

**AT THE CROSSING-PLACES:
REPRESENTATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN SELECTED
21st CENTURY CHILDREN'S TEXTS**

by

Janice Robertson

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Prof. R.A. Northover

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For my boys

Brandon, Michael and Gareth

10 years later

*I am a growing teen who reads,
I wonder about love,
I hear my bones stretching,
I see a young man brewing,
I want to thrive in life,
I am a growing teen who reads.*

*I pretend to fly on dancing skies,
I feel the love, true love that keeps me going,
I want a flag, a flag of peace,
I worry for all the mistakes I make,
I cry for broken hearts and lives,
I am a growing teen who reads*

*I understand how loneliness can hurt,
I say, "Don't give in"
I dream of happiness, not money or fame,
I try to love my enemies,
I hope for peace and self-respect,
I am a growing teen who reads.*

Brandon, age 12

ABSTRACT

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Janice Robertson

Supervisor : Prof. R.A. Northover

Department : Theory of Literature

This study explores the representations of masculinity in selected contemporary children's adventure literature. According to John Stephens (2002:x), a problem for boys, both in narrative fictions and in the world, is that hegemonic masculinity 'appears simultaneously to propose a schema for behaviour and to insist on their subordination as children, to conflate agency with hegemonic masculinity, and to disclose that, for them, such agency is illusory'. This issue, among others, forms the basis of the research as this paradox is particularly evident in texts that fall within the adventure genre, where protagonists present an image of empowered masculinity that has little or no correlation in real, that is, non-literary, childhood. Nevertheless, despite this apparent conflict, the discourses portrayed in these texts continue to influence society (in varying degrees) as they are promoted, perpetuated and disseminated through cultural productions.

Moreover, as this research rests on the premise of a belief 'in the cultural productivity of fictions' (Knights 1999:vii), it focuses on literary material that forms part of the landscape of childhood in contemporary society. Therefore, this study analyses selected 21st century children's texts in order to identify and discuss the representations of masculinity in these texts in the context of their publication at a time when hegemonic masculinity has long been a topic of popular and academic debate. The primary texts include the *Arthur* series by Kevin Crossley-Holland, Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider* series, the *Young Bond* series by Charlie Higson and Steve Cole and the *Bodyguard* books by Chris Bradford.

By using discourse theory as a lens to complement the masculinity studies approach, this research investigates the questions posed under the problem statement and presents findings that demonstrate that the gender models presented in the texts are, for the most part, cast in 'the masculinist and patriarchal conventions that characterised imperialist adventure' (Capdevila 2003:216). Thus, it is evident that the children's adventure genre seems to be rather tardy in keeping with the times. Nevertheless, much of the conflict surrounding the performance of masculinity in contemporary society is represented through the texts and forms a significant part of the narrative.

Key terms:

Young masculinity; children's literature; adventure fiction; performativity studies; boys reading; gendered identity; fictions of masculinity; Anthony Horowitz; Chris Bradford; Kevin Crossley-Holland.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The 'movement' of my 'inner' life is motivated and structured through my continual crossing of boundaries; by those zones of uncertainty where [...] it is at first unclear which position I should be in, that is, which side of the boundary I should be on.

(Shotter 1996:124)

1.1 Introduction

Back in 2013, I formed part of the task team for a re-circulation of the University of South Africa's Honours degree in Gender Studies. After several hours of intense discussion and blueprinting of ideas, the curriculum design specialist that formed part of the team finally gave voice to her misgivings and enquired, "Why on earth do we need to teach masculinity studies? I mean, what's there to learn? Masculinity is ... well, just masculinity, isn't it?"

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Just a moment, however, before we pointed out that her statements and the underlying assumptions they suggested, were living proof of the need for the promotion of masculinity studies in general, and the research of its various avenues in tertiary education institutions in particular. My colleague's frank outburst unwittingly provided circumstantial evidence of one of the basic challenges faced by the pioneers in the field: that is, the invisibility of masculinity. For example, the widely accepted cliché 'boys will be boys', implies that, regardless of external factors, social conditioning and restrictive parameters, the inherent maleness (whatever that may be) of boys will succeed in manifesting itself in the boy child. Similarly, according to Balswick (1992:12), a masculinity studies scholar, '[t]hroughout most of history it was taken for granted that men acted like men because that was their *nature*' (my emphasis).

Therefore, according to Wannamaker (2008:24) ‘a major goal of masculinity studies is to make masculinity visible as a social construct that is, in varying degrees, created by society and, therefore, also alterable by society’. In this study I will analyse and discuss various representations and constructions of masculinity in order to outline the fictions of boyhood¹ in selected contemporary children’s texts and then speculate on ‘possibilities for creating a new image of masculinity by identifying what literature has to say about changing these social roles’ (Murphy 1994:2).

1.2 Background

*Myths of masculinity have been perpetuated
in literature, art, popular culture, and
the politics of our daily lives.’²*

According to John Stephens in *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children’s Literature and Film* (2002:x), a problem for boys, both in narrative fictions and in the world, is that hegemonic masculinity ‘appears simultaneously to propose a schema for behaviour and to insist on their subordination as children, to conflate agency with hegemonic masculinity, and to disclose that, for them, such agency is illusory. These paradoxes are currently being increasingly dealt with as a theme in children’s literature and film’. This seeming contradiction is particularly evident in texts that fall within the adventure genre, where protagonists present an image of empowered masculinity that has little or no correlation in real, that is, non-literary, childhood. Nevertheless, despite this apparent conflict, the discourses portrayed in these texts continue to influence society (in varying degrees) as they are promoted, perpetuated and disseminated through cultural productions.

Moreover, as this research rests on the premise of a belief ‘in the cultural productivity of fictions (and of the social and intellectual processes through which they are read and valued)’ (Knights 1999:vii), it will focus on literary material that forms part of the landscape of childhood in contemporary society. Therefore, this study will analyse selected 21st century children’s texts in

¹ ‘Throughout this study, the term ‘boyhood’ refers to the period during which certain experiences, ideologies and modes of being contribute to the colonisation of the boy protagonist by various discourses. In other words, ‘boyhood’ is considered to be, as Medalie (2000:42) puts it, ‘the formative stage’ (my emphasis) of life during which boys respond to the ‘modes of masculinity which are offered to them’’ (Robertson 2009:3).

² (Murphy 1994:1)

order to identify and discuss the representations of masculinity in these texts in the context of their publication at a time when hegemonic masculinity has long been a topic of popular and academic debate³. Furthermore, I will be focusing on texts that fall within the ambit of adventure fiction as this is a genre which has long been characterised by its promotion of hegemonic or privileged masculinity⁴.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the study

*'We are just beginning to understand masculinity
as a 'fiction' or a localizable, historical, and
therefore unstable construct.'*⁵

The broad aim of this study is to delineate different representations of masculinity in the respective texts through an analysis of the various discourses that these texts represent, propagate and, at times, subvert. The research aims, therefore, to investigate the following questions:

Firstly, with particular reference to depictions of masculinity in selected children's adventure books, how does the modern male protagonist (man or boy) look, think, and behave?

Secondly, do 21st century representations of masculinity in boy-centred adventure literature reflect contemporary expectations of gender performance? Moreover, do the texts under review offer relevant and culturally acceptable modes of masculinity to modern boy readers?

Thirdly, how can the application of discourse theory to masculinity studies aid the discussion of implicit and explicit concepts surrounding the representation of masculinity in children's texts?

Michel Foucault ([1972] 2003:49) claims that the most fruitful way of thinking of discourse is not

³ My interest and subsequent research in gender-related fields began over a decade ago with my Honours research report which interrogated masculinity issues in texts preserved in the Sammy Marks Museum in Pretoria. Since then, my research has centred on the construction and representation of masculinity and boyhood in selected texts.

⁴ As Martin Green (1993:n.p.) aptly states, adventure fiction 'goes against the grain of our political culture' because it presents 'a definition of masculinity stressing the element of adventure in a culture that has become increasingly hostile to these values (though they survive, at least in attenuated form, in our popular culture)'.
⁵ Thaïs Morgan in Peter Murphy's *Fictions of Masculinity: Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities* (1994:n.p.).

merely as a group of signs or a portion of text, but as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. Using this statement as a point of departure, how does the performance of idealised masculinity relate to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in selected historical and contemporary children's texts?

Finally, in what ways, if any, have altering discourses affected the notions of ideal masculinity as it is presented and negotiated in selected recent children's texts? Early feminist activism and research carved a space for the popular and academic contestation of gender issues and, while feminist pioneers may not have intended it, questions surrounding the stereotypical portrayal of men, maleness and masculinity have since also become topics of heated debate at various levels of society. How have these debates affected the ways in which 21st century authors portray male characters in their books?

1.4 Scope of the Study

The proposed qualitative study will be conducted as a literature review. Relevant, selected, recent publications will be examined and compared. Secondary sources in the form of books, articles and transcribed interviews will be consulted. The findings will be discussed in terms of current masculinity studies trends from a discourse theory perspective.

An eclectic perspective of discourse theory, based primarily on the work of Foucault (1972), Williams (1977), Mills (2004) and Locke (2004) will constitute the theoretical basis from which aspects of masculinity studies, and in particular hegemonic masculinities and representations of masculinity in literature, will be discussed.

