

## Minding the Cover Story:

Boys, Workshop, and Real Reading

**R**ecent studies show that the reading abilities of adolescents are in crisis. The ACT reports that only 51% of high school students who took the test in 2005 are prepared for college-level reading, which requires students to comprehend, make supported inferences from, and analyze complex texts (ACT 1,16). Other studies show that adolescents experience a sharp decline in their desire to read beginning in middle and high school (Snow and Biancarosa 6; AFT 25). Equally, females consistently outperform males in the areas of reading and writing (ACT 7). This information is generally alarming, but, for some teachers, it is not surprising. Nancie Atwell writes that the demands of high stakes testing and standards movements have pushed many teachers to abandon practices that support critical lifelong readers, regardless of gender (107). Instead, the pressures to teach, reinforce, and assess state and local standards crowd English and content area curricula (ACT 9). Ironically, a 2004 report from Carnegie Corporation of New York found that adolescent reading abilities increase when teachers allow students to self-select from a variety of high-level texts, incorporate collaborative text-based discussions, and individualize reading instruction by modeling multiple strategies for dissecting complicated texts (Biancarosa and Snow 26-27). In fact, students exposed to these practices in a third- through sixth-grade reading program did exceptionally better on standardized reading tests than those engaged in remedial reading instruction and test preparation for the same time period (Reis et. al. 16-19).

In 2002, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm

presented research on a specific group of boys and this adolescent literacy debacle. Although they acknowledged the crisis across genders, their study specifically focused on the marked declines in male adolescent literacy (1-2). Among their participants (who spanned multiple ethnicities and social contexts), they found a group of boys whose absorption in video gaming imitated a “flow” experience: the games offered the boys opportunities to feel competent and challenge themselves, but still provided clear goals and consistent, focused feedback (51). Smith and Wilhelm further investigate how similar classroom environments or reading experiences can potentially establish “flow” patterns for students (52). Self-selection, teacher and peer conferences, and aesthetic classroom reading experiences are the foundations of for the reading workshop. Such classrooms also provide opportunities for students to use their selections as gateways to other, more complex, pieces of literature, and engage in collaborative work that exposes the personal or global implications of whole texts (Atwell 12-16). Clearly, the reading workshop incorporates what research tells us are best practices for adolescent literacy; in addition, it is potentially a “flow” environment for specific students (Biancarosa and Snow 24-27; Smith and Wilhelm 109, 147, 198). Likewise, these classroom environments encourage frequent and lifelong readers who often do better on the tests (ACT 27; Atwell 107; Reis et al. 17; Snow and Biancarosa 2). Nevertheless, because all students must first *want* to read before they become lifelong readers, teachers in these classrooms work tirelessly to scaffold the path of independent reading. Through extensive libraries,

suggestion lists, and coaching, they strive to continue the reading conversation with both male and female students.

Building classroom libraries or suggestion lists that clearly reflect the reading possibilities of our individual students is no easy task. In order to do this successfully, we must constantly engage in conversations with them about their personal and reading interests (Atwell 31; Smith and Wilhelm 20). Equally, we have to listen when they talk to their peers about reading, even if those conversations are about texts we do not consider a part of the literature classroom. When we authentically investigate the literate lives of our students, we can better inform our classroom libraries and coaching skills. Nevertheless, there are always those reading dialogues that challenge our knowledge and experience as teachers. As evidenced by the surge of research, teacher anecdotes, library, and schoolwide initiatives, it would appear that boys are less likely than girls to read fluently and voluminously (Smith and Wilhelm xix-xx; Kenney 1). For teachers, this often makes knowing and understanding the reading interests of boys a cumbersome process; yet, we cannot abandon such classroom conversations, even when some students consistently tell us that they do not read. In hopes of coming to a critical understanding about the literate lives of our male students, teachers are often called to consider the gender role stereotypes adolescent boys experience (Smith and Wilhelm 14-16). Max, one of Sally's former students, pushed her to understand how to continue such reading conversations, even at an impasse.

