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The All Guys Book Club: Where Boys Take the Risk to Read

There is a book entitled *Reading With Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* (Rooney, 2005). So, Oprah changed an entire *nation*? Let's see her change one single *middle school boy*. Then I'll be impressed.

I have been conducting book clubs for adolescent boys for five years, and I've been trying to channel the "Oprah Effect" the entire time. But it's just not a level playing field. Oprah gets free books, she has a chef to whip up toothsome snacks, the author often drops by, and most of Oprah's readers are female. I have to figure out how to pay for snacks and books, and my book club members consider digestive sounds catalysts for competition.

All Guy Book Clubs met a total of 77 times and read 24 books.

All About the Book

Six years ago, I embarked on a research journey to learn the reasons why many boys lose interest in reading. I have talked with alliterate adolescent boys—boys who *can* read, but *choose not to*. They have a history of performing poorly in language arts, though they have no identified handicapping conditions. They reported very strong preferences about the types of literature they enjoy, and many, like Blake, seem to be able to "only get into like a few types of books." The theme that emerged most frequently was a preference for books

Sandra: Tell me more about *Sounder*.

Blake: I just can't stand that book 'cause nothing would ever happen. A book that I read has to have some action in it. A person could be walking down the street for like two chapters in that book, and nothing ever happened; they would just walk down the street. Kid going to get his mom and eat a cake for like two chapters. Then he sees a whole bunch of jail people. That just don't have no *action* in it. Doesn't make you want to read it. Makes you want to look for other things to do.

Sandra: How about *Bridge to Terabithia*?

Blake: I don't know why I didn't like that book; it just had no action in it. Like the main action was when the girl died, and that was at the end of it. There was no *action* to back it up or anything.

Sandra: How about *Out of the Dust*? How did you feel about that?

Blake: I didn't like that book. It was so old times and it was in a girl's point of view. The most *action* was when she had to play the piano and she stubbed her fingers.

Sandra: Tell me about *The Outsiders*.

Blake: I don't know why, I just loved that book. It is real *action*-filled.

Another student, Kevin, was enthusiastic about one novel his class read.

Sandra: What did you think of *My Brother Sam Is Dead*?

Ben: I liked it. Like if one class would read a chapter ahead and it had the part where the guy gets his head chopped off . . . The kids that read that would tell the people that hadn't read that.

Sandra: Mm, hmmm. What made you like that book, do you think?

Ben: The *action* in it.

"The single most important decision a book club leader makes is the book selection."

My first attempts at stirring the readers within my male students were not Oprah caliber. I was not deterred. I experimented with the meeting format and book selections. Some meetings, only one boy came. Sometimes the boys hated my book choices, and they weren't shy about letting me know it. Now, though, over one-third of our 300 middle school boys participate in our book clubs. In the 2005/06 school year, the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade

that had "action" and "adventure." I use quotation marks because, over and over again, boys used these exact words in focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and written surveys. On a written survey of eleven boys, six out of the eleven boys used the word "action" as their first response to the question, "What types of books are your favorites?" In interviews, "action" sometimes seemed the only criterion on which they judged books. As one boy said, "There is only one thing I don't like about reading . . . the very boring books. The sit down books." In the following conversation, I asked Blake about a variety of books I knew he had read in middle school. Apparently, he deems many of the books teachers select as the "sit down" variety.



