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Patterns of reading among teenage boys: the reading habits and book preferences of 13-15-year-old boys

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Abstract

What do teenage boys read, and why? Little study has been done specifically of boys' reading habits, leading to the suspicion that much public library selection for this group has been based on guesswork and intuition. This study sought to fill this gap in our knowledge through 60 one-to-one structured interviews of a stratified sample of 13-15-year-old boys, approached through four Essex secondary schools. Discovers that reading compares favourably with other leisure pursuits, most boys reading regularly for 40 minutes per day on average, or one book per fortnight. Selecting fiction by genre, author and series, but chiefly by the blurb, boys are diverse in their tastes. Fifteen-year-olds read predominantly adult novels or have effectively ceased reading. The boys read reflectively, and are equally divided between those who imagine the story unfolding in their imaginations, those who imagine their own involvement, and those who do neither. Finds that the use of non-fiction is lower and less important to teenage boys than had been believed. Draws implications for library provision for this group.

It has sometimes appeared that public libraries have been uncertain how to provide for teenage boys. Most authorities have developed collections, usually labelled as young adult, to bridge the gap between the children's and the adult library. Books specifically for teenagers began to be published in the 1970s, with series such as "Topliners", Nelson "Get-aways" or Hutchison "Spirals", aimed at the "reluctant" teenage reader, particularly in the school context. Now, of course, the shelves are stocked with books from the larger number of imprints developed by major publishers specifically for this market. These include Penguin Plus, Lions (HarperCollins), Corgi Freeway and Aslib (Scholastic), as well as the ubiquitous Point Series in Romance, Horror, Crime, etc., which according to some of the libraries' (young) critics are never represented in sufficient quantities.

Many of these are aimed at, and appear to be devoured by, younger teenage girls. The present study was inspired by the chance remark of a children's and young person's librarian that, though it is easy to know what to select for girls, it is much more difficult to know what teenage boys want to read. Leaving aside the assumptions implicit in the first statement, it was clear that there was little recent information on the reading habits and preferences of teenage boys, leading to the suspicion that much library provision for this group has been based on guesswork and intuition. Previous studies, such as the definitive and comprehensive work by Whitehead[1], and the longitudinal study over five terms conducted by Heather over a decade ago[2], had highlighted that teenagers read less from their mid-teens, and boys read less for leisure than girls. However, every study compared and contrasted the tastes of boys and girls, and this tended to mask features of the former group's approach to reading.

This study sought to fill this gap in our knowledge through one-to-one structured interviews of a stratified sample of 13-15-

This article is an adaptation of an MA dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Information Studies at the University of North London, UK. The author acknowledges the help and co-operation of staff and pupils from the following schools: Alec Hunter High School, Braintree; King Edward VI Grammar School, Chelmsford; Notley High School, Braintree; and Tabor High School, Braintree.

year-old boys, approached through the four secondary schools of the Essex market town of Braintree, which is now within commuting distance of London. It was discovered that reading compares favourably with other leisure pursuits, most boys reading regularly, for, on average, 40 minutes per day, and one book per fortnight. The study then focused on the boys' preferences in book reading, including the factors that are considered in the selection of particular titles.

The 1991 guidelines by the Library Association on public library services for children and young people include no specific advice on the teenage years[3]. However, they suggest that the needs of the target group should be considered in selecting stock for it. Further, they state that stock should be chosen after balancing adult judgements of needs with the child's growing maturity and independence. This implies more reliance on the tastes of the older child. Most public libraries start to take this into account by offering a young adult (YA) reader a privilege whereby the teenager's parents sign to agree to their access to the whole of the library, including the YA section. In order to ascertain the needs of this group librarians must gather information not only about what this group actually reads, but also what it is looking for in its reading experience. The study tried to gain these insights in a series of quantitative measures, and a final but substantial section also investigated the reasons teenage boys choose to read fiction and non-fiction, and what they believe they experience in doing so. This information was expected to be of interest to not only public and school librarians but also publishers and teachers.