The primary texts were chosen with an emphasis on accessibility and popularity as the research concerns itself with widely disseminated discourses of masculinity portrayed in recent children's adventure fiction. All of the principal texts discussed have attained a level of popularity (or notoriety) that would constitute a significant aspect of the genre's literary landscape. Moreover, the selected books follow their teenaged, male protagonists over a period of time, thus allowing for character development and the portrayal of various gendered performances. The *Arthur* trilogy by Kevin Crossley-Holland is the shortest series, followed by Chris Bradford's six *Bodyguard* books (of

which the most recent was published earlier this year). The *Young Bond* series, by Charlie Higson and Steve Cole, boasts nine titles with Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider* topping the primary reading list with eleven books in the series.

1.5 Contribution of this Study

Although a comprehensive library search brought to light several relevant sources which will be valuable to the study, no clear precedent or parallel to the proposed research was found. Moreover, a search of the National Research Foundation's NEXUS database confirmed that no South African research has been done in the specifically proposed field since 1999. An MLA search of the Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA) database showed that no literary study on the proposed primary texts has been done internationally and searches of various other databases confirmed the above findings.

The proposed study aims to add significantly to the existing body of literature by including recently published children's literature within its scope. Not only will it focus on works by highly acclaimed contemporary writers, but also on those written by less known authors who have contributed to the genre. As is evident from the electronic search results, the area of enquiry is largely untapped.

1.6 Outline of the Study

This chapter consists primarily of an overview of the structure of the study. The aims, objectives, and areas of enquiry to be addressed in the respective chapters are set out and a brief rationale is given for the selection of primary sources. It also indicates the scope of the study and situates the research within its theoretical framework.

Chapter Two: Making Masculinity Visible

A literature study of selected aspects of masculinity studies will be presented in Chapter Two. The salient aspects of masculinity theory will be discussed, in particular, the relevance of this theoretical

lens to children's literature. The arguments of prominent theorists in the field (such as Connell, Morrell, Stephens and Knights, among many others) will be critically evaluated and current masculinity studies trends will be discussed in this chapter.

The second part of this chapter will demonstrate the value of discourse theory as a critical approach to masculinity studies. An eclectic definition, based on the work of Foucault (1972), Williams (1977), Mills (2004) and Locke (2004), will be presented with examples demonstrating the application of the concept to literature and masculinity studies and to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity in particular.

The third section of this chapter will investigate gender configurations in children's literature in general, and conclude with an in depth discussion of the representation of masculinity in a recent children's text as a case study.

Chapter Three: 'The King Who Was and Will Be'⁶

The Arthur trilogy by Kevin Crossley-Holland presents a perspective of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table for contemporary child readers through the eyes of a young boy. The masculinities represented in this text are particularly varied and sensitively portrayed. The research aims to discuss the ways in which hegemonic masculinity constructs are perceived, evaluated, and negotiated in these texts for modern child readers. Particular emphasis will be placed on patriarchy and the myth of masculinity as it is portrayed and perpetuated through the protagonist. The chapter will also focus on issues of gendered identity and wounded masculinity.

Although this trilogy falls under what is called, rather loosely, Arthuriana, this research will not be analysing the texts from this perspective. Rather, the books are analysed as part of the children's literature genre as this is the context in which most child readers will encounter them. Reference will, however, be made to some sterling research which has been done on the masculinity of King Arthur in medieval texts, in particular the work by Bonnie Wheeler (1992), Kenneth Hodges (2009) and Jeffrey Richards (2009) as this has particular bearing on the research topic.

⁶ The full heading of Chapter Three reads as follows: 'The King Who Was and Will Be': Mythmaking and the Perpetuation/Contestation of Masculine Hegemony in Crossley-Holland's Arthur Trilogy

Chapter Four: Marketing Masculinity, Branding the Boy

Chris Bradford is an immensely popular author whose bestselling books have been translated into twenty languages. His *Bodyguard* series features a modern teenage boy who works as a close protection officer for a top secret agency. This chapter will present a multifaceted analysis of the representation of masculinity in this series in order to understand its appeal to young male readers and its enormous success in the 21st century children's book market.

Patriarchy and identity will feature prominently in this chapter, as well as a discussion on the representation of the protagonist's body and its production of gendered performances. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the marketability of masculinity as an asset in various contexts presented by the texts.

Chapter Five: Bond is Back

Chapter Five examines two more successful series that fall within the ambit of the children's adventure literature genre: the *Young Bond* books by Charlie Higson and Steve Cole and Anthony Horowitz's *Alex Rider* superspy collection. While both have proven popular in the market, the latter enjoys widespread success having sold an estimated 19 million units by 2017⁷.

This chapter will analyse and compare the respective representations of masculinity in the series with particular emphasis on the relationship between the boy and his gendered and culturally inscribed body. Moreover, the idea of agency as a crucial element in the configuration of hegemonic masculinity will be considered in the light of the protagonist's experiences. Finally, the chapter will consider whether the gender performances presented in the books can be seen as relevant to child readers who live in a society that has been taught to despise the historically inflated ego of the white male mind.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The findings of this study will be summarised and discussed in Chapter Six. Suggestions for further research as well as limitations of the research will be presented here. This chapter concludes the study and, as such, will offer a brief overview of the research, linking it with the problem statements presented in Chapter One.

⁷ Sales figure from Publisher's Weekly.

CHAPTER TWO

Making Masculinity Visible

'Performance masquerades here as nature'⁸

2.1 Background

One afternoon last summer, my nine year-old son and I returned to our car after a particularly long funeral. The African sun had been baking down on the parking lot and the black leather seats were visibly emanating heat waves as we got in. My son exclaimed as his body connected with the boiling hot seat and he instinctively shifted to the front edge to minimise contact, while I let the windows down and started up the car. Then, out of the blue, he said, "No. I must be a man and face this." And he thrust his barely protected back against the full heat of the chair. I glanced across at him, momentarily lost for words, in time to see a satisfied grin as he chuckled and said, "Oh, I am so ... a man!"

Once the hilarity of the situation had given way to reflection, I started wondering how this attempt at tough masculinity had taken place at such an unexpected moment. There was no overbearing or supportive paternal witness, no siblings or peers to impress, and I certainly have not encouraged 'manly' displays to secure my validation and affection. It was as if, for a moment, all the cues my son had picked up from society, family, friends and school had presented him with a chance to identify himself with the gender type he most admires and he literally enacted a 'performance' to prove to himself that he does, indeed, 'have what it takes' to embody the ideal that he has identified as the most desirable. It was as if he felt he could now tick the box that says: 'Bravery and a sense of humour in the face of physical pain.'

⁸ Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland, *Performing Masculinity* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 2.

In the few seconds during which my son shared with me his thought process, the impulse that made him act in what he deemed a 'manly' manner, I could see not only the effect of the action, but also the conscious choice to perform the action; two of the main concepts in masculinity research: constructedness and performativity. This chapter will be exploring these concepts, among others, as essential to a discussion of the problem statement.

2.2 Introduction

Over the last few decades, masculinity studies has come to be recognised as a significant aspect of gender studies in its own right. The field has moved through periods during which various ideas around masculinity held sway and which have been either discarded or developed in the light of ongoing interdisciplinary research. A literature study of selected aspects of masculinity studies will be presented in this chapter as a basis for later discussion. The salient aspects of masculinity theory will be explored, in particular, the relevance of this theoretical lens to children's literature. The arguments of prominent theorists in the field will be critically evaluated and current masculinity studies trends will be discussed.

It is important to note that this review will focus mainly on aspects of masculinity studies which are of particular relevance to the research on hand and cannot, nor does it in any way attempt to, reflect the entirety of the research which has been conducted in this field. The popularity, and, more significantly, the interdisciplinary nature of gender studies would make any attempt at comprehensive review impossible in a research project of this kind. It must also be stressed that while there was initially some resistance to the idea of studying masculinity, most contemporary feminists agree that the study of masculinity is a 'part of the feminist agenda'. Studying masculinity, then, is not at the expense of feminist research; rather, to its advantage.

The second part of this chapter will demonstrate the value of discourse theory as a critical approach to masculinity studies. An eclectic definition, based on the work of Foucault (1972), Williams (1977),

Mills (2004) and Locke (2004), will be presented with examples demonstrating the application of the concept to literature and masculinity studies and to the discussion of hegemonic masculinity in particular. This will provide a useful vocabulary for later chapters.

The third section of this chapter will investigate gender configurations in children's literature in general, and conclude with an in depth discussion of the representation of masculinity in a recent children's text as a case study.

2.3 Masculinity Studies

Emig and Rowland (2010:1) note that the study of masculinity in the late twentieth century met with considerable resistance before acquiring critical acceptance. Initially it was written off as an antifeminist backlash, a typical joke being 'Why study masculinity now? We haven't been doing anything else for centuries!' (Emig & Rowland 2010:1) Most contemporary feminists have, however, come to recognise that understanding men and the societal expectations on men could improve general awareness of the politics of gender and even have a positive effect on women. Gender relations could, in other words, be seen as the two sides of the same coin. Understanding men (of various sexual orientations) and raising awareness of the ways in which their gender is enacted could benefit or even contribute to a knowledge of how women are disadvantaged (in varying degrees) by the status quo. (Emig & Rowland 2010:1)

In *Making Boys Appear: The Masculinity of Children's Fiction*, Perry Nodelman (2002:1) relates his experience while teaching literature and gender representation at the University of Winnipeg. After several sessions of critical reading in which versions of femininity were analysed, Nodelman

decided to choose a number of texts about boys and to focus on questions of masculinity. The new focus distressed my students in revealing ways. They saw it as

a waste of time because they were convinced there was nothing to explore. Girls, in their minds, were clearly the victims of stereotypes. Boys were just boys, allowed to be whomever they wanted to be, enjoying a freedom from stereotypes that girls can only envy. Why bother even thinking about masculinity? (Nodelman 2002:1)

I venture to hope that, in some areas which have been reached by an enlightened gender agenda, perceptions of masculinity have changed over the past decade. Nevertheless, the pervasive idea 'that 'boys will be boys', seems to continue to enjoy widespread acceptance; a dictum which implies that, regardless of external factors, social conditioning and restrictive parameters, the inherent maleness (whatever that may be) of boys will succeed in manifesting itself in the boy child' (Robertson 2010:11). Balswick (1992:12), in challenging this kind of cliché observes that '[t]hroughout most of history it was taken for granted that men acted like men because that was their nature'.

