

Even Hockey Players

# READ

Boys, Literacy and Learning



DAVID BOOTH

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## Introduction: Into the Circle of Print

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*“Some of you reading this book have biological, adopted, foster or stepsons. Many of you have nephews and male cousins as well. Others of you may be teachers, counselors, coaches or Boy Scout leaders. All of you have boys in your life in some way. I am using the word son to encompass a number of relationships that we, as caring adults, have with boys and young men. In a society where some children are uncared for or neglected and in which competition and violence reign, none of our sons or daughters are safe, no matter how strong or independent or caring or nonsexist we raise our sons to be.”*

*From Boys Will Be Men: Raising Our Sons for Courage, Caring and Community, by Paul Kivel*

The title of this book comes from my son’s childhood years, when I would try to promote more reading time at home. My son, Jay, would protest: “But I want to be a hockey player!” and I would retort, “Well, even hockey players read.” And, of course, hockey players do read, and the variety of print materials that they handle would be similar to that of any group of men in similar organizations. But would their choices be the same as those of the members of a women’s hockey team? While waiting for a plane in a fogged-in New York airport, I noticed a group of about 20 men dressed in Armani suits. Eventually I discovered that they were the New York Islanders hockey team. And what were they reading during the waiting time? I observed a range of print experiences: one chap was reading aloud to his group the newspaper report of last night’s game; another was reading Ken Follett’s latest espionage novel; one player was working his way through the *Financial Post*; one was exploring a computer magazine; another, a golf magazine; and so on. These were men who were reading, and their choices represented their interests, the resources available, and their life experiences at that time.

For me, this anecdote is useful in establishing a definition of what we can mean by the term *reading* in the lives of boys and men. Years ago the reading specialist Arn Bowers taught me to handle the question “Can you read?” by changing it to “What can you read?” Why? Because the nature of the *print text* being read affects so strongly the potential of the reader to make any significant meaning. What we read, whether as males or as females, is determined by our life experiences, sometimes by our constructed gender, by what we bring to the print, by our familiarity with the words and the style, by the expectations of the genre, by the social frames of the event, and, of course, by the content. Reading is a complex act for everyone, including hockey players.

During his final year in high school, my son Jay attended a residential hockey school, where the students practised the game from 6:30 a.m. until 10 a.m., and then had academic classes until 5 p.m. He considers it to be his best year in school: small classes, interested young teachers, classmates with similar goals, and the chance to do what he loved for much of the day. Although, as a teenager, I had friends who played hockey, this would not have been my activity of choice, but his experience there altered my understanding of the teaching/learning process for the rest of my life. Many boys (and some girls) see hockey as a life-fulfilling passion. How do they view reading and writing in and out of school? And does the question have much validity without adding, “*What* are they reading or writing?” Although the current interest in boys and reading is most probably fuelled by falling test scores, I want to look at the literacy world that my son finds himself in as a young adult male. I also want

*“Ronald Rohmer studied 118 cultures around the world in an effort to understand how the phenomenon of rejection worked in the lives of children and youth. He found that although cultures differ in how they express rejections, in every one, rejected kids turned out badly (with the meaning of ‘badly’ differing from culture to culture, just as the form of rejection did). Rohmer concluded that rejection is universally a ‘psychological malignancy’, a form of emotional cancer.”*

*From And Words Can Hurt Forever: How to Protect Adolescents from Bullying, Harassment and Emotional Violence, by James Garbarino and Ellen deLara*

to examine the factors that appear to affect boys in our schools and homes in their development as readers and writers.

When I began researching material in this field, I was amazed at the quantity of available resources for parents and teachers, especially from the Internet. People are certainly concerned about males and literacy. Dozens of books have emerged in the last few years documenting issues in male culture and in raising and schooling boys. Some emphasize biological differences in males and females; others take a socio-constructivist approach; still others struggle for a culturally elitist model promoting literary wonders. Personally, I need to look at them all, to find directions for supporting parents and teachers and educational policy makers, but especially for helping youngsters themselves to begin taking control of their literacy lives, aware of their needs and interests as developing readers and writers.

I want to examine the issues pertaining to the literacy lives of boys, how they perceive themselves as readers, and how parents, teachers and peers influence their literacy development. The role of gender in reading success is complex, and I want to uncover many of the assumptions and stereotypes that parents and educators have about boys and how they handle the world of print text. For each issue I explore, I have included the voices of writers for young people, of authorities in these fields, and, most important, of boys and men that teachers in my preservice and graduate classes have interviewed and observed. There, male readers reveal their literacy challenges, struggles, tastes and values, and offer us insights into how we can support all children in their journey.

Consider the change in the texts we read today at home or work: books of every variety—softcover and hardback; thousands and thousands of magazines and comics available at the local newsstand; letters, bills, ads and pamphlets through the mailbox; electronic print of all sorts, from ones that fit in the palm to giant TV screens; memos, fact sheets, documents, e-mail and attachments. The definition of literacy has altered, as have the strategies necessary for reading texts.

