



Who the Boys Are: Thinking About Masculinity in Children's Fiction

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A couple of decades of important work by feminist scholars has taught all of us who work in literature a repertoire of revealing ways in which texts express ideas about girls and women and help shape the femininity of female readers—a repertoire many scholars have effectively applied to children's fiction. But, I realized a few years ago, I had little access to a parallel set of ways to think about boys, and men, and masculinity. Surely young readers were having their ideas about masculinity shaped by the fiction they read just as much as their ideas about femininity? I headed off to the Gender Studies section of a local bookstore, expecting to find a variety of books about being male, about the nature of our cultural ideas about masculinity, and so on—ideas that would help me think about the boys in children's books. To my surprise, the Gender Studies section turned out to have just two subsections: one for books about women and one for books about lesbians and gay men. About men or boys in general, about non-gay men or boys, nothing.

The absence of a section for books about non-homosexual masculinity is revealing. I suspect it is a logical result of our tendency in contemporary culture to view both male homosexuality and femininity as divergences from the natural state of being human. From a distressingly common point of view, homosexuality is abnormal, if not actually perverse or even unnatural. Commonly, also, traditional forms of femininity are understood to be restrictive roles females are required to adopt, repressive impositions on their natural and normal individuality. But masculinity is often understood exactly as not being either eccentric or repressed—as just being one's natural, normally human self. A lot of people think of homosexuality as a disease to be cured, and so take it for granted that heterosexual masculinity is a desirable, healthy normalcy. And a major strain of what some of my students and many others in mainstream culture would rather vaguely and inaccurately consider feminist thought imagines as a utopian goal the adoption of traditionally non-restricted male behavior for everybody—a natural freedom from repression. If being normally male is just being normal and natural, there are not likely to be all that many books to keep in a section on non-gay masculinity. What would there be special or distinct to write about?

As I have discovered since that trip to the bookstore, there has been growing interest amongst academics in exploring masculinity lately, including the heterosexual kind. I have found a good half a

hundred or so theoretical books about what maleness might mean published in the last few years, albeit hidden in other sections of bookstores than ones devoted to Gender Studies. But even this relatively vast outpouring is nothing like the interest in femininity or in what is now known as queer theory. For the most part, ideas about non-gay masculinity tend to be of interest for those who think about them at all only as that which in fact they usually are: the taken-for-granted backdrop of power and privilege against which gay men and both gay and straight women experience their oppression. What we believe non-gay masculinity itself is or should be; what we think boys need to learn about being male; how masculinity of any sort might be as oppressive a burden for the males expected to feel it and act it as it is for others around them: These are not subjects much considered by most people, male or female, most of the time.

So, what, in our world today, does it mean to be masculine? When I first began to raise this question with students in my university-level courses in children's fiction, they had a hard time even beginning to think about the subject. Their main assumption about masculinity was that they made no assumptions about it—that, indeed, there was nothing much there to think about. Yes, they agreed, girls are different from boys, but only because girls are not free to be themselves. Boys *are*—and what else is there to say? But once my students did begin to think about it, they were surprised to discover how many assumptions about typical or desirable male behavior they knew and could, with prompting, name—how very much they had been taking for granted without even being aware of it.

Since I first asked many students about these matters, I have managed, with the help of students

and colleagues, and my reading of some of that scholarly literature about masculinity, to develop an extensive list of assumptions about masculinity widespread in contemporary culture. What follows is a version of this list, accompanied by my explanations of some of the less obvious or more thought-provoking assumptions. Following this article is an exploration of one particular novel about a boy and some men, Tim Wynne-Jones's *The Maestro* (1996), written by Charlie Peters as part of her work for one of the courses I teach. Charlie

has agreed to share the thoughts she had after a class discussion of the list as an example of how awareness of assumptions about masculinity can help readers to engage with texts written for children in revealing and useful ways. My hope in encouraging students like Charlie and readers of this journal to develop this sort of awareness is that they will then find ways of encouraging child readers to develop it also—both by talking about the assumptions and by talking about the ways in which the books they are reading might be representing the assumptions. The more aware of these matters we all are, the more likely we are to move past a blind and unconsidered acceptance of potentially dangerous attitudes.

