RELUCTANT YOUNG ADOLESCENT MALE READERS:

CHOOSING AND USING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

TO MOTIVATE BOYS TO BE REAL READERS

by

ALLISON LINDSEY ESTEY

(Under the Direction of Elizabeth St. Pierre)

ABSTRACT

Recent studies and research consistently find that boys' success, especially success as readers in the English classroom, lags well behind that of girls. A review of the literature indicates that there are hundreds of thousands of nonreading young adult males who need our attention as English teachers. There is much we can do, including altering text choice, discussing openly issues of gender, providing purposeful reading for motivation, and making reading a more authentic and social endeavor. This thesis and the research it presents highlight the perspectives of many teachers, authors, and researchers throughout the field and offers suggestions for motivating reluctant male young adults.

INDEX WORDS: Reluctant Readers, Aliteracy, Young Adult Literature, Motivation

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated first and foremost to every teacher and teacher educator who is fiercely devoted to the constant reevaluation of our schools so they best serve every student. I also dedicate it to my professors at the University of Maine and the University of Georgia for instilling in me a passion for education and lifelong learning. Thanks to my parents for making me a lover of books and for always believing in me, I love you both very much. And to Jeffrey Michael, because it was your constant encouragement, love, and support that has made so many of my dreams come true.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Aliteracy: Why are our boys failing?

Illiteracy is rampant in our country and has crept into the lives of many American homes. Becoming more common, however, and perhaps even more alarming, is illiteracy's ugly cousin *aliteracy*. Aliteracy can be defined as "without literacy," but its actual meaning is closer to "against literacy." It affects millions of people around the world and, according to the National Endowment for the Arts (Weeks, 2001), over half of American citizens over the age of eighteen are aliterate. A Gallup Poll taken in 1999 shows that 59% of Americans said they had read fewer than ten books the previous year and that the number of nonreaders has been steadily climbing for the past twenty years. With the growing popularity of and limitless access to media such as video games and the Internet that often take the place of reading, the number of nonreaders in the United States shows no signs of shrinking.

So what does this mean for students and teachers? Many researchers and educators have designated aliterate young adults—also called nonreaders or reluctant readers—the focus of immediate attention. According to Edward T. Sullivan (2002),

> a more significant problem affecting our society that receives little attention and is rarely addressed by our education or public library systems is *aliteracy*, which is best defined as a condition in which one can read but chooses not to…If aliteracy is a problem affecting people of all ages, why focus on young adults?…because it

> is in the early years that there is one last opportunity to turn these kids away from aliteracy and lead them to become lifelong readers. (p. 2)

Aliteracy is becoming a very real problem in schools, and there is an urgent need for a course of action through teacher education, research, and the implementation of certain changes in reading instruction.

Though there are both boys and girls in our schools who are aliterate, it is the male population that presents the most concern. In 1988, the International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) conducted a study

> involving thirty-two nations…girls achieved higher total reading scores in all modes…In short, research makes it clear that as a group, girls outperform boys on overall reading tasks, though boys' performances do tend to improve when they read for information, or when they read to accomplish something beyond the reading. (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.2)

Though school is an institution fashioned by males, though the majority of the government officials creating and implementing most of today's legislation are male, and though the novels most typically taught in middle and high school English classrooms are written by males and most often feature male protagonists, it is the male students in our schools who have fallen behind their female peers in reading and writing. Only a quarter of a century ago our concern was girls' struggles in math and science, but today it is the boys who are slipping away from us, refusing literacy and content to just get by using whatever means necessary so long as they don't have to read.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) are two researchers whose research has focused specifically on young adult reluctant male readers. Though they warn against making generalizations about these nonreading boys as if they are one cohesive group, the majority of research findings support similar conclusions:

- Boys take longer to read [an assigned text] than girls do.
- Boys read less than girls read.
- Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do.
- Boys tend to be better at information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks than girls are.
- Boys generally provide lower estimations of their reading abilities than girls do.
- Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do.
- Boys have much less interest in leisure reading and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes than girls are.
- Significantly more boys than girls declare themselves “nonreaders.”
- Boys spend less time reading and express less enthusiasm for reading than girls do.
- Boys are more inclined to read informational texts.
- Boys tend to resist reading stories about girls, whereas girls to not tend to resist reading stories about boys.
- Girls read more fiction.

- Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor; some groups of boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy.
- Boys are less likely to talk about or overtly respond to their reading than girls are.
- Boys require more teacher time in coed settings. (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.10-11)

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also make the distinction that "Boys increasingly consider themselves to be 'nonreaders' as they get older…nearly 50 percent make that designation by high school" (p.11). Several other researchers agree, including Laura Sokol (2002), a professor at the University of Winnipeg, whose extensive research on children's gender development has consistently shown that boys' reading performance lags behind girls' by approximately 1.5 years. These discrepancies aren't just in Canadian schools, however. Similar differences are found in the United States, England, and Wales. This being the case, it is crucial that we turn our attention to these students before they fall through the cracks and introduce literacy as a practice that is not only enjoyable but also an important skill necessary for functioning in this world as a lifelong learner.

CHAPTER 2

Who Are Reluctant Readers?

