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Reluctant Reader Boys: Writing Appealing and Acccessible Fiction

Introduction

> There is no such thing as a book for reluctant readers. If a story does not interest the good readers it will never attract the children who are having difficulties. Writing a book for reluctant readers is like writing a book for people with blue eyes. Reluctant readers have exactly the same needs as other students. They are entitled to a top tale and accessible prose. (Jennings 2003: 47)

The value of children's literature as an aid to individual development, socialisation and cultural integration has been much discussed in both popular and academic arenas. As Peter Hunt suggests, 'it is arguably impossible for a children's book…not to be educational or influential in some way' (Hunt 1994: 3). However, reading is not something that all children will undertake willingly, and boys tend to make up a disproportionately large number of the school children who display poor literacy skills and a reluctance to read (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 197-8). While some children will have perceptual, cognitive or linguistic difficulties that make reading an unenjoyable task, for many boys a reluctance to read will have more to do with their cultural environment.

In recent years efforts to deal with boys' reluctance to read have been focused upon two major areas: the culture surrounding boys and reading, and providing suitable reading material for the reluctant reader. Academics, authors and teachers have endeavoured to raise community awareness and offer strategies for overcoming the social side of this problem, with a particular emphasis on the need for 'reading male role models' in boys' lives. While many reluctant readers have a reading age below their actual age, finding suitable reading material is not simply a matter of offering them books written for younger children. Fortunately, books that reluctant readers respond well to have become more widely available as understanding of the problem and awareness of the boys' needs have grown.

However, given the claim made by Paul Jennings that 'there is no such thing as a book for reluctant readers' (Jennings 2003: 47), this paper considers the question: ***Is it possible to write fiction for boys that is appealing and accessible to the struggling reluctant reader and, at the same time, of genuine interest for the accomplished reader within the same peer group?***

I will begin by considering some of the social and cultural circumstances that contribute to boys developing a reluctance to read. I will also identify elements of published titles that make them suitable for reluctant readers. My own area of interest is in writing for ten to thirteen year-old-boys. With this in mind, particular attention will be given to some of the titles in the Puffin Books series *Aussie Chomps*, a series for upper primary to lower secondary children intended to meet the 'demand for shorter, snappier, high-interest, low-level books' (Penguin Books 2004).

Reluctant Reader Boys

> If boys are reluctant to read, it is because they have been taught by the society they live in that books are not an important part of their lives or their identity as males. Arguments that books and reading are essential to their futures…mean nothing to them. Such concepts, no matter how much they concern teachers and parents, simply do not rate alongside the more immediate adventures in a boy's life. (Moloney 2002: 50)

Storytelling is fundamental to the communities and cultures of the world. Even those who cannot claim to have a favourite book will more than likely be able to name a family story, a film, a play, or perhaps a joke that they hold dear. The emotional attachment we have to stories can be felt deeply; as Maurice Saxby suggests, 'the appeal of story is irresistible' (Saxby 1987: 5). But stories provide more than just a warm feeling; they hold a significant place in communities as a means of maintaining and passing on cultural identity from one generation to the next. For Saxby, 'it is essentially the ability to use language to shape story that is the hallmark of humanity. So the listener…is bequeathed access to the accumulated experience and wisdom of the ages' (Saxby 1987: 5). And while it is true that stories are transmitted in a variety of forms, and that adults have other avenues open to them for learning about their environment and culture, for children, stories, and books in particular, provide greater opportunities to engage with their world than would otherwise be possible. Rebecca Lukens comments:

> The many discoveries that children can make through literature might be sought in other ways by adults. Adults might discover human motivation through a study of psychology, or the nature of society and its institutions through a study of sociology, or the impact of nature upon human behaviour through a study of anthropology. However, literature can do all of these things for children. Literature is more than a piece of writing that clarifies; it gives the child pleasure as well as understanding. (Lukens 1999: 9-10)

Saxby agrees, suggesting that story provides opportunity for exploration: 'children can wander around inside the story as it were, trying on roles, predicting outcomes, even retreating when necessary' (Saxby 1987: 5-6). Stories allow children to prepare for life in community, helping them to 'order [their] environment as relationships become clearer, human motivation is made manifest…and the reader's role in a social matrix emerges' (Saxby 1987: 5-6).