Max entered Sally's tenth-grade reading workshop classroom as an avid reader; he had experienced the workshop model for years, confidently made his own literature selections, and took risks at the suggestion of peers and teachers. So, when he arrived one morning looking slightly broken, Sally was stunned to find out that it was the result of reading. After showing her his new choices for reading workshop, he quickly put them back into his bag. He then asked Sally if she thought he liked "girly" books. Apparently, when he had gone excitedly to buy his choice titles for reading workshop, the cashier at the bookstore looked at the covers and suggested that his English teacher was making him read "girl" books. Max was crushed. He didn't dare acknowledge that he had chosen the

books for himself; instead, he informed Sally that he would not read his new choices. Even after all the work the school had done to coach confident, lifelong readers who made independent choices about texts, someone had still made a stereotypical reading decision for Max. He asked Sally to suggest some "boy" books. Suddenly, independent Max had become dependent on his female teacher to steer him toward the "masculine" side of reading.

As teachers, we want our students to believe that there are truly no "boy" and "girl" books. In a perfect reading workshop, boys and girls are free to blur these lines by exercising their own independent reading interests. We would like to believe that the classroom communities we create for students nurture their choices, regardless of the title, cover, or amount of glitter. Nevertheless, we know that the real world of reading is not so kind. Boys and girls receive different, but equally perplexing, gender messages from our society. These messages often spill over into their public reading lives and impact their confidence in choosing their own texts or simply reading at all. Without conversation, however, Sally would never have understood why Max had abandoned his reading independence for the sake of perceived masculinity. Because she respected his decision as a fellow reader, she did not argue with his thoughts about abandoning the books. Instead, it was more important to bring Max back to independent reading. When she reflected on his new experience and former reading patterns, however, she realized the importance of the cover story.

Max's reading patterns, interests, and dialogues

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about books showed similarities to other male students in Sally's class. These students often self-selected what they called real fiction. For them, real fiction mirrored their realities as teenage boys. Their reading patterns showed disinterest in stories about

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boys who became the star athlete and won the high school trophy or men who solved the code to save the world. Although the above books might have proven themselves to be more cover-friendly to the outside world, these students enjoyed books that affirmed them as the boys they were, not the ones they should have been. In such books, male characters were not violent or rebellious teens who fought with their parents. They didn't have any monumental problems like abuse, addictions, or alcoholic relatives; nobody got pregnant in them, and, usually, nobody even died. Essentially, these particular boys liked books void of the *do something, save*

*someone, win something* message that many of Sally's male students received from adult and peer communities. In addition, even though this group of boys understood the critical implications of choosing books based on covers, this understanding did not translate into reading with abandon.

There are several male young adult novelists who write books that appeal to readers like Max. These books are wonderful ways to entice or reinforce readers whose interests lie in real fiction. In title and appearance, they are low-risk books for such male readers, but prove to be profound for male and female readers alike. In addition, their use of complex storytelling devices and multiple themes that extend realistically beyond the scope of a novel are excellent ways to nudge students toward higher-level analysis. Likewise, they are seamless transition points for

students whose reading histories involve non-fiction, biographies, or memoirs. They debunk gender stereotypes by providing us with authentic male characters that ultimately learn to embrace the humorous and unpredictable worlds they inhabit. These characters confront the *do something, win something, take care of someone* demands of society and inadvertently discover the everyday heroes within themselves. They are reminders that when we open our eyes and truly engage in our social, human experience, we become vulnerable to failure, but also champions of our own individual gifts. Ultimately, we know that these personal realizations profoundly outweigh winning the high school football trophy. They help students like Max find a sense of place and self in Young Adult Literature by accepting and celebrating who they already are as boys. Not surprisingly, some of these texts are clear reflections of the pressures male students experience in our society, schools, and classrooms.