The lists that follow contain terms that might follow the phrase, "Masculinity is...." Some refer to physical attributes, some to states of mind. As I gathered the various assumptions, I realized they seemed to fall in categories. The first of these is:

Phallic Masculinity

- "Natural"—authentic, inherent, biological
- Essential, fixed—there are no degrees of masculinity; one is either male or female
- Dominance, authority, power; being on top
- Hard, not soft

What we believe non-gay masculinity itself is or should be; what we think boys need to learn about being male; how masculinity of any sort might be as oppressive a burden for males expected to feel it and act it as it is for others around them; these are not subjects much considered by most people, male or female, most of the time.

- Phallic; penetrating, not penetrated
- Thrusting, aggressiveness
- Explosive, uncontrollable ("boys will be boys")
- Big; "size matters"; the bigger, the more masculine
- Being irresistible to women
- Being active
- Enjoyment of physical activity (sports, etc.)
- Enjoyment of the chase, etc.
- Go-getting
- Enjoyment of violence
- Sadistic, not masochistic
- Lust-driven; "brains in crotch"
- Lustful but not seeking emotional attachment; sex but not love
- Desiring (i.e., as opposed to desired); lustful, but not inviting lust
- Being a seducer, not being seductive
- Polygamous

What ties these items together is that they all emerge from the first item listed: the idea that maleness is biologically mandated, and that being masculine is merely doing what comes naturally to males. "Boys will be boys," people often say, as if aggressive or antisocial behavior is an inherent and unchangeable aspect of maleness. Michael Gurian, author of a popular guide called *The Wonder of Boys* (1996) believes that "a boy is in large part, hard-wired to be who he is. We can not, in large part, change who he is" (p. 5). But despite conventional assumptions, and despite Gurian's wiring metaphor and his assertion that the maleness of boys is an unavoidable effect of "their dominance by the hormone testosterone" (p. 60), I have to insist that these qualities are not necessarily natural or biologically mandated, and certainly not unchangeable. I have deeply personal reasons for doing so. If masculinity as Gurian understands it were indeed inherently biological, then the boy and the man Perry Nodelman are weird freaks of nature.

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As a boy, I was not aggressively physical, not competitive, not interested in taking part in or being a spectator of sporting events. I am none of these things even now. And yet I feel happily masculine, thank you—or, I guess, happily male, since I am happy about who I am and I am in fact male, despite my lack of conventional masculinity.

What we call "normal" is just about always the imposition of culturally constructed and therefore, politically motivated ideals that have the main purpose of repressing individual difference by identifying the supposed ideal as the norm. Normal, or more exactly, normative, masculinity is repressive in exactly this way. Like femininity and being female, masculinity is a social construct that connects with but does not necessarily always coincide with maleness. That is why we can have tomboys, and why we can tell certain boys (boys like I was once, for instance) that they throw like a girl. Logic would suggest that the way a boy throws, whatever it is, is like a boy, since it is,

after all, a boy who is doing the throwing. But societal gender assumptions tell us that is not the case.

Clearly, then, a main function of these normative assumptions is to make people like me feel guilty about being who we are as opposed to whom others in general think we should be. I suspect a lot of conventionally non-masculine boys feel exactly this guilt about their presumably faulty hard-wiring. And so they should. Believing, as Gurian and many others do, that boys are somehow inherently and inescapably captive to their testosterone—a biological imperative allows many children and adults to stigmatize boys who act in what I would call a more mature fashion as sissies or wimps or just plain "girls." It also allows many boys who buy into theories like Gurian's to be dangerously aggressive to others and to themselves, and to be approved for doing so. They, and the adults in their lives, can simply blame their testosterone

for behavior that ought to be objectionable, and that can in fact be controlled—for after all, if biological urges were so truly hard-wired as to be immutable, then none of us would ever have been toilet-trained. In matters like these, our believing something to be so does in fact make it so, at least as a powerful social truth we all too often act on.

I have labeled these biological assumptions as “phallic” masculinity simply because they relate directly to the mere fact of having a penis—a phallus is a metaphorical penis—and assume that having a penis controls one’s behavior in ways that cannot be resisted. Many items on this list seem to be phallic metaphors: masculinity is being hard, penetrating, thrusting, aggressive, explosive—and above all, uncontrollable. Men are most male, it seems, when they reenact on a larger stage the behavior of sexually aroused penises.