If we believe that all children should have access to the literacy world, how will we ensure that boys, in particular, see themselves as readers who can handle the requirements of such a variety of texts? Non-readers tell us stories of punishment and pain, of no care and no touch, where books never metamorphosed into friendly objects, where worksheets and controlled readers dictated their eye movements and caused their reading hearts to beat irregularly. They drown in printer’s ink.

The search for meaning is paramount in all our lives. The daughter of a stroke victim was attempting to teach her father to regain his lost literacy. She began each session with flashcards of letters. Both of them ended each session in tears of frustration. Then one day, she printed her name on a card, and her father read it aloud. Meaning had been made.

## JAY LEARNS TO READ

Most parents keep photo albums of their children, but partly as a parent and partly as a teacher, I have kept a reading journal. Journal writing is becoming more popular as a mode of memoir, and parents and teachers who have discovered this art form know that it can act as a mirror and as a window, reflecting what has happened and opening new worlds of understanding. A journal consists of impressions rather than of factual reports—readers will interpret my words in light of their own lives.

I know that Jay required adults on his journey to literacy, not always as guides or taskmasters, but more often as companions who knew the path and who could help maintain his spirit as he began his print walkabout—wise people prepared to hold his hand, whisper in his ear the secret codes, and pass on the anthem that the difficult journey towards becoming a reader and a writer is worthwhile, even life-giving. It may be that how we accompany children into the print world will determine their future as literate beings.

I have included bits and pieces from my journal to punctuate the ideas under discussion. So much magic is involved in this whole process, and for each boy who makes it into the print circle, we must revel and shout and cry to everyone in sight: *He has learned to read. Alongside us. He joins the circle.*

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### **Literacy Flashbacks**

by Jay Booth

*I don't remember learning to read. (I know that Sesame Street was a big influence.) It is as if I always knew how. I do remember being upset with my father when he discarded my Disney books when I was about eight. Mickey holds a special place in my heart, no doubt connected to our Disney World holidays. Although I started reading much earlier, the first thing I can recall reading would be the giant map we had at Phoenix School. Our teacher would place the map on the floor and we would gather around and try to find locations that he called out.*

*I have always been a capricious person; I like to do things quickly and move on to the next event. This might explain why record books, sports books, and magazines often piled up on my bed every evening. I enjoyed reading*

*through certain articles or sections, and then moving on to the next selection. The reason Archie comics were so appealing is largely based on their formats. I could read a few strips and move onto something else. They also allowed me to skip around and read whichever strip I wanted, without missing the plot from an earlier one.*

*I really loved the plays I did during school years. In Phoenix, I was of an age that enjoyed attention (there was never enough), and in the plays, I often got the main part. I was a very hyperactive child (as many boys are), and I loved the physical nature of acting and working on stage. To do this, though, I had to read and memorize the complete scripts, and yet I enjoyed reading all of them, and trying to come up with my own lines to add to them. In Horizon Junior High, I didn't seek attention any longer, but I enjoyed*

*participating in the plays once more, because they were so well-written, and by us students! I loved being in the play that Esther, one of my classmates, wrote and directed. It was such an interesting story of her family's emigration.*

*I don't remember too many novels from school, the main reason being that we were made to read certain books and often they weren't interesting to me. I do, however, remember reading several by Gary Paulsen and Jerry Spinelli at Horizon. Our teacher, Nancy, often allowed us to select our own novels, and in high school I don't think that was ever an option, something that I think needs to be considered.*

*As a child I liked to write a lot. I enjoyed trying to come up with novel ideas (mostly trying to make another Lord of the Rings type novel), and writing letters. I rarely finished anything, and I never had anyone else read what I had*

written. It was just quite fun to write all on my own. I believe it helped my imagination to grow, and it also, of course, allowed me to practise my reading and writing.

I don't really remember what my friends read. I do know that my girlfriend loves to escape from university required reading lists with Stephen King, but she doesn't like horror movies. I think that's the thing about reading, as opposed to films: it opens up your imagination and often lets you make your own worlds.

I remember my teacher, Michael, from Phoenix really well. He read to us, and often acted out parts as he was reading. I do remember him also reading on his own when

he had time to himself. Nancy, from Horizon, loved to read to her students. I mostly remember her reading poetry.

I know that the computer was, and still is, one of the biggest factors in my development as a reader and writer. Much of my reading nowadays is done on the computer. Visiting message boards and my favorite Web sites are a daily activity. I am also a video game addict, and in spite of what many people may think, some of those games require a great deal of reading. The computer has been a great way for me to engage in literacy activities.

Whenever I get a new CD the first thing I do is look at the liner

notes. I like to read the lyrics over once, and for some reason I enjoy reading the acknowledgements.

When it comes to magazines, I read mainly guitar and music varieties. They let me keep up with my favorite bands, and offer choices I can select from. When I read magazines, I actually read them backwards, skimming through, and then I come back to the articles that look interesting.

I do love to read, just not often in novel form. I am working my way through the Harry Potter series at the moment. In contrast to my college reading, my home-time reading is mostly based on the computer, magazines, and sports sections.