Colin Singleton, the main character of John Green's 2006 novel *An Abundance of Katherines*, expresses his greatest fear in this way: "What if this is it? What if ten years from now I'm sitting in a fugging cubicle crunching numbers and memorizing baseball statistics [. . .] and I never do anything significant and I'm just a complete waste?" (9). Colin, like so many of our students, believes two myths perpetuated by modern society concerning a boy's transition from adolescent to man: one, that success in the workplace is not dependent on a man's sense of fulfillment of his passion, but on his ability to provide monetary security for himself and his family; and two, that employment, in addition to the hypothetical wife and 2.5 children, will not be enough to lift a man from the ranks of the average to become a significant member of society. Rather, young men are pressured to make a contribution to society – one that can be measured in a tangible, socially identifiable way.

For Colin, social obscurity is especially dangerous; he is an achiever. Once a noted child prodigy, skilled and adept at math and various foreign languages, Colin's childhood was a succession of adults and playmates amazed and wonder-struck by his proficiency. But now, at the end of his high school career, Colin's intellectual superiority has tapered off; his gifts have evened out until Colin is only *slightly* better at math and foreign languages than his peers. With this

sudden shift of his role in life, from savant to teenager, Colin sinks into a depression. He recognizes that now no one will notice, nor pay special attention, to him. His relationship problems are the same ones facing every other boy he knows. After four years, he has graduated, and college lies ahead. Colin is doing exactly what he is supposed to do. Still, he is unsettled. No one, teachers and parents included, shares Colin's concern or worry that he has become his own worst nightmare: average.

Hassan, Colin's best friend, has decided to take a year off after graduating high school. Thus far, he has spent the majority of his days watching television's *Judge Judy*. Hassan's parents have all but given up on earlier hopes of their son becoming an important member of society. His father finally concedes, "If you call me in a week and have a job, you can stay wherever you want as long as you want, as far as I'm concerned" (14). The resignation Hassan's father expresses should not be read as disappointment in his son's choices. Rather, because they love him, Hassan's parents recognize the stigma attached to any boy in the process of becoming a man, who is seen to lack the socially expected impulses toward ambition and drive.

Ultimately, Hassan and Colin, who are both urban teenagers, realize their gifts in the rural town of Gutshot, Tennessee. In Gutshot, they finally find a sense of self far away from their Chicago homes. Removed from the pressures that had previously dominated their lives, Colin and Hassan discover an "always-coming infinite future stretching out before [them]" (215). Hassan decides to attend college, but not as an act of defeat. Instead, by deciding in his own time that he is ready, he gains control of his life. Colin, who struggled to retain the qualities he felt made him unique, sees that "there [is] room enough to be anyone – anyone except who he'd already been [. . .] you can't stop the future from coming" (214). Through the relationships they cultivate with both the youth and elders of the town, Colin and Hassan find beauty in the gray area that exists between child prodigy and couch potato extremes. They both come to understand that individual satisfaction determines success. Nevertheless, such discoveries are not without personal risks and cautious surrender to the unpredictable qualities of human relationships.

Similarly, fifteen-year-old Craig Gilner of Ned

Vizzini's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* finds self-satisfaction in a very unlikely place. Just as Hassan is initially content to do nothing, Craig Gilner accepts he will never do enough to succeed. From the earliest pages of Vizzini's novel, Craig realizes he is in over his head. Though he's been accepted to the Executive Pre-Professional High School in Manhattan, Craig knows he nearly ran himself ragged studying and cramming; it's a lifestyle he will not be able to maintain. Yet, the pressure weighing down on Craig is relentless, so he begins to smoke pot and throw up what little food he eats. His downward spiral culminates with a call to a suicide hotline, and Craig's hospitalization in an adult psychiatric ward. Here, he realizes the consequences of his actions.

Extreme? Of course. Realistic? Sadly, yes. Every day, students are reinforced with the notion that if they are not the class leaders, they are somehow lacking or less important. School bulletins commend student athletes on their achievements; students are trained to join as many extra-curricular clubs as possible, not to cultivate their interests or give back to the community, but because clubs look great on college applications. The valedictorians, prom queen and kings, and students awarded for service projects all represent the high school, yet, in actuality, these students are the minority. Classes are full of young, male students who do their homework, attend and participate in class, but never step to the forefront. Inadvertently, these boys, while not being punished for getting by, are not particularly noticed either.