Few would argue with observations such as these; it is generally accepted that reading is valuable and important. And yet, significant numbers of children, the majority of them boys, are reluctant to practice reading. It is a problem that has been both sensationalised and politicised. Rob and Pam Gilbert note that the media often take the latest test results and run 'battle of the sexes' type campaigns (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 197). Wayne Martino comments:

> The whole notion of boys as the "new disadvantaged" informs public debate about boys' education and the Australian government's official position on boys' lower literacy performance relative to that of girls… In fact, statistics pertaining to boys' poorer literacy performance, as a specific gendered phenomenon, have been used by the Right to fuel the "moral panic" and crisis about boys' disadvantaged status relative to girls. (Martino 2003: 9)

Nevertheless, literacy test results are concerning. A 1994 New South Wales Department of School Education inquiry revealed that three times as many boys as girls were receiving special reading assistance, and a comparison of national literacy test results from 1975 and 1995 suggested that during that period the difference between the number of girls and boys without basic literacy skills had grown from three to eight percentage points (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 197-8).

However, news stories about such results rarely contextualise the findings, and academics argue that definitions of literacy are too narrow. Christine Hall and Martin Coles point out that many of the boys who do not score well in such tests, 'outside school, in their home contexts…are able to demonstrate competence and motivation in reading, discussing and applying information which they see as relevant to their lives' (Hall & Coles 2001: 219-20).

There is little doubt that literacy survey results will generate much statistical analysis and debate for quite some time to come, and, despite the relatively recent decline in boys' literacy levels in Australia indicated by the national literacy test results noted above, the issue of boys' poor literacy results is not a new one. Comparing a 1994/95 British literacy survey with another conducted in 1971, Hall and Coles observe:

> What the figures also show, of course, is that boys read less than girls - and that they seem to have been reading less than girls for 25 years. Nor was this a new phenomenon in the 1970s. A survey conducted by Jenkinson in 1940 indicated the same pattern. And Michele Cohen, in her very illuminating work tracing historical perspectives on boys' performance, quotes such seventeenth-century luminaries as John Locke and Daniel Defoe, both of whom were concerned about boys' underachievement over 300 years ago. (Hall & Coles 2001: 215)

Is this centuries-old problem a crisis? Martino brings needed balance to the literacy debate, pointing out that, despite poor literacy test results, many boys are engaging in literate practices beyond school curricula, and 'that they in fact may be advantaged through actively taking up electronic forms of literate practice that have a particular currency in the changing post-industrial labour market' (Martino 2003: 23). Hall and Coles agree, suggesting that 'for girls…concentration on narrative reading might

actually be failing to educate them for the wide range of reading required outside the school curriculum' (Hall & Coles 2001: 220). Sandra Power points to a 1996 South Australian survey that showed while girls read a larger number of books, boys selected from a wider topic and genre range, and that it was not wise to conclude that girls were better readers because they read more books (Power 2001: 53). Martino and these others argue for a broader definition of literacy, concerned that current literacy test results do not properly represent, and tend to devalue boys' actual achievements and involvement in literate practices (Martino 2001, 2003; Hall & Coles 2001, Power 2001).

While Martino, Hall and Coles successfully counter the idea of a 'boys' literacy crisis', they are careful not to 'downplay the significance of boys' underachievement in particular forms of literate practice' (Martino 2003: 10), and point out that 'we regard the teaching of fiction as fundamental to the development of literacy and to establishing a sense of cultural heritage and cultural continuity' (Hall & Coles 2001: 219). In short, though not the crisis the newspaper-selling headlines might suggest, it is clear that a larger number of boys than girls struggle with literacy, and those who do are at an 'educational and social disadvantage' (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 11).

Whether a reluctance to read is a result of a learning problem, or has resulted in learning problems developing, reluctant readers will often be aware that they would be better off if they could read well. Pam Macintyre notes that the claims of children and adolescents that books are boring is often actually an indication that they find reading too hard, and 'do not really understand the reading process' (Macintyre 1994: 29). However, this raises the question, why are boys whose reluctance to read does not stem from a learning difficulty missing out on this fundamental aspect of education and, indeed, life?