A Profile

Most uncommitted and unmotivated readers are boys. Studies have consistently shown that "boys read less than girls and…they have been reading less than girls for the last 25 years" (Hall & Coles, 1997, ¶ 12). The need to address our reluctant young adult male readers is not a new concept, in fact, surveys as far back as 1940 show the same discrepancy between the achievement of boys and girls. All over the country boys' reading scores are far behind those of girls. For example, in Vermont, recent test scores point to an alarming gap in the reading and writing abilities of boys and girls. One principal said the gap might have something to do with the reading material available to boys and girls. "A lot of the literature and books for kids are designed more for girls than for boys" (Lorie, 2006, p. A1). Librarians in the state agreed, saying they consistently saw more girls in the library than boys, and that there were vast difference in "the way the children approached books…Girls wanted fiction, which would more likely increase their vocabulary and introduce them to the mechanics of writing. Boys were more interested in nonfiction, the goal being to gather information instead of immerse themselves in the story" (p. A1).

Larry Mikulecky, Professor of Education and Director of the Center for Innovative Assessment at the Indiana University of Bloomington and author of several books about literacy including *The Status of Literacy in Our Country* (1986), was the first professional to use the term "reluctant reader," when referring to students or adults who *can* read but will not. Researchers studying these particular students still today (e.g., Clarke, 2006; Sullivan, 2002) make the

distinction between reluctant readers and students who struggle with the skill of reading. Though struggles with learning to read can often lead to students becoming reluctant readers, the two categories of students are different. According to experts, "being able to read does not mean being willing to read or being skilled at reading" (Clarke, 2006, ¶ 1) and "*Reluctant readers* are not the same as poor readers, that is, students who possess some sort of reading disability" (Sullivan, 2002, p.7). Reluctant readers are usually perfectly capable of reading at least on some level; they simply choose not to. Students with reading disabilities struggle to read at all, and this frustration can sometimes lead to aliteracy.

Reluctant young adult male readers have "little or no inclination [to read] except what is required by way of work or normal everyday life" (Sullivan, 2002, p.7). These are the students who will listen to the teacher tell them about an assignment or project that involves reading in some way—reading they're not interested in and usually see no value or purpose in doing—and will say to themselves that they're not going to do it. They are most likely more than capable young adult male readers who simply make the choice not to read for one reason or another. Though generalization may be dangerous, the following is a list of characteristics typical of most reluctant readers:

1. By the time many students reach high school, they equate reading with ridicule, failure, or exclusively school-related tasks.
2. Students are not excited by ideas. They prefer to experience life directly rather than through reading.
3. Many active adolescents are unable to sit still long enough to read for any prolonged period of time.

4. Teenagers are too self-absorbed and preoccupied with themselves, their problems, families, sexual roles, etc., to make connections between their world and books.
5. Books are inadequate entertainment compared to other competing media such as television, video games, and the Internet.
6. Persistent stress from home and school to read constantly is counterproductive for some adolescents.
7. Adolescents may grow up in non-reading homes void of reading material and with no reading role models. There is no one to pass down the value of reading.
8. Some adolescents may consider reading solitary and antisocial.
9. Reading is considered "uncool," and something adults do.
10. Some adolescents view reading as part of the adult world and reject it outright. (Sullivan, 2002, p.9)

Though these reluctant readers—also sometimes called nonreaders, unmotivated readers, and literate nonreaders—boys, in particular, have different backgrounds, they all have one thing in common: they don't want to read. Many of them have traumatic or humiliating associations with reading, either because of being told to read aloud when they may have been unable to do so fluently, being told they misinterpreted a text, or having been made to feel stupid or inadequate. Many come from families and cultural environments where reading is simply not advocated or seen as useful—it is strictly a classroom task. Many reluctant young adult male readers also think of reading as uncool, girly, or a waste of time when there are many more enjoyable things to do.

Kylene Beers (Sullivan, 2002 & Beers & Samuels, 1998) identifies three kinds of reluctant readers: dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated. Dormant readers like to read but don't take the time to do it. They have positive attitudes toward reading, usually shaped by parents, and have books at home. This kind of reluctant reader is not so alarming, since they usually succeed academically and will read when they must; they just don't see it as profitable or enjoyable. Uncommitted or unmotivated boys, however, have no positive feelings toward reading whatsoever, and "…no aesthetic appreciation of the reading experience" (Sullivan, 2002, p.8).

Michael Gurian (2002), coauthor of *The Minds of Boys,* says boys learn differently from girls, so the way school is organized favors girls. Boys learn best through activities with lots of movement, not by sitting at desks, and with more integration among disciplines. For example, boys typically respond better to literature through more physical activities, such as role-play, drama, or peer teaching, whereas girls prefer connections to writing, such as journaling (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Reluctant male readers present a unique problem because though they *can* read, the way in-school reading and reading instruction is being presented is in direct contrast to how reluctant readers best learn. "The real distinction lies in how they learn, not what they can learn" (Lorie, 2006, p. A1). Though boys are just as capable as girls of reading, understanding, discussing, and applying concepts in English class, teachers' teaching and many of the texts used are completely opposite of how boys best learn and of what generates their motivation and interest. It is very important that we make changes in the teaching of English to accommodate these reluctant young adult male readers. That change begins with choosing and using the best texts.

Contributing to the Aliteracy of Young Adult Males

How do reluctant male readers become so opposed to literacy? What factors in a boy's childhood cumulate in fostering aliteracy? These answers are not clear. Even when everything goes as right as possible young people may still be unmotivated readers, and there are several fingers to be pointed. According to Edward Sullivan (2002), a library media specialist, author, and adolescent literacy researcher, "Librarians, parents, and teachers do indeed all share complicity in turning many kids *off* to reading and *on* to lifelong aliteracy" (3).