In this culture, students like Craig can decide to push themselves beyond their limits in order to gain recognition and attention. In the end, however, Craig's health is at risk. Oddly, his motivations are almost entirely unselfish. He is not attending the high school for him, but for his parents. Craig, like many young men, feels a duty to fulfill his role in society as it has been presented to him throughout the whole of

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his education. While not the stereotypically pushy parents, Craig's mother and father stress the importance of a good education. Perhaps because they have seen the part of the world that values and judges young men and women on the basis of schooling, they want their son to succeed in his educational life. With one eye to his adult future, and the other eye to the teenage experience that he is missing, it is no wonder, then, when Craig stumbles and falls.

Once again, it is in this unlikely place that Craig finds his way back to himself. Surrounded by adult mental patients, Craig begins to realize the diverse faces of mental illness and chronic depression. Yet, he is also thrust into a space where, because the patients are so authentic, he cannot avoid realizing their needs.

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In one instance, a fellow patient (Bobby) needs a dress shirt for a housing interview. Without thinking, Craig offers him one of his. Upon finding out that Bobby passed the interview, Craig realizes the impact of such a seemingly small gesture. "I stand up and Bobby hugs me [. . .] I think about how much this means to this guy, about how much more important

it is than going to any high school or getting with any girl or being friends with anybody. This guy just got a place to *live*" (317). As the novel progresses, Craig struggles, but shifts into a hopeful character who does not judge himself by the outside world's prescription. Instead, he ultimately sees his own personal gifts as "Anchors" (391-392). Oddly at home in the psychiatric ward where no one is graded and no competition exists for the most prestigious padded cell, Craig sees his decision to almost kill himself was perhaps the greatest mistake he's made. "Travel. Fly. Swim. Meet. Love [. . .] Take these verbs and enjoy them [. . .] You could have left them all behind but you chose to stay here. So live for real now, Craig. Live. Live. Live. Live" (444). At last, his happiness comes from his own self-realization and understanding that, for him, life will be more fulfilling when he bucks the status quo in order to simply live.

Ed Kennedy, from Markus Zusak's *I Am the*

*Messenger*, can't help but feel like a loser. He explains: "Constantly, I'm asking myself, *Well, Ed—what have you really achieved in your nineteen years?*" (16). Ed works as a cabbie, is hopelessly in love with an amazing girl, and is unmotivated. Living his normal existence, Ed inadvertently thwarts a robbery at a bank, and becomes an unwilling hero. A series of messages appear on playing cards, with cryptic instructions and names for Ed to investigate. Suddenly, Ed has what society has always told him he needed: a purpose. His journey in the novel is both beautiful and honest. He becomes privy to the daily struggles and celebrates the small accomplishments of strangers. In this, he inadvertently becomes connected to them and, in turn, shares their pleasures and pain. Each one of these characters comes to know him, and their mutual stories mirror the vulnerability of human life. Ed encounters people he would never have picked up in his cab, and he sees acts of kindness and hatred that shatter his assumptions about the small world he's occupied for the majority of his life. Yet, his endeavors are not comparable, at least according to society, to Ed's original act of heroism in the bank. Regardless of the impact Ed has had on so many people, he is still considered to be a nobody working a nothing job, going nowhere fast.

In the end, however, Ed is no less a hero because he works as a cabbie and did not go to college. Instead, he is all that we hope our real-life heroes will be: honest, gentle, slightly unsure of himself, but armed with the empathetic insights that are a product of his journey into the worlds of random strangers and friends. Ed Kennedy realizes that, although he did not meet the expectations of his society, his journey brought him back to himself. He reflects on the small, seemingly insignificant, things he has accomplished along the way and embraces their personal significance and purpose. Through this, he ventures to believe that maybe, possibly, "everyone can live beyond what they are capable of" (Zusak 357). His small world is more profound than he imagined.

