MISREADING
MASCULINITY

Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture

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Foreword by Ellin Oliver Keene

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The newspaper articles . . . about the upcoming Senate investigation into comic books always cited “escapism” among the litany of injurious consequences of their reading, and dwelled on the pernicious effect, on young minds, of satisfying the desire to escape. As if there could be any more noble and necessary service in life.

—From The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, by Michael Chabon

In this final chapter, I hope to suggest some practical implications for teaching. These will not be fully tested, failsafe ways of engaging boys (I don’t think those exist). Rather they will be what I hope are plausible ideas for opening up the literacy curriculum to make it more appealing for boys—and I hope for girls as well.

The central argument of this book runs something like this: Boys underperform girls in school literacy tasks, but not because they are biologically “less verbal.” This would be an essentialist claim, locating “difference” in unchanging human nature—which
is not to say that many boys don’t accept this explanation. As one of my college freshmen told me (told me!) he saw reading and writing as “girl things.” It was a matter of X and Y chromosomes. Real men, he may have been saying, have better things to do than read or write.

I suspect that many young boys have internalized this model before they even come to school. The research suggests that they rarely see adult males reading extended fiction (or doing any writing)—and in schools it is the reading of extended fiction that typically marks them as successful readers, even as successful students. Those teachers promoting reading and writing will typically be female, so there is little to challenge a perception of literacy tasks as feminized. I have argued that this problem—this construction of literacy as feminized—cannot be countered if schools fail to be self-critical about what counts and does not count as valid literacy activity. In the end, a broadening of the literacy spectrum will not only benefit boys; it will benefit any student whose primary affiliation is to the “low status” popular narratives of television, movies, comics, humor, sports pages, and plot-driven fiction.

**Widen the Circle**

The central challenge for schools can be illustrated by the concentric circles of Figure 8–1. The larger circle represents all the forms of narrative pleasure that can be experienced in a culture; they could be written, oral, visual, musical, or, most likely, some combination. It contains rock videos, Web pages, animated cartoons, and gossip. It includes the spectrum of written narratives from low culture (e.g., jokebooks) to acknowledged classics. It even includes narratives (pornography, racist jokes, movies that demean women) that, although legally protected “speech,” are clearly pernicious.

The smaller inner circle represents school-sanctioned narratives, those that count as a measure of reading and writing devel-
development in schools. This circle cannot—and should not—be as comprehensive as the larger circle. Traditionally it focuses on print literacy, on a literary canon featuring works of high “cultural capital.” As I have argued, there is a bias toward a type of fiction that has thematic weight, that features introspection and the expression of feeling, that engages readers with significant moral issues, and that helps promote a tolerance for diversity. Preference is given to books that are morally functional, that assist personal development and socialization. Books trump magazines; print trumps the visual; the serious trumps the humorous; fiction trumps nonfiction. In some cases, literacy instruction is seen as assaulted on all sides by an indulgent popular culture that now
caters to young people without asking anything of them. The inner circle becomes a wall, a barrier keeping out a degraded, demeaning, and amoral culture (read: MTV).

But I would argue that the more tightly we draw the circle of acceptability, the more students are left out. If literacy instruction defines itself against these more popular forms of narrative, we lose a resource, a lever, a connection. As Anne Haas Dyson has so brilliantly argued, the issue is not simply widening the circle; we are not just bringing in this outer culture unchanged. Dyson (1997) argues for a “permeable curriculum” where these popular culture affiliations form the cultural material that children employ (and transform) in their stories. Jamie, the video game fanatic of Chapter 6, used his knowledge of Japanese-inspired video games to create complex written adventures.

Jamie provides a good example of what we might call the obsession theory of writing development. Literacy development is dependent upon obsessive interests, ones strong enough to sustain the writer in the often-laborious task of developing an extended piece of writing. Writing becomes a way of documenting and employing this allegiance; it piggybacks on these primary affiliations children bring to school. A Red Sox fan may never like writing better than he likes Pedro Martinez, but reading and writing can attest to that allegiance. In some cases, children are affiliated with the “high capital” experiences that align them well with school literacy; they’ve heard The Hungry Caterpillar so often they know it by heart. They have a rich array of experiences to draw on—ballet lessons, trips to the White Mountains, visits to Boston and New York. Others, like Jamie, must rely on “low capital” obsessions, like video games, that may be just as useful in bringing them into the “literacy club.”

