

# Master Teague, what is your story? Male negotiation in fiction for children<sup>1</sup>

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**Résumé:** À la lumière d'un bref examen de best-sellers récents pour adultes, Roderick McGillis déplore la "disparition des vertus masculines". L'analyse du traitement de la "masculinité" dans les romans pour la jeunesse canadiens des dernières années l'amène à constater que le héros, trop souvent, doit prouver sa virilité en adoptant un comportement agressif et violent. Or, l'écrivain Brian Doyle propose en revanche un modèle différent: la masculinité est créée non dans un espace marqué par cette violence dite virile mais dans un nouvel espace "où les questions d'autorité et de domination n'ont plus de place".

Lamenting lost masculine virtues has emerged as an interesting recent pastime, if still a slightly surreptitious one.

(Peter N. Stearns)

We badly need some training for our lads if we are to keep up manliness in our race instead of lapsing into a nation of soft, sloppy, cigarette suckers.

(Robert Baden-Powell)

## 1. Preamble

I'll get to the reference in my title later. Right now let me focus on my two epigraphs. Lamenting lost masculine virtues may have been a surreptitious pastime in 1987, the year Peter Stearns published his article, "Men, boys and anger in American society, 1860-1940," but since 1990 and the publication of Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* lamentation is fashionable. One article in *USA Today* asks, "Has the 1980s Man Become Superwimp to Superwoman" (Nov. 26, 1986). And as my second epigraph illustrates, ruing the failure of boys to become men is not so recent as we may believe. The belief that boys need "training" or initiation to become real men sticks with us, suggesting that the notion of manliness or masculinity is learned rather than innate. Men are made, not born. The films of John Wayne from the late 1940s to the late 1970s regularly present the process of boys learning to be men under the tutelage of an older man. Perhaps the most egregious of these films is Mark Rydell's *The Cowboys* (1972) in which a group of boys learn that to be men they must take control of their lives and thrust off weakness and femininity. They learn to accomplish noble deeds through violence. In short, they learn to kill. Aggression and anger are the means to manhood.

The aggressive, angry man receives some superficial tempering in more recent films, as Paul Smith's treatment of *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Heartbreak Ridge* (1987) illustrates (see his *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production 1994*: 181-190). My example is, however, James Cameron's *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1992) in which the male robot, programmed for destruction, learns that he must not kill from the young boy he must protect. Instead he shoots platoons of policemen in the knee-caps and demolishes automobiles by the scores. Despite the cute twist the film gives to Wordsworth's famous phrase, the child is father of the man, in the end it is the man or at least his cyborg equivalent in the figure of Arnold Schwarzenegger who teaches the boy that a man leads, has courage, protects, follows a code of honour, and is strong and taciturn—all those things John Wayne stood for in film after film. The Schwarzenegger male is no less aggressive, even wild, than the Wayne male before him. The male as protector, sensitive yet not averse to violence, heroic without being bloodthirsty, is evident in this year's *Forrest Gump* (1994), starring Tom Hanks as the innocent who looks good in a uniform. *Plus ça change ...*

Recently, Robert Bly has spoken favourably of the strong male, naming him the Wild Man; he argues that our society has given too little attention to this aggressive and primitive side of the male character. Trying to salvage something of the authority and confidence of manhood in a world in which insecurity has weakened males, Bly distinguishes between the Wild Man within each male and each male's primitive urges to violence and power. Today the male has become, in Bly's view, "soft" (2). He may be "life-preserving" but he is "not exactly life-giving" (3). To right the balance, men must make "contact with this Wild Man," "descend into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there, including the *nourishing* dark" (6; Bly's italics). Men must separate from the debilitating effects of the mother and femaleness generally. I suspect that the popularity of *Iron John* derives from some misunderstanding of Bly, a misunderstanding that focuses on the aggressive and "dark" aspect of masculinity that is so readily available to us in films such as *The Cowboys*. Indeed, the return of the western in our culture signals a desire for men to revalidate the traditional male values associated with the cowboy, even if we know that cowboys do cry. Bly himself tries to dissociate "the true radiant energy in the male" from both the "feminine realm" and "the macho/John Wayne realm" (8), but when he asserts that the male should revive the inner warrior, that part of the self which is confident and even combative, forceful, resolute, and authoritative the whiff of the Waynes and Schwarzeneggers returns to the air. As Marina Warner argues, "the monsters of machismo are created in societies where men and women are already too far separated by sexual fear and loathing, segregated by contempt for the prescribed domestic realm of the female, and above all by exaggerated insistence on aggression as the defining characteristic of heroism and power" (30).