Parents are partially to blame for these reluctant young adult male readers, "not so much in turning kids off to reading, but rather in never turning them on to it in the first place" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 20). Some parents, believing, rightly so, their child is able and willing to do anything, will expect too much from their child, expecting them to read, comprehend, and succeed at mastering texts that are well beyond their level developmentally or simply uninteresting. Still other parents will be aliterate models for their children simply by being non-readers themselves, by thinking reading is a waste of a time, or an activity of last resort when there's nothing better to do. "Over the years, research has shown again and again that children who grow up with nonreading parents in a home that is devoid of reading materials are much more likely to grow up aliterate" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 21). Beers (as cited by Sullivan, 2002) explains that the

> Contrast between parents of children who have positive attitudes toward reading and those with negative attitudes is obvious. Children with positive attitudes toward reading had parents who spent a lot of time firmly planting the notion that reading is an enjoyable, worthwhile activity. Most of these parents were creating

for their children, without even realizing it, an aesthetic stance toward reading.

Though this took a lot of time on their part, it was time well spent. (p. 21)

Parents who engender aliteracy in their children typically do so because they had similar childhood experiences with parents who were also aliterate. It is this cycle that sets children up for inevitable hardships in school and with literacy, and teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that many of our students come to school with their minds made up about reading and books, and that it is going to be difficult to deconstruct many of those ideas.

Some students, however, teeter on the brink of being either aliterate or real readers, and it is negative or positive school experiences that nudge them one way or another. Reading education in today's schools focuses almost exclusively on the mechanics of reading—decoding, vocabulary, grammar—and there is very little instruction beyond basic comprehension (Sullivan, 2002). Though many English teachers want to move more deeply into reading instruction, teacher accountability, standards-driven curriculums, and large scale tests determine that they teach breadth over depth. By catering to these limitations, however, teachers are inadvertently throwing wood on the fire of unauthentic learning experiences.

In English classrooms, it is the efferent approach to reading—the approach where what happens *after*, not during, the reading is important—that is most commonly taught (Rosenblatt as cited in Sullivan, 2002). "Too many teachers do not see as one of their roles instilling in their students an appreciation for literature. They have a rigid utilitarian view toward books…to them, books and the reading of them are a means rather than an end. A book is simply another tool to be used in the classroom to teach the lesson" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 12). When every reading experience includes a quiz or test (often created to try to trick students into giving the wrong

answer or to try to prove the student doesn't know the answer, rather than seeking specific knowledge and understanding) or a worksheet, drill, or lecture, teachers suck any kind of enjoyment out of books and can often destroy confidence and erase any risks students may have been willing to take. Teachers need to create opportunities for students to make meaning from texts—not the teacher's meaning, or a critic's meaning, but their *own* unique meaning—and they need to do it consistently, not just once or twice and be given the "real" answers to study for the test. Teachers need to adopt a new perspective on reading instruction and on the texts they select and teach.

Defining Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature is not a new genre, but its meaning is not stable across the masses. To some, it is simply books published specifically for young people, with solely young adult narrators. To others, however, the genre of young adult literature encompasses much more.

> According to expert, Laura Sokol (2002),
>
> Only one-third of school libraries carry the types of books boys prefer—scary stories, cartoons, magazines and stories with themes such as war. Many ECEs, librarians and teachers disapprove of these types of books and therefore do not provide them to the children because they would prefer children read from other genres. The result is that some boys choose not to read at all. (¶ 6)

The situation described here, not at all uncommon, is unacceptable. These reluctant young adult male readers are thirsty for texts with engaging stories and our schools and libraries are coming up short. With the banning of controversial books, the financial burdens of theNo Child Left Behind Act, and the lofty and fallacious definition of "literature," many schools are either

unwilling or unable to provide aliterate boys the kinds of texts that will get them reading. We must reevaluate the kinds of literature we are putting in the hands of our young adults. Books that appeal to boys may not be those typically found on the school library's shelves, but books like Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* or Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* series that hook reluctant male readers and keep them reading. What do these books and others like them have in common that more traditional kinds of literature don't? What criteria should we use in the selection of literature for our young adult collection?

As technology and media make different kinds of texts more accessible to students, it's important to understand the meaning of "young adult literature." Traditionally, young adult literature, or YA Lit, are books published specifically for young adults. However, experts in the field (The Young Adult Library Services Association 2006; Moloney 2000) are moving to a more general definition that includes everything young adults enjoy reading both in and out of school. This includes texts that may not have traditionally been considered "literature," such as graphic novels, magazines, and audio books. Some professors and researchers in the field of reading education, including several at the University of Georgia, go so far as to posit that music, websites, and video and computer games should be considered young adult literature. If websites like MySpace (www.myspace.com) or MTV.com can get reluctant adolescent males reading, they should be considered a valuable part of the collection. The definition of "literature," specifically young adult literature, is broadening.

There still are, of course, many barriers to this more progressive and encompassing definition. Lots of texts—including magazines, websites, computer games, and some of the more modern and controversial young adult books—are being banned, contested, and removed

from classrooms and libraries around the country for being too graphic, too violent, unscholarly, too mature, or too controversial. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, for example, is consistently not taught because of its adult language and themes and explicit descriptions of sex acts. Many books by Robert Cormier are deemed too dark or violent for teens, and J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series—wildly popular among many reluctant readers—is often yanked from the hands of young people for occult themes, witchcraft, and satanic acts. This is a large part of the problem—uncontested texts have nothing too extraordinary about them, and in turn, nothing to get young adult male readers interested in or excited about. Many YA Lit advocates "have come to loathe the word 'appropriate' because…librarians continually use it as code to mean 'something kids will like but won't make adults mad.' Trying to create a collection that is of real interest to young adults will likely upset somebody, so it would be smarter to learn to manage intellectual freedom" (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2006, ¶ 13) rather than further distance our aliterate students.