But accepting this “low capital” material will require us all to imagine a positive role for television programs we rarely choose to watch. I’m always struck by the reaction to statistics about TV viewing among African American and Hispanic children: The call is always “How can we get them away from the television set?” In effect, how can they change their lifestyle to be more like white
middle-class kids? It's as if there is nothing usable in that TV watching, no possible transfer between these visual narratives and the writing kids might do in school. As if “plot” or “conflict” or “dialogue” on a TV show has nothing to do with writing (even though screenwriters develop these shows). But if we are to help students use these resources, we will need to spend some time with them, maybe watching a few mornings of Saturday anime cartoons, a few minutes of Tom Green, or a bit of Jackass, or allowing Jamie to lead us through the intricacies of a Final Fantasy game.

This openness to popular culture should not mean an abandonment of the established literature that has historically been valued in schools. Jamie was allowed to write his media-driven fantasies—and he regularly listened with his class while his teacher, Mike Anderson, read The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe; Tom Sawyer; The Giver; and The Hobbit. To borrow Jamie’s analogy, Anderson created a “big room,” one that could admit popular culture and classical literature, and where children, in their writing, often merged the two in unexpected ways.

**Allow Cartooning as Serious Business**

In almost any elementary classroom there is a clearly identifiable small group of boys. They seem young for their age, immature, and addicted to drawing. They will painstakingly draw their specialty—a fighter jet, a mechanical scorpion, a particularly warty goblin—again and again and again, ignoring the pleas of the teacher to get some writing done while they are at it. These boys are self-taught, and so immersed in a world of fantasy and popular culture that they are just as much of a problem to the art teacher who’s pushing them to imitate high-status artists like Monet as they are to their regular classroom teacher.

Many artists and cartoonists recognize themselves in these students, and some, like Dav Pilkey and Roger Essley, have taken it upon themselves to open opportunities to such boys (and their classmates). Pilkey includes one of George and Harold’s cartoons
in each of his Captain Underpants adventures, thus providing an approachable model for visual storytelling, an earlier Dav Pilkey. Some of his Amazon.com admirers claim that they can’t wait to start their own comic books.

Essley has taken this visual approach a step farther, developing what he calls a “telling board” approach where students develop a story by drawing on the storyboarding practice used by many picture-book writers and animators. Students develop stories by drawing quick rough sketches of the key action and by taping these sketches, in sequence, to a large board. In this way students and teachers can see the entire story at a glance. Like an animator presenting the idea for a cartoon, students tell their story to the class, and as a class, they discuss if there is a “hook”—a “focus or central point . . . something exciting/funny/scary” in the story. The next step is to develop the telling board into a picture book, though Essley notes it could also lead into a cartoon.

In this approach the print-based writing is built on drawing and oral storytelling, both often stronger and more appealing systems for students with learning difficulties (Essley was one himself). Essley notes that many individual education plans (IEPs) for special education students identify them as visual learners and require multimodal approaches to literacy learning—yet relatively few teachers are comfortable enough with visual storytelling to make this an option. Despite the bold promises of the IEP, special education students typically face a world of worksheets and exercises that make no use of drawing or visual abilities. Cartooning and “tellingboarding” can be the critical bridge for such students, most of them, of course, boys.

**Acknowledge the Complexity of “Violence” in Reading and Writing**

In the opening scene of Martin Cruz Smith’s thriller Havana Bay (1999), a putrefied body is being removed from the Havana harbor by a group of divers:
As the diver steadied the head, the pressure of his hands liquefied the face and made it slide like a grape skin off the skull, which itself separated cleanly from the neck: it was like trying to lift a man who was perversely disrobing part by part. A pelican sailed overhead, red as a flamingo.

“I think the identification is going to be more complicated than the captain imagined,” Arkady said.