Bly's book did strike a chord in our society, and similar books sprang up extolling the virtues of the male warrior. Two of these are Dan Millman's *Sacred*

*Journey of the Peaceful Warrior* (1991) and Robert Moore's and Douglas Gillette's *The Warrior Within: Accessing the Knight in the Male Psyche* (1992). I react to such books with a shiver. As Victor Seidler suggests, there is "something disturbing in the return of the warrior image of masculinity, especially if it means turning your back on relationships with women and children to take this heroic journey on your own" (4). Often in the books young boys read, the model of development is just such a journey away from friends and family. The journey tests and tempers the male, readying him for the battles to come.

My argument, then, is that little has changed in the way we view masculinity, and that our culture continues to train boys to become men, men who are aggressive, misogynistic, independent, and authoritarian. Obviously, such an argument amounts to a generalization. Like any other social construct, masculinity is not one-dimensional, although the force of the title of a book I read nearly thirty years ago, remains; I refer to Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964). Forces in our culture do move to create men and women without wrinkles, without deviation from a popular norm. All one need do is glance at the toys available for young boys: G.I. Joes, transformers, and a dazzling array of futuristic weapons. Or glance at the video games springing up like infectious insects, games such as "Streets of Rage," "Street Fighter," and "Mortal Kombat." One does not have to think too long or hard to understand that a one-dimensional notion of the male is implicit in such cultural products.

This preamble deals with aspects of American culture rather than strictly Canadian culture because, despite our heart-felt desire to express something other than our neighbours to the south, Canadians share many cultural assumptions with Americans, including assumptions about gender. Our heroes, as I have argued elsewhere in *CCL*'s pages, may be ordinary, little guys such as Jacob Two-Two or Nicholas Knock, but the little fellow is also a scrapper who aspires to be a superhero. Whatever subtleties and complexities might be evident in the various depictions of the Canadian male, one thing remains certain: he has not changed over the years as much as we might think. And despite the vaunted penchant for compromise in the Canadian psyche, Canadian males learn that negotiation is best carried out with physical force, or at least with aggression.

I must explain what I mean by "negotiation." Negotiation derives from the Latin for "business," the negative of leisure, "not at ease": *neg otium*. Ease and leisure are, of course, supposed to make up some of childhood's delights, and when a child grows up, he puts these behind him for the more serious activity of work and negotiation. In other words, the very process of growing up involves a necessary initiation in the ways of dis-ease and negotiation. To negotiate, we say, is to discuss a matter with a view to settling it or forging a compromise (I paraphrase *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*). The word "negotiate," however, has origins in hunting where it meant the act of clearing a fence or overcoming an obstacle. This association with hunting nicely reminds us of

things predatory, and if we remind ourselves of the medieval period's use of hunting as a metaphor for sexual activity then we have even more striking evidence of negotiation's relation to power and authority. To negotiate is to manoeuvre for a position of authority—to get what one wants.

In order to examine the image of the male in recent Canadian fiction for young readers, I focus on six books, all but one of which appeared within the last three years. Three of these books are by men and three are by women; the three books by women target an audience of roughly eight- to twelve-year olds, and the books by men target a slightly older audience, in one case an audience of high school age. The books by women are Elma Schemenauer's *Jacob Jacobs Gets Up Early* (1991), Alison Lohans's *Germey Johnson's Secret Plan* (1992), and Maureen Bayless's *Howard's House is Haunted* (1993). The three books by men are Paul Kropp's *Fast Times With Fred* (1990; first published as *Justin, Jay-Jay and the Juvenile Dinkent* in 1986), Martyn Godfrey's *Don't Worry About Me, I'm Just Crazy* (1992), and Duanne and Darcy Jahns' *The O-Team* (1992). What strikes me as similar about all these books is their authors' ostensible depiction of a "new," more cerebral and less aggressive male, while they maintain a more deeply felt belief in traditional concepts of maleness, including the inevitability of male negotiation through fighting or at the very least through an aggressive stance. None of these books presents males starkly; that is, all of them attempt to show that the process of growing into manhood is possible without rituals of violence. The paradox lies in the act of reading itself which substitutes for the ritual act, and the voice that speaks from the book serves as the wise older male figure, what Freud refers to as the superego.

My approach is cultural, rather than psychological, although it is difficult to speak of culture without some consideration of psychology. Recently Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh have argued that male psychological development in Canadian books for adolescents often follows a pattern set out by Otto Rank, in which the governing concept is separation as a means of individuation (*CCL 72*; 1993). The idea of separation is, of course, familiar to readers of Bly who insists that all males must separate from the mother, from female influence, in order to discover the essence of masculinity. Separation from the mother, however, does not necessitate separation from the father or from other males. On the contrary, Bly argues, and depictions of male development in literature and film regularly emphasise, that the individual male needs the company of other males for successful maturing. Male bonding is alive and well in books for adolescents. The male group is an important entity for the growing boy.