Similar to Colin, Hassan, Craig, and Ed, our students will also look to the outside world for validation. Often books chart journeys of characters from small towns to larger, where all it takes is one act of astonishing courage, or a display of masculine power, to gain validation. Other novels feature male characters fighting in wars and playing in that one,

make-or-break football, basketball, or baseball game. The message these novels send to young men is the importance of one moment or one victory. A single incident can define a life. A wrong choice, as much as a right, can mean the difference between a happy future and many years of regretful obscurity. A personal accomplishment or a small, interior struggle finally won can be deemed insubstantial if it is not recognized by society; the value drops away if it fails to align with the established norms. Contrarily, Smith and Wilhelm write that the boys in their study liked certain texts because they made them feel like insiders on an unconventional journey, but also challenged them to see their lives differently (155-156). Green, Vizzini, and Zusak invite us on such journeys where there are, in fact, other options for boys. Among the diversity of texts in our classrooms, we can offer those where male characters disprove the notion that only exterior forces determine happiness. When we do this, we remind students of what Ed Kennedy repeats in the end of Zusak's novel: "I'm not the messenger at all/ I'm the message" (357). Indeed, our students, with their whole dream-filled lives ahead of them, truly are the message.

Nevertheless, the current reality of the English classroom often upstages these characters and journeys. Although research shows that there are best practices for adolescent literacy, the demands of high stakes testing often overshadow them. Because of this, for some it might appear frivolous to set up reading workshop classrooms at the secondary level when students need to be learning the standards by practicing reading comprehension, analysis, and fluency. Research, however, tells us that the more students read independently and have access to varied texts, the better they often do on the tests (Atwell 107). Setting up a reading workshop classroom allows teachers to create an environment that nurtures lifelong readers who know how to independently select texts and read for pleasure. In such a classroom, peer and teacher dialogue challenges students to expand their repertoires into more diverse and complicated texts. Reading fluency, comprehension, and analysis all improve when students read more. Likewise, when students have the right to choose their own texts and read independently during class, they are more likely to become personally invested in reading. This is also a best practice for male students

(Smith and Wilhelm 196-198). In order to help students find a sense of place and self in literature, we need classroom environments that nurture independent reading. Equally, we have to embrace the idea that such practices *do* teach the standards. When we allow research to inform our practices, we find that we are doing what is in the best interests of all our students.

Likewise, a well-tuned reading workshop is never void of critical talk about books. Our classrooms are full of diverse readers and the books that we love are often not the same ones they choose; yet, students often look to us for guidance in their choices. Our relationships with them as fellow readers must respect and acknowledge their experiences as private and public human beings. Such understandings lead us, as teachers, into reading territories that we might not otherwise explore. They call us to reflect on our understanding of the adolescents in our classrooms and the ways literature can reinforce or reject the gender roles or status quo around them. Thus, our libraries and suggestion lists constantly evolve to reflect new students and new literature. In such environments, conversations about literature are equally diverse and, hopefully, offer critical opportunities for texts to inform students' lives, whether they read to find out that they aren't alone or to escape into solitude where anything is possible.

Our workshop dialogues might lead us to suggest texts that mind the cover story, but are also rich with characters that ultimately reject it. Through characters like Colin, Hassan, Craig, and Ed, we realize the implications of our own, individual, cover stories. Such novels reflect societies where the stakes are high for adolescent boys to demonstrate success to the outside world and each story poignantly articulates these experiences through a male main character. For teachers, these male characters are reflections of the countless boys who have entered and exited our

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classrooms. These boys, for the most part, do their work, have friends, love their families, but are still, for whatever reason, unsettled. Each book provides us with a glimpse of what it means to be unsettled for some teenaged boys and, ultimately, the profundity of finally learning to settle oneself. They remind us that, no matter how many messages we send students about controlling their destinies through good grades, test scores, and social accomplishments, life is still very funny and unpredictable. Workshop experiences provide our students with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth, but such stories give our male students the unassuming possibility that has been kept hidden from them for too long: “Keep living [. . .]. . . . It’s only the pages that stop here” (Zusak 354).

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