Careful analysis of a wide range of historical and contemporary texts (literary and other) shows, however, that issues of masculinity and identity have never been as uncomplicated as this perception suggests. Yet, as Emig and Rowland (2010:1) note, 'the common observation that what is pervasive in society and culture often remains invisible also holds true for masculinity'. Buchbinder (2013:4), also, notes that 'despite the evident belief of many that masculinity and femininity are unchanging and inevitable properties of male and female bodies, respectively, these attributes are in fact culturally specific and historically conditioned'. Furthermore, as Martin Crotty (2001:2) explains, 'most sociologists and historians of gender reject biological determinism and argue that gender is a cultural construct imposed upon a sexed body'.

Similarly, in the introduction to his seminal book, *Men and Masculinities*, Stephen Whitehead (2002:5) observes that

the turn of the millennium appears to be a particularly appropriate moment to cast a critical eye on men. For there are social movements and transformations taking place, beyond the control of any individual or group, that are shaking up gender relations and turning the spotlight on males in ways unimaginable just a few decades ago. This is not to suggest that men have previously been invisible. On the contrary, men, as a gender group, are omnipresent across the social world. Are not men the very centre, the core, the drive, the universal 'mankind'? Certainly, men have been prone to seeing themselves as such. But is being at the 'centre' the same as being 'visible'? No, for, paradoxically, being at the centre can serve to hide, obfuscate, confuse, obscure. Often we do not see, through any critical lens, that which is most obvious. And this is where feminism comes in. (Whitehead 2002:5)

Masculinity studies has come a long way in debunking the myth surrounding the inevitable naturalness of masculinity, in some cases even highlighting the dangers implicit in such preconceptions. Kindlon and Thompson (1999:5)⁹, for instance, observe that when they first began researching and speaking about issues that affect boys, a large portion of the challenge lay in convincing 'sceptical parents and educators of a truth we knew from our years of experience as therapists: that boys suffer deeply as a result of the destructive emotional training our culture imposes on them, that many of them are in crisis, and that all of them need help'.

While my research does not explore the idea of masculinity in crisis (in the media sensationalist form)¹⁰, the recognition that boys may, in fact, not be performing in a 'typically masculine' manner

⁹ *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys.*

¹⁰ Rivers and Barnett (in Wannamaker 2008:6) observe that 'the boy crisis we're hearing about is [...] the product of both a backlash against the women's movement and the media's penchant for continuously churning out news about the latest dire threat to the nation'. This rather strong animadversion must be seen against the backdrop of countless publications and documentaries lamenting the generally poor performance of boys in school and predicting a generation of young men who are unable to cope with the demands of modern society. I must note here that in most cases, the term 'boy crisis' refers to boys' supposed

as a result of 'natural expression' but rather in a bid to conform to cultural expectations, holds particular value. Moreover, John Stephens (2002:iv), in his preface to *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film*, claims that many boys 'find the contemporary world bewildering' and he attributes this to 'a lack of correspondence between their experiences of living in the world and a perceived demand to conform to the hegemonic masculinity of their society'. A telling, and equally poignant, example of this bewilderment occurs in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which Stephen Dedalus (described by many as Joyce's fictional alter ego) tells of an episode that took place soon after his arrival at Clongowes Wood College, a boys' boarding school:

... Wells came over to Stephen and said: 'Tell us, Dedalus, do you kiss your mother before you go to bed?'

Stephen answered: "I do."

Wells turned to the other fellows and said: "Oh, I say, here's a fellow says he kisses his mother every night before he goes to bed."

The other fellows stopped their game and turned round, laughing. Stephen blushed under their eyes and said: "I do not".

Wells said: "Oh, I say, here's a fellow says he doesn't kiss his mother before he goes to bed."

They all laughed again. Stephen tried to laugh with them. He felt his whole body hot and confused in a moment. What was the right answer to the question? He had given two and still Wells laughed. But Wells must know the right answer because he was in third of grammar. [...] Was it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother? What did that mean, to kiss? (Joyce [1914]1992:11)

disenfranchisement in the field of education, where teaching and learning styles favour the type generally most accessible to girls. While valuable research has been done and awareness has subsequently been raised in terms of boys' educational needs, this area falls outside the parameters of this particular research.

Leaving aside the issues that arise with particular reference to the boy's sexuality as is inferred by Wells' interest in whether or not Stephen kisses his mother, I would like to draw attention to two other aspects of this excerpt. Firstly, from Stephen's internal deliberations, one understands that he sees no clear, 'natural', or obviously correct way to answer a question that involves an admission of affectionate physical contact with his mother. Even in the mind of the bully, the one to whom Stephen inevitably turns to determine the 'right answer' (Joyce [1914]1992:11) there is a sense of conscious ambivalence. Secondly, Stephen's sudden attempt to deny kissing his mother (after discovering that his initial response had led to mockery) demonstrates not only his desire to be seen as conforming to the 'right' way of being a boy, but also highlights the social mechanisms that ensure this conformity. For Stephen, as for many non-fictional boys, dominant masculinity is anything but natural; for him, it is a bewildering set of norms he must first identify and then negotiate in order to gain social acceptance.

Many men who have taken to recording how they experience their own masculinity have responded with a similar sense of confusion. In an extract from his deliberately provocative yet insightful book, *Being a Man*, David Cohen relates that

When I was a boy I was often told to be a man. When my marriage was breaking up my mother told me to 'be a man'. By this she seemed to mean that I shouldn't go back to my wife. Being unforgiving and hard was the proper posture for a proper man. [...] Sometimes, being a man (as far as my mother was concerned) meant standing up to my father. This was necessary, she said, since he was forever being unfaithful, stingy or acting as a barbarian. He couldn't help it, she conceded when she was in a conciliatory mood, though she never clarified whether this was because he was a man, or an Arab, or due to some darker unmentionable flaw. (Cohen 1990:1)

Behind the facetiousness of this admission, there lies a latent bewilderment; one which seems to ring true with many autobiographical accounts penned by men who seek to understand society's expectations of dominant masculinity. This is particularly true of men who live in a modern world that has been sensitised to gender issues and that is, in some respects, in a period characterised by change. Robinson (2013:59), in considering the extensive research findings of masculinity writers observes that there has been, in most fields, 'an acceptance of masculinity as a social construction which, as such, sees masculinity as fluid and open to both contestation and change'. She cites Morgan (1992:vii) who claims that this understanding 'has led to a recognition that the dominant forms of men and masculinities are themselves not merely natural and unchangeable [...] Thus men and masculinities are not seen as problematic, but as constructions which need to be explored, analysed and indeed in certain aspects, such as the use of violence, changed. (Morgan 1992:vii)

Texts such as these help to make masculinity and its accoutrements visible as societal constructs which, by reason of their constructedness, remain essentially malleable and open to possible permutation. As Kimmel et al. (2005:1)¹¹ suggest, revealing the dynamics of gender, [...] problematises the position of men.

2.4 Hegemonic Masculinity

In a discussion of 'Social Theories for Researching Men and Masculinities', Holter (2005:17)¹² claims that scholarship in this field, 'especially critical scholarship, has been strongly influenced by notions of direct gender hierarchy, which usually invoke some notion of male dominance. The direct gender hierarchy perspective emphasises the consequences of men's superior social position'. In *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, for instance, Raewyn Connell, one of the leading theorists in the field, claims that 'there is an ordering of versions of femininity and masculinity at

¹¹ In *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (2005).

¹² In *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (2005).

the level of the whole society [... that is] centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women' (Connell 1987: 183). To the uninitiated, this may seem to be a summary of a simple hierarchical system, a bald yet accurate statement of the reality of gender relationships. This is not, however, true. As Connell's many subsequent research publications demonstrate, this is just the broad outline of the situation; a plethora of personalities and performances, male and female, occupy the space between the top dog and the underdog in the gender arena.

Speaking from a similar perspective, Emig and Rowland (2010:2) observe that 'traditional feminism had subsumed all men under the umbrella term 'patriarchy,' the traditional passing on and sharing of power between men. Yet not all men felt empowered by patriarchy¹³; indeed lots of men, initially largely gay men, signalled that they perceived themselves as much oppressed by it as women, though usually in different ways'. While critics may question the possibility that some men may be 'as much oppressed' by dominant masculinity as women, the statement nevertheless highlights the complexity of the concept of masculinity. Being born male does not, it seems, necessarily guarantee societal ascendance in every case. There are unspoken rules which govern the enactment of the role that leads to gender dominance. Some men find the negotiation of these standards difficult or undesirable and are subsequently marginalised or rejected on this basis. As Ben Knights (1999:6) observes, 'Men are themselves the victims of patriarchy and the heterosexual presumption'.