Generalising is always dangerous, and the circumstances for boys who are reluctant to read can vary enormously, but Lynn Pritchard observes that of non-voluntary readers, that is those without learning difficulties, 'three issues stand out as central to whether or not students choose to read voluntarily at school and at home: choice, opportunity and access' (Pritchard 2004). Lack of resources or emotional support will disadvantage any child with regard to learning. Gilbert notes that in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia:

> African-American, immigrant Caribbean and Aboriginal boys, boys living in poverty, boys who live in rural areas, and boys who do not have English as their first language at home, are significantly more at risk of being disadvantaged in our schools than are boys from white affluent areas. (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 5)

This is particularly so where literacy is concerned given its fundamental nature and significance in early development. But *choice* can be an issue for boys *across* socio-economic and cultural groups, many complaining that 'they are required to read materials that they have no voice in selecting' (Pritchard 2004). Hall and Coles note that analyses from developed countries around the world indicate there is a 'sense that boys in general are failing to make proper progress in literacy and that their peer cultures and school contexts exacerbate their difficulties' and that, while girls' vernacular reading practices 'equip them well for school literacy requirements', boys' preferred reading material does not serve them so well

(Hall & Coles 2001: 213, 218). In such circumstances it is not surprising that boys might feel alienated from or uninspired about the reading tasks they are given.

However, Jo Worthy regards the 'reluctant reader' label as ambiguous given that 'what appears to be reluctance may stem from a variety of complex and individual factors'. In keeping with the observations of Martino and others noted above, Worthy's own research found that a number of 'so-called' reluctant readers, who were regarded as disengaged readers at school, 'were passionate about reading self-selected materials outside of school' (Worthy 1998: 509). Power comments:

> Some boys - many boys - *are* reading! They may not be always engaging with academically sanctioned texts, but boys are involved in a reading practice that is both information gathering and responsible for enhancing their desires. (Power 2001: 49)

Despite the ambiguity of terminology, the problem exists, and many frustrated parents and teachers will testify to the fact that they have difficulty encouraging boys to read. Moloney notes that in their search for reasons for the problem parents will list sport, busy lives, television and videos, computer games, and a lack of appropriate reading material for boys among the suspected causes for their sons' reading reticence. However, it would seem that girls tend to be at least as busy as boys (often more so) and will still make time to read. Furthermore, publishers and academics insist that children's literature is more often deliberately targeted at boys because, while boys are not interested in reading about female protagonists, girls will happily read stories with a male protagonist (Moloney 2002: 34-40).

That a reluctance to read is significantly more prevalent among males is clear, but Moloney warns against the use of 'pop psychology' to explain boys' attitudes towards reading, suggesting that 'we need to be cautious here, for these psychologists have taken valid discoveries in one field (neurology) and used them to create a raft of new theories in another (behavioural science)' (Moloney 2002: 42). Martino also draws attention to this tendency, observing that an explanation for boys' poorer literacy performance 'grounded in biological determinism' argues that 'boys' fine motor skills are not as developed as those of girls in the early years', but fails to 'explain why [the] biomechanics of pencil grip might be underdeveloped, and yet the fine motor skills required for electronic game playing so well developed'. And, while testosterone might also be mentioned 'as a factor impacting on boys' rejection of reading and writing as passive literacy practices', there is considerable disagreement among biologists regarding the evidence used to 'support theories that testosterone affects learning and perception' (Martino 2003: 13).

Having exhausted all the 'folk' possibilities, parents might become concerned that learning difficulties such as dyslexia or early maturational delay might be the cause of the their boy's reluctance to read. However, while acknowledging that some children will be reluctant readers because of 'learning difficulties related to perceptual, cognitive or linguistic factors', Paul Jennings notes that 'most children who have reading difficulties…do not suffer from these problems' (Jennings 2003: 177-8). Jennings' experience suggests that 'most reluctant readers have attitudinal, social or environmental reasons for their problem' (Jennings 2003: 178). A 1997 Yorkshire study of 255 adolescent students' attitudes to reading lends

weight to this view. Analysis suggests attitudes were influenced in three areas: 'the peer group in school, the friendship group and the family… [and] that there was a gender difference in the experience of reading in the home, and that this influenced attitudes of reading at school' (Power 2001: 53).

Significantly, in the popular and academic writing that I have consulted, the role of parents in shaping boys' attitudes to literacy is most commonly suggested as a major contributing factor for the gender imbalance among reluctant readers. Many conclude that without male role models in their lives who read, boys will often come to view reading as a feminine pursuit and reject it as such in the process of developing a masculine identity. With reference to work by Annette Lareau, Gilbert comments:

> Lareau demonstrates how in both working-class and middle-class British families, the "work" of school falls predominantly upon women, particularly in terms of homework completion and parental classroom support. Boys' earliest experiences of reading, of literacy and of the home-school nexus are likely to be associated with their mothers, rather than with their fathers: with femininity and the female, rather than with masculinity and the male. (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 204)

Power notes, however, that the findings of recent studies 'require us to question past assumptions that boys do relatively poorly at reading because…fewer men [are] providing reading role models at home'. These studies do suggest that 'parents are powerful literacy role models for their children, providing them with their earliest books, materials for writing and often acting as their first teachers', and that there was anecdotal evidence that 'home literacy practices were crucial to boys' development as readers'. But it was also shown that both men and women in the home considered themselves readers, although 'men will more often give functional reasons for reading, and women identify pleasure and relaxation when asked why they read'. This tendency often led to boys associating fiction reading with their mothers, and reading related to computers, sports results and television with their fathers (Power 2001: 54-5).