In order to hook these nonreading boys—to pull them into the web of magic that is literature and texts—we must build a young adult collection that is all-encompassing, appeals to a variety of reading levels and interests, and contains many different genres and types of literature. According to the Young Adult Library Services Association (2006), the organization that generates the "Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers" list each year, "a YA collection that is just print these days is inadequate, even worse if it is just fiction. The research coming out on boys' reluctance to read, or admitting to be readers, has a lot to with a…bias toward narrative fiction on the part of teachers and librarians" (p. 4). These kinds of non-traditional texts are often called "soft" literature, and are not viewed as academic or as valuable

as many canonical texts, making it hard for their worth to be recognized by many parents, teachers, and administrators. The point is, however, that if our reluctant male readers won't read, it should be our priority that they read *something*—not that they read *Moby Dick* instead of 50 Cent's *From Pieces to Weight*. After all, "What adults value in a book is not necessarily what boys value in a book" (Moloney, 2000, ¶ 31)

> So what do they value? Author and researcher Rachelle Lasky Bilz (2004) states that
>
> Teenage boys naturally prefer to read about male protagonists, characters who seem familiar to them and with whom they can identify. Realistic, recognizable figures in books enable readers to understand their behavior and motivation. Young adult novels written for boys often feature typically male activities such as sports, cars, outdoor activities, and war. Teenage boys seem to like stories that have some sort of action or adventure, be it sports, conflicts, or survival situations. (p. 140)

There is no formula in text selection that magically determines what boys like to read. Like any group of readers, reluctant young adult males prefer many different kinds of texts, genres, and topics. Chapter 3 goes into specific detail about what sorts of texts to put in the hands of reluctant readers, as well as what's clearly *not* working.

CHAPTER 3

Text Choice

Alternatives: Better Book Choices

Allowing boys to choose what they read is a step in turning reluctant male readers away from the path of aliteracy. Teachers can support these boys in their search for identity by providing them with resources for security, validation, enjoyment, escape, answers to questions, and a connection to the world. According to Rachelle Bilz (2004), author of *Life is Tough*,

> Novels can assure young adult males that they are not alone, that other people their age feel just as awkward, scared, angry, confused, and alienated as they do. Guys need to know that there are young adult novels written for them with characters that reflect their interests and mirror their lives' experiences". (p. xii)

Bilz advocates young adult literature and other texts "as aids in navigating adolescence…and tools to improve literacy" (xiii). But what kinds of literature do unmotivated boys want to read? How can we use text selection as a means to get reluctant readers engaged with literature?

According to Bilz (2002), there are seven types of young adult literature that are well suited to the nonreading teenage male, because they can identify with the characters, and the typically action-packed and fast paced plots hold their attention. The classics—books like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—are old favorites. Newer, young adult literature categories Bilz identifies include novels about martyrs and misfits, coming-of-age stories, conflict and survival stories, sports stories, books about choices and consequences, sexual issues, and family and friends conflicts. Bilz (2002) says that books of this kind,

> just might help a young man solve a problem, overcome an obstacle, or see himself in a new, positive light. Positive male role models in books can do more than just improve reading or provide the impetus to read; they can change lives in favorable ways. In William G. Brozo's (2002) opinion, "capturing boys' imagination through literature is a critical element of improving boys' psychological, sociological, and academic health. Reading books that appeal to and affirm young men's masculine identities in positive ways may transform a boy's sense of self and expand his academic possibilities." (p. 140)

William Brozo (2002), the researcher cited in the above passage, is another important scholar in the reading field. He says boys must find "entry points into literature" (p. 3). Once this happens, and they can identify with a certain kind of character, they will become more motivated learners and engaged readers. By seeing themselves as similar to characters in the story and identifying with their conflicts, reading becomes more interesting because it becomes more real. Brozo (2002) argues that there are 10 positive male archetypes boys identify with that serve as "entry points" into literature, including the prophet, the pilgrim, and the wildman. These entry points make the literature more accessible to reluctant male readers. How important is accessibility? Why aren't more traditional texts accessible to nonreading students?

The Canon and Why It's Not Working

Thomas Newkirk (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, argues that traditional books of the canon may no longer be the best, or even the second best, choice for engaging and motivating students in literature and reading. He maintains that "If, for example, *The Scarlet Letter* fails, year after year, to draw

students into an engaged reading experience (as I think it does, even with committed teachers), why should we continue to teach it?" (p. x). There is, in this country, a high value placed on a sort of "cocktail knowledge" of literature. In order to be educated (or at least to appear to be educated) people should ideally have a working knowledge of the "classics." Thus, we believe those texts should be taught as literature.

Well-known professor of English at Wayne University in Indiana, E.D. Hirsch, advocates a "lasting body of knowledge"—that includes classic literature—as well as general knowledge, including basic facts, in order for students to become well-functioning adults (Coppola, 2001, ¶ 1). Rather than emphasizing the joy of learning, Hirsch believes that in order to ensure success for our students we need to rethink the roots of education, identify the skills our students need to succeed in life, and aid them in the memorization and mastery of certain facts, skills, and information, including canonical texts and authors. Many progressive theorists disagree, however, arguing that rote memorization, drill methods, and a fact-driven knowledge base cause the frustrated and overmatched students to feel even more hopeless. Canonical texts are disengaging readers and causing them to fail long before they get the opportunity to add to the kind of knowledge base Hirsch promotes.