In order to discuss this aspect of gender relations, there has been an attempt to identify and understand 'hegemonic masculinities'. Central to this research is an interrogation of how 'particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance' (Robinson 2013:60). Morrell et al. (2013:4) elaborate on the characteristics of the concept by claiming that 'hegemony is an achievement, an expression of social power, and evident in 'the ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set

¹³ The concept of patriarchy will be explored in more detail in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideals and define morality' (Connell 1987: 107; cited in Morrell et al.).

In a reflective article called 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:829) claim that 'the concept of hegemonic masculinity, formulated two [now three] decades ago, has considerably influenced recent thinking about men, gender, and social hierarchy. It has provided a link between the growing research field of men's studies (also known as masculinity studies and critical studies of men), popular anxieties about men and boys, feminist accounts of patriarchy, and sociological models of gender'. The writers admit that this is 'a contested concept' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:830) but maintain that 'the issues it names are very much at stake in contemporary struggles about power and political leadership, public and private violence, and changes in families and sexuality'.

In a nutshell, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is argued to embody 'the currently most honoured way of being a man' that, implicitly, requires men to 'position themselves in relation to it' and that legitimates, on an ideological level, 'the global subordination of women to men' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). This description allows for the historicity of gender to be taken into account as well as the idea that gender is shaped by context. In other words, in different social settings and in different historical milieus, different kinds of masculinity may be regarded as most desirable. Also, in a 1995 publication, *Masculinities*, Connell (1995: 77) observed that 'the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are (not) always the most powerful people'; 'hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual'.

Even so, Victoria Robinson (2013:61) notes that 'most men do not correspond to the hegemonic model' (as I mentioned earlier, some men find emulation of the ideal undesirable, repressive or

difficult), but it is argued that 'most men are complicit in sustaining it'. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:832) summarise this argument by claiming that men who accept the 'benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance could be regarded as showing a complicit masculinity' and it is in relation to this circumstance as well as to the acquiescence (in broad and generalised terms) 'amongst heterosexual women, that the concept of hegemony [is] most powerful'.

Moreover, it is essential to note that hegemonic masculinity is 'not assumed to be normal'¹⁴ in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). Yet it is undeniably normative (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). Countless biographies relate the strategies young boys and men employ in order to meet the requirements of hegemony whether or not they are physically or psychologically predisposed to that particular gender type. In *Performing Masculinity*, Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland assert that, historically, 'the accomplishments of masculinity are usually the results of a process, typically one that involves some degree of physical or symbolic violence.'¹⁵ Connell, similarly, suggests that 'violence is a relationship between bodies that has been of great importance in the history of masculinities'.¹⁶ Achieving the ends of hegemonic masculinity seldom comes without some form of physical or psychological mutilation¹⁷.

2.5 Multiple Masculinities

According to Debbie Epstein (1998:50) in 'Marked men: whiteness and masculinity', 'the science of gender is itself socially produced and, in turn, produces different practices of masculinity, different ways of 'doing man'. She clarifies her meaning by elaborating that 'men become particular kinds of

¹⁴ In relation to what is considered 'normal', Foucault's theory on discourse is particularly valuable. This will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

¹⁵ Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland, *Performing Masculinity* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 2

¹⁶ Connell, 'Globalisation, Imperialism and Masculinities,' 82

¹⁷ More on this in Chapter Three.

men through their own histories and the histories of the societies they live in. Different masculinities become relevant, common, or even possible, in different historical times, in different places, and in different political situations' (Epstein 1998:50). It is because of this social reality that the notion of multiple masculinities has gained credence amongst scholars across a wide range of disciplines.

Morrell et al.¹⁸, (2013:4) observe that not all men have equal access to hegemonic power, but that many are themselves 'subjugated or subordinated by and to it'¹⁹. They cite Connell's claim that 'hegemonic masculinity is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women' (Connell 1987: 183). This perspective indicates a 'more complex conceptualisation of masculinity' (Mac & Ghail 1996:2)²⁰ in which the social positioning of different kinds of men in various contexts may be analysed. In discussing Connell's theories on hegemonic and multiple masculinities, Morrell et al. (2013:4) claim that

The beauty of Connell's concept is that it offers an alternative to essentialist and sex role treatments of men, and combines a number of interrelated features. The concept shows how men can take up a range of positions, including complicity, subordination, or opposition to hegemony, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identities, ideals, relationships, power and patriarchy.

In their 2005 article, Connell and Messerschmidt reflect on some of the theories that have come about since the idea of hegemonic masculinity was first thrust into mainstream academia. They

¹⁸ Robert Morrell , Rachel Jewkes , Graham Lindegger & Vijay Hamlall (2013): Hegemonic Masculinity: Reviewing the Gendered Analysis of Men's Power in South Africa, *South African Review of Sociology*, 44:1, 3-21

¹⁹ In 'Hegemonic Masculinity/Masculinities in South Africa: Culture, Power, and Gender Politics', Morrell, Jewkes and Lindegger (2012:12) claim that one of the main reasons why the concept of hegemonic masculinity was so enthusiastically embraced by the intellectual community was that

it sought to analyse gender power in conjunction with issues of male hierarchy, allowing for differentiation between groups of men who had different relations to one another and more or less power in relation to a dominant group. This was particularly useful in an historical context in which colonialism and apartheid had so clearly divided the political and economic landscape along the lines of race and social class.

²⁰ See Robinson (2013:58).

mention, with evident approval, a proposition made by Demetrakis Demetriou in 2001²¹ that suggests that one should differentiate between internal and external forms of hegemony. According to his theory, 'external hegemony refers to the institutionalisation of men's dominance over women; internal hegemony refers to the social ascendancy of one group of men over all other men' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:844). The two concepts should never, however, be seen as divorced from one another for, as Demetriou points out,

hegemonic masculinity appropriates from other masculinities whatever appears to be pragmatically useful for continued domination. The result of this dialectic is not a unitary pattern of hegemonic masculinity but a 'historic bloc' involving a weaving together of multiple patterns, whose hybridity is the best possible strategy for external hegemony. A constant process of negotiation, translation, and reconfiguration occurs (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:844).

It is the representation of this multifaceted process in children's adventure fiction that is central to the research aims of this thesis.

2.6 Performativity

According to Emig and Rowland (2010:4), 'it took Gender Studies to unravel the conundrum of identity, not by making things clearer, but by showing how entangled they were'. In this comment they are referring to an added dimension which was brought to the gender identity debate by Judith Butler in her highly influential book *Gender Trouble*. They summarise Butler's ideas in a proposal that gender is essentially 'the result of performance, a performance that [does] not so much imitate a given essential model as create the idea of such a model and norm through incessant repetition in

²¹ 'Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique' by Demetrakis Z. Demetriou *Theory and Society* Vol. 30, No. 3 (Jun., 2001), pp. 337-361.

the first place (Emig & Rowland 2010:4). As Butler phrases it, 'gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself' (Butler 1997: 306). Emig and Rowland (2010:4) observe that in making this claim, 'Butler shifted the debate on gender from that of an essential (natural) quality to a set of performances inside the power structures of society'.

Epstein (1998:50) understands Butler's theory to suggest that 'gender is inscribed on the body through continual performance'. Moreover, 'that gender is not something stable, which leads to a person behaving in certain ways or doing particular things. Rather, she says, gender is something people perform, a performance which takes place in time, which is often fragile and needs to be defended, and which is produced both within oneself and for other people' (Epstein 1998:50). Gender is constituted, according to Butler (1990:140), through 'a stylised repetition of acts'.

Moreover, in her chapter on subversive bodily acts, Butler (1988:191) develops her argument further by claiming that

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

Gender is thus viewed as the result of countless and repetitive performances which, of themselves, recreate and reaffirm various ways of re-enacting identities for gendered beings.

2.7 Discourse and masculinity

In outlining the theoretical premise of his book, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1999), Ben Knights explains that his working assumption 'is that masculinities are not given but achieved through a constant struggle with countervailing tendencies' (Knights 1999:1). The ideological basis of my own research is much the same; my critical lens is, however, focused on children's literature and the masculinity of fictional boys and men as an indicator of societal expectations and authorial experience. For many years, I have considered Foucault's discourse theory (tempered by the inflections and propositions of various other critical discourse analysts) useful to the discussion of masculinities as a social construction. The insights provided by discourse analysis form a valuable platform for research into 'the way social being and individual identity are produced through cultural performances' (Knights 1999:13).

The value of Foucault's theories on discourse and power are particularly relevant to discussions on hegemony. In *The Order of Discourse*, for instance, Foucault claims that 'discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is a struggle, discourse is the power²² which is to be seized' (Foucault [1970]1981:59). Although many of his statements have come under fire from various critics and although I do not agree with all Foucauldian discourse, his philosophies provide a convenient vocabulary for the articulation of ideas. The ideological link between masculinity studies and discourse theory will become clearer as the discussion progresses but I think an early indication would be useful here. In my analyses, 'I refer to hegemonic masculinity as a dominant discourse whose perpetuation depends on its continued re-

²² Fairclough (in Locke 2004:1), asserts that the purpose of discourse analysis is

to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power.

enactment and reinforcement by the performers for the maintenance of its privileged status' (Robertson 2013:3).