The diver caught the jaw as it dropped from off from the skull and juggled each, while the detectives pushed the other black, swollen limbs pell-mell into the shrivelling inner tube. (4–5)

This is graphic violence, realism meant to shock and repel. It is what Hodge and Tripp (1986) call “high modality” violence, writing that dwells skillfully on the detailed physiological effects of death. In my experience such graphic descriptions are rare in student writing. For all the claims that males like to write about blood and gore, their writing seems sanitized and stylized (“low modality”) when compared with the work of writers like Smith. The detail that he employs requires a knowledge of human biology that students lack; it probably crosses a comfort zone (recall Corey’s description of the “right amount of blood”); and from the point of view of the young writer, it slows the forward movement of the plot.

The student writers I interviewed rarely even used the term “violence” at all; they claimed to like “action” and “adventure” and saw various forms of threat, contest, and combat as essential elements of what they were attempting. In most cases there was a cartoonlike, slapstick quality to these accounts. Any categorical banning of violence would effectively preclude their attempting their favorite genres, removing one of the few motivations boys have to attempt writing. At the same time, I felt that the boys I interviewed recognized that there can be some reasonable limits; in fact, I don’t think they would endorse a situation where there were absolutely no restrictions on representations of violence. Here are some issue or claims that I have tried to make about violence in this book:
Writing that causes teachers or classmates to feel threatened or belittled is inappropriate. There is a distinction between writing that has a violent effect (fear of being harmed, severe embarrassment, being mocked because of racial/ethnic identity or physical appearance)—and writing that employs violence (battles, shooting, missiles) without having a negative effect on others in the class. Admittedly, this is not always an easy line to draw, but this principle might help in making distinctions. And one would hope that we can discuss this issue with students who cross the line without automatically invoking criminal penalties.

Violence in the media—and its effect on us—should be a topic of discussion. For me, the most interesting sections of the student interviews dealt with their theories about media violence. What is its effect upon them? What are appropriate limits? What limits would they set for their own kids? What is its role on fostering violence in our culture? What makes someone susceptible to media violence? When is violence necessary in a story? When is it too much? Why do we “enjoy” violence? Why do we “enjoy” being scared? When does a movie become “too scary?”

Even young children have opinions on these centrally important questions. In the end, discussions of these questions are more important than any rule because they suggest that the issue is complex. Violence is both abhorrent and fascinating; it is a social problem and a central element of the movies and books enjoyed by the most nonviolent among us.

Is it violence or comedy that young writers are after (or both)? Children’s stories, as we have seen, are often rough approximations of the TV and movie narratives they enjoy. Even “low class” popular films like Jackie Chan’s Rush Hour movies or the Lethal Weapon series with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover employ storytelling techniques far more sophisticated than anything young students can match. One thing they skillfully accomplish is meshing action and comedy; often the detective team is mismatched in some way—they squabble, get in each other’s way, or just get on
each other’s nerves due to enforced proximity. This humorous action allows us to see the characters as human and subject to irritation; it lightens the drama of crime, danger, violence, and detection. This humor also has a distancing effect, marking the story as safely unrealistic, “low modality.”

Even a writer like Jamie, so in love with his action plots, stops long enough for his protagonists to argue:

“Hey, Where’s Daron??” asked Matt.
“I don’t know and I don’t care,” answered Kujo.
“Hey! Hello! We need Daron for the mission!” said Matt very angrily.
“What ever” said Kujo.
“WHAT EVER!!! We need Daron for the mission!!!!” screamed Matt.

Finally Kujo agrees to search for Daron: “OK as long as you SHUT UP!!!” In this exchange, Jamie is trying for that humorous interplay (imagine him reading aloud “Hey! Hello!”) among protagonists that is characteristic of so many action adventures.

In fact, I would argue that the action writing that is most successful with peers—male and female—is that which successfully employs humor in the form of slapstick, parody, exaggeration, or comedic exchanges among main characters. Humor, not endless violent action, is the real key to popularity among young writers. These humorous interludes become anticipated moments during oral readings, and confer a status to the writer. Familiarity with their true models—the films, TV shows, and video games students are imitating—can help us at least talk with them about their attempts, using the reference points they are familiar with. But that, of course, means that we must accept these visual narratives, at least some of them, as legitimate models.

