



Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture

Thomas Newkirk, Ellin Oliver Keene, Ellin O. Keene (Foreword by)

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Post-Columbine has been a time when the issues of popular culture and the behavior of boys have generated more heat than light. This complex, contested intersection has led to censorship and worse-alarm, irrationality, and a failure to examine our ways of teaching, particularly teaching literacy to boys. In this book Tom Newkirk takes an up-close and personal look at elementary boys and their relationship to sports, movies, video games, and other venues of popular culture. Unlike the alarmists, he sees these media not as enemies of literacy, but as resources *for* literacy.

Through a series of extraordinary interviews, Newkirk listens to young boys, and girls, who describe the pleasure they take in popular culture. They explain the ways in which they use visual narratives in their writing. They even defend their use of violence in their work. Newkirk disproves the simplistic stereotype of boys who are primed to imitate the violence they see. He shows that, rather than mimic, boys most often transform, recombine, and participate in story lines, and resist, mock, and discern the unreality of icons of popular culture.

Using a mixture of memoir, research project, cultural analysis, and critique of published findings, Newkirk encourages schools to ask questions about what counts as literacy in boys and what doesn't, to allow in their literacy programs boys' diverse tastes, values, and learning styles. In other words, if we want boys to join "the literacy club," then we have to invite them in with genres of their own choosing.

Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture Details

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From Reader Review Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture for online ebook

Stacy says

great book. really gave me new insight into working with and understanding boys, especially my own

Pamela Huxtable says

This is an insightful work about boys and how they approach reading and writing. Unfortunately, the work is so heavily grounded in popular cultural references that it feels a bit dated. But that doesn't mean that Newkirk's points should be disregarded.

I especially appreciated Newkirk's research showing that children do have highly developed critical thinking skills, and are fully cognizant how violence in books , television, and movies is highly fictionalized, and not reality. He also points out how their awareness is balanced by their' need for limitations to frame their world, and they also need limitations to push against and rebel against in a healthy way.

Newkirk's research puts my sons's choices of Captain Underpants and Diary of a Wimpy Kid in perspective for me, and I will try not to cringe when their choices of reading material and viewing material do not match my idea of so-called "quality." After all, even Shakespeare was fond of a good fart joke.

Stuart Macalpine says

In a nutshell the message is don't discount 'low culture' from boys writing. Don't be threatened by violence in their stories; they know the difference between fantasy and reality. Don't always ask boys to write from life, instead of their rich fantasy worlds, often partly made up of computer games. Don't underestimate the power of symbolic narratives (like Starwars) rather than the 'true life' narratives that adults and 'literary types' tend to prefer.

I am not a total convert, but wholesomely support the idea about allowing students to engage in narrative that they can make sense of and see as engaging rather than the introspective, character and relationship nuancing work that so often is seen as the only right way to 'do' creative writing in schools.

The books makes its point well. There are passages that are a little difficult to swallow if you are sensitive to gender equality.

Ariel says

I read this for my undergraduate thesis on boys literacy. It influenced the way I think about reading. Insightful!

Lara says

I have read quite a few of these books and this one was just OKay. I think the author takes his theory a little to far. The logic is missing a few steps. But the first half of the book is okay.

Joell Smith-Borne says

Really enjoyed this defense of non-traditional "literature" in kids (not just boys) reading and writing. Very readable for an academic book, too.

I especially love Newkirk's reminder that kids are not without agency and critical thinking skills when it comes to the media they consume. One of the most important skills students need (and a recent study pointed out that they aren't getting, even in college), is critical thinking. Being willing to talk to kids about whatever stories they love, and finding out what they think the relationships are between the stories and the real world, even apart from the literacy aspect, is a great way to communicate to kids that their critical awareness is important to us and give them chances to practice it. I wonder if this means I have to actually read all those Captain Underpants books on my kid's shelf now, though....

Sarahanneme says

please read this book if you have boys in your life.

Jeff Raymond says

Closer to a 3.5, presents an important message about literacy and boys, including quite a bit about how writing and reading instruction isn't reflecting what we know about boys.

This was written in 2002, so a lot of it feels dated, but so much of it unfortunately still rings true. The book is very specific, so it probably has more value for educators, but it could also use an update.

Scott says

As I sat and watched my daughter's first grade classroom filled with boys, I wondered if the unique dynamics of the class could be addressed differently. I think that Misreading Masculinity puts some of our fears about boys in school to rest. It seems to suggest that it might benefit everyone to do more to build off the literacies the young boys already employ versus trying to marginalize them.

Josie says

This book was recommended to me by a blogger I follow as something that anyone who is raising a boy should read. I didn't really research what it was about.

I thought the book was going to be about different ways of reading boys behavior. It sort of was, but its real focus was on closing the reading gap between boys and girls.

The intended audience for this book isn't really parents, it's English and Writing teachers who struggle to reach the boys in their classrooms. What the book illuminated--that schools are racially and class biased, that teachers are often making assumptions about kids based on class without realizing it, that it's okay for kids, boys especially, to like super heros and action movies, that comic books are real literature, that literary fiction isn't the only kind of reading that has value--wasn't really a new way of thinking to me.