The suggestion here appears to be that, rather than fathers presenting a 'non-reading' model, they often provide a 'functional' reading model that many boys adopt in their own reading practices. However, studies are open to interpretation, and it is worth noting that both Power and Gilbert summarise the findings of a 1994 Australian study conducted by Sue Nichols. While Power's paper (2001) focuses on definitions of literacy and education practice, Gilbert's (1998) work is concerned with issues surrounding masculinity and boys' behaviour. Consequently, Power avoids definitive gendered interpretations, while Gilbert writes:

> Nichols' Australian work indicated that literacy was clearly linked with mothers and with women, that fathers often identified themselves as non-readers, and that a "negative identification with reading was associated with a positive identification with perceived masculine activities and qualities". (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 203-4)

Regardless of ones' agenda, current debate appears to find agreement in the notion that boys' literacy practices are influenced by social and environmental circumstances. For many boys, a reluctance to read is

learned behaviour. In terms of the nature versus nurture argument the commentators agree that this problem comes down to nurture. Discussing his own research results relating to a survey of sixty-two fifteen-year-old boys, Martino writes:

> …42.8% of the cohort tended to reject reading on the basis that they found it "boring" and "a waste of time"… These boys' rejection of reading, in terms of a lack of interest, is organized around a set of norms in which a particular gender system…is at play, one that is operative across other social arenas for these boys… For some boys, literacy training becomes implicated in a regime of social practices in which particular versions of masculinity and femininity, as oppositional categories, are implicated. Within such dualistic frames of reference sport is designated as sex-appropriate for boys in relation to more passive and feminised activities such as reading. In this sense, these boys' involvement in literacy appears to be influenced by a set of social practices through which they learn to police a particular form of desirable masculinity defined in terms of the active / passive dichotomy. (Martino 2001: 64-5)

For Moloney, 'the models of manhood boys are exposed to are essential' to the development of reading practices. He laments the fact that 'the behaviour most often presented to boys is the stereotyped form of masculinity endlessly perpetuated in the media and on the sporting field': a model that promotes 'physical activity, strength and ascendancy…[and] in its narrowest form dismisses books and reading with contemptuous disdain…' (Moloney 2002: 44-5.)

There is little doubt that boys who have been presented with a model of masculinity at home that actively encourages the use of literature for pleasure are given a good start with regard to literacy and the enjoyment of literature. However, some will need continued encouragement and positive reinforcement from parents and teachers for this good start not to become swamped by schoolyard attitudes. Martino notes that

> boys who enjoy reading or like English have been referred to as "faggots", "squids", "squares", "spocks", "try-hards" or simply just as "rejects" by their peers…for many boys, there appears to be something "uncool" about reading and school in general. (Martino 2001: 61)

Gilbert's discussion of boys' culture in schools suggests a dominant culture that mirrors the 'stereotyped form of masculinity' presented by Moloney. Boys tend to place academic achievement and reading in the same category, and to aspire to either is the domain of girls and nerds - an affront to the general perception of masculinity (Gilbert & Gilbert 1998: 132-43). In such an environment, peer pressure is enough to turn some boys from regular to reluctant readers. Those already struggling don't have much of a chance.

While this discussion considers why boys might develop a reluctance to read, I do not wish to suggest that every Australian schoolboy will become a reluctant reader, dismissive of reading as a feminine pursuit and a threat to his masculinity. A great many do not. Furthermore, as alluded to above, some boys are simply reluctant to read the type of literature commonly included in school curricula. Others do well in reading tests and yet are

still reluctant to read. Whatever the causes, a significant number of boys are disadvantaged by their reluctance to read. Dealing with the complex social and educational issues involved here is a long-term community project, but there are books available now that reluctant readers respond well to. Some of the popular titles have been criticised for their content, and others applauded; that these books are gladly read suggests the authors understand something of the needs of reluctant reader boys and how to meet them at the literary level.