Though canonical literature doubtlessly has a place in certain curricula—it has, for example, sometimes gripping and detailed historical perspectives—it may not make reading an enjoyable or readily available experience for most readers. Reluctant readers, in particular, often become frustrated or detached when presented with canonical texts. Typically, they're asked to read these lofty tales, often filled with unfamiliar vocabulary and themes adolescents struggle to relate to, and then write a paper analyzing some component or meaning (usually dictated by the

teacher), supporting a claim with lofty proof. The result, of course, is that many fail miserably. Newkirk (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) condemns this cycle, saying, "these boys are regularly 'overmatched' when they are confronted with these books. No book, after all, should hold its place in the curriculum without regard to the experiences students have with it" (p. x). Sullivan (2002) concurs,

> As a former teacher of English literature, I certainly cannot argue with the desire to expose students to the glorious musings of such authors as Chaucer or Shakespeare. But to what end must that be done? Must it be done to the point that, after having read *Julius Caesar* and *The Canterbury Tales* forced down their throats, students are left with a permanent distaste for reading? (p. 14).

It is often the case that the literary canon fails to emotionally involve students in their reading, and, if that's the case, it is up to teachers to find a better alternative.

In contrast to canonical literature, young adult literature has been available only since about the 1960s, with the publishing of books like *The Outsiders, The Pigman,* and *The Chocolate War*. It's taken some time for these non-traditional texts to become recognized as literature, and still today they are often not as highly valued as canonical texts. The classics hold a steadfast and unwavering place in school curriculums and in the priorities of many teachers and parents. YA lit continues to struggle to be viewed as worth reading and discussing, even though there are now multiple book awards specifically for young adult literature. Teachers and parents should always question *why* we ask children to read what we do. The answer shouldn't be, "because I read this in school and my parents read this in school and everyone should read this in

school" but more along the lines of, "because kids will be interested in it, they will engage with it, and the themes and topics are relevant to today's world and the lives of teenagers."

Other Kinds of "Literature"

Though novels—particularly those belonging to the literary canon—are the books most typically taught in English class, they are sometimes perhaps the least engaging kinds of texts when it comes to motivating young adult male readers. Though themes, characters, time periods, or main ideas in a story may well be of interest to teenage boys, they are typically too difficult or considered boring by reluctant readers. Choice often dictates what novels and texts nonreaders find enjoyable—being forced to read something makes it automatically less enjoyable. However, there is literature other than the novel that teachers can incorporate into their English curriculum to offer a variety of reading experiences and generate interest and motivation.

Graphic novels, described by Edward Sullivan (2002), are short novellas or a set of related stories illustrated with pictures. These stories are typically about superheroes with fantastical themes, but the variety within this genre is increasing and there are graphic novels of every sort. Even Shakespeare has been adapted into graphic novels. A graphic novel is technically "a self-contained story that uses a combination of text and art to articulate plot" (p. 51). They are not "overgrown comics" (p. 51) but actually present very complex themes and engaging characters. Coupled with finely detailed illustrations, "Graphic novels engage and stimulate readers…the fact is that many kids who will read nothing else will probably read comics and graphic novels. The adults who ignore this fact are missing a great opportunity to use graphic novels as a way of motivating reluctant readers" (p. 53). The short, visual format of these texts is appealing to reluctant male readers—it makes the experience more like TV, and it

doesn't require a dedicated attention span. These texts are often published as a series, which builds reader comfort. Once they've read one, they'll seek out others since they already know they enjoy the genre and can read the books competently.

High/low books are young adult books that are geared toward reluctant young adult readers who struggle to read longer, more complicated texts because of reading level. According to Ellen Libretto and Catherine Barr (2002), two advocates for these texts, "High/Low Books…are written and published specifically for the reluctant reader aged between 12 and 18. These titles are written at a low reading level (grades 1 to 5) and are short in length (25 to 75 pages)" (p. viii). They also have several other traits that make them unique, including,

- The appearance of the book must be suitable for teenagers (Not humiliating).
- Photos and illustrations are of teens and accurately reflect the text.
- Photos and illustrations contribute to the pace and texture of the narrative.
- The bindings and style of the book design should conform to the look of standard YA books. (Libretto & Barr, 2002, p. 2)

The idea is that, if the books look like average books, not baby books, and the characters in the novels are typical teenagers in realistic conflicts, students won't be mortified to be seen carrying them around and won't feel humiliated.

Another new trend is thinking of websites as literature for students to read to increase motivation. Libretto and Barr (2002) are big fans of these kinds of texts for reluctant readers, saying, "Reluctant readers are particularly drawn to the Web. Many sites are attractively designed and offer graphics, sound animation, and interactivity along with the text. Some of the better sites present the same information in a variety of ways, catering to different learning styles

and reading abilities" (p. 9). In many cases, interactive and engaging websites are so much fun for students they may not even realize they're reading. When it's not intimidating, difficult, or boring, the reading becomes second nature and is no longer the source of frustration. Websites "allow the readers who have become interested in a topic to explore further" (p. xiii) and should offer "suitable, age appropriate content" (p. 9) as well as high quality content, accurate information, consideration of reading level, and general appeal to teenage boys.