A second set of assumptions clearly relates to the first in focusing on aggression, but differs significantly in insisting on the possibility of and need for control:

Warrior Masculinity

- Competitiveness
- The need to test courage, power (“Are you a man or a mouse?”)
- The need to win; to be better than others
- The need to be *seen* to win glory, acclaim, reputation, etc.: masculinity as a prize awarded by the opinions of others, especially other men
- Uncertain; maleness as continually in question, always in need of being proved, tested, etc.
- Being strong and silent
- Being hard, cool, unemotional
- Being egocentric; self-sustaining
- Being unwilling to speak of emotions
- Not crying
- Bragging; voicing of maleness as key feature of masculinity
- Having courage, bravery, fortitude
- Self-control
- Maintaining control and discipline of one’s body; not being subject to desire
- Maintaining control and discipline of one’s

body; the ongoing achievement and maintenance of a societally privileged appearance of masculinity

- Invincibility; feeling no pain
- Eating meat; real men don’t eat quiche

I have labeled these items “warrior” masculinity because they seem to have emerged in the past as ways of producing the perfect warrior—someone whose supposedly natural aggression, far from being explosive and unconstrained, is disciplined and therefore available for various cultural uses, such as willing service in an army. This is in fact the masculinity encouraged or created by basic training in the military. Good warriors have the discipline to face fearful circumstances, even death, without fear—they know how to control their egocentric urges to be self-protective or self-indulgent. Above all, they need to ignore and to hide their emotions, to be strong, silent, cool, and in control.

There is obvious danger for boys and men in assumptions of this sort. They define suffering as good for you—something to seek out—and therefore encourage masochism. They also encourage sadism, the willingness to hurt others without moral consideration or too-tender second thoughts. Just as bad, they lead adults to encourage boys to repress and to fear their emotions. The latter is the subject of William Pollack’s popular book *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (1998). Pollack’s concern is that boys forced to deny their more vulnerable selves cause unhappiness and become dangerous both to themselves and to others.

One of those dangers is the ongoing guilt and insecurity associated with the assumption that masculinity is always in question, always in need of being tested, confirmed, and reestablished in ways that will convince others—particularly other males. In terms of this assumption, one is never man enough, always in need of proving one is man enough. Assumptions of this sort underlie many of the relationships men and boys have with each other. I say more about them below in terms of assumptions about group masculinity.

Meanwhile, the fact that control is exactly as central to warrior masculinity as lack of control is to phallic masculinity is especially revealing. De-

spite their contradictory nature, both these assumptions about masculinity are current and widespread in our culture. They are, indeed, often believed by the same people at the same time, without an awareness of the contradiction—a sure sign that they are ideological, ways in which our culture works to shape us for its own purposes and possibly against our better judgment. In this case, it is interesting that soldiers, for all their professional discipline, have historically been able to get away with rape and other forms of violence directed against women on the assumption that it represented a natural and un-

controllable urge. Similarly, we conventionally admire boys with the ability to discipline their bodies in order to become good at various sports, but assume that what really makes one good at these sports is an inherent and uncontrollable aggression.

Another interesting contradiction revealed in this set of assumptions relates to the question of appearance. According to the art theorist John Berger (1992), the assumption behind both traditional European paintings and contemporary pinup photos of nude women was that men act and women appear—that men were most admired for their actions, women for the way they look. In recent decades, a new focus on bodybuilding and on the idea that women might appreciate male pinups in exactly the same way men once appreciated those of women means that males must now appear also—achieve and maintain a societally privileged appearance of masculinity. Paradoxically, however, in order to appear desirable men must appear aggressive, strong, dangerous. They must, as the title of a recent book by Mark Simpson suggests, be *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (1994). Bodybuilding reveals the essential contradiction here—it creates, not strength, but the appearance of strength. The goal is to win, not a physical battle, but an award for one's only apparently tough appearance.

For readers of children's fiction, then, a key function of an awareness of conventional assumptions about masculinity might be an ability to discern contradictions and the ways that fictional texts work to hide them, in order to try to move beyond them.