*Action writing as a channel for male activity.* Watch any first-grade boys composing and you will see the drama of hands simulating explosions, accompanied by sounds effects, with intervals of
consultations with friends about who is in which spaceship. Meanwhile the artist in the group is painstakingly drawing a jet fighter, with elaborate gun mounts and lines simulating the projection of missiles and demolition of targets. I realize that this is a masculine nightmare to some, an exercise in hyper–male bonding.

Yet these opportunities for action narratives often explain why writing can become so popular among boys. Literacy too often seems unappealing and inactive to boys. It gets in the way of the need to move, to talk, to play, to live in and with one’s body. In one sense, reading and writing represent the choice of language over physical action, the vicarious over the actual. But writing time often provides the most open space (outside of recess) in the curriculum—a space to enact fantasies of power, adventure, and friendship. And as many boys claim, when they are writing these adventures, they feel themselves physically inside the stories. Rather than denying the physical needs of boys, writing can employ that energy—if we can keep the space open for their play.

Accept Youth Genres

Children combine the cultural resources at their disposal to create “youth genres,” which may differ in significant ways from the literature that appeals to adults. In Emile, Jean Jacques Rousseau made this thunderous claim about human development, which became an underlying principle in the study of children:

Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs. ([1762] 1979, 90)

Turning children into precocious, adultlike performers, according to Rousseau, was a great perversion of the natural order—a deprivation of childhood itself.

I feel this principle was abandoned in much of the early writing process work, when the model of the adult writer was superimposed upon young writers. Adult writers revise—there-
fore young writers should revise. Adult writers receive editing help from peers—therefore the same should be true for young writers. Adults write memoirs—therefore young writers should want to do the same. The list could go on. At national conferences where children’s writing was presented, it was common for sophisticated, adultlike narratives to be featured along with commentaries where young writers sounded wise beyond their years. No bathroom humor or intergalactic battles. Few examples of kids obsessed with funny names.

If the developmental principle is abandoned (as I think it often has been), the task of teaching becomes one-directional—to teach the craft of practicing writers. We teach about leads and detail, conflict, setting, and other craft issues. But researchers like Dyson complicate this picture by suggesting that children often employ their cultural materials toward their ends, which may differ in significant way from the ways adults work. John Updike does not use his fiction to directly celebrate his friendship with Anne Tyler (of course asking her permission in advance to be in his stories). But children’s stories often perform this “social work” even when the persistent naming of friends may seem to us superfluous.

We might summarize some of the features of these “youth genres,” particularly the work of boys, as follows:

- Fiction becomes a way of assuming freedoms, powers, and competencies that the writer does not possess in real life. It is an act of wish fulfillment, not an accurate and realistic rendering of their actual, constrained experiences.

- The pace of narrative is quick. It there is reflection, it has to do with how protagonists can handle a situation, not how an experience has affected them. The writing seems more cinematic than literary, with the pace of an action movie or cartoon.

- The writing works to celebrate and solidify friendship groups. Friends are mentioned by name, often like a roster of \textit{dramatis personae}, at the beginning of a story. By employing shared loyalties to sports teams and popular youth culture
(“He’s back!”), young writers also affirm their existence as a group, separate from adults. As we will see in “The Dead Cashier,” excerpted below, this “social work” can also involve cross-gender teasing.

The writing often moves to the exaggerated, extreme, and absurd; the slapstick; even the silly. Any mention of the bathroom, underwear, or throwing up is good for a laugh. Sound effects, another cinematic borrowing, are also more important than they would be for adults.

“The Dead Cashier” was written by Jessica, a fourth-grade girl, who found it so funny that she could barely contain her own giggling when she read it to me. Dedicated to “the cashiers that work at Market Basket” (a local supermarket chain), it combines elements of a conventional girl friendship story and an over-the-top monster story involving two of the more popular boys in the class, one of whom is chased through the store. The story mixes traditionally male and female story types in an ingenious way.