By Sandra Lingo

Guys Book Club Selections

6th Grade

- Gantos, Jack. (1998). *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Gantos, Jack. (2000). *Joey Pigza Loses Control*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Goodall, Jane. (2001). *The Chimpanzees I Love*. Scholastic Press.
- Haddix, Margaret Peterson. (1998). *Among the Hidden*. Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing.
- Hiaasen, Carl. (2005). *Flush*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hilker, Cathryn Hosea. (1992). *A Cheetah Named Angel*. Franklin Watts.
- Horowitz, Anthony. (2001). *Stormbreaker*. Philomel Books.
- Korman, Gordon. (2001). Island (series): *Shipwreck; Survival; Escape*. Scholastic.
- Korman, Gordon. (2003). Dive (series): *The Discovery; The Deep; The Danger*. Scholastic.
- Lewis, C. S. (1950). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. HarperCollins.
- Matthews, Tom. (1998). *Light Shining Through the Mist: A Photobiography of Dian Fossey*. National Geographic Children's Books.
- Park, Barbara. (2000). *The Graduation of Jake Moon*. Atheneum.
- Paulsen, Gary. (1987). *Hatchet*. Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Paulsen, Gary. (2001). *Guts: The True Story Behind Hatchet and the Brian Books*. Thorndike Press.
- Philbrick, Rodman. (2004). *The Young Man and the Sea*. Blue Sky Press.
- Riordan, Rick. (2005). *The Lightning Thief*. Miramax Books/Hyperion Books for Children.
- Spinelli, Jerry. (1996). *Crash*. Alfred A. Knopf.

7th Grade

- Bloor, Edward. (1997). *Tangerine*. Harcourt Brace.
- Hiaasen, Carl. (2002). *Hoot*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Hobbs, Will. (1996). *Far North*. HarperCollins.
- Korman, Gordon. (2002). Everest (series): *The Contest; The Climb; The Summit*. Scholastic.
- Korman, Gordon. (2005, 2006). On the Run (series): *Chasing the Falconers; The Fugitive Factor; Now You See Them, Now You Don't; The Stowaway Solution; Public Enemies; Hunting the Hunter*. Scholastic.
- Riordan, Rick. (2006). *The Sea of Monsters*. Miramax Books/Hyperion Books for Children.

8th Grade

- Draper, Sharon. (1994). *Tears of a Tiger*. Atheneum.
- Draper, Sharon. (2003). *The Battle of Jericho*. Atheneum.
- Farmer, Nancy. (2002). *The House of the Scorpion*. Atheneum.
- Hobbs, Will. (1996). *Far North*. HarperCollins.
- Horowitz, Anthony. (2001). *Stormbreaker*. Philomel Books.
- Jacques, Brian. (1987). *Redwall*. Philomel Books.
- Mikaelsen, Ben. (2001). *Touching Spirit Bear*. HarperCollins.
- Myers, Walter Dean. (1999). *Monster*. Amistad.
- Patterson, James. (2005). *Maximum Ride: The Angel Experiment*. Little, Brown.

"Sometimes the boys hated my book choices, and they weren't shy about letting me know it."

The boys I interviewed also revealed a strong preference for books with male protagonists.

Sandra: Why didn't you like *Out of the Dust*?

Norm: 'Cause it was about a girl, and I couldn't relate.

Sandra: So, is it really important for you to have a boy main character?

Norm: Yeah.

Sandra: Why is that?

Norm: Just 'cause I can relate and they do more exciting things than girls, I guess.

Norm says he liked Harry Potter books.

Sandra: Is the main character a boy or girl?

Norm: Boy.

Sandra: Does that matter to you, or do you think you would like it just as well if it were a girl?

Norm: No. Because . . . I don't think a girl would do as many things as he does.

Blake and Maxwell agree with Norm.

Blake: I don't know why, but for some reason, whenever someone associates stuff about girls, there doesn't seem to be any *action* in the book, and I don't know why that is, but it seems like it's going to be about purses and stuff like that.

Sandra: What didn't you like about the book?

Maxwell: It was kind of girlie. Because it was all about a girl.

Sandra: So, you don't like books about girls? You think they are kind of girlie?

Maxwell: Yes. They don't have any sports in them or anything.

As a person, like many of you, who enjoys reading nearly everything, it's easy to pathologize boys who have reading preferences so different than mine. I admit that the following exchange with Jimmy Cap shocked me a bit.

Sandra: What kind of things would be in books you typically like?

Jimmy Cap: Outdoors. Fighting. Killing. Not necessarily killing, but has violence. Misbehaving. Somebody has to be misbehaving.

Sandra: Why do you think you like all those things?

Jimmy Cap: Probably because they're kind of like me.

The single most important decision a book club leader makes is the book selection. Chips and soda will get them to come the first time, but if the boys discover you are going to pick the usual school-sanctioned books, they won't come back. If you are a female, as most librarians and language arts teachers are, realize that when you read, you are looking through a different lens than boys, especially boys who are turned off to reading. Many boys' reading preferences reflect the socially constructed notions of masculinity.