Kjerstin Andersson (2008:139) observes that 'many researchers have studied masculinity in terms of discourses or cultural discourses, albeit in different ways'. Let us clarify, then, the (rather eclectic) definition of 'discourse' for the purposes of this research. The first set of characteristics is set out by Foucault ([1972]2003:49) in his claim that discourse consists of 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. Similarly²³, Mills (2004:15) observes that discourses can be identified through a certain 'systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving' (Mills 2004:15). As Gee (1996:127) summarises it, 'discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life'.

In relating these ideas to masculinity research, Andersson (2008:139) claims that 'cultural discourses are widely shared background assumptions or truths about how the world works. A cultural discourse of masculinity would refer to how people assume that the majority of men in society act, talk and feel'. Andersson's reference to 'truths'²⁴ echoes Foucault's expressed desire to 'try to discover how this *choice of truth*, inside which we are caught but which we ceaselessly renew, was made – but also how it was repeated, renewed and displaced' (Foucault [1970]1981:70; my emphasis).

To paraphrase this in masculinity study terms, discourse theory is not so much preoccupied with which form of masculinity constitutes the most desirable type in terms of gender politics, but rather

²³ According to Terry Locke (2004:2), discourse is 'manifested in the various ways people are and enact the sorts of people they are'.

²⁴ Mills (2004:17) points out that discourses do not exist in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are in perpetual conflict with alternative discourses and the social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority.

with the mechanics whereby one discourse of masculinity becomes regarded as dominant and powerful, while another obtains only limited access to the benefits of hegemony.

In discussing the constructed nature of discourse in relation to masculinity studies, Andersson (2008:139) concurs with Brickell (2005: 37) and claims that

those performing masculinity are therefore constructs and constructors of symbolic orders; simultaneously productive and produced, loci of action and participants of interaction, they may perpetuate and/or resist hegemonic social arrangements. This definition enables an understanding of masculinity performed within a restricting order of symbolic meaning, constantly negotiating, producing and reproducing what it entails to 'do masculinity' in relation to the surrounding culture and social structures.

A further aspect which serves to underline the relevance of discourse theory to that of gender and/or masculinity studies is its recognition of the importance of reassessment and reconsideration of dominant discursive structures in society. For example, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* ([1972]2003:28), he claims that all

these pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitely of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction, the rules of which must be known, and the justification of which must be scrutinised: we must define in what conditions and in view of which analyses certain of them are legitimate; and we must indicate which of them can never be accepted in any circumstances.

Foucault's remarks seem particularly relevant to any discussion of social constructions of masculinity and gender formulations in general. Even the most superficial knowledge of the rise of feminism as a discourse that disturbed the tranquillity of previously accepted and largely unchallenged dominant discourses of male supremacy serves as evidence of the fact that a certain amount of change can be achieved by challenging discriminatory discourses. Foucault calls for an analytical scrutiny, a suspension of unthinking consent to potentially unjustified practices and revolutionary action where necessary. Such sentiments are at the heart of gender studies and highlight the compatibility of the two fields.

2.8 Power and Discourse

Another area of useful overlap lies in the concept of hegemony²⁵ (referring in most gender specific texts to masculine supremacy) and Foucault's influential idea of power and the struggles that determine discursive practices. He claims that 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault [1972]1993:340).

Foucault's comments have, according to Mills (2004:14) played a large part in reassessing models of power and resistance. His views are controversial in that rather than simply assuming that power is a possession or a violation of someone's rights, he attempts to 'penetrate the complexity of the range of practices which can be regarded as attributes of power'. In his view, power is dispersed throughout social relations, producing and representing possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behaviour (Robertson 2010:27). He claims (rather disingenuously some would argue), that

²⁵ While the term had previously been used by Marxist theorists, Antonio Gramsci expanded and popularised the term to refer to the way in which societies are governed by implicit consent through cultural institutions.

‘power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’ (Foucault [1972]1993:334).

Dominant discourses are thus, according to this model, not seen as entirely impregnable but rather as potentially vulnerable, in constant need of reassertion and reassurance. Foucault follows the argument through by asserting that

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (Foucault [1972]1993:335.)

This perspective on power relations is invaluable to the study of not only external, but also internal hegemonies (as proposed by Demetriou above) and will be revisited in various contexts in subsequent chapters.

2.9 General Observations on Gender in Children’s Literature

According to Mills (2004:13), discourses help to construct both people’s sense of reality and their perception of personal identity. Deconstructive discourse analysis allows people to consider alternative domains in which they can ‘construct different and potentially more liberating ways in which [they] can exist’ (Mills 2004:13). The Women’s Movement, for example, has been important for many women in delineating new discursive roles for both men and women. In this manner, an alternative discourse has fundamentally altered what it means to exist as a gendered subject (Mills 2004:13).

For example, the following excerpt from Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (1998:289) delineates the prevalent discourses of femininity (as defined by a man) during this period:

To make a good husband, is but one branch of a man's duty; but it is the chief duty of woman, to make a good wife. To please her husband, to be a good oeconomist [sic], and to educate her children, are capital duties, each of which requires much training. Nature lays the foundation: diligence and sagacity in the conductor, will make a beautiful superstructure. The time a girl spends on her doll, is a prognostic that she will be equally diligent about her offspring. (Lord Kames, 1781)

By contrast, one may consider the very different portrayal of a woman and womanhood as described in Martin's (1991:8) *Babysitters Club: Dawn on the Coast*:

Just then my mum came home. She usually doesn't get home from work until 5:45 or so, but that day she was early.

'Hi, Dawn!' she called up the stairs.

I could hear her kick off her shoes in the living room, drop her bag on the couch and her keys on the kitchen table. That's my mum, all right. I love her, but she is a little on the disorganised side. Mum padded up the stairs and plonked herself down on the one corner of my bed that wasn't covered with stuff. [...]

'How was work today?' I asked her.

Mum sighed and looked vaguely across the bed at all my things.

Evidently, the dominant discourses of womanhood that make this late 20th century portrayal of femininity possible are distinctly different from the potential discursive structures offered by 18th century discourses. Several political and social factors have contributed to the disparity between

these descriptions, and as a result, the 'reality' of being a woman has been fundamentally challenged. Torfing (1999:3) elaborates this point by asserting that social identities are constructed as 'differences within a system of purely negative relations. [...] Social identities are constructed within the relational system of a particular language'.

Furthermore, according to Kendall and Tannen (2003:548), the study of discourse and gender is an interdisciplinary field shared by specialists from diverse theoretical backgrounds. While several researchers have been concerned primarily with gender-related patterns of language use, others have focused on the study of language as a means of viewing social and political aspects of gender relations. Irrespective of the vantage point from which the study emanates, gendered discourse provides not only a detailed account of masculine/feminine discourse, but also a valuable symbolic resource for constructing and analysing personal, social, and cultural meanings and identities (Kendall & Tannen 2003:548). In *Gendered Discourses*, Sunderland (2004:5) highlights the fact that men and women 'are members of cultures in which a large amount of discourse about gender is constantly circulating. [...] The number and diversity of discursively gendered sites and topics is equally vast'.

Furthermore, according to Ruth Wodak (1997:1), studies of gender-specific language and behaviour are frequently contradictory and depend largely on the author's implicit assumptions concerning gendered discourses. As a result, sweeping generalisations have been made about the salient characteristics of male and female discourse respectively. For example, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet note that 'women's language has been said to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control' (cited in Wodak 1997:1).

In order to avoid contradictory assumptions and results, Wodak (1997:1) supports a more critical approach to gendered discourse studies which acknowledges and assimilates all relevant circumstances and prevalent ideologies surrounding the language behaviour in question. She claims that many empirical studies have neglected the context of gender-related discourse and have often analysed it by merely looking at the speakers' biological sex.

In recent years, therefore, feminist approaches to language as discourse no longer see a particular word or phrase as simply 'sexist',²⁶ since its meaning varies with the context. Jane Sunderland (2004:192) claims that 'even if a word is agreed to be sexist in a particular context – for example, a derogatory term intended to be abusive by a speaker and taken as abusive by a hearer – “damage” may not be a result. [...] The “radically contextual” nature of meaning is also one reason why “sexist language” is now of less interest to feminist linguists than previously'. As Deborah Cameron puts it: 'Discourse rather than language per se is now seen as the main locus for the construction (and contestation) of gendered and sexist meanings. As discourse has attracted more attention, “sexist language” has attracted less' (cited in Sunderland 2004:193).

According to Mills (2004:70), gender theorists are generally preoccupied with the analysis of power relations and the way in which women negotiate these. Recent feminist research has ceased to regard women as an oppressed group – mere victims of male domination – and has attempted to analyse power as it is manifested and resisted in the context of everyday life. As Thornborrow (cited in Mills 2004:72) puts it:

²⁶ Roald Dahl's version of the timeless nursery rhyme, *Hickety, Pickety* comments on a discriminatory gendered discourse that has been overlooked by countless generations. It would seem, furthermore, that he is also satirising the petty nature that certain early forms of feminist critique have assumed in their quest for gender equality in all spheres of life, including the mass corpus of inherited children's literature (*The Roald Dahl Treasury*, Dahl 2003:142):

Hickety, pickety, my black hen,
She lays eggs for gentlemen.
Not for ladies? That's absurd!
What a chauvinistic bird.