This would be a great book for an English or Writing teacher to read. I'm just not the right audience, and the book isn't really made for me.

But, come on, "Misreading Masculinity" is a GREAT GREAT TITLE!

Shana Karnes says

Newkirk at one point apologetically makes the case FOR the craziest parts of boy writing--violence, humor, etc. Then he supports his argument and convinces me. Loved this and it definitely reframed my thinking about boys.

Jimmy says

"Probably the most dangerous mammal on the planet is the adolescent male."--Charles McCaffery, forensic psychiatrist. So begins this book, a fascinating look at boys and literacy.

In the early 60s, there were lots of cowboy shows with guns in them. Boys played cowboys and Indians. I did. But we always used toy guns, of course. Was that bad? I knew other boys who had BB guns, killed birds without a second thought. I think that is the difference. Playing adventure games and pretend killing and dying are not necessarily bad. Cultures with low crime rates have the same cultural influences, such as American movies. The difference is usually the gun laws. Ours are out of control.

Shakespeare, Joyce, Rabelais, Chaucer, and Aristophanes are all examples of writers who used bodily humor, now considered low brow. Cultured adults often look down on low brow stuff today. When I was a boy, I read a magazine called Monster Parade. The Greek priest caught me with a copy and took it away, calling it trash. I had a mom who was terrific. When the priest squealed on me, she told him to give me back my magazine. Movie critics look down on fart jokes, but let's face it, farts are always funny. Boys seem to have a particular fondness for farts.

Researchers find that boys writing violent stories often engage in collaborating with friends, just like I did. We acted out monster stories and shooting. We collected horror books and loved going to horror movies.

While I was teaching in the 90s, an extreme effort was made to help girls in school. No such effort has been made for understanding boys. Why not? Here's the elephant in the room. There are so many women in the education field. Some boys leave a home without a father then go to a school where they are dominated by women. In elementary school, the percentage of women teachers is vastly higher. Same with special education aides. I have been to meetings where the mother would answer for her son. To ask the boy a question, I had to call his name, then count to 3 so everyone knew I was talking to the boy and definitely not his mother. It was a constant problem.

Professor Newkirk says, "If schools had been designed to favor boys, they wouldn't have looked like the ones we attended." I agree.

It ought to be possible to work on boys' problems without ignoring girls, and vice versa.

Too much recent attention on boys treats them as violent beings that need to be rescued.

There is no monolithic way of being a boy or a girl.

"I just want to be average."--A male student. I had friends in high school who did not want to be smart and make the honor roll. It was considered too feminine. I never felt any pride in making the honor roll. Never bragged about it to my friends.

Newkirk questions the prevailing idea that any attention, even negative attention, is a good thing that boys desire. I never knew anyone like that.

Black males in particular are regularly consigned to low achievement groups from which they never escape.

Many teachers choose to work in private schools because they can exclude disruptive students. I have always wanted the opposite: the challenge of helping those same students. "Discussions" in those private schools often rely on handraising, bidding for the teacher's attention, and publicly displaying knowledge. There are other ways to handle this.

The popular media regularly reinforce the idea that most forms of reading and writing are unmasculine. The nerd wears glasses like Clark Kent.

"Why should I read about doing things, when I can actually do them?"--a middle school boy to Newkirk. Reading is utterly strange to the outsider, the men of action. Boys get the idea that reading is something you do alone, like being banished.

"I read this book before," says the boy. "I'll show you I read it. You see? Look. Words, words, words. I tell you I read this before."

Students are not allowed to leave the room for recess until no one moves in line. Student, boys are taught since they are the last ones out, requires supreme bodily control that comes easier for girls who are then rewarded by female teachers.

Carolyn Coman won the Newberry Award. Then her next project was to write a book "her son might actually read."

When researchers do studies they point out "aggressive actions." But they fail to distinguish between fantasy

and reality. Pretend karate chops do not have to be aggressive. Watching fantasy violence on tv does not necessarily desensitize children to violence.

Charles Simic once said, "There are two kinds of poets--those who create images with their eyes open, and those who create them with their eyes closed." Simic focused on an inner dreamlike landscape.

Quintilian, legendary Roman writing teacher, spoke about boys writing "beyond the limits of propriety." That's part of the answer.

Tamara says

Another good book about what motivates boys to read. Lots of ideas to get them to interact with various texts. I actually liked this one better than Reading Don't Fix No Chevy's, except that that one had a better breakdown of trends.

Joe says

I love this book on boys and literacy and violence and popular culture! The first time I read it was for my M.Ed. program. This time I'm using for my Ed.D. But it's also just an awesome reminder of the diverse needs of boys in a mostly socially-feminized content area. It's a breath of fresh air. I highly recommend this for anyone who teaches boys, or has boys, especially those of the rowdy nature. You'll gain some new insights that for boys are really common sense.

Davelowusa says

Those rascally male students. They want to play video games, watch TV, and express themselves violently. And we won't let them. We're afraid they'll write about zombies fighting aliens and then go and orchestrate a school shooting. So instead, we ask them to write about what they did that summer while reading Emily Dickinson. Then we complain that they're resistant to literacy when they don't want to do those things.