We might consider such notions of male psychological development from a Freudian perspective, and note that often male adolescents in fiction separate from both mother and father in order to come to terms with the Oedipus complex by transferring their affection for a female from their mothers to a suitable substitute, and by discovering a male mentor who does not threaten their security

by coming between the boy and the female of his affections. Often this growth into mature relationships with both males and females entails a character learning to accept someone in his life—an aunt, a new sibling, a young girl, a new male friend, a teacher, camp counsellor or some other adult male figure. This move to acceptance is often accompanied by a sense of loss (loss of contact with the mother who had, in the early months of life at least, fulfilled all the child's needs and desires), of something irrevocably left behind, and of something always to be desired. For a Lacanian, this signifies the inevitable entry into the father's world, into the world of loss and absence in which substitutes (simulations?) forever fail to bring back the splendour in the grass. For Lacan, this situation also touches on language which itself remains always sadly incompetent to express precisely what we think and feel. For this reason, perhaps, boys who must separate more radically from the mother than girls suffer the lack in language more acutely than females. Perhaps this lack finds some outlet in physical action. Boys negotiate physically. Girls talk.

Whether the male tendency to negotiate with arms derives from his psychological development or from culturally acquired notions of male power and authority, I think we can see this tendency's persistence in even the most innocuous products of our culture. I take for my first examples the three books about boys written by women.

## 2. Boys Constructed by Women

First, and because they are relatively unfamiliar, I'll briefly describe these books. Elma Schemenauer's *Jacob Jacobs Gets Up Early* recounts the story of eleven-year-old Jacob who doesn't conform to his family's idea of masculinity. He sleeps late, doesn't go fishing, tells stories, knows computers, and has few friends at school; in short, he isn't like his athletic and more traditionally masculine cousin, Peter. But on the first page of the novel, he saves a rabbit from the clutches of a great horned owl, and the reader knows this kid is made of sterner stuff than his parents or his cousin Peter realize. Jacob wishes something exciting would happen to him, and of course it does. During the course of the book, he meets Mary Rose O'Malley, an eleven-year-old girl who has a heart problem; she also has "spunk" (69). Mary Rose serves as Jacob's friend. Usually in books of male maturing, the main character finds a male friend who is instrumental in his maturing process. Here Mary Rose serves this role. She goads Jacob into climbing a tree by telling him that Peter, who "looks so strong and athletic," would "climb it in a minute" (70). Jacob climbs the tree to untangle the ropes of a helium balloon, but he ends up drifting over the treetops in the unattached balloon. Here is his adventure; Jacob takes a journey alone and discovers his own inner strength, his own masculine ability to survive an alien environment. Jacob ropes a branch to bring the balloon to ground, finds the whereabouts of Helga, the escaped snow-white moose, gets locked in a cabin,

sends a flag made of his yellow windbreaker up the cabin chimney, and finally ropes and catches the escaped moose, saving Peter and Mary Rose in the process. At the end, athletic Peter tells Jacob: "for a weird little zombie, you're pretty brave" (109). And his father praises him, calling him "brave" and "resourceful" (115). Jacob is "a hero" (111, 113). The book ends with Jacob feeling confident and ready to make friends when he returns to school.

Alison Lohans's *Jeremy Johnson's Secret Plan* tells the story of Jeremy Johnson's attempt to rid his house of his Aunt Pru who has come for a long visit and who has displaced Jeremy from his own room. The plot is thin. Jeremy has a new cat, a substitute for the dog he longs for, and he has to cope with taunts and threats from the school bully, Shaun Higgins. His plan for getting rid of Aunt Pru is to make her sick by collecting all the germs he can and passing them her way. In order to collect germs, Jeremy has to get dirty, muck about in yucky things, in short, show he is a typical boy who delights in doing things his parents shiver to contemplate. Jeremy is a good bad boy, the type Leslie Fiedler associated years ago with Tom Sawyer. Of course his attempts to motivate Aunt Pru to leave fail, and he learns to appreciate her, to express his affection for her, and to cry. Jeremy's acceptance of his aunt signifies his newly acquired "feminine" traits. If we pursue the book's architectural metaphor, however, then Jeremy's acceptance of his aunt Pru is also an acceptance of his place in the basement, traditionally the place of rationality, the male sphere, the place of exploration and labour. At the very least, we might interpret Jeremy's relocation in the basement as a retreat, even a regression into womb-like security. The problem is how to present the "new male" without resorting to subterfuge or encouraging weakness?