...we need to consider certain kinds of discursive actions, including silence, as interactional *resources* available to speakers across many different settings, [rather] than see particular forms of utterances as being more or less powerful than others. Which of the resources a speaker chooses to use, and the interactional outcomes of that choice, will depend on any number of factors at play in the context at hand. This will always be an “of the moment” affair.

This notion of women using discourse resources to challenge status inequalities has been widely influential and has challenged the idea of power as an elite male possession. To be sure, this idea is not altogether revolutionary. Throughout the ages, women have taken stock of their available resources and used them to their advantage. For instance, in *The New Female Instructor: Or Young Women’s Guide to Domestic Happiness*, published in 1824, the author advises that ‘it is by the arts of pleasing only that women can attain to any degree of consequence or power’ (cited by Kelly in the introduction to Gaskell [1866] 2003:xv). In a similar vein, consider the following passage from the girls’ school story *Patty and Priscilla* by Jean Webster (author of *Daddy-Long-Legs*). In this excerpt, the incorrigible Patty is describing her interview with one of her school professors during which she evidently employed her ‘arts of pleasing’ to gain her point:

“Was he nice?”

“Yes,” said Patty; “he was a dear. When he got through discussing Universal Truth, I asked him if I might take up astronomy, and he said I would find it pretty hard the second term; but I told him I was willing to work [...].”

“I think a man as forgiving as that *ought* to be elected,” said Priscilla.

“You certainly have more courage than I gave you credit for,” said Bonnie. “I could never have gone over and explained to that man in the wide world.”

Patty smiled discreetly. “When you have to explain to a woman,” she said in the tone of one who is stating a natural law, “it is better to write a note; but when it is a man, always explain in person.” (Webster [1903] 1927:187)

Children’s literature has been a focal point for the Women’s Movement for many years, with apparently sexist children’s stories being severely criticised and possible alternatives being identified, published and approved. In ‘Five run around together – clearing a discursive space for children’s literature’, Rudd (1999:45) notes that ‘what gives sexism its bite’ – as with racism and colonialism – ‘is not the words *per se*, but the relations of power within which they operate. But, as Foucault argues, these power relations are not “set in concrete”; they are continually being renegotiated, argued out at the capillary level’. Therefore, according to Sunderland (2004:199), ‘feminist intervention and activism in the first and second waves of the Women’s Movement brought about major upheavals in the social order in terms of rights and opportunities for women, as well as perceptions of what girls and women can achieve²⁷ and should expect.’²⁸

2.10 Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are the product of the cultural imagination. If, then, as Emig and Rowland (2010:4) suggest, gender is recreated as a ‘set of performances inside the power structures of society’, one would expect a reproduction of some of the aspects of culturally relevant gender expectations in this

²⁷ The way in which women and girls worked in traditionally male environments during World War One did much to alter the perceptions of their capabilities.

²⁸ Enid Blyton, for example, was aware of the discursive structures governing acceptable feminine behaviour during her lifetime, and her creation of the tomboyish ‘George’ can be interpreted as a rebellion against the order of the day. Not only does this character refuse to accept prescribed gender roles, or ‘pigeonholing’, but she also objects to the typically patronising language employed by male characters when addressing her:

“But you’re a girl,” said Toby. “Girls don’t understand the first thing about aeroplanes or motorcars or ships – or spiders either, come to that! I really don’t think you’d be interested, Georgina dear.”

“My name is not Georgina,” said George furiously. “And don’t call me ‘dear’.”

(*Five Go to Billycock Hill*, Blyton 1957:67)

genre. A brief discussion of this type of text will form a kind of preface to the more in depth case study of a children's text, *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom* by Christopher Healy, that has intertextual links with several fairy tales and which uses this cultural knowledge as a basis for the narrative.

Sunderland (2004:144) comments that the fictional children's genre which has received the most gender-related scholarly attention to date is probably the fairy tale. Although versions of these stories differ from place to place, commonalities can still be identified, along with undeniable linguistic traces of gendered discourses. It is true that the versions most Western children are now familiar with have undergone processes of selection, censorship and 'sanitisation', but even so, a large body of highly controversial material remains. Consider, for example, the passivity of Sleeping Beauty and Snow White until the rescuing kiss from a prince, the physical imprisonment of Rapunzel in her tower, the virtuous beauty attributed to Cinderella and, the inevitable wedding after an alarmingly brief acquaintance. Obviously, it is not difficult to identify a significant variety of gendered discourses that are common to many fairy tales (Sunderland 2004:144).

Nevertheless, Sunderland suggests that traditional fairy tales do not necessarily have to be *read* in a traditional way. As an example of a non-traditional interpretation of a fairy tale, Sunderland (2004:145) cites Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) reinterpretation of Snow White's stepmother as

a powerful, inventive, active, creative woman, constrained by demands of patriarchy. Her seeming vanity in front of the mirror is explained by [an] interpretation of the voice of the mirror as the voice of the absent king, representing patriarchy, judging women by their appearance.

Despite the controversy surrounding their salient characteristics, Sunderland (2004:145) reiterates her belief that fairy tales still have value for modern child readers, and that gendered discourse

analysis simply alerts one to the fact that the stories are not *just* imaginative books which provide pleasure for children.

2.11 Case Study: Testing the Boundaries of Hegemonic Masculinity in *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom*

2.11.1 Introduction

In Christopher Healy's children's book, *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom*, published in 2012, the idea of hegemonic masculinity is subverted in various ways. In this reinvention of four fairy tales – 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Snow White' and 'Rapunzel' – the author seems consciously to subvert the prevalent stereotypes surrounding traditional representations of the idealised, yet largely uninterrogated image of 'Prince Charming'. All four of the princes who feature as protagonists in the book express their dissatisfaction at the prescriptive expectations that govern every aspect of their lived realities. Healy explores alternative ways of representing this type of character to modern child readers, in many cases testing the boundaries that dictate which physical characteristics and behavioural patterns are allowable in such characters. This case study explores Healy's negotiation of masculinity in the context of its intended 21st century child audience.

The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom tells a humorous tale of the exploits of four Princes Charming and their attempts to protect their kingdoms from the evil machinations of the sorceress Zaubera. In the process, their stories and even their love-interests become disastrously entangled and the members of this mismatched quartet, ultimately referred to as 'The League of Princes', set out on a quest of self-discovery and reinvention. The book is interesting in terms of its representations of contemporary and culturally mediated performances of gender, and particularly

in relation to the politics of masculinity that shape the narrative. Healy's text explores various portrayals of the Prince Charming character and seems, initially, intentionally to undermine the reader's expectations – though with a sense of indulgent hilarity throughout. It is significant, however, that even in a book that takes such liberties with the Prince Charming character as to render him incapable of defending himself with dignity against a ten-year old bandit in a duel, there seem to be certain gendered realities that remain incontrovertible, certain risks that popular children's literature cannot run.

2.11.2 Meeting Prince Charming

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, 'Prince Charming' represents 'a man who is handsome, brave, polite [...] and would be a perfect husband or boyfriend.' This definition may be seen as a reflection of a traditional, arguably self-deluded Western imagination fuelled by a variety of deeply gendered children's texts and their associated cultural practices. According to Catherine Orenstein in *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, and the Evolution of a Fairy Tale*, Prince Charming characters appear most often as 'banal male foils' (Orenstein 2002:121) to the female protagonists. Moreover, they are 'all interchangeable and usually illustrated as one and the same from tale to tale'. In much the same vein, Christopher Healy asserts his opinion of historical representations of this stock character: "He's so inconsequential[...] He's presented as the ideal man, but he has no personality. If princesses are going to fall in love with princes, [...] then shouldn't we care about who these men are?" (Burnett 2012:1)

Thus, it is not surprising that *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom* opens with the following rather unsettling observation:

Prince Charming is afraid of old ladies. Didn't know that, did you?

Don't worry. There's a lot you don't know about Prince Charming: Prince Charming has no idea how to use a sword; Prince Charming has no patience for dwarfs; Prince Charming has an irrational hatred of capes.

Some of you may not even realise that there's more than one Prince Charming. And that none of them are actually *named* Charming. No one is. *Charming* isn't a name; it's an adjective. (Healy 2012:1)

As a children's literature scholar with a gender representation agenda, this prologue caught my attention. Here is a book, I thought, that promises to subvert the stereotypical hegemonic masculinity inherent in the popular fairy tale culture that children, from certain literate backgrounds, so voraciously consume. As Annette Wannamaker (2008:24) observes, a 'major goal of masculinity studies is to make masculinity visible as a social construct that is, in varying degrees, created by society and, therefore, also alterable by society.' Moreover, as Lindsay Clowes (2013:13) convincingly argues in 'The limits of discourse: masculinity as vulnerability',

it is only through a focus on men and masculinity, through foregrounding masculinity as a performance of gender, rather than nature, that men and boys are likely to begin to understand that they too are gendered, that their gender exposes them to avoidable harm and profoundly threatens their wellbeing.

In literature, this visibility is sometimes achieved by the 'subversion of [the] hegemonic ideal' which effectually 'highlights the vulnerability of masculinity' (Wannamaker 2008:24). Thus, a Prince Charming who is unable to wield a sword or even ride a horse is not only a break from tradition, but also an indicator that such a tradition exists. For the purposes of this article, 'hegemonic masculinity' will refer to 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the

dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 2005:77). The concept has been extended by scholars to propose 'a multiplicity of masculinities and hierarchies of power' that demonstrate 'how men exercise power over women and other men.' (Morrell et al. 2013:3). In challenging dominant masculinity, Healy's book presents a comparison of different versions of masculinity; from the diminished and susceptible to the overstated and essentially impotent.

