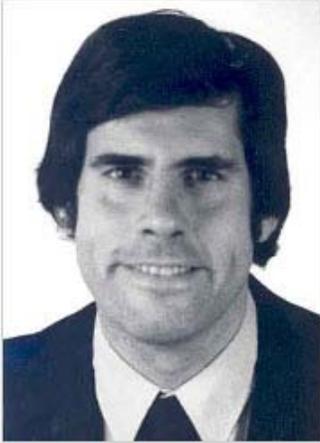


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An Interview with Ralph Fletcher: On Boys Writing

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Michael F. Shaughnessy Senior Columnist EducationNews.org



Dr. Shaughnessy is currently Professor in Educational Studies and is a Consulting Editor for Gifted Education International and Educational Psychology Review. In addition, he writes for [www.EdNews.org](http://www.EdNews.org) and the International Journal of Theory and Research in Education. He has taught students with mental retardation, learning disabilities and gifted. He is on the Governor's Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Council and the Gifted Education Advisory Board in New Mexico. He is also a school psychologist and conducts in-services and workshops on various topics.

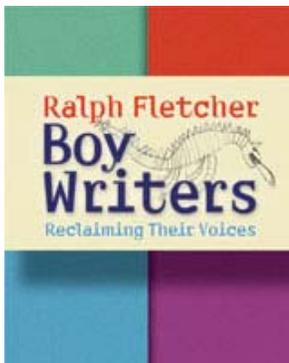
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An Interview with Ralph Fletcher: On Boys Writing

Michael F. Shaughnessy  
Senior Columnist EdNews.org  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Portales, New Mexico 88130



### **Ralph Fletcher**

is a friend of writing teachers everywhere. He has co-authored many books and videos for writing teachers including *Craft Lessons*, *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, *When Students Write* (video), *Teaching the Qualities of Writing*, and numerous others. He has also written many books for young readers including *Marshfield Dreams: When I Was a Kid* (a memoir), *Moving Day* (poems), and the novels *Fig Pudding*, and *Flying Solo*. (The above taken from

<http://www.stenhouse.com/0425.asp?r=n98>

where additional information about the book and the author can be procured.

*In this interview, he discusses his latest book and his recent exuberant, ebullient ideas for working with these rascallions that we call boys!*

### **1) Tell us about your latest book, and what prompted you to write it?**

The deep roots of *BOY WRITERS: Reclaiming Their Voices* come from reading Tom Newkirk's fascinating book, *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture*. This book prompted me to re-examine boy writers, and writing classrooms from a boy's perspective. What I saw was alarming. Boys score far behind girls in writing achievement tests. What's worse is the sense I get that many boys are turning off to writing—at least writing in school.

I had two purposes in writing my book: 1) to explore the various issues connected to boy writers and why they are not flourishing in schools and to suggest specific steps teachers can take to better nurture them. Each chapter ends with a section titled "What Can I Do In My Classroom."

### **2) How can we create writing classrooms that are friendlier to boys?**

It is no secret that in 2006 school has become an increasingly restrictive environment. More and more schools have eliminated art and music. Recess seems to be a vanishing species. There are more tests and curriculum mandates. Teachers have less of a voice in creating the kind of activity-based, hands-on curriculum that really engages kids.

While these changes have had a negative impact on all students I think they have hit boys particularly hard.

In my book I argue that we need to widen the circle for boy writers. This means reaching out to them, understanding their world, and encouraging to write about the kinds of things they are passionate about. It starts by giving them real choice about what to write about. Few would argue that we need to allow kids to choose books they want to read. In the same vein, let's give them choice about what they want to write about.

### **3) Are teachers neglecting writing in this age of NCLB?**

I wouldn't say that. What strikes me is that many teachers devote more and more writing time to getting kids ready for writing tests. I realize that these tests are a reality, at least for now, but we need to look at tests from a boys' perspective. Writing tests are NOT fun. There is no choice, no audience (at least none they will ever see), and no purpose (except for getting them done). Teachers do not encourage kids to write with flair, to approach the topic in an original manner. Rather, in many classrooms students are taught to use a formulaic, paint-by-numbers format. This is deadly for boy writers.

### **4) Violent writing- how do you deal with it?**

This is the most controversial issue in this book. It's no secret that that after the shootings at Columbine and other places, many schools have become much more careful and suspicious of violent writings. I think this is unfortunate. I played war as a kid. I wrote war stories complete with bomb-dropping planes. Yet today I am the opposite of a war-loving, gun-owning grownup! I think writing about violence is a necessary stage that many boys go through. Written language could allow boys to explore and grapple with these dangerous issues in a safe way. Alas, in schools today this can't happen.