Maureen Bayliss, in *Howard's House is Haunted*, presents the reader with a boy who resembles Sid rather than Tom Sawyer. Howard is afraid of nearly everything: "ghosts, spiders, creaky noises, slithery snakes, bullies, basements, and the dark. He was afraid of lots of things. Almost everything, in fact" (1). Bayliss does not specify Howard's age, but it is clear that he is old enough to have put behind him the need for the security of soft toys, yet he takes Scruffy Monkey with him to school to buoy his confidence. In short, Howard is a young nerd. At the beginning of the story, Howard's parents inform him that they have purchased an old house, one famous among the kids of the town for being haunted. Howard's consternation does not, however, keep him from doing the dishes.

At school, Howard faces the ordeal of coping with the class bully, Punch McLaredy. The move to a haunted house, however, gives Howard the courage to forge a truce with Punch; in turn for doing Punch's homework, Howard asks that Punch get rid of the ghost that haunts the house on Walnut Street. To effect the dismissal of the ghost, Punch brings to Howard's house his pet snake, Chokey, but Chokey simply slithers off without accomplishing what Howard expects him to accomplish. Each night Howard hears creaks and thuds through-

out the house, and his fears grow. For several nights, he rises after his parents are asleep and flicks on all the lights in the house. This proves ineffectual; in fact, Howard finds a note taped to his backpack telling him he's crazy to leave the lights on. The note is signed "the ghost" (34).

Howard's next plan is to leave chocolate chip soup (yes, chocolate chip soup) and Orange Fizzie for the ghost several nights in succession, and then only put the soup out. When the ghost starts looking for the Orange Fizzie, Howard and Punch will bop him. To help them, the boys invite Willie Wong and Rebecca Green to sleep over on Halloween. The four friends succeed in throwing a net over the ghost, a palpable ghost who turns out to be Conrad Warbles, an indigent descendant of former owners of the house. Warbles is a ghost writer, a writer of ghost stories, and a ghost of a writer, unable to find a publisher for his stories. Of course, Warbles finds a home with Howard and his family; Howard manages to coax Chokey the snake from under Mrs. Nutt's (she's the next door neighbour and something of a witch, a good witch mind you) dresser. What better image for Howard's initiation into true masculinity than his drawing out of a snake from a dark place?

Each of these books tries to depict young boys who deviate from the popular norm in some way. All three boys—Jacob, Jeremy, and Howard—suffer from the badgering of bullies or bigger boys, but Jacob and Howard become friends with the bully by proving that they are not wimps, and Jeremy finds a way to ignore the bully with the help of his friends. All three authors are careful to depict their male characters interacting (to some extent) with girls, and two focus on such interaction: Lohans' plot turns on Jeremy's discovery of affection for Aunt Pru, and Schemenauer uses a girl, Mary Rose, as the means of Jacob's emergence from wimphood. These females, however, pass muster with the boys because of their spunk: Aunt Pru tells stories of chickens running about without their heads and Mary Rose is smart and open to adventure. In all three books, the male protagonist succeeds in some ordeal through a developing relationship. We might conclude, following Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, that these women writers present their male characters as developing through relationships with others.

But relationships in themselves do not necessarily mean that these males are "new," less given to the familiar patterns of patriarchal development than males in literature earlier in the century. Both Howard and Jacob must prove themselves capable of manly activity. Jacob's test comes when he is alone in the free floating balloon, and surviving this test gives him the courage to save Peter's life by throwing himself in front of the charging white moose. Howard, as I noted above, gains the courage to confront the snake, and if I invoke Freud then I need say no more. True, Howard's test is accomplished in community—he, Willie, Rebecca, and Punch together confront the ghost—but Bayliss makes it clear that the other children approach the ghost caper as a test for Howard. Willie and Rebecca remark after the event that Howard is "a lot more interesting" than they thought (71), and Punch tells Howard that he is "not a yo-yo after all" (75). As

for Jeremy Johnson, he is something of a Tom Sawyer as I mentioned earlier. He plays with cars, longs for a dog as a companion (he finally settles for a cat), gets into trouble, and feels a desire to “slug” Shaun (40).

These boys have neither a complex inner life nor much to do with their parents. They have little to do with their fathers. Fathers are in the background, but rarely interact with their sons. As for mothers, they are the disciplinarians in the households. These books set out to interest young readers in plot, and their messages concerning masculinity strike me as anything but radical. The only thing noticeable about the boys in these books is that they do not solve problems with their fists. When it comes to negotiating their desires, these boys either learn to deal and compromise (Jeremy and Howard) or they overcome the objections of others the way Jacob does when he acts heroically. Perhaps the most satisfying of these presentations of male negotiation is Lohans’s *Germey Johnson’s Secret Plan*, in which Jeremy not only comes to appreciate his Aunt Pru, but he also accepts the idea of a room in the basement in lieu of his old room which Aunt Pru now occupies. My only hesitation here derives from the role of the basement as a sort of retreat, a substitute womb for Jeremy.