It opens with Andrea at her friend Jessica’s house on shopping day. They look for ice cream, but the container is empty. After that they play Diddy Kong Racing on Nintendo 64 and watch TV. A commercial comes on:

It was about BEHOLD THE POWER OF CHEESE, and it showed the moon made out of cheese. Andrea and Jessica said to themselves, “What is the big whoop about cheese? It’s just cheese.”

But the commercial makes them hungry for soup, which is also unavailable and on the shopping list. Thus the table is set for the food-store adventure. Jessica and Andrea drop out of the story and Jake and Ethan, who are buying Cocoa Flakes, become the characters who must confront the “dead cashier.”

The cashier that Jake and Ethan were at looked a little weird. He had a nose ring like a bull, horns sticking out of his head, his finger-
nails were an inch long, warts on his hands, bolts sticking out of his shoulders, neck, and head, he had bloody wounds all over, he had blood dripping fangs like a vampire, he had tan wet skin, he had wrinkly flesh and finally he had red eyes.

After scanning the third item, the cashier begins to chase Jake, who tries to escape into the girls’ bathroom—only to find “the cashier sitting on a toilet.” The escape becomes a slapstick demolition of the store:

When [Jake] was running he bumped into a box of bananas. The box of bananas tumbled down. Jake ran and the bananas fell on top of the cashier and then he slipped on a banana, slid, and bumped into a box of watermelons. The watermelons tumbled over him and one landed on his stomach but he managed to get up.

At one point in the chase, the “dead cashier” bends over, cracks his back, and seems to be truly dead. Jake falls for the act:

Then Jake walked over to the DEAD cashier and when Jake went up to take a close look at the cashier his eyes opened quickly and [he] got up like a bolt of lightening.

Finally, cornered in an aisle, Jake is captured and eaten—“The only thing left of him was his world series baseball cap.”

Jessica’s story is a fine example of what Anne Dyson calls a “hybrid text,” one in which there is an “intermingling [of] voices drenched in cultural meaning” (1993, 211). Jessica combines the realistic domestic world, involving her mother and best friend, with the cartoonlike fantasy of a monstrous cashier (and the opportunity for “gross” writing). Into that imagined fantasy she places two of the most popular boys in the class; so even this fantasy accomplishes the social work of cross-gender teasing. This mockery involves bathroom humor, the automatically funny intrusion of a boy into the girls’ bathroom. And, throughout, there is a precise naming of consumer culture products. Dyson would refer to these strands as the intermingled “multiple worlds” of the
writer; Jessica’s story is multifunctional, maintaining and affirming relationships with particular friends (male and female), amusing the class, and doing “schoolwork” all at the same time. One cannot simply place this story on a grid of realistic fiction, pushing the writer to develop her characters more carefully—that would entirely miss the intent of her writing.

In responding to many of these stories, teachers need to enter into the fantasy and play of creation—to join the game. This was the case with a story written by third grader Barry in a double class taught by David McCormick and Ann Pinto, both known for their senses of humor. Barry’s story involved the eating rampage of two characters, Bigfoot and Monstermouse. There is a battle at the Empire State Building, after which the monsters come to their school, where they eat eleven teachers and 272 kids for lunch. David’s response was to make a list of the eleven teachers probably eaten—he and Ann weren’t, of course, on the list. This led to a revision, the only one I could see, where Barry changed the eleven to twelve teachers, and “Mr. McCormick got gulped down like a pill.”

Barry inspired Joe, a classmate, to write a story where he has a dream that he’s a werewolf going on a similar eating rampage, but when he wakes up, the “weird thing was I was stuffed full.” Ms. Pinto is eaten and described as “sour as an apple.” I asked what her reaction was:

She’s like, “Oh that’s inspiring. Better put Mr. McCormick in.” And I’m like, “I did.” And she’s like, “Good.”