According to Frederic Jameson (1981), "the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (p. 79). If that is true—and I believe it is—then we can expect that children's fiction about boys will be working to create such solutions, in order to allow readers to live with a comfortably unquestioning acceptance of the contradictory nature of the behavior their culture invites them to take for granted. For readers of

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The idea that masculinity is connected to questions of self-control leads to another set of assumptions, this one centered on the idea that admirable men and boys have no need of, and indeed must resist, relationships with others:

Self-sufficient Masculinity

- Independence
- Egocentricity
- Outsider anti-conformist rebelliousness
- Impatience with, or defiance of, the limitations of convention, the values of law and order, the supposedly female rules of etiquette, good manners, taste, etc.; maleness as that which is restrained or repressed by civilization and social concerns
- Not being interested in neatness, cleanliness, order; no housecleaning
- Fear of entrapment, containment
- Being non-romantic, non-needy ("Big boys don't cry.")
- Being non-nurturing

The underlying assumption holding together these items is the idea that concern for others is a female trait. To avoid being characterized as effeminate—and therefore, in terms of the most basic of conventional assumptions, dangerously non-masculine—boys and men must not only disguise their more tender feelings of love for or need for others, they must also avoid entrapment by a sense of responsibility for others. To accept that one might have responsibilities to individual others, or to the needs and desires of one's community or society, is a sign of weakness, a matter of being dangerously repressed, restrained, even imprisoned. From this point of view, any adherence to social regulation or conformity is a sign of emasculation. Real men revel in their anarchic impulses; do not necessarily obey the law or any presumed authority; and flee constraint by domesticity, or orderly employment, or the duties of good citizenship.

An increasingly significant assumption along these lines is that, for boys, conforming to parents' and teachers' desire for one to do well at school is a sign of effeminate weakness. Real boys don't study. Male children are increasingly accomplishing less at school than girls are. They are also increasingly reading less well and less often. Because publishers doubt that an audience for books for or about boys continues to exist, they produce fewer and fewer of them. The most distressing current effect of assumptions about masculinity on children's fiction might be the gradual elimination from it of any significant portrayal of male experience.

When boys do appear in children's fiction, furthermore, it is often so writers can characterize their rebelliousness or aggression as dangerously anti-social—bad. In children's fiction, child readers, intellectuals, and artists tend to end up honored and happy, bullies chastened and apologetic, or merely seen through. Consider what happens in Paul Fleischman's *Weslandia* (1999) or Jerry Spinelli's *Wringer* (1997). I suspect that most boys,

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caught up in the more powerful ideas about these matters fostered in popular media and widespread among their peers and even the adults in their lives, are unlikely to want to read or to pay much attention to the messages of such books. Being a geek continues to represent a lack of masculinity.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric of popular music, from rock and roll to hip hop, continually reinforces the view that the free expression of masculinity requires a different sort of outsiderliness. It celebrates a resistance to norms and conventions and to being controlled, constrained, or tied down, and identifies intellectual pursuits with conformity and the enemy.

Similarly, the male heroes of popular literature, both in books and in TV and movies, tend to be not particularly intelligent outsiders like Happy Gilmore or just about every wrestler in the WWF (World Wrestling Federation), admirable in their resistance to powerful book-reading insiders.

Some significant children's books about boys do seem to replicate these patterns. James Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), Max of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), and David of David Shannon's *No, David* (1998) are all exuberantly active and not obviously intellectual anti-conformists who resist entrapment in female-administered rules and systems. Yet all these heroes—with the exception of Peter Pan, who is, significantly, understood to be eternally boyish—come to some accommodation with and acceptance of the forces that work to constrain them, in ways that proclaim that acceptance as a happy ending. Furthermore, the vastly powerful corporations that produce the popular music, TV, and movies for young consumers that reinforce an antisocial rebel outsider stance hardly want to encourage any genuine rebellion against the current status quo. In fact, I believe, the absorption of rebellious instincts into a taste for a certain kind of music and the need to purchase the appropriately rebellious-looking clothing op-

erates as a co-option of the desire to resist conformity, a way of policing and preventing any real or positive change. So does the encouragement to thoughtlessness in the idea that intellectual work is emasculating. We might well explore children's books in terms of how their apparent encouragement of rebellious resistance to authority works to support and maintain authority—particularly the disempowering and counterproductive aspects of it.

Ironically, furthermore, boys come to be acceptable to other boys—and to girls and many adults—by conforming to ideals of anti-conformity. To be this sort of a supposedly self-sufficient outsider is the grounds for admission into a group where one will be safely free from the stigma of being a genuine non-conforming outsider—as, all too often, boys considered to be intellectual or otherwise effeminate are. Another set of assumptions about masculinity has a paradoxical relationship to assumptions about self-sufficiency. It supports the same or similar values by focusing on how they allow one to bond with others:

Thus, male bonding often constructs itself on declarations of homophobia.

