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# Developing Children's Interest in Reading

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## ABSTRACT

Librarians have always discussed methods of developing children's interest in reading, but they have focused more on the books being read than on the act of reading. Although many touted the need to "establish the reading habit," a closer reading of the literature reveals that this referred specifically to reading "good books," those which socialized children into culturally acceptable sex roles. As early as 1876, articles warned of the dangers of sensational fiction for both girls and boys. By the 1940s, comic books had replaced sensational fiction as a potential "corrupting influence." Only in the late 1950s did public librarians begin to address the new problem of a reluctance to read at all among children in general and among boys in particular. This paper will examine the effect of gender role expectations on librarians' efforts to promote reading to children in the twentieth century. In particular it will explore the questions of whether these strategies continue to be designed to promote reading literature that reinforces society's gender role expectations and of whether they are designed to promote reading to both boys and girls equally, or whether one group is privileged at the expense of the other.

## INTRODUCTION

Any exploration into issues of libraries and children must begin by defining what is meant by "child." The term has had different meanings during different periods, and is almost never defined in contemporary writings. The primary focus of this paper is what are termed "older children," from nine to fourteen years, because research has demonstrated that the gender-based differences in reading do not appear until about

nine years old and fourteen is the generally agreed age at which "children" become "young adults." Another difficulty in doing research in this area is the paucity of published data on the methods used to promote reading, the characteristics of the children reached, the number and type of books read, and the effect on reading ability and habits. Most published information on reading promotion is vague and general. Programs are merely reported as "a success," "a lot" of children participate, and they read "many" books, with no definition of those terms. Even when numbers of children are given, they are not expressed in terms of gender or other characteristics.

### THE 1880S-1920S: THE DANGERS OF SENSATIONAL FICTION

The question of how to develop children's interest in reading and how to establish the "reading habit" is nearly as old as public librarianship itself. A glance in the *Bibliography of Library Economy* reveals at least 250 articles on the topic published between 1876 and 1920, and a further search of *Library Literature* and its successors suggests that while the topic may have been of lesser or greater interest depending on the era, some measure of attention was always given to it by librarians and library supporters, and even such noted librarians as Samuel S. Green (1879), John Cotton Dana (1898, 1901) and S. R. Ranganathan (1936) addressed the issue in their day.

A closer look demonstrates that the concern was not so much to interest children in reading as to interest children in reading the books that parents, teachers, and librarians wanted them to read, books that would provide class- and gender-appropriate role models and instill socially acceptable values in both boys and girls. The early period from the 1880s through the 1920s, as the country struggled with the problems of rapid urban growth, industrialization, and accompanying juvenile crime (Cunningham, 1995, pp. 134-159), is dominated by articles that deplore the influence of so-called "sensational" fiction and propose methods for developing boys' and girls' interest in "good literature" (Chamberlain, 1879, p. 365). Public librarians and library leaders assigned blame for "many a girl's . . . foolish marriage" and "many a boy's rash venture in cattle ranches or uneasiness in the harness of slight but regular salary" to "books that fed early feeble indications of a tendency to future evil" (Wells, 1879, p. 327). They warned that "the case of the dime-novel-reading boy is not nearly so hopeless as that of the yellow-novel-reading girl or young woman" (Coe, 1895, p. 118), who was destined for a life of prostitution. Such works were blamed for instilling in boys the idea that "a quiet life of honest labor is contemptible, and that a career of adventure is the only thing worthwhile" (Brett, 1885, p. 128), and for providing the "inspiration to the unlawful deed which brought the little fellows into the clutches of the police, or into danger and trouble" ("Pawtucket Free Public Library," 1885, p. 105). Such works also threatened the accepted structure of the family and

society by leading girls to either accept "male ideals, and sometimes even [wish] that they had been born boys" or to "make excessive and impossible demands upon [life]" (Hall, 1905, p. 391), rather than embracing their traditional roles as docile, submissive wives and mothers. Readers of the *Library Journal* were advised that "there is no greater evil abroad in the land than the flood of pernicious literature in the hands of boys and girls" (Stimson, 1884, p. 143), and purchasers of dime- and yellow-novels were characterized as "wallowing in the mire of bookstands" which sold the material (Coe, 1895, p. 118). Such books were not the only danger. By the mid-1920s, librarians were deploring "the sensational vulgar moving picture . . . [as] one of the biggest factors in destroying children's taste" (Wisdom, 1924, p. 873).

Librarians were agreed that the function of "good novels and stories for the young" was to "aid materially in the work of educating children and men" (Green, 1879, p. 345) particularly in the norms of society and only permitted sensational novels in the library in order to "keep men and women and boys from worse reading" (p. 348) and girls from becoming "prey to much worse pursuits" (p. 349). It was hoped that these books would give "young persons a taste for reading" (p. 348), after which they could be lead "away from an immoderate use of the best stories even, to books of other kinds" (p. 352), specifically history, literature, and the biographies of great men, that would provide socially approved role models and indoctrination into cultural norms and values.