Books Boys Read and How to Write Them

> This then is the plastic part of literature: to embody character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye. This is the highest and hardest thing to do in words; the thing which, once accomplished, equally delights the schoolboy and the sage, and makes in its own right, the quality of epics. (Stevenson 1988: 250)

Canadian children's literature expert Ron Jobe points out that 'no one ever finds time [to read]…you have to make time' (Moloney 2002: 38). The challenge for the writer of children's fiction is to write in such a way that will leave readers *making* time to read. It is primarily the responsibility of parents and teachers to encourage children to take their first steps in reading, but if that experience is not a rewarding one, the chances that a child will see reading as a good use of his or her time are diminished. With regard to reluctant reader boys this is particularly so. A 'guaranteed to appeal' type of story doesn't exist, if it did there would be no reluctant reader boys. However, it is possible for children's authors to write accessible and engaging prose that will give their stories the best chance of providing a positive experience for boys who are reluctant to read.

As noted above, it is not uncommon for boys who are regarded as reluctant readers because of their disinterested attitude towards the books on the school curriculum, or novels in general, to be avid readers of self-selected materials. Archie Fusillo notes that he 'taught boys who would not read the set texts but read voraciously magazine and newspaper articles on motocross, the speedway, military tactics and so forth' (Fusillo 2000: 6). And while one study of children's reading choices found that only 2.8% of those surveyed read non-fiction exclusively, 78% of those who did were boys (Hall & Coles 2001: 217). It is generally agreed that the major reason such observations and results are commonplace is found in boys' approach to and expectations of reading.

David Metzenthen suggests that, while girls seem to be accepting of the fact that not all books will work for them, boys are less forgiving. As in most of life, 'boys are "reward oriented" when they read…[they] expect more from all books… Boys require immediate gratification' (Metzenthen 2000: 8). Fusillo agrees that 'many boys read with a view to practical application' (Fusillo 2000: 6).

Once again, the reason for such an approach to and expectation of their reading can be attributed to the example boys are set by their male role models. If boys rarely or never see older males reading for pleasure, but do see them reading newspapers, product manuals, work-related material and so on, the example set is that of reading for practical purposes. With

reference, once again, to Sue Nichols' study, Martino notes that '…fathers preferred to read non-fiction texts and were interested in fact finding' (Martino 2001: 67). He continues:

> …reading fiction fares pretty poorly for boys in relation to the range of other texts that are available to them in their culture for stimulating and accommodating their interests. What is significant is that their reading is organized around practices and interests such as sport, TV, and computer-related activities. It is in this sense that many boys' engagement or refusal to engage in specific literacy practices is tied to the ways in which they learn to police and enact desirable forms of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. (Martino 2001: 68)

The inclusion of these observations here is not to suggest that authors hoping to write material appropriate for reluctant reader boys should abandon fiction, nor that writers of fiction should adopt a journalistic or DVD instruction manual style. However, they do carry implications with regard to content and style that appeals to boys generally, and reluctant reader boys particularly. As Metzenthen explains, boys 'want to take something away from a book that is substantial and useful - be it facts or knowledge or an emotional tool…' (Metzenthen 2000: 8).

Boys will often respond well to fiction if snippets of information relevant to the detail of the story that also add to their store of knowledge are woven into the tale. Examples of Metzenthen's incorporation of 'facts or knowledge or an emotional tool' within a story can be found in one of his contributions to the *Aussie Chomps* series, *The Really, Really High Diving Tower* (2003). His protagonist, Pete Podlewski, spends most of his summer school holidays at the local swimming centre with his best mate. They have set a goal to 'conquer' the ten-metre diving tower by the end of the holidays. Virginia, a new girl at the pool, joins them in jumping from progressively higher platforms as the summer passes.

Metzenthen manages to include details about diving and the detail and experience of the diving towers within the natural unfolding of the story. When Pete first sees Virginia he is besotted and imagines himself impressing her with a dive from the ten-metre platform:

> Suddenly I dive, feet together, arms wide. Down I plummet, holding the Flying Swallow Position until, hands locked, I slash into the water, streaking towards the bottom of the five-metre deep pool like a bullet. (Metzenthen 2003: 7)

His actual attempt at the end of the book is not so elegant, but the reader has learned a little of what a good dive should look like. Furthermore, Pete falls in love with Virginia, confessing various feelings to the reader along the way. The reader learns that such feelings are normal, and that friendship with a girl can be a good experience.