Sample and methodology

The study selected a sample of six boys from the three schools in the town, in each of years 8, 9, and 10 (aged 13-15), providing 18 from each school. These boys were selected from across the whole ability range. The method of determining ability depended on organizational factors in each school, such as the existence of setting or streaming, or the existence of suitable "objective" tests of ability. A random selection from each of the ability levels minimized selection bias. The grammar school (Essex retains a partial Grammar school system for its top 5 per cent in ability)

provided a sample of the upper ability range, to give a total sample of 60 boys.

Each boy was approached through a structured interview. The interview schedule consisted of 16 questions, some of which required free answers, but with most requiring answers prompted from checklists. The checklists and phrasing of questions themselves were tested and validated in a limited pilot study. The interview situation enabled greater consistency of interpretation of the questions than anonymously completed questionnaires would have done, and enabled more flexibility in the less quantitative questions. Each interview took just over 30 minutes.

The average time each boy read daily was calculated indirectly by correlating information given about the frequency of boys' reading in certain places with the average length of time they read at particular periods of the day. This method was felt to give both a more reliable total and a more accurate picture of each boy's overall reading pattern than could have been obtained by asking simply "How long do you spend in reading each week?"

Reading as a hobby

The study was concerned with reading which was done by choice. This is a difficult concept to define for school pupils who have a certain amount of set reading which they must do. All the schools had some sort of policy on encouraging reading for leisure, reinforced in varying degrees by classroom follow-up, and it is this reading of the pupils' own choice of titles which was focused on.

Reading was done by more boys than any other hobby, except watching television. More to the point, apart from television watching and listening to music, which after all can be done at the same time as other activities by most teenagers, reading is the most regularly conducted activity. It compares favourably with playing sport, drawing and writing and meeting friends. In fact most boys reported reading most days or daily.

Almost all the boys read fiction. Some 88 per cent reported reading non-fiction and magazines, 77 per cent newspapers, 52 per cent picture books and 45 per cent comics. Newspapers were read the most frequently, even if in some cases that was just the sports page. Fiction was next most regularly read, followed by magazines and comics. Non-fiction, however,

was read between weekly and monthly. Among the older boys only the more frequent readers continued with comics and magazines.

Reading is a private occupation, conducted mostly in bedrooms in the evenings and before sleep, as Figure 1 shows.

Amount of reading

Boys read, on average, two books per month, and for an average of 40 minutes per day, including all types of reading. However, there was a divergence of reading habit with age; older pupils either read more or increasingly less in terms of number of books or time. As one might guess, it is particularly the lower ability pupils who read significantly less, though this is not true of all such pupils.

Sources of books

In Braintree, increasing use has been made of the school library and personal purchase at the expense of the public library, as Figure 2 illustrates.

The schools’ libraries have been increasingly effective in supporting leisure reading, encouraging, at 27 per cent of all books read, a higher level of borrowing than many previous studies had found. That the public library accounts for only 11 per cent of all books read must be a matter for concern among public librarians. This might be partly accounted for in this case because Braintree Library is acknowledged by the authority to be situated in cramped premises, with room for only a minimal young adult section. (After many years waiting for planning permission, a new purpose-built library has just been started.) The present placing of a shelf of horror books above the young adult section at the present Braintree library may be a sensible arrangement to meet these users’ needs.

Choosing fiction books

Fiction, as the major category of reading, was examined in more detail. The boys were asked to list all the books they could remember reading since the start of the previous holiday, usually about ten weeks. One-third of all the books read were in a series or by an author which the boys had read before. One-fifth had been read before. The implications for libraries are clearly in stocking, and retaining for a long enough period, the works of popular authors and series. For teachers and librarians, a related challenge is how to introduce these boys to new authors and series, to begin new chains of association.

The boys read less “teen” books than they anticipated. Two-thirds claimed to choose books specially written for teenagers, almost as many as for adult books. In the survey period, however, only 21 per cent of the books actually read were young adult or “teens” books. The 15-year-olds read just 17 per cent of these. Overall the boys read over twice as many adult books as “teens” books. Year 8 were in fact reading more equally between the three broad levels of books than they seemed to expect. A total of 62 per cent of the fiction read by Year 10 were adult books. Figure 3 summarizes these findings. One explanation of the apparently poor showing of books specially for teenagers could be that more books are perceived by the teenagers as being written especially for them than those placed as young adult by the public library. It was the public library classification of the books into age levels that was used in the study.