I don’t think either Ann or David even thought about these reactions as teaching responses; it was surely their instinctive love of play and teasing at work. But their reaction did open space for more writing, for revision, and even for these coded expressions of affection. No response rubric, outlining the “official” qualities of good writing, can guide such intuitive teaching.
Make Room for Obsession

Some degree of obsessiveness, even narrowness, is essential for literacy development. The noted art educator Eliot Eisner once told a group of teachers that he had no use for “well-rounded” students because “they could roll in any direction.” He was making the case for what he called “productive idiosyncracies,” quirky obsessions and abilities that the unrounded students (like Jamie) bring to school. Yet there is an iron law of curriculum development that often makes little room for these narrowly focused students who return again and again to an intensely imagined world. Conventional curricula focus on breadth, on lists (usually long lists) of objectives, which allow little time for extended engagement and reengagement with the same story types, certainly not for Jamie’s small epics. Readers who fixate on one author or series (The Babysitter’s Club, Stephen King, Dav Pilkey) are often nudged to diversify their reading—even though I have found that active adult readers frequently point to these obsessive, “narrow” periods as crucial to their development (recall Andrew Schneller with his lasers, underwater troopers, and sharks).

Standard curricula (and the more recent state frameworks) typically focus on coverage to the extent that one wonders how sustained, self-chosen writing can survive at all amid the various objectives. Here, for example, is one of the social studies standards in New Hampshire:

Demonstrate a basic understanding of the origin, development, and distinctive characteristics of major ancient, classical, and agrarian civilizations including Mesopotamian, Ancient Hebrew, Egyptian, Nubian (Kush), Greek, Roman, Gupta Indian, Han Chinese, Islamic, Byzantine, Olmec, Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations. (New Hampshire State Frameworks, Social Studies, Standard 18)
This standard, according to the frameworks, should be accomplished by the end of sixth grade. Which only goes to prove a point made by the educational reformer Alfie Kohn—the standards movement is going to make satire obsolete.

The central characteristic of an obsession is repetition that to the outsider seems extreme, even nonproductive. The obsessive student seems to persist in an activity beyond the point of mastery, and we regularly talk about the student being “in a rut.” Andrew Schneller talked about persisting in his “sharks and lasers” theme for years, as does Jamie with his media-inspired adventures (he would even pick up a narrative he started years before). In many cases teachers do not share any affection for the models (e.g., action cartoons) these students are working from, so it is hard to imagine the pleasure of the genre itself, let alone the pleasure of repeating a story type dozens of times. The narrow innovations in each reiteration seem inadequate evidence of reasonable “growth.”

But let me make a few points in defense of these obsessive writers.

• Obsessive writers rarely create exact reproductions of the visual models they enjoy—they are transforming them (not always drastically, to be sure) and mixing them with other cultural “worlds,” often involving their friends. Here for example is one fifth grader telling how he altered a TV show, The Haunted Mask (he refers to it as the “real” story):

In the real story they go into a costume shop [to get the mask]. In this they get it in an alley from a man. And it doesn’t start to rain. They just venture into a mansion. Anyway, it rains in this story and it doesn’t rain in the real version. And in the real version they don’t go into a mansion they go into an old, old shack or something. And in this they go into a mansion. And they don’t meet a rock star who is really crazy in the mansion, they meet this old man that’s a nut. And in
my story at the end they go to the police and in this story the police check it out and in that story no one checks it out.

In other words, the writer takes the original story and improvises, most notably by substituting a fairly creepy rock star, Marilyn Manson, for the old man in the “real” story.

• Similarly, they are rarely exactly repeating themselves, although the innovations may not always seem significant to the adult reader (e.g., the introduction of a new, more powerful weapon). Still it is important to track these innovations, to enter into the problem solving an invention of the writer. The more the teacher knows about the sources of the writing, the more he or she can enter into the creation.

• Finally, what seems like excessive repetition to the outsider does not feel that way to the child absorbed in Gundam Wing, or The Babysitters Club, or the Dallas Cowboys. One of my strongest impressions of reading and playing with my own children was their immense capacity for repetition. I would play peekaboo with Sarah at one year, and it was a charming game the first couple of dozen times, but that wouldn’t be enough. My kids wore me down every time. They would want books reread so many times that I had to throw in improvisations and silliness to keep my interest. I was frankly sick of Richard Scarry’s Lowly Worm in those busy picture books.

