



## Books for boys: manipulating genre in contemporary Australian young adult fiction

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the play's, both films attested that the bonds between husband and wife were stronger than the closeness between men.

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**Books for boys: manipulating genre in contemporary Australian young adult fiction**, by Troy Potter, Trier, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2018, vii + 195 pp., €29.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-868-21760-5

For the last 30 years, we have been warned that there is a crisis with boys' reading skills. This is usually located within a larger panic about the perceived decline in general academic skills amongst boys. This again often mutates into conservative jeremiads against the "war on boys", where natural masculinity is being drained away by an ill-defined but nevertheless pervasive conspiracy against clear gender roles. The way to get boys reading again, so these observers argue, is to reintroduce them to "manly" tomes such as Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, Twain's *Huck Finn* and Hinton's *The Outsiders*. As Troy Potter's *Books for Boys* notes, even governmental agencies are forced into proposing reading matter which it is presumed will interest typical boys—action, mystery, fantasy and detective fiction are mentioned (3). Dealing with the perceived crisis inevitably becomes a policing of gender roles and these genres develop a reciprocal relationship with the reader, both responding to and producing masculinity norms. Problems emerge, however, when these books promote masculine ideals that are white, able-bodied, heterosexual and working class.

Australian productivity in the fields of children's and young adult literature is so prodigious that the life cycle of novels can be completed before they are ever reviewed, let alone subject to a thorough analysis. *Books for Boys* engages in a deeply insightful and detailed set of readings of novels which, though successful in terms of receiving literary prizes, have not always been subject to a literary critical gaze. Troy Potter has offered a set of interpretations that fully engage with the complexity of the material. He argues that many YA novels directed towards male readers seem to re-establish normative gender roles with physically strong, heterosexual protagonists overcoming obstacles. But his voice is not that of the censorious lecturer offering disapproval. Instead, Potter acknowledges that many of the books show real character changes, including the development of empathy, respect for others and co-operation, even while the books are operating within the framework of essentialising masculine behaviours.

Potter notes the difficulties of writing any novel critical of the Anzac mythology, particularly given the Howard government's investment in the militarisation of history teaching and the publishing industry's sensitivities to these political realities (56–7). Nevertheless, recent novels such as Robert Newton's *When We Were Two* can at least engage with more modern perspectives on soldiers including sentimentalising them as tragic heroes, broken by their experience. The soldier protagonist of David Metzenthén's *Boys of Blood and Bone* is also sentimentalised, achieving a transcendentalising war time death, but his experience of was is refracted through modern understandings of trauma. These novels rework earlier conceptions of stoic masculinity, instead casting the boy soldiers as victims, yet still work to

perpetuate Anzac mythologies. The role of women in some of these novels is problematic—either relegated to marginal figures, inserted into the angle/whore dichotomy or simply being vehicle for the propagation of the male line (63).

Subsequent chapters in *Books for Boys* include reflections on crises of development in fictions featuring young males. For me, this was an introduction to the word *Entwicklungsroman*, which is a novel of development, in contrast to the rather more familiar *Bildungsroman*, the novel which features the transition to adulthood. Self-recognition, including an ability to deal with complex problems in friendship and sexuality, characterise these novels—J. C. Burke's *The Story of Tom Brennan*, David Metzenthén's *Jarvis 24*, Marcus Zuzak's *The Messenger* and Philip Gwynne's *Swerve*. Potter observes that these novels, which date from the first decade of the 21st century, feature young heterosexual male characters who readily accept gay friends and relatives, although they feel the need to reinscribe their own sexual identity as a reaction. Heteronormativity remains invisible as does class in the novels. Class in Australia is often an unstated but forceful binary of the masculine, working class default Australian identity contrasted with the effeminate upper class who somehow remain foreign to Australian culture. Potter's analysis of class, though brief, has an excellent exegesis of Zuzak's *The Messenger*, which shows how when class is made explicit it can work to construct the current myth of the disadvantaged, victimised white male.

One of the most popular genres in young adult writing is post-disaster fiction. Clair Zorn's *The Sky so Heavy*, Kirsty Murray's *Vulture's Gate* and Tony Davis's *The Big Dry* are examples Potter analyses, showing how these books can reinscribe the traditional male values of perseverance and violence as found in colonial novels of adventure, but also how they may test individualist ideologies by valuing the collective good. These novels also test the boundaries of what it means to be human, a tension that is further examined in the chapter on the body and science fiction. Here Potter gives the reader a useful summary of the development of post-humanism in YA science fiction and the tension that exists between the implication of post-humanism and often very traditional depiction of the strong, heroic male body in the genre. However, that body can also be reworked in the fiction as it explores gender switches and fluidity of the body in machine/body mergers.

Potter's book is directed towards academics with an interest in young adult fiction but a wider audience including teachers and librarians would profit from a set of analyses that admit that masculinity in modern Australian YA fiction encompasses much variety but always feel the gravitational pull of the traditional working class and white paradigm. Potter's set of sensitive and intelligent readings pay tribute to the complex dynamics of "books for boys" that, by definition, cannot escape their essentialist paradigm.

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