Another example is found in David Harris' *Cliffhangers 1*, *Devil's Island* (1999). The teenage protagonist, Luke, is caught in a storm while trying to land on Devil's Island. His kayak is damaged beyond repair in the hazardous landing on a thin strip of sand at the base of a cliff. Rather than leave it at the mercy of the elements, Luke decides to sink it:

> Luke watched the waves bashing against the rock walls. He couldn't leave the kayak to be slowly smashed to pieces. He

> unclipped the fore and aft hatch covers and swung them back onto the deck. Then he reached inside and took out the inflated wine bladders he'd stuffed in for extra buoyancy. They scattered and bounced like silver balloons around the beach and over the water. (Harris 1999a: 13-14)

From this kind of detail in a number of passages in the early chapters of the book, readers of *Devil's Island* learn a little about kayaks and the preparation required before indulging in serious kayaking.

How to define 'good story' for boys is the next problem. As suggested above, no 'guaranteed to appeal' story exists. Moloney's experience as a teacher librarian and children's author has led him to conclude that 'a good book for a boy is one he *wants* to read' (Moloney 2002: 137). Andy Griffiths recalls:

> When I sat down to read I wanted entertainment, surprise and fun…
>
> I remember being encouraged to read by adults, but I was perplexed by the fact that as soon as I found something that I really wanted to read they would ban it. (Griffiths 2000: 3)

Not surprisingly, adults will often disapprove of the children's stories Griffiths now writes. The *Weekend Australian* recently reported that Griffiths is 'in trouble with parents, teachers, librarians and even some booksellers who think his latest effort, *The Bad Book*, goes too far' (Hall 2004: 3). Hall notes that references to swearing at parents, driving over old people, Little Willy burning his penis, and a baby in a manger urinating, were regarded by some as being in extremely bad taste and undermining of society's commonly held values (Hall 2004: 3). Even less surprisingly, many children love to read his books. The problem is clear; books that adults might regard as 'good stories' for boys, and books that boys want to read, may not be the same books.

But is this as much of a problem as it might seem? In discussing definitions of children's literature, Barbara Wall claims: '…the first test of a children's book should be that it is genuinely for children and not that it is comfortable for and extends to adults' (Wall 1991: 233). Moloney notes that boys 'love the ghoulish, the gross and the disgusting', but that such material is not often considered suitable content for children's books:

> Paul Jennings' stories were initially dismissed as toilet jokes. Roald Dahl's *The Twits* was castigated for the nose-picking and other filthy habits portrayed. Raymond Briggs' *Fungus the Bogey Man* was banned in some American states… All of these books have achieved legendary status, especially among boys. They are all quite well written, while still managing to avoid sanitisation. Libraries and bookshops stock them with relish. (Moloney 2002: 138-9)

Moloney suggests that while these, and many other titles, may not be regarded by adults as appropriate reading material for boys, 'such books… have found the right wavelength for boys. Boys actually want to read them' (Moloney 2002: 139).

Of course, most would agree that it is possible to go 'too far', to be too gross and disgusting, but there would be few adults who could say that

their childhood was completely devoid of 'lavatory humour' or the like. That their elders regarded such as inappropriate was a significant part of the fun. Moloney claims that boys 'have an image of themselves as anarchic beings bringing chaos to stultifying order' (Moloney 2002: 135). It would seem that to voice disapproval, or even ban books that tap into this aspect of boyishness is one sure way to interest boys in them.

Once again, it is not intended that these observations lead to a conclusion that writing for reluctant reader boys must necessarily be gross and disgusting, far from it. While peer pressure has a part to play, each child develops a particular taste in books. As Jennings comments: '…not every child likes my books. Thank goodness for individual differences' (Jennings 2003: 171). But it is worth being aware of this propensity, especially given the enthusiasm with which reluctant readers receive books such as those written by Jennings.

Indeed, Jennings' recent collaborations with Morris Gleitzman in writing the six-part serial novels *Wicked* and *Deadly* are typically (for Jennings at least) a combination of the bizarre and the gross. *Deadly*, for example, features a special 'fountain of youth' type tea plant that can only be germinated when its seed passes through the digestive tract of a human, with all the associated scatological humour, and a corpse preserved in ice that is variously used as a raft and an ice bridge (Jennings & Gleitzman 2001). Essentially it is an action / adventure story but there is a heavy emphasis on the grotesque.

However, authors of stories for boys that would be regarded as adventures much closer to realism will also make use of the gross and the ghoulish throughout their narrative, aware of its appeal for their audience. In James Moloney's *Grommet Saves the World* (2003), another in the *Aussie Chomps* series, the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Grommet, goes undercover at a theme park to help find out who is sabotaging rides and exhibits. It is an adventure / detective story but Moloney's first-person narrator tells readers of a melted 'five thousand litres of ice-cream that you could row a boat in'; a panther keeper who, when attacked by a lion years before, 'pushed the lion off before it could kill him but it [had] ripped out all his vocal chords'; his concern that he might 'end up as road-kill'; and the warning he is given in the panther enclosure not to move because the panthers will 'know you are prey and then they'll rip your throat out in seconds' (Moloney 2003: 9, 20, 52).