Young and Brozo (2001) emphasize the importance of helping boys find entry points into active literacy. Entry points are materials that grab boys and teach them the joy of reading. Brozo (2002) argues that engaged readers will develop their reading skills and eventually expand their areas of interest. To critics who worry that allowing boys to read more of what they like will reinforce gender stereotypes, he counters that "concerns for listless and struggling male readers must take precedence for teacher and parents alike" (p. 19).

Reading: It's a Girl Thing

For many adolescent boys, their developing masculine identities seem to conflict with school-based literacy. There seems to be an "abrasive rub between literacy and masculinity" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998, p. 220). The following passages reveal how dominant notions of masculinity make it risky for boys to posture themselves as readers.

Sandra: What would you think of a guy



who was carrying around a bunch of books, like novels?

Phillip: Like I'd kind of think he's some person that, no offense, but like doesn't really like wanna play sports, just focuses mainly on reading, and like he wants to fit in but don't know how . . .

Sandra: What do you think other people would think?

Phillip: Some nerdy guy that's walking around with a bunch of books.

Sandra: If you saw girls carrying around a lot of books, would you feel the same way?

Phillip: No.

Sandra: Why not?

Phillip: I think that girls just like reading more.

Sandra: If it were a boy, would it change your opinion of him?

Phillip: Like it wouldn't . . . if he was my friend, it still wouldn't change it, but if I didn't like him, say we didn't like each other, I might use it as an insult.

Jimmy Cap sees reading as a uniquely feminine practice.

Jimmy: I think girls like to read more because boys are more outdoorsy and boys would rather watch a movie than go and read. I think girls kinda like to stay in the house and do make-up and read. Boys don't like it as much. Girls are more into not breaking their nails and not getting dirty.

It's not surprising that boys associate literacy practices with females. For the most part, who are their first reading teachers? Mothers and female primary teachers. As they move onto middle and high school, their language arts teachers are still primarily female. Who are their librarians? Mostly women. Do they have male role models who read; in fact, do they have any positive male role models that aren't athletes? You can buy posters that show burly football players posed with their favorite books, but when was the last time our students saw real live men in their homes read?

Book club leaders have to make painstaking efforts to create meeting

The Nuts and Bolts of Book Clubs: Step-By-Step Directions

1. Raise funds

- Grants
- Donations: cups from fast food restaurants; gift certificates from grocery stores; gift certificates from book stores; snacks from parents; cash from parents and community
- Membership dues
- Fundraisers

2. Select a book

- Obtain and prepare copies
- Think action! Look for novels that are action-packed with male protagonists. Ask guys for suggestions.
- Consider nonfiction books that can often dovetail nicely with field trips. For example, read animal books and go to the zoo. Read books about baseball parks, and take a tour of one. Read a book about the Titanic, then go see an Omnimax movie about it.
- Borrow books from the public library on a collection card, or purchase from a local or online vendor. Ask other librarians in your system and classroom teachers if they have copies.
- When you know who is attending, use removable labels (Avery 6460) to label the books with their names. You may be able to scan the public library's barcode and make it a temporary item in your automated system. If not, print temporary barcodes on the removable labels and place them on the inside of back cover where the ink won't wear off.
- Order the audiobook if available—ebay is often a good source if you can't get it from the library.
- Collect related resources—picture books, news articles, authors' Web sites, speakers.

3. Promote

- Create a signup sheet and ask teachers to pass it out in class or distribute it in your library classes. The signup sheet should have a schedule of meetings and reading expectations. Typically, we meet four times for each book over a period of three weeks. If possible, schedule a few meetings during lunch. Don't forget to have a line on the sign up sheet where boys can list names of male friends and family members they'd like to invite.
- Ask teachers if they're willing to give students extra credit for participation. This is what draws the more reluctant readers, just the students you most want to attract.
- Have older students go to classrooms to "sell" the book, or do it yourself.