Group Masculinity

- Bonding with other males
- Male homosociality: one's most important relationships are with other men
- Misogyny
- Homophobia; fear or repugnance at physical contact with other men outside of the context of battle or play-battle (sports); fear of the male gaze (homosociality as not homosexuality)
- Needing to conform to values of a male group
- Needing ritual reinforcement of involvement with male group—names, ceremonies, secret handshakes, etc.
- A desire for the male gaze—attracting the admiration of other men (e.g., body builders, models) for masculine appearance
- The policing of unmanliness, etc.; category maintenance
- Being rigid and conservative; forbidding trans-

gression, avoiding the confusion of fixed boundaries and categories

- Closeting divergence from group values, such as one's own vulnerability, softness, etc.
- Being anti-intellectual (anti-geek, nerd, etc.)
- A form of dress: wearing certain colors, styles, forms of appearance, etc.; no frills, no pink, baseball caps, hairy and/or muscular, not pudgy or skinny, etc.; body-building.
- A lack of interest in fashion or appearance; no makeup
- Peacockery

Many of the items on this list are slightly different versions of ones I've described already, but with a key difference. Here their underlying significance as a means by which men and

boys define their acceptability to each other becomes clear.

For instance, I've already suggested that phallic masculinity defines maleness as natural and fixed—what one is born with—and that therefore it represents the complete and absolute opposite of femininity. In terms of this assumption, there can be no male traits in females and vice versa. As a result, boys and men who express characteristics assumed to be female are stigmatized, and must be excluded from acceptable groupings. In order to be acceptably male to other males, boys and men must therefore hide and repress any of their characteristics that might be viewed as female, or their admiration for or even tolerance of the female. Males then frequently bond together on the basis of their shared misogyny—or pretend misogyny. To admit that one likes to look after babies or cook or gossip or houseclean—or read—is a threat to the shared assumptions that allow males to form acceptably masculine groups.

Homosociality is the word used by the theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to describe the acceptable social relationships of men to each other. In order to have important and socially significant homosocial relationships with each other—on sports teams, in business deals, or merely as

friends—males must conventionally make it clear to themselves and to each other that their deep interest in each other is not sexually motivated—not, in other words, homosexual. Thus, male bonding often constructs itself on declarations of homophobia. Men and boys can allow themselves to be naked together in shower rooms only by making jokes about not dropping the soap.

Furthermore, since male homosexuality is commonly understood to equate with effeminacy, the understanding of normal masculinity as opposite to homosexuality further stigmatizes supposedly effeminate behavior in boys. Abby Harper, a student in the symposium I taught a few years ago at the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College in Boston, works in a toy and children's book store in a small town in Massachusetts. She told the class that, while her adult customers are generally willing to buy anything in the store for girls, they tend to have a firm set of prejudices about what is appropriate for boys. They will not buy boys any sort of doll. They will not buy any boy over the age of two any sort of stuffed animal. They will not buy boys any dress-up costume of any sort, no matter how macho the character it represents, nor any craft kit except those that involve woodworking: no copper work or decoupage, and certainly never anything involving a needle and thread. Indeed, these adults will not buy boys over the age of seven or so most of the things this toy store sells, except for Lego building kits, car and plane models, and things related to sports and science. Otherwise, they simply don't shop there for boys any longer. I feel safe in suspecting that these chillingly typical toy store customers who refuse so many kinds of toys for boys do so out of a fear that a boyish interest in supposedly female pursuits is most significantly a sign of homosexuality. Wishing to dress up and play at being someone else, pretending to be a nurturing parent, being imaginative or artistic; in a culture that tends to conflate effeminacy and creativity with homosexuality, all these are signs of gayness. If that is in fact what drives Abby's customers, then the possibility of a young male child having gay tendencies in early childhood is surely of less significance than the possibility that others, children and adults, might *perceive* the child as having gay tendencies—the

appearance of un-manliness.