Figure 1 Total hours of reading

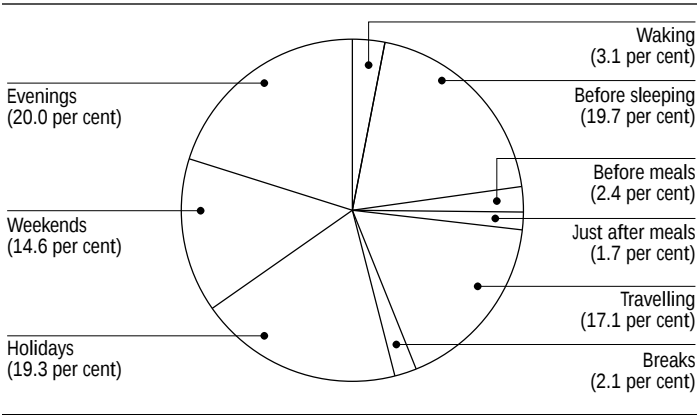


Figure 2 Sources of books read

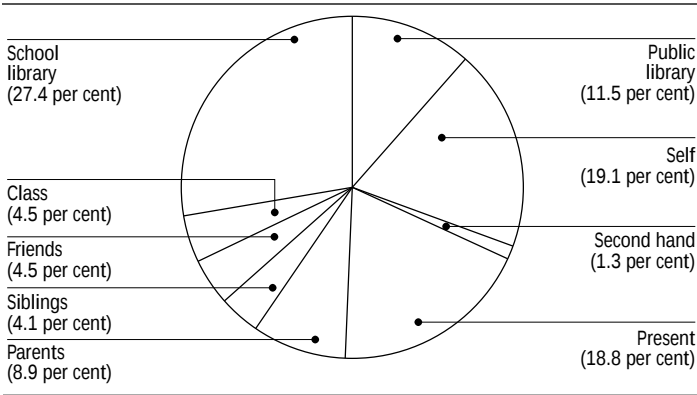
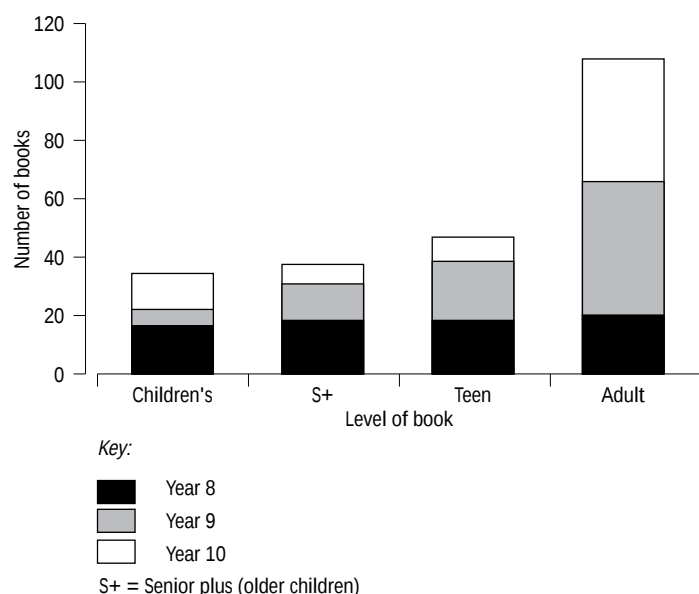


Figure 3 Books read (number of each level)

Fifteen-year-olds seem to read very little if they are not reading adult books. The boys who do not read suggested they prefer active occupations. These figures suggest that, in Braintree at least, books normally classified by the public library as young adult are not the most widely read, even among the younger teenage boys.

The boys were asked about how they selected fiction to read. The blurb is the most considered factor, followed by genre, then author or series almost equally. Only 15 books were related to a film or television series, though *Jurassic Park* was the most frequently read book, showing the potential power of the tie-in.