Let me share a story about a 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy I know. He and three buddies went to the library to type their stories for Language Arts class. When they finished their stories there was still ten minutes left in the period so they started fooling around. The computers had a program known as Universal Reader. The boys could type in a sentence, and the computer would speak it aloud. They started slow: "You are stupid." "Your mother is a hippopotamus." The boys stifled their giggles. To make it more fun, they upped the ante. "I will throw a rock at you." "If you do that I will shoot you with a bazooka." By now the sound of the computerized voice saying such things had the boys howling. The librarian came over, saw what they were doing, and brought them to the assistant principal.

I know these boys. There is no way on earth they were seriously threatening each other. But all the boys' parents received

letters saying the boys had used "violent, threatening language" while using computers in the library. And the boys lost their computer privileges for a month.

Commonsense should apply here, but in general I think we should be more accepting of violence in writing. As much as possible I want to normalize it. Many adult novels (Cold Mountain, for instance) contain graphic violence. War has been the subject of many enduring works of literature.

### **5) What about humor? Do boys prefer to write about humorous topics?**

Yes! Boys love humor which is why a series like Captain Underpants is universally adored by little boys all over the country. Since boys like to "read funny" it's natural that they would want to "write funny." But when they try to do so they often get the cold shoulder from teachers who feel the boys are just trying to act up, disrupt the class, get attention, and be rude. One of the main problems is that simply don't understand boy humor. Instead of outlawing it, we should sincerely try to understand it.

I believe we should give boys more leeway in what they write about, and how they write about it. (The world won't end if we allow a boy to strategically insert a fart into his story!) If we sanitize our classrooms and remove all the sarcasm, wise-guy jokes, bodily humor, punching and hitting, we have succeeded in creating environment that is ultra-safe and stupendously boring to boys.

### **6) What are some writing genres that appeal to boys?**

According to my research, many boys yearn to write what they read--fantasy. Yet for various reasons many teachers are hesitant to allow them to do so. That's too bad. Teachers often say to me: "But the writing they do isn't very good!" I reply: "So what? Let them take a crack at it. At least they're engaged."

I think we could find lots of other genres that would appeal to boys including:

--humor especially spoofs and parodies

--sports commentary

--scary stories or horror

--graphic novels or comics

### **7) We have classes where kids read for fun, pleasure and enjoyment, but we do not seem to have the same approach in terms of writing. How come?**

Well, I'm not sure I totally agree with your premise here. In many writing workshops, teachers still allow students to choose what to write about, and that makes it fun. But I think you're onto something with the issue of pleasure. I think you could almost evaluate a school district's literacy program by how much reading and writing kids do at home. If they feel a sense of pleasure in reading and writing they will read at home. (Isn't that why adults read and write?) In politics they say: Follow the money. In boys' writing I'd say: Follow the pleasure; follow the fun. If those elements are completely absent, boys will be turned off.

### **8) Do most boys have an outlet for their work- a school newspaper or something like that?**

Many boys don't find much of an outlet for their writing at school. But if you could follow them into their private world at home, you might be surprised at how writing boys do. They email. They write in their own blogs. They create the kind of stories they really want to write complete with blood, outrageous humor, and action-packed drawings. They I.M. (Instant Message). So in fact boys DO have a writing life, though you might not know it to watch them in school.

### **9) What do you mean by "persnickety questions"**

In my book, I suggest we need to be more generous with the kind of wild, edgy, zany, often violent writing boys yearn to write. But, as the old saying goes, the devil is in the details. In this section I wrestle with thorny questions about how far we might go. How much violence should we allow in boys' writing? Every teacher must decide this issue for him or herself; I share where I stand on these issues.

**10) Do you have a web site where readers can get more information?**

Actually, no. My own website ([www.ralphfletcher.com](http://www.ralphfletcher.com)) has information about me and my writing but there's not much additional information about this issue (boys' writing). For that I'm afraid you'll have to read the book.

**11) Your subtitle (Reclaiming Their Voices) implies that boys once had their writing voices, but lost them along the way. Do you think that's true?**

I think over time the voice in boys writing—their humor, energy, passion—tends to disappear because it is not being encouraged in school. Rather, many teachers perceive boy writers as a problem to be managed. No wonder their voice gets dimmed and dimmed and finally extinguished.

Boy writers have so much to say, and such a unique way of expressing themselves. We need to give them more choice, more room, specific praise and encouragement, so they can reclaim their strides as writers. This can happen. I have found again and again that it only takes one teacher, or one powerful writing experience, to turn these boys around.