Other sorts of texts that are gaining validation as "literature" in English classrooms include magazines, short stories, nonfiction, and formula novels and series books. Magazines offer a shortened, illustrated reading experience. Certain publications, such as *Hero Illustrated* (comics), *Transworld BMX* (extreme sports), *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (gaming), *InsideOUT* (gay and lesbian), *The Source* (hip hop), or *Sports Illustrated for Kids* (Sullivan, 2002) are geared directly toward teenage boys and offer articles, stories, and profiles on computers, sports, music, celebrities, popular culture icons, and other topics reluctant male readers would doubtless be interested in reading about. Short stories are engaging to reluctant readers because they often offer a condensed version of a novel, still incorporating the same kinds of themes, archetypes, characters, and concepts; but they are shorter and hence, less intimidating, making them more accessible to boys. Formula novels and series books are great, since young adult males can really get into the continuous storyline. According to Sullivan (2002), however, some adults look down on them because they're too predictable and superficial. Those are the very reasons, however, why adolescents like them. The predictability gives the nonreading boys comfort because they know what they can expect.

Nonfiction is another completely underrated genre of literature that reluctant young adult males typically find very enjoyable. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) (2005) explains that "Often, reluctant readers think reading = school, and that also equals fiction (*assigned* fiction).

Nonfiction about rappers, or cars, or your zodiac sign is not likely to be assigned reading or even encouraged" (¶ 3). The biggest drawback to this kind of nonfiction is that it's timely, and it comes in and goes out of style all the time. What was popular five years ago, "The Backstreet Boys" for example, is now completely outdated, and no teenager would be caught dead with a book on that topic. This makes it very difficult for libraries and schools to have nonfiction books as a part of their arsenal for reluctant readers.

A fairly underrepresented type of literature in most high school English classrooms is audio books. Many special education teachers use audio books in place of traditional texts so their illiterate or severely learning-disabled students can have reading experiences similar to those of their peers without having to do the actual reading. Despite the fact that most reluctant male readers are able to read the text, many choose not to because it may be too difficult or fail to hold their attention. Audio books put the reading experience back in their hands, without the difficulty or tedium of actually reading the text. Sullivan (2002) asserts that audio books "make accessible to students texts which they would be unwilling and possibly unable to read…[audio books] build confidence" (p. 92). "Audio books can also bring literature alive to students in a way that cannot be done through their own reading or even through the teacher reading aloud" (p. 90). Plays, especially, including the typically taught Shakespeare, are much better understood

when listened to, so the reader can hear tone, inflection, and character. Scholastic and Houghton Mifflin both produce young adult audio texts from many different genres.

Through a variety of non-traditional texts we can reach these reluctant young adult male readers. However, it is not text choice alone that motivates these boys to be *real* readers and to choose to read independently. We must connect the literature to activities and experiences that make reading personal, realistic, authentic, and valuable.

CHAPTER 4

Strategies to Motivate Reluctant Male Readers

Social Aspect of Reading

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) put it best when they said that, “Literacies grow out of relationships” (p. 199). Students make sense of their reading and connect it to their own lives through the relationship between the reading and the world, the reading and their curiosities, and especially, through relationships they have with peers in connection to their literacy. In fact, in Smith and Wilhelm’s (2002) experience with reluctant male readers, reading as a social affair made all the difference. It seemed that, “when the literate activity provided the occasion for social connections, the boys had intrinsic motivations for their engagement” (p. 147).

Smith and Wilhelm aren’t the only researchers who stress the very important social aspect of boys as readers. Christine Hall and Martin Coles (1997) of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, agree with that notion, stating that, “boys need to be encouraged to understand how they have been socially constructed as readers; they need to be engaged in discussion about their reading and the implications of the choices they make” (abstact). This kind of reading develops “critical and discerning readers” (abstract) which is a big goal for English classes, especially in high school and college. Discussing reading, reader identity, and how we became the reader we are promotes motivation because students see how literature fits into their unique part of the world.

Boys are much less inclined to be social readers than girls. In fact, Wayne Martino (1998) of Murdoch University in New Zealand, one of the leading researchers in the field of gender and education, says that “reading communities in which books are shared and discussed”

(¶ 12) are what make the difference in the reading lives of boys. By making it shared, not solitary, reading becomes an adventure, a challenge, instead of an impassable journey. Smith & Wilhelm (2006) have several suggestions of how to make reading instruction a more social affair,

1. Create a context of inquiry, whether for a lesson or unit.
2. Ask a significant question or pose a real problem.
3. Connect the question/problem to the material, to student lives, and to the world.
4. Pose questions or problems that must be addressed from a number of different perspectives.
5. Foster debate, consider, read, and discuss these multiple points of view.
6. Create situations in which students can read, write, talk, role-play, and make things together that address various facets of the question or problem.
7. Provide time for exploration. (p. 82).

Vygotsky (as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2006) argued that we learn by combining our ideas and understandings with those of our peers. In order for this to happen, teachers must foster a classroom where learning is a shared inquiry and reading is an exploration of a multitude of meanings and perspectives. When there is one right answer that teachers know and that students are supposed to learn the social aspect of reading and learning disappears. Instead, we must cultivate that social aspect, let it become a source of motivation, and encourage our nonreading young adult males to use it as a means for understanding.

According to Martino (2003) in his research of young adult male reluctant readers, the general consensus is that "English is more suited to girls because it's not the way guys think" (p. 241). Some young men described English as fun or enjoyable but most said it was boring or a gender-specific subject. Martino draws attention to the "gendered patterns of boys' literacy and other social practices and we argue for the need in the English classroom to make the links between boys' private and public lives in relation to how they engage with literacy both inside and outside of schools" (p. 241). In other words, where girls will typically engage with texts, discuss literature, and participate willingly in the social aspects of literacy, boys are hesitant, resistant, and consider literacy, English class, and sharing books and ideas as feminine practices. In order to move past these connotations, we must relate our classroom practices to boys' home lives, unique interests, and ideas about the world.