The value of access tools which include a brief synopsis of the plot would be indicated. The blurb needs to be clear, factual, reflecting the contents of the book rather than the advertising hype or reviews. The next main method of access for efficient selection should be genre. However, access also needs to be possible through author and, to a lesser extent, series. At present, the young adult section stands alone in most public libraries, arranged by author, with no further genre subdivisions. This arrangement may need to be re-examined, to reflect the ways in which boys select their reading matter.

The format of the book was discounted as a factor almost unanimously. Librarians and teachers should note the strength of feeling on this point. This means that for librarians and booksellers the criterion of user preference

does not arise among boys; there is no preference. Other considerations, therefore, such as price, and, for the teacher and librarian, durability and life expectancy, can be the sole criterion for teenage boys.

The books the boys read were also analysed by genre, as shown in Figure 4. No one genre was read by more than 15 per cent of boys. Even when related types such as horror, ghost or monster stories are added, no one group was read by more than 20 per cent. Humorous books were the most popular type, though these overlap with genre categories: there are many examples of humorous science-fiction for instance. A total of 35 per cent of books were of a diverse mixture of minority types. This dispels the myth that has grown up in some quarters that boys read only horror or adventure game books. Granted these are popular types, but librarians need to provide for a wide range of interests in fiction.

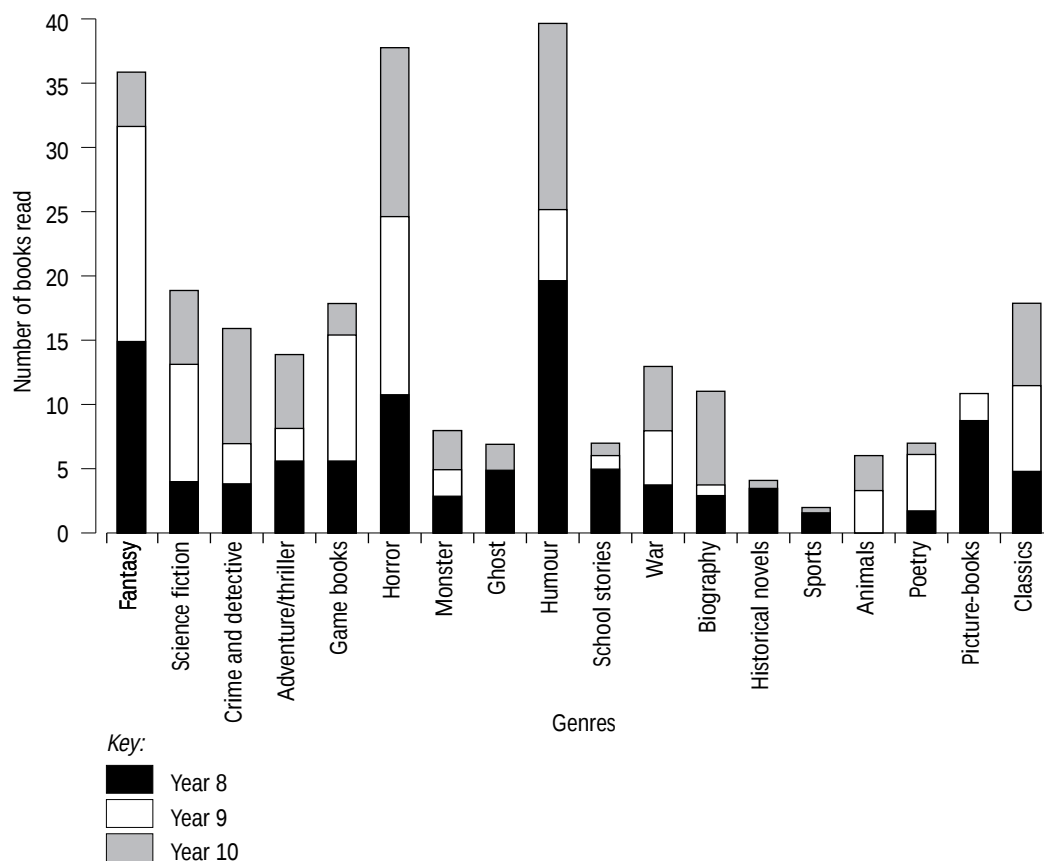
The lists of titles and authors showed a low degree of duplication of reading. Only 25 out of 219 different fiction titles were read by more than one pupil, while 51 out of 81 authors were represented by a single reader. The most read authors are shown in Table I.