Healy's opening paragraph offers some valuable insight into the construction of the popular image of Prince Charming by pointing out that '*Charming* isn't a name. It's an adjective' (Healy 2012:1). Implicit in this remark is the assumption that the individual characteristics and tendencies, or the unique 'names' that would potentially differentiate between the various identities of the respective princes, pale into insignificance beside the overwhelming ideology regarding the performance of their masculinity. Instead of a name that acknowledges the reality of their necessarily differing identities, these characters are labelled according to prescribed expectations regarding performativity and appearance. The Cambridge Dictionary defines 'charming' as 'pleasant and attractive'. The male hero's identity then is bound up in issues of social acceptance and physical appeal.

The largely idealised yet perhaps genuinely desired model of masculinity that reaches its epitome in Prince Charming constitutes a fine illustration of Judith Butler's proposal that gender is 'the result of performance, a performance that [does] not so much imitate a given essential model as create the idea of such a model and norm through incessant repetition in the first place' (Emig & Rowland 2010:5). As quoted earlier in this chapter, 'gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself' (Butler 1997: 306).

Healy's deliberately subversive introduction to Prince Charming may also be interpreted at a deeper level. The observation that 'Charming is an adjective' also implies the added positioning of the

character as an object of public scrutiny by an external, critical gaze. This is evident in the following extract from *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (published in 1812) which describes Rapunzel's first impression of the prince when he enters her tower room:

Rapunzel was greatly terrified when she saw that a man had come in to her, for she had never seen one before; but the king's son began speaking so kindly to her, and told how her singing had entered his heart, so that he could have no peace until he had seen her herself.[sic] Then Rapunzel forgot her terror, and when he asked her to take him for her husband, and she saw that he was young and beautiful, [...] she put her hand into his saying, "I would willingly go with thee" (Grimm & Grimm [1812] 1993:77).

From this extract it is clear that the prince's ability to appear 'pleasant' and 'attractive' – in a word, charming – enables him not only to seduce Rapunzel but also to sire the twins that she bears 'in a waste and desert place' before he is able to find her again, thus securing the royal succession.

The versions of the four princes presented in the retellings by the 'Brothers Grimm' present similarly generic portrayals of the character, but with an added distancing in terms of personal explorations of identity. In many cases, such as the one above, the hero is merely referred to as 'the king's son' – a description which removes individual agency from the young, virile lover and presents him, instead, as the product of patriarchal desire. One is led to assume, through this impersonal discussion of the prince's actions, that his behaviour and demeanour comply with paternal ideologies and expectations.

That is not to say, of course, that being born into circumstances in which the specifications for successful performance of hegemonic masculinity are unusually high does not have its advantages. Should the build of one's body (natural or constructed) and one's personality make emulation of the ideal possible, all the advantages of a monarchy built on patriarchal precepts become the prince's ordained property. After all, the prince's successful embodiment of society's ideals gives him the

unchallenged right to claim the bride of his choice without any further ado. This is evident in the Grimm version of Cinderella when the prince is finally reunited with the elusive heroine. After the two step-sisters have mutilated their own bodies by chopping off their heels and toes in order to fit the prince's rather restrictive specifications for a desirable bride, they discover that their sacrifices have been in vain:

The stepmother and the two sisters were thunderstruck, and grew pale with anger; but [the prince] put Cinderella before him on his horse and rode off. And as they passed the hazel bush, the two white pigeons cried,

“There they go, there they go!

No blood on her shoe:

The shoe's not too small,

The right bride is she after all.”

(Grimm &Grimm [1812] 1993:125)

During this spectacular exhibition of male sovereignty, even nature conspires to vindicate the man's right to carry Cinderella off. Prince Charming, successfully performed and internalised, grants the performer all the historically unchallenged privileges due to representatives of dominant masculinity.

2.11.3 Unmanning Prince Charming

Nevertheless, in cases where the male protagonist fails, due to environmental conditioning or personal inclination, to personify the ideal, his deviation from the desired model often serves to negate his masculinity in the text. In *The Emergence of Man into the 21st Century*, Ed Madden

speculates that 'those people who are most conscious of the ways that dominant masculinity is constructed in our culture and those most invested in making it visible are perhaps those who have been most marginalised by it, not those who most easily conform' (Munhall et al. 2002:xxix). Similarly, one could argue that the characters in a narrative that are most instrumental in delineating the ideals of preferred masculinity are those who, in some respect or another, fail to perform according to the culturally constructed script.

Prince Frederic

A case in point is Healy's subversive portrayal of Prince Frederic, who is famed for having impressed the lovely Cinderella with his dancing skill. Frederic's overbearing and overprotective sire does everything in his power to control his son's actions.

Pretty much anything young Frederic could have wanted or needed was handed to him on a silver platter. Literally. The only thing Frederic had to do in return was live the life of a proper gentleman. He was allowed to attend as many poetry readings, ballroom dances and twelve-course luncheons as he wanted. But he was forbidden to take part in any activity that could be considered remotely risky or dangerous. (Healy 2012:6)

Beyond his direct control of Prince Frederic's activities, the king's ideology is reinforced through the literature he allows his son to read. We know, for example, that Frederic's favourite bedtime story is, and has always been, 'Sir Bertram the Dainty and the Quest for the Enchanted Salad Fork' (Healy 2012:7). To understand the importance of this seemingly insignificant piece of trivia one must understand that '[l]iterature is of significant cultural importance in reaffirming or challenging cultural ideologies, including those of gender and masculinity' (Potter 2007:28). In his article on men and masculinity in Australian young adult fiction, Troy Potter supports David Buchbinder's belief that cultural texts 'reflect models and ideologies abroad in the culture and [...] reinforce them and refract them back into the culture' (Buchbinder 1994:74; Potter 2007:28). Moreover, it is probable that

‘repeated representations will become naturalised, with any criticism of these representations deflated and, potentially, absent’ (Buchbinder 1994:74; Potter 2007:28).

For Frederic, the performance of masculinity presented by the inimitable Sir Bertram the Dainty has become naturalised within his context and he seems to feel no discomfort in spending ‘over an hour grooming himself to his father’s specifications’ (Healy 2013:15). At first, one may assume that Frederic’s father is intent on modelling his son along the lines of the ‘New Age Man’ who is, according to Buchbinder (1994:2), ‘supposedly gentler and less aggressive than Old Age Man, more in harmony with the earth and with nature, less convinced of the authority and rightness of traditional male logic, and more amenable to alternative ways of thinking. He attempts to get in touch with his feelings, and is willing to make himself vulnerable, emotionally, to others’.

In many ways, Frederic exhibits the definitive traits of this kind of alternative masculinity. He is remarkably persuadable and he allows significant persons (both male and female) to understand their importance in his life. When Ella disappears from the palace in order to seek adventure and carve her own destiny, Frederic consults his valet regarding the incident.

“I don’t want any other women. I want *Ella*. Reginald, what do you think I should do? And be honest with me; don’t just tell me what you think my father would want you to say.” [...]

“Don’t let her get away,” Reginald said. (Healy 2012:25)

The valet’s advice is clearly reminiscent of dominant masculine rhetoric in which the female object remains the unquestioned property of the male; the girl’s flight is interpreted as reckless rebellion, rather than an expression of rational personal agency. Frederic is urged to not let Ella ‘get away’ and his decision to set out in pursuit of her marks the beginning of his attempts to perform a foreign, yet, as the author insinuates, innate, form of capable and possessive masculinity.

Prince Frederic may conform to his father's apparently misguided requirements for what is necessary to perpetuate male-centred power in his kingdom, but the author seems to imply that this kind of gentle, cautious and sensitive masculinity is signally lacking in the ability to maintain peace and prosperity. The chapter in which we are introduced to Prince Frederic is significantly named: Prince Charming Misplaces His Bride. In this deeply layered title, Healy hints at the essential impotence of this kind of masculinity and its inability to maintain hegemony in the face of feminist opposition. Healy, moreover, implies that this shift in power dynamics is undesirable as it paves the way for a widespread massacre and the destruction of the kingdoms by evil. Cinderella flees the palace in an attempt to escape the monotony of Prince Frederic's cloistered lifestyle and his penchant for picnics, petit-fours and poached eggs. Her flight, which signals her rebellion against the expectations placed upon women to accede to the whims of powerful men, gives the narrative direction as the heretofore ineffectual prince decides to exert himself in order to reclaim the object of his desire.

In order to follow Ella (alias Cinderella), Frederic is required to enact performances which are entirely foreign to his unconventional expression of manhood. Frederic's intentions to set out in pursuit of his bride are hindered by his apparent deficiencies. Healy portrays the departure scene in singularly unromantic and unpromising terms:

The next morning, after several hours of secret, intensive riding lessons, Prince Frederic trotted out through the palace gates on horseback, with Reginald and Charles the groom waving him good-bye. His eyes were tightly closed, his arms wrapped around the horse's neck. Then something dawned on him. "Wait," he called back to Reginald. "I don't know where I'm going. (Healy 2012:28)

This account is just one of many in which expressions of alternative masculinity, in this case signified by a lack of equestrian and athletic ability, feature as less desirable than the dominant form of manly performance. Thus, although Healy presents essentially subversive versions of masculinity in the

narrative, the hilarity and negativity attached to these representations serve to underscore rather than undercut dominant gender configurations.