In addition to acquiring acceptable books for boys and girls for the library collection, suggested methods for instilling a "taste for reading" such literature were: book clubs and leagues, story hours for children of all ages, book talks, recreational clubs, and summer or vacation reading programs (Locke, 1992). A common format for summer reading clubs was to distribute a list of approved books to elementary school students at the end of the school year and award points for books read and reported on during the summer vacation. In some communities, librarians were already performing outreach by visiting classes before school ended. While a few permitted children to select their own books, the majority provided lists of approved books so that the children "will not have so much time for the mediocre series books which parents and relatives give them or which they buy at the five and ten cent store" (Buest, 1924, p. 245). Librarians also began celebrating Book Week, established by a coalition of children's book publishers in 1919 "to focus attention on the need for quality children's books and the importance of childhood literacy" (Children's Book Council, 2005).

Some programs were designed specifically to promote reading to boys and young men as antidotes to "the baneful influences of street loafing and the saloon" (Driggs, 1909, p. 510), which led to juvenile delinquency and adult crime. The Library Gymnasium Movement proposed building

joint library-gymnasium complexes, which would subtly encourage fitness-minded young men to sample the good books available in the library (Driggs, 1907). One state library organizer advocated permitting boys to work as volunteers processing materials, cleaning books, and cutting pages in order to attract them to the library, then taking advantage of the opportunity for book talks and story hours ("Miss Downey Talks," 1902).

Fear of the "feminization" of librarianship was also expressed during this period. Long a trend, many felt it was being escalated by the increase in public library work with children performed almost exclusively by women who were "indicated by nature as the custodian of the young" (Bostwick, 1955, p. 221) and girls, but not of the adolescent male. The complaint that "in some libraries of considerable size there are no men at all in places of authority" (Bostwick, 1955, p. 222) and the recommendation to hire more male librarians to supervise the female children's librarians suggests that the fear was not only that women were incapable of providing the authoritative role model deemed necessary to appropriately socialize young men, but that they were achieving too much public power as well.

### THE 1930S: SOCIAL SCIENCE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

During the Depression years, a time of rising unemployment that led to increasing social instability and the fear of class violence, the focus shifted from encouraging children to read to encouraging specifically boys to read. For the years 1933-39, *Library Literature* includes a subject heading "Boys' Books," which indexes mainly lists of books believed to appeal to boys, but not "Girls' Books," making girls and their needs and interests not only secondary but invisible. Given the gender-bias of the English language at the time, even those articles that referred to "children" and "child" used the singular pronouns "he" and "him" and usually offered the example of "little Johnny."

The purpose of promoting reading was explicitly the socialization and acculturation of boys into accepted societal masculine roles. One children's librarian who found boys "such formidable creatures in their buckled boots and fleece lined leather jackets" advocated recommending a wider range of books to boys rather than "allowing the girls to monopolize" (Shepard, 1934, p. 817) both traditional girls' books and boys' books "because the things a boy reads help to determine the man he will become" (p. 819). However, she stopped short of "giving *Hitty* to eighth-grade boys" and assured readers that her goal in recommending poetry was not to "make sissies of them," but to develop their moral and aesthetic sense (p. 819). Her comments also demonstrate that librarians had already segregated books by gender, mentally if not physically, and were aware that, while girls read books of all kinds, boys are reluctant to read anything that might be deemed a "girls' book."

Another lauded librarians for "reducing the demand for tales of meteoric rise from newsboy to Wall Street magnate" and increasing the "liking for books that emphasize the joy of achievement due to hard work and courage rather than luck" (Carter, 1935, p. 418), and advised "we must keep apace with the boys of today, and the book selection should be up to date" (p. 419). This same librarian wondered why society continued to "plan for the girls to be mid-Victorian, and consider them hoydens beyond reclaiming, when instead of shrieking and running . . . they are interested in snakes and can light a fire with two matches?" (p. 418). But there is no evidence that she developed this idea further.

In the search for appropriate role models for boys in 1929, Denver librarian Katherine Watson wrote to "40 heroic men" asking what books they had enjoyed as boys, "with the idea of inspiring young people to read more worthwhile books" (Morris, 1998, p. 29). In her letter, she referred to children as "natural hero worshippers," who would naturally wish to emulate their heroes' behavior. The letters of reply, along with copies of the books, were displayed in the children's department for National Children's Book Week. Due to the success of the program, the next year she wrote to one hundred prominent women with the idea of providing gender appropriate role models to girls as well, and included those letters and books in that year's Book Week program. Eventually, Mrs. Watson, who continued to correspond with prominent people regarding their reading preferences, created a weekly radio program, "Once Upon a time," which was broadcast from the Denver Public Library as a service to rural children.