The boys were asked about what they liked to read, and when these lists were compared with actual reading some interesting differences suggested gaps in the reading market. Sports stories, magic stories set in our world, and myths and legends are found and read much less than the readers would like.

Reasons for reading: the fiction experience

Satisfaction surveys are well known for averaging above the centre rating. However, the average rating for the books the boys read was 4 on a scale where 5 = excellent, which was felt to reflect high satisfaction levels. I would suggest that boys are no less conservative than any other section of the reading public in trying to maximize their chances of enjoying their reading, and making safe selections. However, one-third of all books were found to be gripping or thought-provoking. Almost all boys felt that they would continue to read at least some fiction after leaving school.

All the pupils said they would continue to read fiction after leaving school, and were here asked why, which excluded their needing to satisfy teachers, important a motivator as this may be at the present moment. Their reasons

Figure 4 Books read (by genre)

were evenly spread between three uses of reading: as a time filler, for enjoyment or relaxation, or for self-improvement.

Many boys could analyse what they liked about fiction; the ability of the author to involve them, the feeding and stimulation of their imaginations, the elements of humour

and surprise. A total of 75 per cent agreed that reading exercises their imaginations. Two-thirds agreed that reading for escapism is important for them. About 70 per cent agreed that reading makes you think. The same proportion liked surprise in stories, though a smaller number actually liked to be scared. Realism was important for 38 boys, in that it helps them to understand how and why people behave as they do, while for 32 it helps them to understand the cause and effect of events. Interestingly, realism was least important for the lower ability readers, for whom believable characters were also less important. This could be important for publishers, teachers, librarians and writers targeting this group.

Stance was divided equally between those who feel detached from a story, those who feel as observers of the story, and those who imagine their own involvement. These categories were equally represented among different ages and abilities, suggesting that these features are a product of personality type and background.

The use of non-fiction

Non-fiction use was largely utilitarian. One quarter was for school use, 35 per cent hobby-

Table I List of authors (read twice or more in the period of the study)

Authors	Times read	Authors	Times read
Roald Dahl	20	Stacey Ryder	3
Terry Pratchett	10	Sue Townsend	3
JRR Tolkien	9	Arthur Conan Doyle	2
James Herbert	8	Bernard Cornwall	2
Michael Crichton	8	Gene Kemp	2
Goscinny	8	Grant Naylor	2
Stephen King	7	J.M. Dillard	2
Ian Livingstone	6	George Orwell	2
Joe Deaver	5	John Dickson Carr	2
C.S. Lewis	4	John Grisham	2
Charles Dickens	4	Michael Hardcastle	2
Enid Blyton	3	R.L. Stine	2
Franklin W. Dixon	3	Robert Swindells	2
Ian Watson	3	Steve Perry	2
R. Crompton	3	Terry Deary	2
Shakespeare	3		

related, and a further 28 per cent sport-related. Just 10 per cent appeared to be for general interest. Most boys read either one or no non-fiction books (see Figure 5), and much less non-fiction was read overall than fiction.

Twenty-two out of 60 claimed not to use non-fiction for homework assignments at all now. Some 30 per cent would not be likely to use non-fiction after leaving school. The relatively low level of non-fiction use appears to be associated with a low level of participation in hobbies; hobby use being the major use of factual books reinforces this effect. If this lower level of non-fiction use continues into adulthood, the implications for the library service may be that the most important need for these male users will continue to be provision of fiction rather than information resources.