In any case, none of these three books perpetuates male negotiation through violence the way, for example, Geoffrey Bilson’s book for older boys, *Hockeybat Harris* (1984), does. The covers of the three books I have been discussing show young boys who are either nerds (Howard and Jacob both wear glasses, a sure sign that the child is closer to the Sid Sawyer type than to Tom, and Howard carries a soft toy monkey in his backpack) or they are visually associated with things feminine (Jeremy stands with his back to orange-haired Aunt Pru and he has a cat on his right shoulder). These women writers clearly wish, ostensibly at least, to present their young readers with male protagonists who do not have to be independent and strong in order to succeed or gain approval of their peers and parents.

### 3. Boys Constructed by Men

Again I begin with a description of the three books. They are written for older readers than are the books discussed above, and they show a hipper style and willingness to be cute. Whether this is because their authors are men or because they adopt a first-person point of view is not clear to me. Paul Kropp’s *Fast Times with Fred* tells the story of two brothers and their new babysitter. Jason and Justin have “fast times” with Fred, their babysitter, who has the distinction of being a juvenile delinquent; he got into trouble by trying to boobytrap a public toilet. Anyway, the plot involves the three boys getting into a series of misadventures such as running afoul of this book’s bully, a character called Beefy, losing money in McDonald’s, making home-made French fries and onion rings, sneaking into a drive-in movie theatre, bumping Fred’s truck into Beefy’s Camaro, and nearly being smashed by a train. These misadventures are



all in good fun, and the boys' parents learn to appreciate and trust Fred as their sons' friend. The book ends with a family conference in which Fred takes part, and we might consider this a major step in the process of the boys learning how to negotiate in words rather than with aggressive action. We might consider this, but the book as a whole gains its readers' interest through the nearly constant immanence of a violent outburst of some sort, especially as a way of dealing with the perpetual threat of Beefy and his gang. The youngest of the boys, Justin, keeps urging Fred to beat up Beefy, a solution his older brother Jason finds too simple (85). Among the solutions suggested by the less aggressive Jason is "to seek protection from the local Mafia" (85-86).

*The O-Team* by Duanne and Darcy Jahns also concerns a group of children, this time three boys and a girl. The O-Team of the title refers to the name three of these kids give to their money-making enterprise; Max, Pigeon, and Hoddy decide one summer to do odd jobs around their town to earn money for Blitz Blades. The name they choose might bring to mind another group, TV's A-Team, itinerant soldiers of fortune and fugitives from the law whose penchant for violent activity resulted in many weekly explosions, fistfights, and shootouts. The allusion is strained, but it does suggest that Max, Pigeon, and Hoddy are your usual aggressive, energetic, and resourceful young people. The fly in their summer ointment, so to speak, arrives in the person of Max's cousin, Woodrow Delschneider, better known as Woody. Woody's a "klutz," a "geek," a "nerd" whose "got an I.Q. somewhere around the speed of sound" (15-16). And of course he wears "thick, black horned-rimmed glasses" (21). The plot has Woody ruining several of the O-Team's jobs, but finally he comes to the rescue with his worm farm, and he finds acceptance with Max and the others. Significantly, Woody's acceptance by Pigeon and Hoddy follows an incident in which he shows that he is capable of typical male negotiation tactics; while in the local arcade, the O-Team meets town bully, Ivan O'Connor, who threatens to pulverize Max only to rouse the ire of Woody who puts a lock on the bully's thumb and then threatens to put a "solar plexus reflex" on him (108-109). In admiration, Hoddy announces "It's Rambo" (109).

Martyn Godfrey's *Don't Worry About Me, I'm Just Crazy* is the most ambitious of the books under scrutiny. It tells the story of Roob Fowler and his friend Paul Lawson, and their coming to terms with dysfunctional fathers. Roob's father is an itinerant alcoholic who used to be a writer, and Paul's father is "a manager for the city" (34) who used to be a marine sergeant. The one father shows no responsibility for his son and the other places too much pressure on his son to perform well in school and sports. I might add that Paul's family is black, whereas Roob's is white, although this seems of little consequence in the story. In fact, the simplicity of Godfrey's attitude to racial difference indicates the simplicity with which he approaches his other important themes: sexual awareness, family romance, peer pressure, and adolescent thoughts of suicide.

The story follows Roob in his attempt to make the school relay team so that

he can avoid probation. This brings him into conflict with his best friend, Paul, who is going through difficulties at home, difficulties that are driving him to the edge of hysteria. We might say that male hysteria is the subject of this book. It takes form in Roob's anti-social behaviour and in Paul's wild drive toward suicide. Male trouble here is a result of poor fathering. The book's penultimate chapter takes the two boys to the edge of Niagara's precipitous falls where Roob succeeds in saving his friend Paul from plunging to his death. The location with its torrent of a river nicely captures the emotional swirl that goes on inside the two adolescents. But the book does not end with this heroic rescue. In the final chapter, Roob's sexual fantasy, one he has indulged in throughout the book, proves not to be a fantasy at all. Rachel Parsons proves to be as accommodating as any full-blooded thirteen-year-old could wish for. Godfrey's vision is as sexist as it is virile.