Learning outside of school often has a different rhythm than learning inside. Understandably, school curricula seem to foster a “master-and-move-on” pace; to dwell on a “mastered” skill is to waste time and avoid the challenge of skill development. It is to stay on one “level,” to stagnate. This is an almost muscular view of literacy development, as if the reader/writer is continually placing another weight on the exercise machine, continually moving up a color on the old SRA.
This view, it seems to me, must be balanced by an acknowledgment of the value of persistence with genre and authors, even when the tasks children choose for themselves seem familiar or repetitive. It is as if they are working with old friends, improvising within well-known story types. Every Babysitters Club book is somewhat different, yet there is comfort knowing the general formula of the book. Jamie will employ his mechanical scorpion in most of his narratives, but not always in the same way or with the same results. I wonder, after all, how many adult readers constantly “challenge” themselves, rather than choosing to reenter the fictional worlds of well-known writers.

Resist Narrowness

We must resist those forces that would narrow the range of writing (and reading) allowable in schools. Such restriction will invariably most hurt students outside the mainstream, those who draw their inspiration from low-status cultural sources. The “reform” movement at work in U. S. schools clearly sees standardization and uniformity as central to the goal of “not leaving any child behind.” If schools clearly define objectives and test for those objectives, the energy of education can be profitably focused and performances of schools can be tracked. Where previously marginalized students were allowed to drift from grade to grade without acquiring basic skills, now schools will be accountable, and, if they don’t produce, be identified as “failing schools” and presumably shamed or threatened into self-improvement. Reformers piously claim that they are not determining teaching strategies, only the objectives—yet if objectives are minutely described (and if tests are high-stakes), they invariably morph into classroom practices.

Writing instruction comes to resemble test taking—a prompt-and-rubric approach, tightly timed and lacking in any social interaction. These rubrics predetermine the qualities of
successful writing, and are not likely to include the traits that make writing appealing to children. I've never seen “silly names” as a key trait, nor the capacity to create frightening technological monsters, nor the imaginative involvement of friends. Anne Dyson claims that this narrow instructional focus fails to engage the social and cultural resources (and energies) of children: “Tightly structured tasks and interactive spaces do not ensure tightly focused children—but they may make substantive interplay between social worlds problematic” (1993, 187).

The reliance on rubrics also can short-circuit the task of response, to the point where it seems that no human response is going on at all. I offer as an example the case of a Los Angeles kindergarten class where the teacher was training students to get the highest rating for their drawings. To avoid charges of exaggeration I will quote in full the description, which was offered as an exemplary practice by *Educational Leadership* magazine:

A kindergarten teacher shared with other teachers the value and impact that scoring guides had on her children. In class, the teacher held up a drawing of a scene outside the classroom and explained to the kindergartners what parts of the drawing gave a clear picture of the environment outside the school. She explained what elements the students needed to include in their drawing to receive the highest score of 4.

“Notice how the drawing shows the ground colored green and brown,” she said. “There is also a tree, the sky, some clouds, and the sun.” When she held up a second drawing, she explained how it was similar to the first but the tree, the clouds, and the sun weren’t as clearly defined. That was why the drawing received a 3.

As she discussed the next two drawings, the children started to point out what was missing and noted that they deserved a score of 2 or 1. Then the teacher instructed the children to do two things: first to create artwork that met the requirements of the level 4 drawing and second, to ask another student to evaluate the work and agree on which of the four posted samples the drawing most resembled. (Berman, Cross, and Evans 2000, 39–40)
It is difficult to imagine a more developmentally inappropriate task—who has the heart to mess with kindergartners’ drawings? The approach predetermines what these kindergartners will notice when they look out the window (Do all kids notice the clouds? Can they even see the sun when they look out a window?). At an age where the children’s art is wonderfully idiosyncratic, this “instruction” pushes them all into a conventionalized, schematic pattern. Yet if raising scores keeps a school from being designated as failing, we can surely expect to see more of the same.

In one of my interviews, a bright fourth-grade boy explained that in a “quest story” there is a need for some event to precipitate the journey of the main character, who is transformed by what he experiences. As I think about it, the account you have just read is a sort of quest, precipitated by horrific events in our schools and the anxiety about boys that they precipitated. I am, of course, not the main character, more often just a middle-aged man with a tape recorder, looking for quiet rooms in crowded schools. But it has been a journey into a wild fictionland—where humor and horror intertwine, where friends and rock stars interact, and where, like a good movie, there is always the possibility of a sequel. These stories defy the conventions of good realistic fiction, representing instead a utopian space that, if we believe their accounts, the kids enter bodily, and where they can enact fantasies in which they are braver and more powerful than they are in the confined spaces of home and school.

