

Oh boy! Why is reading such a bore?

GUZELIAN

Boys will be boys. But these days, instead of evoking images of slugs and snails and puppy dogs' tails, boys have become synonymous with underachievement in school, disaffection and spiralling exclusion rates. The Leverhulme Primary Improvement Project at Exeter University found that boys consistently lagged behind girls right up to A-level. And one of the most fundamental areas of this poor show is in reading.

In evaluating National Foundation for Educational Research reading tests taken by primary school-children, the Leverhulme Project found that boys began and ended the school year in the same position: between four and five points behind the girls. Pleasure reading for boys in this age group tends to mean non-fiction, with hobby magazines and information books being especially popular.

So whatever happened to all the boys who curled up with their parents (mainly mothers) for eagerly awaited bedtime stories? What happened to the little fellas who would make us repeat their favourite Piglet exclamations in a painful falsetto and would lie stiff with suspense as Riki

Tiki Tavi waged war with the snake, and would join in with thundering Tyrannosaurus Rex roars? The lads who, so smitten were they with picture books on the Greek myths, insisted on dressing up like Cyclops on Hallowe'en? Does the death of their love of narrative coincide with the demise of their imaginations, too?

There are any number of hypotheses as to why boys are not the readers that girls are. Among the more convincing is the argument, presented in a recent report from the Roehampton Institute, that "as a consequence of social pressures on the relationship between boys and reading, it [reading] undergoes a steady decline between the ages of 7 and 16... It seems to be bound up in the acquisition of masculinity".

But then what is it about being masculine that militates against reading? Professor Ted Wragg of Exeter University puts it succinctly: "There's more peer group pressure on boys not to be 'boffs' than on girls." He also points to the Leverhulme Project findings, which showed that mothers were

What happens that leads to boys falling behind girls in reading? Is it their choice of material — hobby magazines and information books? **Reva Klein** investigates

far more likely than fathers to read to their children. That reality — coupled with the domination in primary schools of women — communicates the message that reading and books are more for girls than for boys. In other words, real boys don't read books.

There are a growing number of educationists calling for a rethink on how schools and parents deal with our "deboffinized" boys. The tried and tested methods — coercion at school, threats at home — only engender boredom and rebellion. Their older sisters may have

the idea that reading books is like eating your greens: it'll do you good."

When she recently asked some six-year-olds why it's important to read, their responses underlined her assertion. "One girl said 'So you can get a job'. Another boy declared that 'If you don't read, you'll be stuck on Orange [reading scheme level] for ever'." A fate — few could dispute — worse than death.

The instant they cross the threshold of the school library, many boys make a beeline for picture books that they know are below their reading ability or information books on cars, football, skateboarding and the like. Teachers need to adopt strategies to broaden their interests.

But first and foremost, Wendy Cooling stresses that teachers need to be more accepting of the kinds of reading

'Reading is the curse of childhood. . . A child has no great wish to perfect himself in the use of an instrument of torture, but make it a means to his pleasure, and soon you will not be able to keep him from it . . . Present interest, that is the motive power, the only motive power that takes us far and safely.'

from *Émile* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

lapped up *The Railway Children* at nine and *Jane Eyre* at 11, but the lads would rather be dreaming of football than wading through that stuff. There's not a lot you can do about it once they dig their heels in.

But there are approaches that can be adopted before their heels reach the point of no return — both at home and at school. In his book on young people and reading, Daniel Pennac, a French writer and teacher, makes an eloquent argument for parents and teachers to read out loud to children, no matter what their age, to keep alive the magic — and the unique intimacy — of storytelling. While all primary teachers read to their pupils, it would be interesting to investigate how many of the books they read are chosen for their appeal to boys who are reluctant readers.

Thinking about what kind of reading excites children, says Wendy Cooling, a freelance book consultant, is the antithesis of the "utilitarian image of reading" that is communicated in some schools. "We're cutting out the message that reading is a pleasurable activity," she says, "and supplanting it with