In general, these three books present the male experience in traditional ways. Unlike girls, boys chafe at family. They seek ways to move beyond the family orbit, and they attempt to solve problems with aggression rather than with words. Males negotiate with their fists, or at least in some sort of aggressive manner. In *Fast Times with Fred*, even six-year-old Justin encourages Fred to beat up Beefy (85) and later he tells Fred that he would "have punched them all right in the nose" (122). Even more telling is the emergence of Woody in *The O-Team* as a fighter, a figure his friends associate with Rambo. Despite his intellectual mode of discourse and pursuits to match, Woody knows the importance of venting aggression; his preference is for "primal-scream therapy" (113). As a side issue here, we might note that Woody is also the most inventive entrepreneur of the group, a budding capitalist who understands the ways of the market economy. Aggression well controlled can turn into profit. The other children come to respect Woody: "What a man.... Yeah ... a man of science" (167). On the final pages Woody confesses his need to belong to the group and he is prepared both to learn how to use Blitz Blades and to change the diapers on his new baby sister. The Jahns try to envisage a masculinity that is all things, independent and rational, feeling and relational, adventuresome and domestic, sensitive and strong.

Finally, however, what comes through is a vision of masculinity that continues to privilege virtues of strength and a touch of wildness. The boys in *The O-Team* cross domestic rules when they set up their worm farm in Max's dresser drawers; Jason and Justin in *Fast Times with Fred* succeed in perpetuating their fast times by convincing their parents that Fred is a good friend and not a bad influence; and both Paul and Roob in Godfrey's *Don't Worry About Me, I'm Just Crazy* achieve their ends through hysterical acts. Roob pushes everyone to the edge of restraint until finally his mother hysterically orders him out of the house (53). Paul plays his suicidal game of hanging over the dangerous river until he accidentally falls in. The picture of adolescents here owes something to images of youth in such films from the 1950s as *Rebel Without a*

*Cause* (1955), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), and *High School Confidential!* (1958). More recent influences are in the books of S. G. Hinton and films made from her works such as *Rumble Fish* (1983) and *The Outsiders* (1983). Roob's preparation for adolescence included toys such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figures, a Sega Genesis game, and a BMX bicycle. On his wall is a poster of the Rolling Stones and one of his fantasies is playing in a heavy-metal band. In other words, little has changed in the way these writers envisage masculine entry into adolescence and adulthood.

#### 4. Children's Books and Masculinity

To generalize from these six books is dangerous, especially since their audiences differ. But they do illustrate a common desire to revision masculinity for today's young reader. Four of the six books contain, for lack of a better term, nerds who prove to be made of stronger mettle than either the reader or the other characters in the books first imagine. Just because a boy wears glasses, likes to read, or is clever at school work is no reason to devalue him. Indeed, such a boy is not necessarily weak and cowardly. In short, such a boy might prove to have all the masculine virtues patriarchy could wish for. We have seen this kind of thing before in, for example, films such as *The Big Country* (1958) and *Superman* (1978). Mild-mannered men may appear weak, but underneath they are as strong and powerful as a man's world could want.

The other two books clearly show boys interested in girls as sex objects and willing to exert their masculine authority in typically aggressive ways. Boys who have reached adolescence—Fred in *Fast Times with Fred* and Roob and Paul in *Don't Worry About Me, I'm Just Crazy*—act more openly rebellious than younger boys. Indeed, Fred serves as a role model and initiator into male behaviour for Jason and Justin, while Paul and Roob serve as wish-fulfilment models for young male readers. Neither Kropp nor Godfrey envisages a masculinity different from that of the time in which they themselves grew up. Male rebellion from adult authority is, it seems, a necessary ritual in the process of growing up.

Also necessary is what I think of as a phallic aggressiveness. Roob couches his fantasies of Rachel and himself on a desert island in a self-deprecatory and parodic tone. However, the image these fantasies project of a strong and capable male ordering the world for the passive female, his mate, is not far from the reality Roob finds (and Godfrey imagines) at the end of the book. Roob discovers that Rachel has, in fact, been interested in him for some time and that she is eager to help him with his homework. She has her own fantasies of being on a desert island with Roob, something, she admits, akin to the hokey idyll offered by the film *Blue Lagoon* (98; presumably the recent version with Brook Shields and Christopher Atkins made in 1980).