Educators and librarians alike blamed "progressive education" (Coxe, 1932, p. 9) for a decline in reading ability, as well as the "lack of any manners" from "some rather disagreeable individualists" (Davidson, 1930, p. 314), while seeing in students' increased freedom of choice an opportunity to direct the child's choice of reading material. Under the growing influence of psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the emotional life of children, articles in the library literature emphasized that "the librarian's task consists almost solely in getting them to want to read the best books" rather than providing access only to books on school-assigned and approved lists (Davidson, 1930, p. 313; McPherson, 1935). Writers advocated that librarians become friends with the children, and then allow them to make their own selections from a well-developed collection including in particular science, technology, and biographies of great men (Carter, 1935, p. 421; Davidson, 1930, p. 315).

Scientific research on education and librarianship began to be conducted and reported during this period, and the reading interests of children were not exempted from investigation. Studies found that children of all ages preferred prose to poetry, and fiction to nonfiction, with girls reading more fiction than boys and boys reading more history and biography

than girls. Boys preferred adventure fiction while girls "enjoy stories about themselves" and novels of manners and daily life (Cleary, 1939, p. 120; Coxe, 1932, p. 11). The characteristics of preferred fiction strongly reflect the socially approved gender roles of the day, with boys preferring books about physical ability, self-control, independence, heroism, loyalty, adventure, "being honest, straightforward, open, and trustworthy" and winning admiration (Coxe, 1932, p. 12). Girls, "the weaker sex," were interested in books that emphasized compassion, fashion, social position, "possessing a clean mind," success in the home, social approval, "having things happen" rather than making things happen, becoming a stage or screen star, and moving to the city (Coxe, 1932, p. 12), presumably where things would happen.

Other factors found to influence reading preference were age, with preferences changing over time, intelligence, and writing style. The effect of the gender of the protagonist was not investigated. All children preferred stories with dramatic action, adventure, heroism, and interesting characters (Cleary, 1939, p. 123; Coxe, 1932, p. 13). While all children read magazines and newspapers, boys spent more time reading magazines and newspapers than girls. Their preference for science and adventure magazines was considered "much more wholesome" than girls' interest in entertainment, celebrity and general interest magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post* (Cleary, 1939, p. 124; Coxe, 1932, pp. 12-13). Recommendations for stimulating reading interest included provisions for browsing, advertising, free reading, reading clubs, displays, and story hours (Coxe, 1932, p. 14).

A suggested year-round plan of events and activities included Washington and Lincoln biographies during February, nature story hours with boys' birdhouse-building contests, summer activities featuring stories of boats and boating for which boys exhibited their model boats, model airplane contests for the boys, football-themed activities in the fall, and Bible stories around a Christmas tree in December. Children's Book Week featured dolls dressed as book characters from children's classics, with the tomboy Jo from *Little Women* voted the favorite. No information is given on the gender of the voters, but it is clear that those who voted preferred independent, active, intelligent female characters. Suggested themes for book lists were adventure stories, sea stories, dog and horse stories, and aviation, all stereotypically male interests (Power, 1934). Summer reading programs and Book Week themes included such boy-appealing motifs as a transcontinental air race (one librarian wrote that they had adopted the theme in order to attract more boys and had succeeded; she does not mention the effect on girls' participation (Haagensen, 1937), parachute jumpers, ships (the children progressed from sailor to Captain to Admiral), and a golf tournament. Other themes were more gender-neutral, such as a balloon race, world tour, treasure hunt, hobbies, and the old standards of the clock and thermometer ("A Book Week miscellany,"

1934; "Exhibits and contests," 1936; Fraites, 1934). A particularly timely program, the VRA (Vacation Reading Act) was modeled on the NRA (National Recovery Administration) (Kitchell, 1935).

### THE 1940S-50S: THE DANGERS OF COMIC BOOKS

The 1940s saw both a rise in juvenile delinquency, particularly among children eight to fourteen and among teenage girls (Freidel, 1960, p. 404), and a resurgence in articles about the dangers for both boys and girls of reading fiction, this time comic books. Again, librarians and others proclaimed that this type of reading was not only inferior to reading "good books" but was a corrupting and degrading influence. So many articles were published about this topic that, in 1943, *Library Literature* added "Comic Books" as a subdivision under "Children's Reading," and in 1952, "Comic Books" became a separate subject heading of its own.