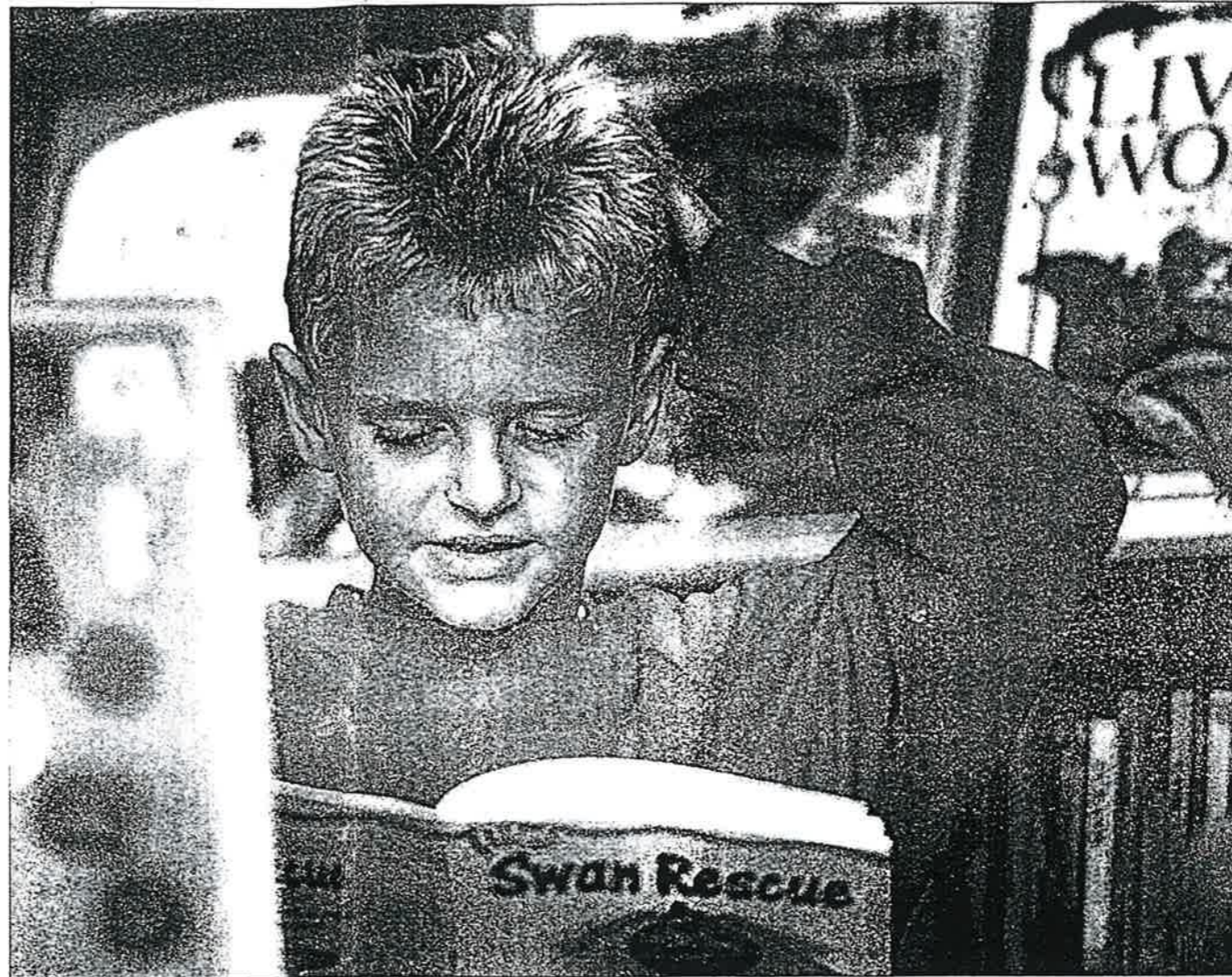
choices that boys make, using them as a point of departure from which to broaden out.

"Many boys prefer reading non-fiction and they tend to move from one fad to another. We've got to value the reading that boys do and hope that they develop skills in their reading of other areas."

One way is to make sure that libraries stock the sort of books that appeal to boys, low-brow as some of them might be. Fantasy, horror and humour are popular and cover a wide range of standards, including the Terry Pratchetts, Allan Ahlbergs and Michael Rosens of this world.

Another approach, Cooling suggests, is "to set up an atmosphere where talking about books is natural. Group reading, in which children have the opportunity to talk about the book they're reading, is very valuable." While girls do this as a matter of course, it is not something that is in boys' culture. But formalising the classroom discussion of the book, sitting at a table with other girls and boys, it becomes acceptable.

There also needs to be an under-



Girls' stuff: the most likely explanation for boys' reading reluctance is the stronger peer-group pressure on them not to be seen as 'boffs'

standing of not just what but how boys read. Those who have taken to reading non-fiction exclusively will not have acquired the stamina that fiction requires. Narrative fiction is not chopped up under convenient headings or similarly digestible chunks. And descriptive writing can go on and on.

For reasons that we don't really understand, boys, more than girls, have a tendency to demand immediate gratification, which makes some children's novels seem like a trek up Everest, and a thickish one, something to be avoided at all costs. Books of short stories and the new graphic novels, which present novels in a comic-book format, can bridge the gap between novels, comics or non-fiction such as *The Guinness Book of Records* much adored by boys.

It is a cliché, but children do choose a book by its cover. Boys at

last year's Young People's Reading at the End of the Century — a survey of 9,000 seven to 16-year-olds' reading attitudes and habits carried out by the Children's Literature Research Centre at Roehampton Institute, southwest London — showed

that twice as many boys as girls considered themselves "reluctant" readers. Although between the ages of seven to 11, boys and girls are almost neck-and-neck in the number of hours a week they read fiction (a total of three or more books

at home and school), the slope gets well and truly slippery throughout secondary school. Reading for pleasure takes a nosedive after age 11, when 32 per cent of boys compared with 47 per cent of girls read for three hours or more a week.

acy Association's Docklands Learning Acceleration Project is just one initiative that uses computers to make reading and writing more attractive to primary pupils.

Illustrated novels on CD-Rom are a way of transforming reading from a low-status activity to a high-status one, simply because the computer is the vehicle for it.

If boys are being switched off from books because of social pressures, it is up to teachers, librarians and parents to present alternatives that are palatable. This means schools buying more contemporary fiction and thinking about the interests of boys. It also means, both at home and at school, adults exercising all the flexibility they can muster to be accepting of boys' choices — and ensuring that those choices are available to them.

Finally, books must be presented as a pleasure, not as a punishment.

WHEN BOYS START FALLING BEHIND

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