Perhaps because writers of books for children must make their stories

accessible to young readers, they cannot confront openly the complexities of gender construction. Having said this, I hasten to add that these books do enter a cultural discourse about gender. The use in these books of phallic objects such as snakes and worms, cars, balloons, and dinosaurs indicate that a young boy needs to come to terms with all that the phallus represents: power, language, rationality, the external world, even the female. Females in these books are either absent or unthreatening. When they are present, females invariably fit in with the masculine ethos in some way. For example, Mary Rose in *Jacob Jacobs Gets Up Early* is as isolated as Jacob and therefore a suitable companion for him. She is smart and daring, but she does not offer competition to Jacob because of her heart problem. As so often, the female here is saved by the male, saved from boredom and from the threat of a charging moose. Pigeon, in *The O-Team*, fits in with the male group and the fact of her being a female is irrelevant to the plot. The same can be said for Rebecca Green in *Howard's House is Haunted*. When females are threatening, as in *Germy Johnson's Secret Plan*, the plot makes clear that the threat is an illusion; in reality the female is kind and nurturing.

The attempt in these books, and others, to present masculinity in a new and sensitive way results in highlighting what Jonathan Rutherford, in the subtitle to his 1992 book, points out are "predicaments in masculinity." Simply put, the male predicament stems from the dual attractions (and fears) of the mother and father, what we have known for decades now as the Oedipus complex and the family romance. How many stories for children deal with a young person's (often a boy's) departure from home, confrontation with adult figures who represent aspects of the mother and/or the father, negotiations with other young people, and a return to a reformed family? Even when the child remains at home, this pattern is evident. For example, in *Howard's House is Haunted* the main character does not leave home, although he experiences a separation from his parents because of his fears that their new house is haunted. The ghosts, however, have come to this house with Howard and his family; they are his mother and father. Howard is forced into independence when his father refuses to allow him to sleep with them anymore (42). He calls his friends to help him cope with the ghost, and when the children succeed in unmasking this mysterious stranger they discover he is a writer who has hidden himself in the house because he has nowhere else to go. The ghost is both a male and a writer nicely drawing together Howard's father and mother (she is a magazine writer) into one person. When the ghost is no longer a threat, Howard's parents ask him (aka Conrad Warbles) to stay with them. Howard now feels vindicated in his earlier fears, and at the same time he discovers that these fears are gone. Freud, in his case study of Little Hans, argues that Hans' phobia arises from his fear of his mother's absence; it is the father's duty to help the child overcome his reliance on the mother. Howard's father initiates this process of separation when he refuses to let Howard sleep in his parents' bed.

A similar removal from the regressive tug of home, domesticity, and the

mother is evident in all these books. Jacob Jacobs leaves the comfort of his tent and flies the New Brunswick skies; Jason and his younger brother Justin follow their older friend Fred in his various adventures; members of the O-Team embark on a business venture that takes them at first away from home, and then back home where they discover that their best customer is Max's father; Roob and Paul in *Don't Worry About Me, I'm Just Crazy* take different routes, but both lead away from and then back home. Jeremy Johnson is perhaps the odd one here because his acts of rebellion lead to a final return to his parents' fold. Here the images of the basement room, the feline pet, and the feminine warmth of Aunt Pru suggest regression rather than independence. In any case, the return home brings these characters to a new relationship with their parents, one in which their parents know and accept their sons' anxieties.

### 5. Master Teague, the modern male, and the superego

My title refers to a nursery rhyme:

Ho! Master Teague, what is your story?  
I went to the wood and killed a tory,  
I went to the wood and killed another;  
Was it the same or was it his brother?  
I hunted him in, and I hunted him out,  
Three times through the bog, about and about;  
When out of a bush I saw his head,  
So I fired my gun, and I shot him dead.

William and Cecil Baring-Gould, editors of *The Annotated Mother Goose*, have little to say about this rhyme, noting only that the word "tory" in Elizabethan England meant something akin to a knave and a highwayman (144). The inference is, I guess, that Master Teague rid the world of a blighter. But who is Master Teague and who is the "tory" and does Teague shoot the same person twice or does he shoot two people? *The Annotated Mother Goose* remains silent on these questions. Whatever the answers to such questions might be, one thing is certain: Teague goes to the bush to hunt someone, and when he finds him he shoots him.

What interpretations might we bring to this nursery rhyme? One possibility is a Freudian approach in which Teague seeks out the person who stands in his way to maturity; that is, the father. He must hunt him through a feminine landscape, the wood with its verdant bushes. But why must he repeat the violent act? And who questions him? More pressing might be the question: why is the voice of the questioner so non-judgemental? Teague has perpetrated an act of violence—for whatever reason—and his interlocutor does not express disapproval. I confess the secret to this rhyme remains a mystery to me, but I want to use it as a paradigm of male aggression and the acceptance, indeed encouragement, of such aggression by social forces.

