studies, Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, and Girlhood Studies, as well as in numerous edited collections. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7858-4283
Note

1. The Bechdel Test is a tongue-in-cheek test developed by Alison Bechdel in her comic strip Dykes to Watch Out For (1983–2008) that can be used on any movie to assess the presence of women. The test has the following three rules: (1) the text has to have at least two women in it (and these two women must have names); (2) these women with names must talk to each other; (3) and what they talk about must be something besides a man.

References


Filmography

Reiner, Rob, dir. 1986. Stand By Me. USA.

Glatter, Lesli Linka, dir. 1995. Now and Then. USA.
Boy Genius

Reflections on Reading The Great Brain

Edward W. Morris

Abstract: Based on reflection and analysis of a formative childhood text, this essay disentangles the relationship between reading, intelligence, and masculinity. The author argues that although reading fiction appears to encourage empathy, books written specifically for boys may contain detrimental messages about masculinity. The analysis reveals that the popular Great Brain series reinforces notions of whiteness, ableism, and masculine superiority. These messages are reinforced by the books’ emphasis on pragmatic “genius” and the savior trope in boyhood.

Keywords: education, gender gap, genius, masculinity, reading, savior narrative

Boys read much less than girls. Compared to boys, girls read full-length books more often, enjoy reading more, and score higher on tests of reading comprehension (Loveless 2015). Look around any public setting—the subway, airport, park—chances are you’ll see more women and girls reading for pleasure. I know perfectly intelligent adult men who haven’t completed a book in decades. This is one reason that young women in the United States are surpassing their male counterparts in advanced stages of education. Women now account for 57 percent of undergraduate enrollment in the US and outpace college men in degree attainment, especially in the arts and humanities (Field 2021). Given the paltry literary capability of many men, it is not surprising that parents and teachers implore boys to read.

One strategy for encouraging boys’ reading is to give them “boy books.” Analogous to a pink soccer ball, a boy book is supposed to feature the types of characters and storylines that boys will instantly take to, making reading more exciting (and more masculine). One such book I remember from my own childhood in the 1980s is The Great Brain by John D. Fitzgerald (2004). Set in late-nineteenth-century Utah, these books featured a highly intelligent, devious, but courageous 10-year-old boy named Tom. Reminiscent of Mark Twain, the stories were told in folksy, humorous style from the perspective of Tom’s younger, admiring brother. I remember reading and rereading the book as a child, staring for hours at the quirky Mercer Mayer illustrations, and imagining myself as a modern-day Tom Fitzgerald.

On one hand, the book indeed realized its desired effect. I read it and the subsequent books in the series voraciously, which catapulted me into
a lifelong love of reading. But on the other hand, my enjoyment came at a cost. Boy books do not simply meet boys where they are, they reinforce and promote ideals of masculinity to which boys should aspire. Such messages tend to reinscribe toughness, physical risk, violence, emotional detachment, and a host of poisonous behaviors associated with being a boy and man. Upon further reflection, *The Great Brain* also presents a model of ingenious masculinity that very much resonates in an information-based, neoliberal era. While the frontier setting of the books might appear a far cry from Zoom and iPhones, the Fitzgerald family, and Tom in particular, are depicted as technologically advanced (the first chapter features Tom’s father installing a “water closet” for indoor plumbing). Perhaps the frontier setting also evokes nostalgia for a time when masculinity was thought to be simpler: less fraught by feminism, office work, and anxiety. As the title implies, and the jacket description makes clear, Tom is considered a “genius.” Despite the greater success of women and girls in most facets of education, boys and men are more likely to be considered exceptionally intelligent (Musto 2019). Moreover, as I have found in my own research (Morris 2012), people see girls’ academic skills as the result of hard work, while boys’ skills are seen as emanating from intrinsic “gifts.” Tom embodies a highly clever, but never pedantic, aptitude that offers a historical forerunner to today’s ascendent techno-masculinity.

Tom’s “great brain” radiates a sharp, pragmatic intelligence. His traits show what is meant by the concept of a “boy genius.” Instead of academic interests, Tom’s acumen is cunning, practical, and decidedly capitalist. He performs well in school but does not especially enjoy it, preferring to be active and outdoors. He frequently devises plots to “swindle” other children (and sometimes adults). Although Tom is magnanimous, he inevitably hustles his way to capital accumulation, such as when he offers to help a Greek immigrant boy by advising his purchases of American commodities while taking some of the boy’s money in exchange. Accounts of Tom’s brilliance throughout the book have nothing to do with academic efforts. Indeed, Tom is intelligent almost *despite* the plodding conformity of the small schoolhouse he attends. In one chapter, Tom stands up to the injustice of the authoritarian schoolmaster, who favors swift, excessive corporal punishment. His forthright resistance demonstrates brave independence at the same time that it underscores the inadequacy of formal schooling. Like Harry Potter, Tom exemplifies the truly gifted boy who righteously withstands, rather than submits to, formal authority.
The book layers this honest masculinity through whiteness, nationalism, and ableism. The setting and characters are entirely white. The books are also racist, with condescending references to “Indians” (Indigenous peoples). Occasionally, white characters invoke Indigenous imagery to symbolize wildness, toughness, or stoicism. “I knew my brother could withstand pain like an Indian without crying,” the author writes of Tom (Fitzgerald 2004: 121). But no actual nonwhite characters appear, offering the simulacrum of a bygone, homogeneous rural America that never existed (Fulkerson and Thomas 2014). The only character on the margins of whiteness in the first book is the immigrant boy from Greece named Basil, mentioned earlier. Basil is bullied mercilessly until Tom steps in and helps “Americanize” him, partially through full immersion in the US culture industry and partially through teaching him to physically fight. Another object of bullying is Andy, a boy with an amputated leg. Tom uses his wits to protect Andy by helping him become a star catcher on the baseball team (a catcher plays from a crouching position). Tom’s compassion, while evident, is thus freighted with white, able-bodied savior overtones.

So, what did eight-year-old me take away from these books? After an adult read, I am admittedly a little shocked to see what I was exposed to! But how then was I able to reject—if imperfectly—the texts’ problematic messages? Perhaps the small but identifiable theme of compassion resonated with me. Maybe the realistic fiction forced my boy mind to imagine life from other points of view, increasing empathy (Kidd and Castano 2013). I’m not trying to defend the book (or myself), but I have to think that something in this formative text had some inadvertent positive effect. However, although it might be better for boys to read anything rather than nothing, boy books do not appear to be the answer. The brains of boys will only become “great” through stories that emphasize less masculinity and more humanity.

Edward W. Morris is Professor of Sociology at the University of Kentucky. His research interests include sociology of education, masculinity, and intersections of race, class, and gender. His research has appeared in the American Sociological Review, Gender & Society, Sociology of Education, Social Problems, and Violence against Women, among other journals. He is the author of (most recently) Unmasking Masculinities: Men and Society, with Freeden Blume Oeur, published by SAGE.
References


