Troy Potter

Books for Boys

Manipulating Genre in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Matters of Genre and Gender

Recent years have seen demand for more books that engage young male readers in Western countries. The call for the production of such books arguably stems from a perceived "masculinity crisis" (Horrocks 1994) and the consequent anxiety besetting boys, their development and their education, specifically in relation to literacy.[1] The problem, at least in part, appears to be that boys are not reading in great numbers, and one of the recommended approaches to address this is to introduce "texts that cater more to boys' interests" (Martino 2008, 93). Collectively, I refer to this form of literature as "books for boys", which signifies both the intended male readership of such books and their ideological function to promote male reading practices. Inherent to the reasoning behind books for boys, however, is an essentialist understanding of gender and masculinity, particularly in relation to boys' behaviour and predispositions. Exactly which boys are not reading? And what, supposedly, constitutes a book that boys will find engaging? What kind of book caters to boys' interests? Such a regime of normalisation erases the diversity of how to be male and concomitantly validates binary and hierarchical organisations of gendered identity.

An example of a "book for boys" is the epistolary novel *Dear Miffy* (1997), by the award-winning Australian author of young adult fiction, John Marsden. The novel's inclusion of extreme swearing and its frank depiction of sex and violence, while controversial at the time of its publication, presumably appealed to male teenage readerships.[2] According to Marsden, he wanted to "write about a real person, and explore and understand his life" (2000, 116). Yet Tony, the protagonist who writes the letters in *Dear Miffy*, is not "real", and Marsden's claim to authenticity masks the fact that the novel is a construction of a perception of reality. Rather, *Dear Miffy* is a work of fiction that engages with contemporary concerns about boys and masculinity: Tony is the personification of the at-risk generation of Australian boys, and Marsden insinuates parental abandonment and an absence of appropriate male role models are the causes for Tony's dysfunctional behaviour. *Dear Miffy* serves as a catalyst for thinking about masculinity and the theme of this book, the role of genre in engaging male readers and shaping discourses about masculinity.

1 The two main international reading studies, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have consistently found that girls are outperforming boys in literacy. In terms of reducing the gender gap in literacy, the 2011 PIRLS report showed that there had been little reduction in the gender gap over the last decade (Mullis et al. 2012, 7), while the 2015 PISA report reiterated that girls are still outperforming boys in reading (OECD 2016, 168).

2 See, for example, Jameyson (1997) and Turpin (1997).

The "masculinity crisis" is not limited to boys, nor is it only affecting Australia, although specifically Australian masculinities form the focus of this study. Apprehension about what it means to be male has been growing for over 30 years in Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Many causes for the troubled state of masculinity have been identified. Technological advances have reshaped manufacturing industries; the increased reliance on automated and mechanised processes has resulted in displaced skilled male workers. The rise and pervasive threat of terrorism has led to accusations that the West has become "soft" or dangerously feminised. Liberationist movements, including feminist, black and gay movements, have brought about political and legal reform, as well as an increasing social tolerance of difference. The systematic focus on gender since the late twentieth century has revealed that masculinities are conditional, often competitively constructed, and see impracticable expectations placed on individual men. Put simply, changes to our understanding of gender order, masculinities and femininities—local, national and global—as well as changes in our material circumstances—labour, economic and political—have altered our perception of the typically white, heterosexual, Western male. While this book is not a sociological study, an understanding of the socio-political contexts in which literature is produced is important to facilitate a nuanced reading of the role genre plays in constructions of masculinity in young adult literature.

Australia was the first country to adopt a federal-level policy on boys' education in 2002, *Boys: Getting It Right* (House of Representatives Standing Committee of Education and Training). While the report has been criticised as an example of recuperative masculinity politics (Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2007), the Australian Government responded to it by implementing the *Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools Programme* from 2003 to 2006 to help achieve improved educational outcomes for boys, which included promoting books that specifically catered to boys' interests.[3] Several other countries and educational organisations have followed Australia's lead and commissioned reports on boys' educational issues, many of which recommend pedagogical approaches to resolve the "boy problem". Examples include *The Boys Reading Commission*, compiled by the National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom in 2012, and *Me Read? And How!*, a 2009 report compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Education, Canada.[4] Unlike the Australian reports, the British and Canadian resources acknowledge to varying degrees the limitations of focusing on boys' literacy: "Boys are not a

3 Another initiative, the 2006 *Boys, Books, Blokes and Bytes* program, exemplifies the "boy-friendly" strategies used to promote boys' reading to improve literacy. The program emphasised the importance of using materials that reflect boys' interests and involving male role models. For a brief report about the program, see Kelly (2007).

4 For further discussion about the origins and motivations for the recent "boy turn" in education, see Weaver-Hightower (2003). For specific discussion regarding the issues of boy's education in the United States, see Weaver-Hightower (2009). For comparison of educational gender policies in Australia and the United Kingdom, see Mills, Francis and Skelton (2009).