



We Need Boy's Books

By Phil Rink, PE

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A long time ago, when we used to talk to each other and take things at face value and disagree openly, we had boys' books. The Hardy Boys, Doc Savage, John Carter of Mars, The Mad Scientist's Club, and Tom Swift books were typically short, fast moving, and plot-filled. The stories were built around a technical or societal problem and some sort of moral exploration. Ideally the protagonist solved the problem and saved the galaxy before the 200th (poorly written but wildly entertaining) page.

Then woman's liberation hit western culture like a hammer, and correctly so. Women had been marginalized and our culture failed girls. Our emphasis changed to promoting and creating options for girls. We're still trying to figure this out, which is pretty weird and sad.

But the pendulum has swung too far. Boys are now vilified, not just marginalized. Stereotypical but accurate boyish behavior is now abhorrent. Aggression is evil. Physical confrontation is criminalized instead of channeled. Restlessness and short attention spans are medicated. Kinesthetic skills and learning strategies are dismissed while verbal skills are promoted. Modern kid lit favors complicated plots, multiple characters, vividly descriptive prose, and often moral ambiguity. *The Hobbit* is a great book, but many people (many of them young and male) can't sort it out.

Middle schools are using emotive dystopian novels for their school-wide reading programs. Middle school is dystopian enough. No need to pour gasoline on the fire. In America, it's completely plausible that a boy will enter puberty without ever having a positive male role model. Modern labor laws ensure that he'll be a young adult before he works with men. He certainly won't see any quality men in the movies, TV shows, and computer games being stuffed into his brain. Popular culture (including school work) treats boys as ugly, stupid, loud girls.

“After dinner, we sat on the shore below the restaurant. Before too long, Isaac, Uncle Tim and I were all throwing rocks into the water. Uncle Tim somehow found some flat rocks that he could skip. Isaac just kept looking for bigger and bigger rocks to throw. Finally he tried to throw a huge boulder the size of his head. He slipped, and it dropped at his feet. The splash got his pants all wet. It looked like he peed himself.” - Jimi & Isaac 2a: Keystone Species

I was talking to a library group about my books and a lady got really angry at me. “Are you really saying that boys are different than girls?” she asked. She was not happy at all. “I am,” I said. “They are. I can't explain to you what it's like to be a nineteen-year-old male, but it's great. Amazing. You're completely invincible. You can do anything. You don't need to listen to anyone.” Then I took a breath. “If we haven't given these boys a path to follow by the time they're thirteen or fourteen, they're lost. If we're lucky, we'll get another chance to make them into men when they get out of prison at 25.”

I think maybe she stopped being mad at me. Dunno.

A different lady asked me why I didn't write similar books for girls. “I'm not one,” I told her. “There are lots of girls and women in my books, but they're viewed through the eyes of the boy telling the story. Girls want honest storytelling just as much as boys do. I don't think I can tell honest stories through a girls' eyes.”

Boys want to matter, more than anything. Either we actively teach our boys to be strong, gentle, powerful, thoughtful men of action, or they'll keep throwing bigger and bigger rocks into the pond until someone notices the waves. If you don't know there's a problem you're not paying attention. The water is rough.

Children's publishing is tiny and remarkably homogeneous. To their credit, they surveyed themselves. Now they know the industry's Gender/Race/Sexuality/Disability profile, and they want to hire...others. Good for them. But the real story of [The Diversity Baseline Survey](#) isn't what they found. It's what they didn't even look for.

They didn't ask each other if they knew any boys. Do they play their music so loud it hurts? Have they ever killed, cleaned, and cooked an animal for dinner? Have they ever played a fiercely competitive sport? Have they ever lost a fistfight? Have they ever fixed a car or built something from crap they found in the woods? Do they even know anybody that does boy stuff without apology? Do they even think “boy stuff” is a legitimate term? The publishing industry is failing girls, too. My favorite boys' books growing up were the Nancy Drew series. I read every single one. Nancy and George and Bess took names and kicked butt. They solved problems and got stuff done. The publishing industry is re-releasing the old Nancy Drew books, once they...rework them a little. Take out the butt kicking part.

We can help girls become the best women they can be without abandoning or hurting boys. Not only do women deserve better men in their lives, but sex-typical behaviors aren't binary. They exist on a continuum. Emphasizing verbal skills in schools, as we do now, helps verbally-biased boys. Bringing back tactile learning and physicality will also

help the girls that know the world through function and touch.

A final note on “Diversity.” Diversity of heritage or appearance is easy to measure but not that interesting. Real diversity happens when people interact successfully. When they meet someone odd and choose to work with them before picking sides. You can spend all day all week all month all year telling people to get along. They'll either ignore you or hate you, and you don't get to choose which one. Real diversity happens when people bring their differing backgrounds and viewpoints to a common problem. Problem solving is the path to real cultural diversity.

We can't help group A by excluding group B. We can only help everyone by helping every one, one at a time.

Phil Rink is a [Professional Engineer and Inventor](#), and he writes [Jimi & Isaac Books](#) for Kids.