Although many comic books were (and are) designed to appeal to young men, with male heroes and superheroes and a focus on violence and action (Krashen, 2004, pp. 93-94; Wright, 2001), young women were by no means ignored. During the 1940s and 1950s, the majority of readers of "Archie" were girls aged six to thirteen, and during the last quarter of the twentieth century, readership was 60 percent female (Robbins, 1999, p. 12). Other titles published specifically for teenage girls during this period included the man-chasing "Suzie," with pinups of the title character in bathing suits and other costumes, "Torchy," who wore six-inch spike heels and cleavage-exposing dresses, the fictional movie star "Katy Keene," "Little Lulu" (and other "Little" characters), and "Patsy Walker," a female version of "Archie," among many others. Some titles combined fashion advice, fiction, and articles about celebrities with their comic book stories. Timely Comics published a series of "career girl" books that included *Tessie the Typist*, *Nellie the Nurse*, *Millie the Model*, and *Sherry the Showgirl* (Robbins, 1999, pp. 13-45).

Librarians joined parents, teachers and religious leaders in blaming comic books for eyestrain, illiteracy, arrested mental development, debased morals, crime and other forms of antisocial behavior (Anttonen, 1941; Harker, 1948; Logasa, 1946; Martin, 1959; Zimmerman, 1954). Many cited Dr. Fredric Wertham, whose *Seduction of the Innocent* and other writings purported to demonstrate that reading comic books led to juvenile delinquency, emotional and psychological maladjustment, low self-esteem, and sexual deviance (i.e., male homosexuality). Wertham argued that comic books harmed girls as well as boys, providing role models who were "the exact opposite of what girls are supposed to be" (as cited in Wright, 2001, p. 160), that is, models of strong, independent, self-reliant women who competed successfully with men or even overpowered them.

Suggestions from librarians for combating the epidemic included displaying "the finest and most attractive children's picture books" next to

comic books in drugstore racks and selling them for the same price (Hamilton, 1942, p. 711), using Superman or other superheroes to promote reading "books which we as librarians believe that the children will like" (Lucas, 1941, p. 827), using television "to encourage among children wider reading and better reading tastes" (Shayon, 1953, p. 95), and the surprisingly liberal advice to provide "access to any book . . . without worry over its being too mature, or too explicit, or too violent," that would meet the emotional and psychological needs of the reader (Martin, 1959, p. 365).

Librarians also began debating the efficacy of summer reading programs, with their rewards and incentives for reading, although few provided any but anecdotal evidence. Proponents claimed that such programs increased circulation, provided favorable publicity, facilitated children's interaction with librarians, and emphasized the fun of reading. Opponents argued that any increase in circulation was temporary, that children read merely to earn the reward, that slow readers were discouraged from participating, and that such programs consumed time and resources that could be put to better use such as outreach to parents' organizations. Competition for leisure time from movies and radio was cited as a factor in the decline of reading for entertainment and pleasure ("Summer Reading Plans," 1940).

Efforts to promote reading to children during the latter-half of the century continued those established during the first half, mainly summer reading programs, story hours and book talks. Reading *good* literature continued to be promoted as a method of acculturation. Summer reading programs and reading clubs organized during the years of the Second World War incorporated such timely themes as democracy, Victory Gardens, the armed services, "reading rations," "bookworm bombardiers," and "reading bonds," analogous to war bonds, as well as the less topical circus, Indian war bonnet [sic], and thermometer motifs ("Let's Read," 1943, 1944, 1945), themes that are either gender neutral or traditionally masculine. Even the neutral themes involved such masculine tropes as competition and war while the garden theme, traditionally the feminine domain of Mother Earth, was masculinized by being linked with victory through combat.

### THE 1950S-60S: THE COLD WAR AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

In the immediate postwar era, while the Cold War was developing, public librarians continued to promote reading though summer reading programs and to debate the merits of providing incentives for reading through such programs (Gaboda, 1956; Jennings, 1956), although they agreed that movies, radio, and now television competed with books for children's leisure time (Tozier, 1955). Three notable events during this period took place near the end of the decade. In 1955, the Book Manufacturers Institute established the Library Club of America, Inc. The mission



of this nonprofit corporation was to promote reading through schools and libraries by awarding membership pins and certificates for reading. About thirty-five chapters were founded nationwide in the first year, but the ultimate fate of the program is unknown. This was followed in 1956 by the publication of Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read and What You Can Do about It*, which promoted phonics as the key to reading; and, in 1957, by the launch of Sputnik and the beginning of the space race and intensification of the Cold War.

The vast majority of articles written after that date about children and reading debated over the best methods for teaching reading, an area outside the direct purview of the public library. One widespread result was the institution of "individualized reading" or "self-selection" of books by children in the schools as a method of promoting reading, a "revolution in reading" fueled by new theories of education and the psychological development of children (Frazier, 1961; Larrick, 1959), a stance that librarians had adopted a generation or more earlier.