Examples of style and content could be examined endlessly. And while commentators may be able to quantify in general terms what makes a 'good story', answering the question of what boys like will never be done in more than broad terms. Nonetheless, having noted that generalisations tend to get in the way, Moloney does offer a general summary statement in response to the often-asked question - 'What *do* boys like to read?' I have chosen to reproduce a truncated version of Moloney's summary here because it accurately reflects and summarises much of the opinion I have read by the other commentators and authors I have cited. In short Moloney suggests:

- On the whole, boys enjoy books which place action ahead of emotion; what the characters do should be more important than what the characters think or feel. Hence the apparent preference for the action novel.
- Boys tend to like books that match their image of themselves.

- Boys love to have fun, so they want books that are fun - ones that make them laugh and appeal to their love of madcap mayhem. This is all tied up with their image of the quintessential boy…as much as this can be defined and replicated, they love to find it in the books they read.
- Boys have an image of themselves as anarchic…they love tales of subversion - but this subversion is oddly true to a sense of justice and what is right. (Moloney 2002: 134-5)

If this applies to boys in general, it certainly applies to many boys whose reluctance to read has come about as a result of masculine identity issues.

Commentators agree that writing engaging content for reluctant reader boys is very important; how it is presented is equally so. William Zinsser suggests that while it is the story that makes a good children's book 'work', foundational to its success is its language (Zinsser 1998: 10-11). Language that serves the story well will not be obscured by intricacy; rather it will often go unnoticed for its clarity. Jennings claims, 'good writing is not inaccessible. It does not draw attention to itself. It is almost invisible as it leads the child into story' (Jennings 2003: 95-6).

Jennings' particular concern for reluctant readers began with his nine-year-old son. He tells of his son's frustration with the remedial books available. After tears and a book thrown across the room, Jennings examined the book more closely:

> Sure it was about some teenagers with motorbikes. And he was interested in motorbikes which was why I had chosen it. But nothing of interest happened in the story. There was no plot. No tension, no mystery, no humour. (Jennings 2003: 169)

As noted above, these elements are very important in any 'good story'. Jennings realised his son was bored, and also ashamed to be seen reading such a book. He decided that he could write more interesting books himself that would 'appeal to ten-to-thirteen-year-olds with reading delays of up to three years' (Jennings 2003: 171). The result was the publication of *Unreal* in 1984, the first of a long list of titles that is still growing.

However, Jennings felt that it was important to be writing stories that would attract all boys within the age group, not just the reluctant readers, if the stigma of the 'remedial' tag was to be overcome. He points to the clear, simple prose of Ernest Hemingway and Samuel Beckett as examples of brilliant writing that is not bewildering for its complexity. Jennings comments:

> I worked very hard to tell a good story in simple prose. I wrote short stories with surprise endings to give the readers a quick reward. I even put chapters inside the short stories to give convenient stopping points. I knew humour was a sought-after ingredient. (Jennings 2003: 170)

The beginning of 'Without a Shirt', the first story in *Unreal*, exemplifies Jennings' 'simple prose':

> Mr Bush looked at the class. "Brian Bell," he said, "you can be the first one to give your History talk."

> My heart sank. I felt sick inside. I didn't want to do it; I hated talking in front of the class. "Yes, Mr Bush without a shirt," I said. Sue Featherstone (daughter of the mayor) giggled. (Jennings 2002: 1)

Brian Bell has a speech impediment. He says 'without a shirt' after every sentence. He is laughed at and the reader's sympathy is with him. The solution to the problem comes as Brian's dog, Shovel, gradually uncovers more and more of his great-great grandfather's skeleton at the nearby beach - he had been lost at sea and never laid to rest. Eventually the whole skeleton is found, and so is an old shirt. When Brian buries them all in the one place he is cured. Needless to say, there is plenty of room for some ghoulish storytelling along the way, and nine chapters within twenty pages makes for a satisfying reading pace (Jennings 2002: 1-20). Jennings achieves his goal. Straightforward prose within the grasp of eight-year-olds and older, with enough humour and creepiness to attract even the most accomplished of thirteen-year-old readers.