The voice that speaks to Teague in the nursery rhyme might conventionally

be taken for the voice of the writer, the person who invokes the story in the first place: "Ho! Master Teague, what is your story?" This person encourages Teague to tell his story, to confess his violent acts, and then through silence tacitly approves of Teague's behaviour. If we take Teague's actions as negotiation, then we can see that the narrator does not disapprove of these negotiating tactics. Perhaps the shooting of the father, discharging one gun to rid the world of another, is simply the way things go round. We hunt the bushes for those whom we will replace.

The shooting of the father, however, is something society must manage if it wishes to replicate one generation from another. In other words, parricide must remain strictly metaphorical and imaginary. Children's books allow the child reader the luxury of parricide without the dire consequences of separation from his parents. The book, or more obviously the voice which speaks from the book, manages the imaginary parricide. This voice functions as a superego, which Freud compares to "the parental agency." The superego, he goes on to say, "often keeps the ego in strict dependence and still really treats it as the parents, or the father, once treated the child, in its early years" ("Humour" 430).

In the books I have dealt with here, the voice speaking from the text tacitly approves of behaviour that I have identified as traditionally masculine. In *Fast Times with Fred*, for example, the two brothers get what they want because of the younger brother Justin's aggressive behaviour: he wails and cries uncontrollably until his parents give in to his wishes. Older brother Jason reinforces this behaviour by urging his brother to turn on the tears at appropriate occasions.

Learning to get what you want through negotiation that involves both subtle and aggressive means, then, is what we pass on to our male child readers. I want to offer another example, Perry Nodelman's *Same Place But Different* (1993). This book offers as clear an instance of the pattern of male growth as we could wish for. In it, young Johnny Nesbit is the familiar Canadian ordinary superhero; he hates hockey and avoids the usual masculine pursuits of his peers. The plot has him travel to the land of the fairies to save the world from Strangers. Ultimately, Johnny must confront the Hunter, a figure who remains mysterious here, but who might represent the dark paternity who threatens to inhibit growth. Johnny must blow the horn of the Hunter, confront the Hunter himself, and exchange bodies with him. In the book's central scene, Johnny inhabits the Hunter's body, looks out from his eyes at his own puny body, and proceeds to eat the person who was himself. Not only does this act of self-devouring save the world, but it also results in a new Johnny, one more forceful, confident, and physical. As the book ends, Johnny can even contemplate body-checking without disgust. The male, then, must grasp the horn, blow it for all he's worth, and become the Hunter, he who can protect babies and restore order to a disordered world; he must replace the father. In order to accomplish this heroic task—blowing the horn, exchanging bodies with the Hunter—the male must learn to negotiate wilfully, we might even say manfully.

## 6. A Closing with Hope

Before I turn to "Works Cited," I want to add that not all books for young readers perpetuate patriarchal norms. We can conceive of a masculinity without aggression and without the necessity of authority and power. The work of Brian Doyle comes to mind here. His two books about Hubbo O'Driscoll, *Easy Avenue* (1988) and *Covered Bridge* (1990), present the reader with a male protagonist who is sensitive, willing to work, bibliophilic, athletic, and tough. The bridge in the second book nicely serves as an image of ritual space, a place that represents not only connections between past and present, the individual and the community, but also between Hubbo's childhood and his maturity. Hubbo's desire to paint the bridge and in the process to preserve it reflects both his acceptance of things past and his hope for the future. In these books, the wars men wage are past and Hubbo shows little interest in reviving memories of what his surrogate father, O'Driscoll, experienced. He also shows little interest in the fraternity of boys at Glebe Collegiate. Hubbo's interests are in creating and constructing, and what he constructs best are relationships. In *Covered Bridge*, Hubbo writes a long and continuous letter to his absent friend, Fleurette Featherstone Fitchell, and this letter contains the information, the stories, that he relates to us as well. In short, Hubbo's writing creates a community in which questions of authority and dominance have no place. This is as it should be.

### NOTES

- 1 My thanks to Dr. Donna Batycki who has not only taught me much about masculinity and femininity, but who also gave me the idea for this essay.

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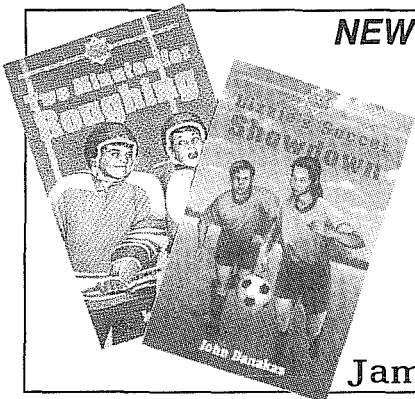
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