- Ask your principal to give professional development credit to teachers who participate. Ask the coolest, youngest male teachers to join. If you can enlist the gym teacher, your book club will be a "slam dunk."
- Make announcements over the P.A.
- Videotape a commercial and play it during lunch in the cafeteria or broadcast it on Channel One equipment.
- Post pictures of students participating in book clubs.
- Post announcements on your Web site.
- Personally invite students. Don't just look for your "readers;" look also for reluctant readers—quiet students who do not participate in other school activities, as well as school leaders who will give your book club status.
- Make book clubs so attractive and beneficial that a boy would feel like a "loser" not joining. Remember that some boys are risking peer acceptance by reading.

4. Reinforce

- Remind students over the intercom the day before and the day of a meeting. Say, "Be sure to sign up now so I know how much pizza to order (or cookies to bake or soda to buy)."
- Call parents to remind them about the All Guys Book Club—and invite them to attend. If you have a phone system that will call students and record messages, schedule a call to all members the night before each meeting.
- Ask teachers to remind the students about the meetings. Catch students in the hall and say, "I can't wait to start the book with you in book club."
- E-mail or mail the book club meeting schedule to the parents. Post the schedule on your Web site.
- Place an easel in an area that gets a lot of traffic. List all book clubs meetings for the week and the pages the students should read.
- The day of the meeting, announce that you have "just two more books left"—even if you have 20—and tell them it's not too late to sign up.
- The more reminders the better. Never underestimate how empty a pubescent boy's head can be once the bell rings at the end of the day!

5. Launch

- Serve refreshments—lots of them.

- Review the rules in the beginning of every meeting:
 1. Respect the books. Bring them to every meeting and return them at the last meeting.
 2. See how many guys are in line behind you, and make sure you leave some food for them. This is not your last meal!
 3. Read the book. The book club is not about the snacks . . . well, it's a little about the snacks. The book club is mostly about the book.
 4. Make sure you attend the meetings. Books and food have been purchased for you.
 5. Use good manners. No digestive sounds.
- Print a bookmark on cardstock on which the dates and times of meetings and the reading assignments are listed.
- At the first meeting, read a chapter or so aloud, or listen to the audiobook. Then have the boys read another chapter silently. You want them to get a good start on the book before they leave the first meeting. They should leave feeling confident that they are able to read the book.
- Think of ways to allow boys to be active at meetings. Let them surf the Internet for information about the author. Let them act out their favorite part of a book. Create an online discussion group about the book. Use magazines to create a collage about the book that will be displayed on the book club bulletin board.
- Give them Post-it™ notes to mark interesting, funny, or confusing parts for discussion at the next meeting. Invite students to be facilitators of small groups for the next meeting if you have over 15 participants.

6. Sustain

- Remind students of subsequent meetings via written notices, announcements, and phone calls.
- Vary the snacks and activities. Give them voice and choice in selecting books and refreshments.
- Remind them they must attend the meetings and read the books to get extra credit.
- Make your first reading assignment relatively short so they don't get discouraged. This is especially important for your reluctant and struggling readers.
- Offer to allow students to come in before school, after school, and at lunch to listen to the audiobook—essential if special education students or struggling readers participate.
- Be flexible. Kids are busy, and you have to make allowances for their other commitments.

- Your meetings shouldn't seem like school. Accept that guys will need to blow off a little steam after school. Realize boys may be taking a risk to admit they like to read. They may be embarrassed to share and appear interested.
- Break the question/response trap. Try to let the students generate a real conversation. The less you talk, the more natural the discussion will be. Be a fellow reader, not the teacher.
- Accept that some boys won't read and will "fake it." Feel happy that they are willing to be associated with a literate group and that they are witnessing literary conversation.

7. Culminate and Germinate

- Ask students if you should use this book again next year.
- At the last meeting, distribute the signup sheet for the next book club. Book talk the book.
- Make the last meeting special. We have a pizza lunch. I tell students, "Have integrity; if you haven't read the book, don't come." Students tend to be very honest about this.
- Post pictures of students participating in book clubs.
- Congratulate the students for completion during the morning announcements.
- Contact the press.