It is a style that continues to be very effective. Boys and girls find Jennings' work accessible and enjoyable - he has sold over 7.5 million copies of his books worldwide (Jennings 2005) - and parents and teachers are able to recommend them to reluctant readers with pleasing results. And while there are children that don't like Jennings' books, many other titles have been written by authors offering different content but drawing on the simple prose premise that Jennings has been instrumental in establishing as a standard in books for the reluctant reader.

A final example of this type of prose is found in another of David Metzenthen's *Aussie Chomps*: *Anton Rocks On* (2004). It is notable for its similarity to 'Without a Shirt', written twenty years before. Chapter one begins:

> Ever since I was small - let me start that again - ever since I was *young* (because I'm still small) there are two short words that have meant just about everything to -
>
> Two short words? Or is it maybe just one long word made up from two short ones joined together?
>
> Anyway, ever since I was young - oh, *forget* it!
>
> Guitar hero.
>
> I want to be one. That's what I was trying to say. (Metzenthen 2004: 1).

Anton struggles with what he wants to say and is short for his age. The reader identifies with the struggle and is also intrigued - will this small boy reach his goal of becoming a guitar hero? While this story is quite different to Jennings' 'Without a Shirt' with regard to content, the strategies used to 'hook' readers in the first instance and keep them reading are very similar. Rather than relying on the ghoulish, it is Anton's wit and charm as he negotiates the difficulties of being a 'shrimp' at school that appeal to readers, but it is the same simple prose and short, cliffhanger chapters that make the story accessible and compelling.

Writing anything that 'shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye' (Stevenson 1988: 250), as Stevenson suggests, is a challenge for any author. Using language that will make the remarkably striking accessible

to children requires thoughtful care. If that care is taken, reluctant reader boys will gain a sense of achievement and be encouraged to read more through positive reading experiences. If authors continue to write engaging content, in accessible prose, that appeals to readers of all levels of accomplishment, the reluctant reader will have the best chance of becoming a practised, perhaps even avid, reader.

Conclusion

> No written story can come to life for us until we become co-creators of the narrative, and it is this cooperation, this "intensity of identification", which defines the reading experience. (Caswell 2002: 115)

Clearly there is general agreement among educators, academics and authors that the culture of masculinity surrounding many boys is a significant contributing factor to their becoming reluctant readers. While some children will not enjoy reading because of perceptual, cognitive or linguistic difficulties, many boys will choose not to read because of social and cultural influences. Despite enjoyable early experiences with literature, lack of reading male role models in their lives can lead boys to develop a view of reading as a feminine activity, a view often reinforced by their peers as boys progress in the school environment.

Such an acknowledgement rightly leads to discussion of ways and means of addressing the cultural problem at the most fundamental levels, but for those children already reluctant to read there is a need for engaging and enjoyable reading material. Jennings' declaration that 'there is no such thing as a book for reluctant readers' (Jennings 2003: 47) reflects a concern that too often in the past simple, easy-too-read language was only found coupled with simplistic story telling. While the reluctant reader may need reading material with language two or three years below his actual age if the reading task is not to be too difficult, he will still need subject matter appropriate to his actual age if the reading task is not to be boring and embarrassing.

In light of this, writing for reluctant reader boys should be seen instead as the task of writing well-told stories that might *appeal* to any boy, in language that will be *accessible* to as broad an age group as is practical. Literature that *appeals* will consider the likes and dislikes of boys, such as an emphasis on action over character, a sense of fun and mayhem, characters or stories that match an image of themselves, ghoulish or subversive tales (though not without a sense of justice) across action-related genre, and good use of humour. Literature that is *accessible* will consider the reward-driven nature of boys and be written in simple prose, with short chapters offering cliffhanger endings that provide achievable goals and an incentive to read more.

Books such as those in the Puffin Books *Aussie Chomps* series endeavour to apply these principles in their story telling. Both reluctant and accomplished readers will earn 'immediate gratification' as they plough through this short-story format. And while the reluctant reader whose reading age is below his actual age might take longer to get through this length of book than an accomplished peer, its size is not daunting. The reluctant reader will be encouraged that, because of its broad appeal, his peers are reading the same material too.

Concerned parents, teachers, and librarians will help reluctant reader boys find material that appeals to their tastes. As I have shown, it is possible to write fiction for boys that is appealing and accessible to the struggling reluctant reader and, at the same time, of genuine interest for the accomplished reader within the same peer group. Authors who recognise the need for *appealing* stories told in *accessible* prose will make it possible for those boys to become co-creators of their narratives and eager participants in the reading experience.

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