In terms of having success and making friends in the culture of childhood at large, nothing could be less desirable. The sociologist Michael Kimmel, who has written extensively on the history of masculinity in America, speaks in an interview available on the Internet about a relatively new form of homophobia,

which is the fear that other people might perceive us as being gay. This is where it ties in most directly to the ideologies of masculinity or femininity as we know them. To make sure no one could get the wrong idea that I might somehow be gay, one goes through an elaborate repertoire of behaviors, ideas, displays.... That terror that someone might see us as gay fuels all the ways in which we talk, act, dress, move in the world—to make sure no one could get that idea. As a result, homophobia becomes a real straitjacket, pushing us toward a very traditional definition of masculinity. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/interviews/kimmel.html>

Thus far, the assumptions I have described focus on specific attitudes a number of people take towards masculinity in contemporary culture. According to various branches of feminist, postcolonial, and cultural theory, certain assumptions may be even more powerful than that. They may, in fact, define the way in which we think about, not just men and boys, women and girls, but everything:

Structural / Cultural Masculinity

- Patriarchal
- Hierarchical
- Binary-oppositional: "us vs. them"
- Colonizing
- Being a keeper of secrets about rules being broken, etc.; seeing but not saying

Here, the assumption that masculinity is fixed and inherent shapes the very structures of our thinking—how we see and interpret our world. The traditional idea the men are opposite to and superior to women underlies the patriarchal and imperialist thinking that divides people into opposite groups and requires us to see one group as supe-

rior to the other. This applies, not just to men and women, but also to rich and poor, White and Black—and for that matter, adults and children. The habit of binary-oppositional thinking prevents us from acknowledging the fact that people are never so firmly fixed and opposite—that males are not opposite to females, nor are Whites to Blacks, or children to adults. To escape these rigid sorts of assumptions might help us to accept the possibility of equality amongst theoretically different kinds of people. It might also free us from what are often identified as traditionally masculine assumptions—patriarchal, as in supporting a world run by male parents.

I added the idea about “seeing but not saying” here as a specific version of warrior discipline that allows powerful political structures to maintain themselves. In earlier times, European countries kept their colonies going by training colonial officials not to report theoretical diversions from the rules—criminal acts of various sorts—that actually helped to sustain their power. In schools still today, bullies operate successfully—and therefore enforce conventional ideas about the validity of male aggression—when others have learned that it is not manly to tell on them. Telling on bullies or other children in the process of breaking rules earns one disfavor not just from other children but from school officials also. This means that wise children quickly learn not to tell—and thus, allow the continuance of theoretically anti-social behavior that actually supports the power structure in ways that seem to contradict its declared principles. There is one final group of assumptions:

Psychoanalytical Masculinity

- Having specific Oedipal concerns
- The repression of polymorphous perversity,

anality, homosexuality, etc.

- Fear of and/or integration of one's anima
- Authority: “he who bears the phallus”—phallus as signifier; “name of the father”
- Fear of one's father, murder of one's father, etc.; masculinity as tied up in relationships with fathers
- Being a gazer—not subject to the gaze

The items on this list are a sampling of some ways in which various psychoanalytical theories theorize conventional masculinity—what it means to be normally male. For Freud, for instance, males normally pass through the feelings for their mothers identified as Oedipal, and normally pass through a stage in which they feel sexual interest in other males. For Jung, meanwhile, males achieve a healthy state of integration by first fearing and then accepting their anima—the female aspect of their personality; and for Lacan (1977), ideas of power are tied up with phallic imagery and conceptions of father-

hood. While I do not have the space here to do much more than mention these views, I do want to mention them. Viewed in terms of these powerful and powerfully unsettling ideas, children's books might well turn out to be supporting child readers in their unconscious attitudes towards fathers and mothers, males and females, and power in general. The more aware of these matters we work to become, the more we can help children to become aware of them also—and, then, to make more conscious commitments for or against them.

Masculinity and Reading Children's Fiction

As my lists of assumptions reveal, masculinity in our time is a weirdly contradictory thing. Perhaps the weirdest thing about it is how separate it

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finally is from the fact of being biologically male. Just about all of us believe that real men are not born. They are made, as in the old phrase, "I'm going to make a man out of you." Manhood is something that does or does not happen to males. It consists of choices. And always, I think, it represents an ideal and impossible to achieve state of being that all males must always fail to meet and must constantly therefore worry about failing to meet, especially since it claims to represent, not an ideal, but mere normalcy. No wonder boys, and men, get confused.

Inevitably, children's books about boys and men contribute to the confusion. The more we become aware of how they do so, the more we can help child readers to see and, I hope, move beyond confusion. In the paper that follows, my student Charlie Peters explores how one specific children's book might be illuminated through a consideration of the ways in which it might be expressing, confirming, and possibly undermining some of the conventions listed above. I encourage others to follow Charlie's lead.

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