8. Enculturate

- Make book clubs an important part of the school culture. Have book club T-shirts and fundraisers. Give book club members special jobs, like working at the book fair, helping select books for the school library collection, leading book clubs for younger students, and doing book talks.
- Give special privileges to book club members: first dibs on field trips to movies, to meet authors, to tour the library; help with book fairs; prepare snacks.
- Feature book clubs in your yearbook.
- Put book clubs on your school calendar.
- Designate a big bulletin board near the office as the "Book Club Bulletin Board."
- Make a large sign to post outside the library, or wherever your meetings are conducted, that says, "Book Club in session."
- Establish an identity and stake out book club territory. Make labels for books that say, "Property of the _____ School Book Club." Label the cabinet where you keep snacks and paper goods, "Book Club Supplies" and the shelves for book club books, "Book Club Library." Maintain a book club scrapbook.

structures that are comfortable for boys who are learning to be men. The bonuses of the book clubs—the pizza, the extra credit, the socializing—must be so enticing that boys see joining as a logical decision.

Saving Face

Many of the boys I interviewed view reading as a competitive sport, with speed being the principal measurement of prowess.

Blake: I really don't like class books, because then when you have people that read a lot, it makes you feel kind of dumb when you're only on page 25 and they're like done with the book. Like, I don't feel dumb, I just feel like I am slow, like everyone in class is way ahead of me in the book and then I have a whole lot of catching up to do.

Boys won't return to book club if they feel they are being compared to one another, or if there are hard questions they'll be singled out to answer. As educators, we have this nagging urge to test students to see if they have *really* read the book, but that kind of inquisition will defeat struggling readers who have taken the risk to participate in a book club.

Research-Based Practice in the All-Guys Book Clubs

What follows are activities I've designed and book selections I chose based on what the research has taught me about boys who've lost enthusiasm for recreational reading. The All Guys Book Club will easily attract the book worms, but if, like Oprah, I endeavor to make a change—if only in my own school—I will need to listen to what boys say about books, readers, and fun.

Possible Book Club Meeting Activities

► Visit the author's Web site.

- How are the author's life experiences reflected in his/her writing?
- What advice does the author have for you?
- What would you ask the author if you met him/her?



“The theme that emerged most frequently was a preference for books that had ‘action’ and ‘adventure.’”

- ▶ Write to the author.
- ▶ Rate the book, 1-10.
- ▶ Perform Reader’s Theater.
- ▶ Listen to the audiobook.
- ▶ Read news articles on related subjects. (*People* magazine is often a good source.)
- ▶ Using *People* magazine, find pictures of actresses and actors to play the characters in the book.

- ▶ Go on a related field trip:
 - The zoo after reading *Gorillas in the Mist*.
 - A tour of the courthouse and jail after reading *Monster*.
 - See the movie adaptation after reading *Stormbreaker*.

- ▶ Watch a related video:
 - *Twelve Angry Men* after reading *Monster*.
 - *Everest: The Death Zone* (NOVA) while reading the *Everest* series.
 - *Jane Goodall: Reason for Hope, a Spiritual Journey* while reading *The Chimpanzees I Love*.
- ▶ Create a book club blog and have an online discussion.
- ▶ Read reviews on barnesandnoble.com and amazon.com.
- ▶ Read a related picture book.
- ▶ Share photographs of the setting of the book.
- ▶ Read the first chapter of the sequel.
- ▶ Prepare or serve food mentioned in the book. ■

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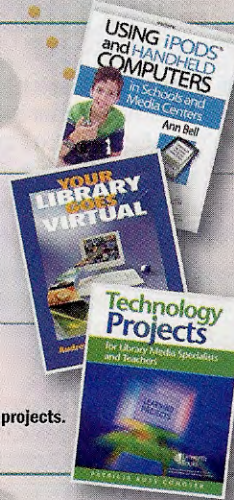
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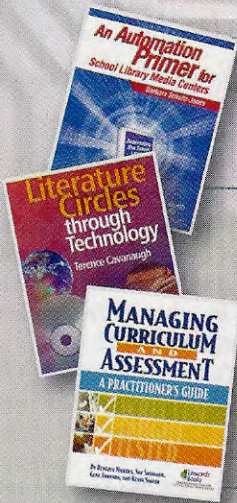
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