The Barriers of Masculinity

Young adult males consistently receive lower reading test scores than girls, and this is largely because most boys do not value reading as most girls do. If they do value reading, some teenage boys still think "but it's not for me" because reading is such a stereotypically feminine hobby. Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) make the point that "masculinity and associated behaviors…run counter to literacy, which is presented culturally as a passive and private act that is feminized" (p. 12). Consequently, Martino (1998) agrees in that "hegemonic versions of masculinity are not consistent with being literate" (¶ 2). The odds are already stacked against teachers who want to inspire these reluctant male readers because, before boys will buy into the idea of reading for pleasure or for a purpose, they must reach the conclusion that reading doesn't have to be "girly." Is it possible "to be male *and* literate"? (Smith, Wilhelm

2002, p. 13). And, by "choosing books that match stereotyped views of boys' interests and capacities" (Millard, as cited in Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 14) are we perpetuating stereotypes and denying alternative interests?

The first step in deconstructing the barrier of masculinity is to choose texts and, in turn, design activities that make reading authentic and more "real world." Boys reject reading when it has an "emphasis on knowledge that is not valued outside of school" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 84). They say it should be personally purposeful, take place in a real context, and be immediately applicable to that real context. By placing literature in connection with boys' lives and making it relevant, we can break down the typical "reading is pointless" mentality. Activities that activate prior knowledge and present an explicit connection to personal experiences (such as opinionaires (Smagorinsky, 2001), surveys, or certain types of graphic organizers) can create an entry point into literature and put purposeful literacy in the hands of boys.

The second important step in defeminizing literacy is to open a dialogue about reading and gender. Previously in this chapter it was said that the social aspect of literacy is crucial to engaging reluctant male readers. By creating a dialogue in classroom discourse about the differences between typically female practices, and those that are typically male, teachers and students can begin breaking down gender stereotypes that exist in the English classroom. Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) highlight the fact that "incompetence and expending effort are also seen as unmasculine. Achievement, for men, is supposed to be attained with ease…researchers use this argument to explain why boys are reluctant to respond to reading or talk about feelings" (p. 13). This is a misconception that can only be dispelled if teachers work

to create a more genderless definition of literacy and achievement by making reading purposeful, real-world, and integrated among many disciplines. We must go beyond text choice to extend literacy outside of school. "To involve boys in reading by simply catering for their interests is not sufficient" (Martino, 1998, ¶ 4) In fact, as Martino dictates, we should use these texts as a springboard for a conversation about traditional texts that emphasize "acting tough" or "being cool" (¶ 4).

Read Alouds, Reader Identity, and Role Models

A big part of creating motivated readers is helping boys foster their reader identity. How do we do this? There are several ways. For example, teacher and author Esme Raji Codell (2003) asks herself "What could get a child to turn these pages?" (p. 17), and the answer usually falls into one of three categories: interest, integration, and invention. All three contribute to the reader's identity. What does he like to read? In what ways can he connect those texts across disciplines or to the real world? By using literature as "a springboard into other disciplines" (p. 15), we help students make connections across disciplines. In what ways can the reader apply the text to his own life and goals as a reader? It's exciting and interesting for boys to produce something that departs from "a formula" (p. 16). Invention helps boys create a reader identity children discover themselves. They are "doing books, living books" (p. 17).

Read alouds are another great way to make reading a more enjoyable and realistic activity for reluctant male readers. A read aloud is when a teacher literally reads aloud to the entire group of students. The text can either be segments of a novel, or short stories, poetry, or other shorter selections of prose. The purpose is to model good reading behavior and strategies for reading. It also gives students an opportunity to engage in reading without the struggles of

decoding and understanding, and it makes the reading experience more accessible to all students. "When the reading is the job of someone else, difficulty and, in particular, the length does not deter a reluctant reader" (Moloney, 2000, ¶ 11). Read alouds, much like audio books, give students a cohesive reading experience without the frustration of a difficult or boring text. There are a few guidelines that should be followed, however, so that the read aloud is a positive experience for everyone. Texts for read aloud should "hold the interest of both teacher and students, stimulate discussion, require just 15-30 minutes to read [per sitting], lead to additional reading [and exploration], involve dilemmas whose situations are open ended…[and] match listeners' social and emotional stages" (Erickson, 1996, ¶ 1). Read alouds are practically extinct in English classrooms at the high school level and are far undervalued for their worth.

Lastly, it is very important for teachers and parents to be reader role models. "Children who are read to everyday, who are regularly taken to the public library, who are given books as gifts, are far less likely to grow up reluctant readers" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 25). Parents cannot underestimate their role in their child's life as a role model of good reading behavior and, in fact, should not count on that void being filled by school and teachers. Though it is the job of the teacher to model literacy and create lifelong readers, many English teachers are not readers themselves and may inadvertently send the message that reading is not valuable of their time. If reading isn't valuable enough for the teacher to do outside of class, why should his or her students have to do it? Teachers and parents alike need to model for their students the many facets of literacy, including reading a variety of texts and reading for a variety of purposes. We need to value literacy and students' role in their own reading lives. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) maintain that we need to

> provide free time to read in the classroom or to incorporate literature circles and book clubs in which students choose books that will help them pursue inquiry questions of interest…Even when the boys had only a limited choice, such as the chance to select a book from among several suggested by a teacher or to select one of several topics upon which to write, they embraced the opportunity to exercise some freedom, explore possibility, pursue interests, and assert their own identity. (p. 197)

Choice and, more particularly, the freedom to engage in personal inquiry not dictated by a teacher, is crucial to a positive reading experience. The general rule of thumb is that a third of the time students should be reading whatever they choose; a third of the time they should be able to choose from a list, either for a particular unit, genre, or for something like literature circles; and a third of the time the teacher can choose. Consequently, a third of the time the students read individually, a third of the time they read as a group, again either with shared reading, book clubs, or literature circles, and a third of the time the whole class reads together, as with a read aloud. The teacher presents literacy as something differentiated, unique for each reader, and in turn the students have power to shape their own reader identities and experiences.