A major research study of the interests of more than 24,000 students demonstrated that gender was a significant factor in reading interests as early as the third grade; that girls enjoyed many boys' books, but boys refused to read most girls' books; that romantic love was attractive to girls but not boys, while violence attracted boys but not girls; and that both boys and girls enjoyed mystery, stories of dogs and horses, and biography told as an adventure story (Norvell, 1958). The study did not attempt to identify any of the causal factors of these findings.

#### *Outreach and Social Awareness*

The social unrest of the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement, and the increasing numbers of young adults as Baby Boomers became teenagers, focused society's and librarians' attention on hitherto largely neglected groups, primarily inner-city African American boys and young men. Numerous programs were instituted to promote reading among these groups, including the Ludington Plan, that provided books to inner city public school libraries, and *Reading Is Fundamental* (Anderson, 1965; "Book Exposure Program," 1964; "Ford Foundation," 1969; "Is Reading for Everyone?," 1968;). Many libraries began concerted outreach efforts, using bookmobiles and converted school buses to take books to inner city neighborhoods during the summer months, inviting noted African American community leaders and authors to speak, and hiring remedial reading consultants to confer with parents ("Luring the Nonreader," 1968).

Children's books continued to be selected for their social and psychological value, but now the accepted themes were those that would provide "new insights into one's own thinking and new understanding of our social and economic crisis." Such themes included loneliness, racism, desertion, poverty, juvenile crime, violence, hopelessness and despair, juvenile

gangs, and "a boy's struggle against unsympathetic parents" and other authority figures (Larrick, 1967, p. 3718).

### *Studies of Reading Interests and Reading Programs*

Studies of children's reading interests continued to support earlier findings that such interests change with age and that gender differences appear at about age nine, with girls reading boys' books but boys seldom reading girls' books. Although all children ranked adventure, action, mystery, animal stories, patriotism, and humor highly and nearly all read comic books regularly, boys read more nonfiction than girls and preferred action stories, science and technology, while girls preferred fairy tales, romance, and domestic stories (King, 1970). As before, none of the researchers investigated the effect of the gender of the main character or searched for other causal factors.

During the 1960s, researchers began to collect scientific data on the effect of summer reading programs on children's reading abilities and habits. Such studies demonstrated that scores on reading tests in the spring predicted scores in the fall better than did the subjects' participation in summer reading programs. The research also supported the claims of earlier opponents that the children who read the most during the summer were those who read during the rest of the year, and called for more scientifically designed and controlled studies in this area (Goldhor & McCrossan, 1966).

Summer reading program themes reported in the literature continued to appeal either primarily to boys or to boys and girls as a group, including cowboys (without cowgirls), Batman and Robin (without Batgirl), knights, spacemen, California Gold Rush, football, book trees, bookworms, and characters from books. Film programs and live performances by local theater groups were also used to entice children into the library ("Batman Reading Club," 1964; "NOPL Superdome Saint," 1967; "Roundup of Children's," 1968; "Things were a-okay," 1965; Whitman, 1961).

### THE 1970S: PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS AND FEMINISTS PERSPECTIVES

Research and writing about the psychological aspects of children's literature exploded in the next decade. In 1970, *Library Literature* added the subject heading "Children's reading—Psychological aspects" to accommodate the new materials and the term *bibliotherapy* entered the profession. Studies and articles addressed issues such as sexuality and sexual orientation, violence, sexism, ethnic stereotypes, the disabled, and the aged in children's literature, and called for additional investigation into factors such as age, reading achievement, intelligence and socio-economic status on children's reading, while studies of children's interests reported similar findings to those of previous years (for example, Bekkedal, 1973; Norvell, 1973; Robinson, 1973).

Although the values that were being promoted had changed, reading was still being encouraged as a method of socialization and acculturation. This long-held value itself came under scrutiny, and the lack of research documenting the efficacy of this method led one study to conclude, "Teachers and librarians continue to operate on the logic and conventional wisdom of these values of reading, but empirical evidence neither supports nor refutes these basic values" (Robinson, 1973, p. 104). A U.S. government-funded study of reading-related programs described the characteristics of "exemplary" programs, but defined "exemplary" as "most cost-efficient," not for its effect on reading habits or ability, and so provided no evidence for efficacy (U.S. Office of Education, 1972). Librarians continued to rely on summer reading programs to promote reading and to debate its efficacy in much the same way they had done for close to a century.