At times in the interviews I could even watch this inventive power at work. The following exchange was triggered by a report on Uranus that contained the line “Its nature remained a mystery.” I asked Karen what part she liked and she mentioned this line. I asked her why:

TN: When you [Liz] wrote this did you imagine you were there?
LIZ (Immediately): Yeah, I kind of pictured I was there exploring a
planet or something.
TN: And when you thought you were there, what did you think
was most important for you?
LIZ: Like how fast the wind went and you could go off the edge
of the planet?
TN: Off the edge of the planet?
LIZ (Laughs): Yeah. I mean if you just kept walking, would you fall
off or stay there?

Conversations like this one, where fact and fiction play off each
other, are evidence of the “age of romance” that Alfred North
Whitehead claimed was the characteristic of this age:

Ideas, facts, relationships, stories, histories, possibilities, artistry in
words, in sounds, in form and color crowd into a child’s life, stir the
feelings, excite the appreciation, and incite his impulses to kindred
activity. (1967, 21)

In this case the topic of space and the single word mystery were
potent enough to set off a chain of associations and connections
to popular culture.

Whitehead calls this stage of development a time of “fer-
ment”—which we can see in the work of Sam, a third grader, and
his friends, who are part way through an epic, fourteen-book series
of Alien books. Here are the completed and proposed chapters:

Book 1: There’s an Adventure in a Closet (Sam)
Book 2: The Adventures of Wacky the Alien (Andrew)
Book 3: Do-Do Goes Crazy (Sam)
Book 4: Do-Do’s Trip to New York (Sam)
Book 5: The Trip to Uranus (Andrew)
Book 6: Do-Do’s Monopoly Mania (Sam)
Book 7: Muscleman Plays Hockey (Dan)
Book 8: Heartbreaker Falls in Love (Connor)
They included a page with the drawings of the major characters of the series, twenty in all. In one of the completed books, *Do-Do Goes Crazy*, Do-Do is in a hospital to have a broken leg treated, and, seeing a patient playing SuperMario, he jumps into the game and begins wandering in the game. Seeing a winter picture within the game, he jumps in that (so he is now two levels into the screen) and begins skiing down a hill. He is thrown out of this first level and runs into Mario himself, and they begin shouting at each other:

Mario said, “It’s me, Mario.” Do-do said, “But it’s me, Mario.”

Mario said, “No it’s me, Mario.” Do-do said, “IT’S me, MARIO!!!!” Mario screamed, “IT’S ME, MARIO.” He was so mad he kicked Do-Do out of the screen.

Sam picked out this part of the story as his favorite, and he and his partner, Danny, enjoyed repeating this line from the SuperMario cartoon.

As I spent time with young writers like Sam I came to appreciate, even marvel at, their efforts; you might say I entered their screen. They combined so much: art, video culture, friendship groups, humor, love of sports, and even a reference to Uranus, which they had studied in science. No third-grade teacher could assign, maybe even contemplate, a writing project so extensive and complex. What made it possible and appealing for Sam was the opportunity to bring together so many affiliations; or, to use Jamie’s analogy, he could build an almost infinitely big room.

I’d like to give the last word to Quintilian, legendary Roman writing teacher, advisor to emperors and tutor to some of the
greatest Latin writers. In this passage he describes the way he approached the younger writers under his care—and, as usual, he gets it right:

Let that age be daring, invent much and delight in what it invents, though it be often not sufficiently severe and correct. The remedy for exuberance is easy: barrenness is incurable by any labor. That temper in boys will afford me little hope in which mental effort is prematurely restrained by judgment. I like what is produced to be extremely copious, profuse beyond the limits of propriety.

(Quintilian, *Institutes*, IV, 7, p. 303, in Bizzell and Herzberg 1990)

Yes, “beyond the limits of propriety.”
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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