When we use reading as a punishment, we are labeling it as something negative. Often, teachers and administrators make students stay after school or in at recess to read quietly if they misbehave. If they talk in class or can't handle a mature discussion, the punishment is typically plain old boring *reading*—reading without discussion or purpose other than punishment. This practice goes against everything we should be trying to promote, and it fosters a greater reluctance to read. Our nonreading young adult males come to view literature as something to be

dreaded, something boring and pointless. Instead, we should be modeling good reading behavior, cultivating readers who are aware of their identity and consistently think about their reading habits and learning styles, and creating reading as a means to intrinsic reward.

Programs that encourage reading for enjoyment don't necessarily have to be wide-scale or expensive, but can be as simple as a classroom read-a-thon or as huge as a school-wide Newberry Book Award book-reading competition. Book clubs, literature circles, and coffee shops are all small-scale versions of special reading activities, but this idea can be modified and expanded to include a variety of students and to make reading more purposeful. No matter how large or what avenue these programs explore, they all have one thing in common; "an attempt to engage students with the books they read—by giving them the freedom to choose what they read and to meaningfully interact with the stories they read" (Sullivan, 2002, p. 35). Programs like SSR (Silent Sustained Reading) and DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) are the roots of specialized reading activities; but the sky's the limit, as long as reading is the focus, there is no "foolproof evaluation scheme" (p. 35), and the sole purpose is to motivate students to read the text, connect to it in some way, and to have the opportunity to be social about reading.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

If we're going to change the aliteracy of our young adolescent male readers, we have to listen to students (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; YALSA, 2005). What are they interested in? Why don't they like to read? How can we change that? By incorporating student voices into this venture we can give them the power to create change. The Young Adult Library Services Association (1996, 2005) surveyed 110 middle school students in 1996 to find out what they liked to read, and, in turn, used their criteria and recommendations for choosing the YALSA's "Quick Picks" to determine the best books for young adults. They've continued this process every year since, putting young adults' and reluctant readers' interests and quality criteria at the center of their philosophy. Some of the criteria the students came up with are as follows: "attractive cover art, catchy title, interesting blurb on the back of the book or the flyleaf, and something has to happen right away" (Rosenzweig, 1996, ¶ 7). The experience gives students back the power, and an evaluative system like this would be extremely valuable in a classroom or school. During the YALSA evaluations, some of the student comments included, "It felt good that someone would actually listen to me," and "I like reviewing because some people are actually going to be listening to what a kid says, instead of just adults" (¶ 13). This structure may be what's needed to turn a reluctant reader into a student eager to have his voice heard and to advocate change in classrooms.

As we work to eliminate aliteracy in our classrooms and create more intrinsically motivated and critical male readers, we must be sure that we're mindful of the times. Technology is changing at a rapid rate, and what's popular one year may be outdated the next.

One example is the new form of digital literacy "zines," introduced in 2001. Zines were wildly popular for a while; they offered students fiction and nonfiction in an easy-access illustrated format, either electronic or paper. Anyone can write a zine, and there are some that are wildly published and read. Many are accompanied by message boards, chat rooms, and additional resources. Though zines are now less popular among teenagers, teachers have begun to see their purpose and are incorporating them into their teaching. Having already lost their popularity, however—it's not certain how many of today's high schoolers even know what a zine is—it's questionable as to how this innovative practice may be received. We must always be as timely as possible in making reading as authentic and real world as possible. Our teaching has to be *real* for these boys to buy into it.

Taking into consideration the struggle of reluctant male readers everywhere, what should our focus be? Where do we go from here? Bill Clarke (2006), author of *Breaking Through to Reluctant Readers,* puts it best. We need to focus on,

> how to strengthen students' reading skills in the face of time constraints, address students' reading phobias, and accommodate the differing cultural expectations of students and teachers…[we must also] understand the urgency of building students' reading, writing, and problem-solving skills in ways relevant to their lives…[and to] rewire our students' expectations of high school, literacy, and their futures. (Clarke, 2006, ¶ 25).

Many researchers agree (Beach & Myers, 2001; Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993) and argue that we should be moving toward a reader-centered classroom instead of a knowledge-centered or a

standard-centered classroom. Our goal is to teach *students*, not subjects, and Wilhelm (1997) says

> In order to develop readers, we must encourage and foster the creative attitudes and activities of engaged readers. We must do this instead of teaching sets of skills or teaching texts—which was what was probably done for (or to!) us—and which was what I was certainly taught to do in my teacher education courses…By instead focusing our instruction and support on the construction of meaning, the classroom can become a place where student not only produce and share meanings, but a place where they share ways of reading and being with text, becoming aware in the process of their own strategies and those of others. And then, with a little luck, reading won't seem so stupid to our students. (p. 11)

Remaking literacy as something social, shared, real world, authentic, and without gender constraints should be the focus of our attention as we move to creating motivated lifelong learners and readers.

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