Under the influence of feminism, researchers began to explore sexism in children's literature and its effects on children's reading. Numerous studies demonstrated that main characters in children's books were at least three times more likely to be male than female, that many books did not even contain female characters, and that those with female characters usually portrayed them as passive, subordinate, domestic, and incompetent (Key, 1971; Tibbetts, 1975). A study of Caldecott winners found that more than three times as many book titles included male names as female names, and that fully one-fourth of the books contained only token female characters. Perhaps most significant was that the presence of females had been steadily decreasing throughout the previous twenty years, as society focused its attention on educating male leaders and scientists to win the Cold War and the space race (Nilsen, 1971). Male names appeared in titles five times as often as female names in a random sample of books for young children, and the books of modern children's authors Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss included practically no females at that time (Fisher, 1970, pp. 6, 44). A study of picture books found that women were portrayed primarily as housewives and mothers engaged in pedestrian activities and occasionally in a limited number of stereotypical female occupations, while men were shown more frequently and in a greater variety of roles and activities (Stewig & Higgs, 1973). Among Newbery winners, books about boys also outnumbered books about girls by three to one (Feminists on Children's Media, 1973). Feminist writers also called for research into the male stereotypes presented in children's books and their effect on boys' psychological development (Feminists on Children's Media, 1973, p. 108; Key, 1971, p. 175; Stewig & Higgs, 1973, p. 122).

Researchers began asking for the first time what motivated children to read at all and addressed the importance of identification with fictional characters. One explanation advanced for boys' rejection of girls' stories and girls' acceptance of boys' stories was "society's emphasis on the greater importance of males over females," and both boys' and girls' "desire to

identify with 'superior' individuals" and to "avoid identification with the 'inferior' sex" (Tibbetts, 1974, pp. 280-281; Jennings, 1975). Girls' lack of interest in biographies and histories was attributed to the dearth of accomplished, admirable women in histories and biographies (Tibbetts, 1975, pp. 2-3). As a result of this analysis and research, the Newbery was awarded to books with strong female protagonists seven times during the 1970s. Two of these books portrayed both males and females in progressive, non-traditional roles (Powell, Gillespie, Swearingen, & Clements, 1998, p. 48).

### THE 1980S: A NATION AT RISK

Professional writing about children's services in public libraries declined significantly during the 1980s, and the majority of the articles that were published described services and programs but not the children being served or the rationale for the program. Although little data existed to support its efficacy, the summer reading program had become entrenched with both librarians and the public as the means to promote reading to children. As a response to decreasing budgets and increasing staff cuts, libraries formed coalitions with commercial enterprises in greater numbers than in previous decades. The Children's Book Council, formerly the Association of Children's Book Editors, expanded its sponsorship from Children's Book Week to summer reading programs as well, selling themed posters, bookmarks, certificates, and reading logs at a reduced price ("Summer Reading," 1979). Companies such as McDonald's provided merchandise coupons and vouchers to be used as prizes for reading ("Connecticut McDonald's," 1977; "McDonald's and Summer Reading," 1984). Librarians responded to the increasing influence of television on children by using figures from popular culture to promote reading, as they had during the height of the comic book era, aided by the American Library Association, which initiated its series of Celebrity READ posters. Initial celebrities included only two females, Linda Carter as Wonder Woman and a pajama-clad Bette Midler (Darling, 1985; Naylor, 1987).

During this same decade, in response to "the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), U.S. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to examine the quality of education in the country. The commission's report, *A Nation at Risk*, which concluded that basic literacy skills had declined, focused public interest on the topic. By the end of the decade, the mass media was declaring that the country faced a "literacy crisis." Further research demonstrated that, while basic literacy was in fact rising, too many people did not possess the skills necessary "to handle the complex literacy demands of a modern society" (Krashen, 2004, p. x; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, p. 3), demands that were becoming

ever greater as the U.S. society and economy focused more and more on information provision and utilization.

As part of the library community's response to the report, many public librarians formed alliances with public school librarians and teachers as members of the educational community. In order to promote adult literacy and facilitate literacy among children, they included parents among their target population. Increases in immigration meant that more children in working-class communities possessed limited English literacy skills, presenting librarians in those communities with new challenges. At the same time, with the rise in two-career and single-parent families in all sectors of society, children's librarians in middle-class as well as working-class communities were faced with the challenge of providing services to so-called "latchkey" children. It is little wonder that in the face of all this, outreach efforts to children in minority communities declined significantly ("Alliance for Excellence," 1984; Eaton, 1985; "Libraries Respond," 1984; Locke & Kimmel, 1987; Naylor, 1987).

### THE 1990S: CHILDREN'S MOTIVATION AND INTERESTS

Articles in the professional literature on children and reading in the public library remained sparse during the first half of the last decade of the twentieth century, as the focus turned toward the school library/media center and its role in teaching and promoting reading. Public libraries continued to use summer reading programs as their primary method of promoting reading and added "family reading programs" sponsored by the American Library Association and McDonald's to promote both adult and child literacy ("ALA/McDonald's Team Up," 1993; "Children's Bookbag," 1999; "For Third Year," 1995; "Riding the Reading Express," 1996). Societal attention on education in general and literacy in particular encouraged further research into causal factors affecting reading motivation and interests, a topic that continues to be explored and debated ten years later.