Conclusions

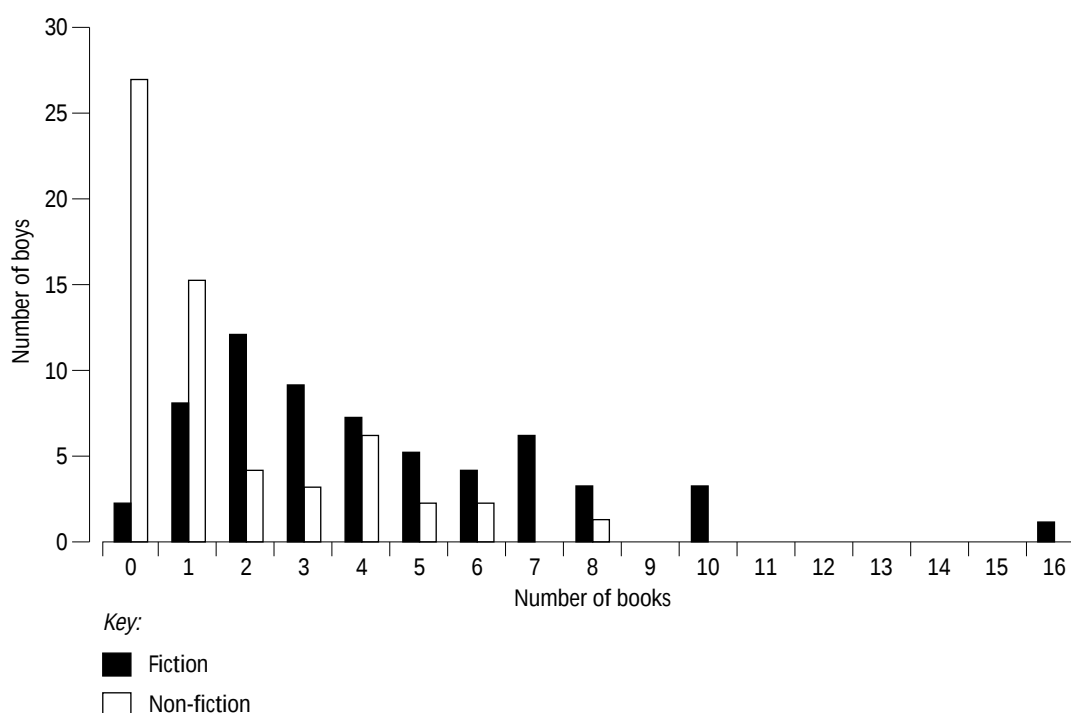
There were three most striking features of the findings. First it appeared that the local schools have been doing an excellent job of encouraging reflective fiction reading. The school libraries were supporting this work effectively. A second, surprising finding was the sheer diversity of books read. Young teenage boys are not merely following teen culture, nor, thankfully, National Curriculum

book lists, but using private reading to develop their own range of tastes in fiction. A third strand of the study's findings was the relative weakness of the use of non-fiction, even for school-based assignments.

There also appeared to be implications for public libraries, which are summarized as follows:

- Arrangement by genre would aid access for this group.
- Access by series as well as by author is desirable. Of course, shelf access can be by only one of these features, but catalogue access should also be considered.
- Retain works of popular authors and series, which also has implications for back-stocking policy.
- Promote new authors and series to sustain the reading habits of teenagers.
- Teenage boys are totally unconcerned about whether a book is in hardback or paperback. Selection by other criteria is therefore not at the expense of format.
- Stock as diverse a range of fiction as possible.
- Provide links between young adult and adult stock.
- Different boys have different needs in fiction reading. Three equal groups need catering for: those who feel detached from a story, those for whom imagining the

Figure 5 Number of books read (frequency diagram)



scene a story depicts is important, and those who imagine their own involvement in the story in some way.

- Realism is not crucial, especially among less able readers. Boys mostly defined realism as writing that made a story, however unlikely, believable. This implies that quality of writing is still important to these readers.
- More work needs to be done on promoting the use of non-fiction for interest and enjoyment. Use of non-fiction was low.

I believe that the conclusions of this study are less pessimistic about the reading of young teenage boys than might have been expected. Indeed the best-seller figures from 1994 tend to support the thesis that teenagers are reading. Of the top 50 selling authors from June 1993 to July 1994, 16 write for teenagers or children, compared with nine the previous year[4]. However, the study examined the reasons for the continued need of boys for the reading experience. There is certainly no room for complacency among public librarians; perhaps schools are finding the most effective way of turning compulsory tasks into leisure choices, at least among a majority of their pupils, and public libraries also need actively to promote leisure reading among boys.

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