Early research established that the most effective and efficient method for learning to read was "free voluntary reading," that is, the individualized or self-selected reading that librarians had promoted for decades, and that the act of reading developed cognitive skills, comprehension, writing skills, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar (as reported in Krashen, 2004, pp. 1-55, 81-84). Other research pertinent to public libraries found that children's attitudes toward reading became more negative with age, although this may be more a reaction to teaching methods that restrict choice than to reading itself (as reported in Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, pp. 65-67). Further research demonstrated that the best method for promoting reading was to provide access to books that children wanted to read, whether at home, at school, or in the public library, with school and public libraries "crucially important" (as reported in Krashen, 2004, pp. 67-77; Wilson, Anderson, & Fielding, 1986). An

additional critical factor was being read to, another practice that public librarians had established a century earlier. Other factors included adult models of reading, time for sustained silent reading, direct encouragement, discussion groups, peer influence, book displays, paperback editions, book talks, and author visits. Comic book and teen romance readers were found to spend more time reading, to read more books, and to have more positive attitudes toward reading. Research into the efficacy of incentives or rewards for reading strongly suggested that such rewards do no good and are probably harmful. Children who are rewarded for reading not only do not come to appreciate the intrinsic value of reading, but they view reading as simply the means to the end of winning the prize (Krashen, 2004, pp. 77–119).

Despite the direct application of such research to public library efforts to promote reading to children, very little of it was reported in the professional literature, and librarians' efforts to promote reading to children resembled those that had been instituted nearly one hundred years earlier. Although as a result of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the feminist movement begun in the 1970s, the "children" who were the focus of those efforts were no longer predominantly white males, librarians continued to promote reading using competitive rather than cooperative methods, offering rewards and prizes as "incentives," and utilizing themes and materials that appealed primarily to boys (Cook, 2000; Minkel, 2000, 2003; Roberts, 2005; Totten, 2000).

As the decade and century drew to a close, the issue of boys and reading, particularly the psychological effect of what they chose to read, once again became one of broad social interest as a result of several violent incidents perpetrated by young men, the most notorious of which was the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado. Societal fear of the unsocialized male intensified as it had in the past (Cillessen, 2002; Garbarino, 1999; Lord, 1999; Newkirk, 2002, p. xvii) and was again reflected in the library literature (Dahlhauser, 2003; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, p. 2–4; Thompson, 2004) as violent movies, television, computer games, comic books, and graphic novels were blamed for the behavior.

These fears were exacerbated by media reports of National Center for Education Statistics National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) surveys and other studies in the first years of the twenty-first century which showed that girls read better than boys and that girls were closing the long-standing gap in math and science (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004, 2005; Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarski, & Skovera, 1996). Despite the fact that reading scores for both boys and girls had increased consistently from 1992 to 2003, as had the percentage of male students reading at or above the basic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005, pp. 10–11) and that girls continued to score lower on the AP English exam (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004, p. 62),

the media declared a crisis in male literacy, seeing in girls' gains a threat to male dominance rather than an approach to gender equity in society. Explanations for girls' superiority included biological differences, maturation and developmental differences, feminization of education, content of reading material, and sociocultural factors (Pottorff et al., 1996; Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, pp. 90–92). Other reports highlighted the greater number of boys in special education and their higher incidence of school failure as evidence of a "boy problem" (Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, 2006, pp. 88–89).

In response to the characterization of the nonreading young male as a danger to society, many public children's and school librarians rushed to promote reading to boys, as they had in earlier eras when "sensational fiction" and comic books, rather than video games and television, were blamed for antisocial behavior. The reversal of the traditional gender hierarchy, with girls ranking higher than boys, and its threat to the established social order also appeared to motivate many of the efforts to encourage boys to read, efforts which were often detrimental to girls (Brooks, 2000; Nilsen, 2001; Parsons, 2004).

Professional journals featured articles that advised librarians to institute boys-only reading clubs led by adult males, to "make reading more boy friendly" (Jones, 2005, p. 37), to become "overtly and blatantly sexist" (Haupt, 2003, p. 19) by collecting books with male protagonists, improving access to comic books, magazines, nonfiction, and other materials that boys prefer, creating gender specific book displays, and structuring discussion groups to support boys' needs (Asselin, 2003; Chance, 2003; Cox, 2003; Knowles & Smith, 2005, pp. xvii–xxi; Martin, 2003; Sullivan, 2004; Welldon, 2005; Woodson, 2004). Author Jon Scieszka, with Penguin Putnam Publishers and the Association of Booksellers to Children, instituted a "Guys Read" campaign to encourage boys to read, while a planned equivalent effort for girls, "Hey Girls" was apparently never realized (Maughan, 2001; Scieszka, 2003). The ALA Celebrity READ posters by 2006 featured males two and a half times as often as females, and offered boys a wider range of role models than girls. Although the majority of all celebrities were either entertainers or athletes, none of the fourteen females represented any other achievement, while males included a firefighter, a conservationist, a chef, a physicist, and multi-billionaire Bill Gates.

With a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of the articles on this topic that were published in professional journals referred primarily to popular and secondary literature (particularly Gurian (2002), Newkirk (2002), and Smith & Wilhelm (2002)) rather than the NAEP data itself, and few cited any researchers, such as Krashen (2004), who contradicted that literature or offered alternative interpretations of the data. Those few exceptions (Doiron, 2003; Hartlage-Striby, 2001; Horton, 2005) warned of the dangers of stereotyping either books or children and of allowing

adult bias and expectations to influence children's reading choice, and advocated promoting nonfiction books to girls while encouraging boys to read more fiction.

Although none of the authors explicitly characterized boys as potential juvenile delinquents or referred to the moral and aesthetic value of "good books," none provided any rationale for the value of reading or for encouraging boys in particular to read, suggesting that they assumed that all recognized the social and personal value of such a skill. It is not unreasonable to assume that they would agree with Ross, McKechnie, & Rothbauer, (2006) that "to lack literacy skills means being shut out of jobs and opportunities" (p. 3), implying that boys who do not read will grow up to be at best unskilled laborers, living lives of quiet desperation, or at worst homeless or criminals.

A closer look at the actual data reveals that "the percentage of 5- to 12-year-old males who had repeated at least one grade declined between 1996 and 1999" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004, p. 40) and that while girls were less likely than boys to repeat a grade in 1999, only 8 percent of boys repeated a grade compared with 5 percent of girls. Although fewer girls (9 percent) than boys (12 percent) dropped out of high school in 2001, this number decreased for both between 1972 and 2001 for all ethnicities except Hispanic males. While elementary school boys were almost twice as likely to be identified as having a disability (21 percent vs. 14 percent), specifically a learning disability, an emotional disturbance, or a speech impediment, none of these disabilities was restricted exclusively to males, and the data simply reports rates of identification (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004), which may be influenced by any number of factors, including teacher and parent expectations and bias, not incidence in the population.

The fact that the majority of boys read better now than they did a decade ago and that cross-cultural and international studies demonstrate that in some cultures boys outperform girls in reading, while in other cultures literacy is restricted to males, refute biological and maturational factors as the sole or primary cause of those differences that exist. The primacy of such factors is also refuted by the historical preponderance of male writers from Chaucer to Stephen King, the dominance of every area of our literate society by males, and the prevalence of males in the university professorate. Generations of boys have grown into successful males under the tutelage of female teachers and librarians, and men continue to dominate the administrative ranks of both of those "feminized" professions. Recent evidence suggests that "children are strongly influenced by sociocultural expectations [including teacher and parent expectations], and that reading and writing tasks were predominantly viewed as female activities" (Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarski, & Skovera, 1996, p. 209). Suggestions for changing this perception are for fathers and other significant male



role models to set an example by reading themselves and for all adults to "promote reading as a desirable activity for boys" as well as girls (p. 209).

While the current advice in professional library literature to provide greater access to a wide range of materials and role models of men as readers are in accord with the evidence, the majority of the literature simplifies the issue by promoting a dichotomous view of reading, one that positions boys and girls in diametric opposition and highlights the differences in their reading interests while ignoring the many similarities. The segregationist and exclusionary nature of much of the advice strongly implies that meeting the needs of one gender means subordinating or disregarding the needs of the other. Complex causal factors are reduced to simple biology and the effects of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and teaching methods, in particular standardized reading lists and tests, are discounted as boys and girls are stereotyped as "non-readers" and "readers." In addition, research has yet to reveal why some boys read and read well and why some girls do not. What effect will focusing on the needs of "non-reading" boys have on the reading boys as well as on girls who do and do not read?

History demonstrates that responding to societal fears of the unsocialized male through such actions as labeling books as gender appropriate and promoting reading as a means of controlling the potentially dangerous boy will reinforce stereotypical gender roles, strengthen a social gender hierarchy, and stigmatize boys who read "girl" books as "sissies." What the research suggests is that the best method for encouraging all children to read is to provide access to a large number and wide range of materials, to allow children free choice in their reading, and to provide an ethnically, sexually, and socially diverse group of adult role models who read.

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