Moreover, Healy's first description of Frederic suggests the idea of an innate masculinity that is brave, adventurous and physically capable and that can be either fostered or stifled by parental and societal interference. We are told that 'Frederic wasn't always helpless. There was a time when he aspired to become a hero. But it seemed it wasn't meant to be.' (Healy 2012:5) Clearly, Healy does not wish to promote Frederic's emasculated version of male gender performance, and although the character is presented in such a manner as to engage the reader's loyalty and sympathy, it is clear, from the start, that Frederic's is a quest of self-discovery, a pursuit of the virility and heroic potential that years of parental conditioning have suppressed. Frederic's valet assumes the voice of hegemonic masculinity in his advice to the distraught prince: "Look, if you go on this journey, you're not just doing it for Ella, you're also doing it for that little boy who once wanted to try everything" (Healy 2012:27).

Prince Liam

By contrast, Prince Liam, famed for the rescue of Sleeping Beauty (the vindictive and manipulative Briar Rose in this version of the fairy tale) has been encouraged and admired for his heroism since toddlerhood. In response to this adulation, we are told that Liam 'devoted himself to being a one-man army, on call to rescue anyone in need. And he was really good at it. He had strength, courage, agility, and natural skill with a sword. He even looked the part: tall and lean, with caramel-toned skin, bright green eyes, and lustrous, black hair that appeared permanently windswept' (Healy 2012:75).

Petted and praised by all his subjects, Prince Liam is seduced into the belief that it is his frequent displays of bravery and protectiveness in the interests of the people that have secured his acceptance by the populace. That is until he decides to do something unheard of.

After the hullabaloo [surrounding his heroic liberation of Sleeping Beauty] finally died down, it occurred to Liam that he had never really spoken to Briar Rose other than to say, “Good morning. You can consider yourself rescued.” He was curious to know more about her. So he did something extremely rare: He sent her a note. Even more shocking, he suggested they meet. In person. Two people from different kingdoms – who are engaged to be married – seeing and talking to each other. Crazy, I know. (Healy 2012:77)

Here Healy is clearly satirising the impetuous lover presented in traditional fairy tales who responds to his manly instincts and rushes into matrimony (in the most sanitised cases) with alarming alacrity. Prince Liam is evidently subverting the tradition by hesitating and desiring to know more about his intended bride.

The upshot of this rendezvous is that Prince Liam decides to call off his engagement to Briar Rose because she is, as he carefully phrases it, ‘not a very nice person’. This is a mild description of the woman who claims “You wanted the real me, you got it. Briar Rose doesn’t censor herself for anyone” (Healy 2012:81). However, when Liam makes his decision known, his entire kingdom rebels against him. Here, Healy draws attention to another requirement for Prince Charming. Regardless of the number of babies he has rescued from burning hovels, a desirable man must also embody the image of financial security and prosperity. Marriage to Briar Rose, who is heiress to a vast and wonderfully rich kingdom, would secure economic growth and widespread affluence in his own country. As Prince Liam soon discovers, failure to promote and embody financial success destroys his image as a desirable Prince Charming.

According to Chris Brickell in 'Masculinities, Performativity, and Subversion', those performing masculinity are 'constructs and constructors of symbolic orders; simultaneously productive and produced, loci of action and participants of interaction, they may perpetuate and/or resist hegemonic social arrangements' (Brickell 2005: 37). Prince Liam's refusal to submit to the conditions of the marriage that has been arranged for him by his mercenary parents constitutes a destabilisation of the symbolic social and economic order; a rebellion against the norms that dictate the extent of a prince's duty to his country.

Prince Duncan

Healy's Prince Duncan, of Snow White fame, represents an example of gendered portrayal where the 'configuration of the man's body is at odds with the familiar representations of masculinity' (Mallan 2002:26).

At that moment, a man burst out from behind some nearby shrubbery. The three princes were all startled, as was the newcomer, who yelped and did a dancey little jump when he saw them. [...] He wore a velvety blue tunic with puffed cap sleeves and a frilly white ruff around his neck. The tunic was belted at the waist, so that the bottom of the garment flared out like a skirt. [...] On his legs he wore striped tights. Vertically striped tights. Green and blue vertically striped tights. (Healy 2012:106)

Because of his extreme deviation from idealised, preferred masculinity and his 'questionable fashion choices' (Healy 2012:108), Duncan, beyond experiencing marginalisation in the context of his role as Prince Charming, is subjected to the relentless tirade of epithets attached to him by the surly, but undeniably masculine dwarfs, who refer to him as Duncan the Daring and Prince Pipsqueak. Despite

this inauspicious beginning, however, Prince Duncan plays a pivotal part in the reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity; a constructive, yet manipulative role that is discussed later in this article.

Prince Gustav

In the narrative, Prince Duncan's emasculated character appears as the foil against which Prince Gustav's overstated machismo plays out. As Peter Murphy observes, myths about masculinity 'have informed men's lives over the past two centuries and focus, frequently, on the relationship between a man and his body' (Murphy 1994:4). This particular Prince Charming, whose engagement to Rapunzel has been called off due to the latter's decision to abscond, suffers from various complexes in relation to what he perceives as his physical inadequacies.

Prince Gustav, who stood six-foot-five and had shoulders broad enough to get stuck in most doorways, was nonetheless the smallest member of his family. Growing up as the "tiny" one among sixteen older brothers, Gustav felt a desperate need to appear bigger and more imposing. This usually involved puffing out his chest and speaking very loudly: Picture a six-year-old boy standing on top of the dining room table, posing like a statue of a war hero, and shouting, "The mighty Gustav demands his milk cup be refilled!" (Healy 2012:31)

In *Fictions of Masculinity*, Peter Murphy observes that 'because many men are forced to comply with macho standards of performance', they often experience their role as containing 'heavy burdens' (Murphy 1994:4) The burden of masculine performance drives Gustav away from home on a quest to validate his manliness and gain paternal acceptance, a boon which he acquires near the end of the book. Exasperated by Gustav's attention-seeking antics, King Olaf of Sturmhagen says to his youngest son, "'I'm proud of you. You can relax now.'" For the first time in his life, Gustav blushed' (Healy 2012:424). It is noteworthy, however, that this unreserved commendation is only bestowed after Gustav has indeed met the requirements of dominant masculinity by publicly exhibiting courage and physical strength in the face of mortal peril.

Moreover, it is also significant that Gustav is more desirous of fulfilling the role set out for him by his sire than paying any attention to Rapunzel's suggestions in favour of a more sensitive, caring model of masculinity. She observes: "You still feel the need to be a gruff, emotionless, manly hero, as if that's what everyone expects you to be. There are obviously parts of you that you don't feel comfortable admitting to. But they're the good parts." "I'm all good parts, okay?" Gustav grumbled. "I don't need you to tell me about myself." (Healy 2012:411) Gustav's gruff rejoinder lends credence to bell hooks's declaration that '[p]atriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples' (hooks 2004: 4).

2.11.4 Redeeming Prince Charming

When I started reading Healy's book, I entertained hopes of encountering male protagonists that subvert dominant paradigms of masculinity by presenting alternative expressions of maleness as valid models whereby the characters gain acceptance regardless of their perceived deficiencies in relation to the heroic ideal. I hoped that this children's text would make an attempt to 'unmask the invisibility of masculinity or to destabilise the unifying discourse on masculinity' by challenging 'common sense' literary and cultural narratives that claim 'a naturalness for boys and men' (Wannamaker 2008:24). I assumed that Healy was aspiring to number amongst the 'countercultural fairy tale writers' that endeavour to 'transform the civilizing process' and thereby unleash 'the liberating potential of the fantastic' (Zipes 2012: 176, 177, 168). I was too ambitious. It seems that even in the 21st century, hegemonic masculinity can be risked only to a certain point.

Instead of exploring these issues, Healy's book centres on the ways in which the four Princes Charming negotiate paternal expectations and discover what the author would have us believe is

their innate masculinity. It comes as no surprise that this is of a distinctly traditional type. Even the timid Prince Duncan eventually manages not only to ride three horses at the same time, but also to tame and fly a dragon in a death-defying act of unsurpassed bravery. The book seems to function, ultimately, as a reaffirmation of the hegemonic ideal, despite its subversive veneer.

In this sense, the title of the book is self-explanatory. This is, after all, *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom*, a publication which turns out to be the name of a treatise Prince Duncan decides to write at the end of the narrative. As Leonard Duroche points out, 'the exploration of narration as a cognitive tool in men's attempts to understand who they are is by now a fixed feature in male consciousness-raising and in male gender studies' (Duroche 1994:81).

'What are you doing, Duncan?' Frederic asked.

'Writing a book,' Duncan replied. 'These good people have given me an idea. Now that I am officially a hero, I believe it's my responsibility to share my knowledge of heroics with the world' (Healy 2012:435).

Prince Duncan's book, in effect, 'serves as a process of self-definition, a staged rite of passage which erases feelings of marginality, fragmentation, and subjective dispersal [...] and in their place, imparts a sense of agency' (Stephens 2002:40). As Merran Toerien and Kevin Durrheim suggest in 'PowerThrough Knowledge: Ignorance and the Real Man', masculinity is a project that 'entails attempts by individuals to develop unified narratives of their gendered selves' (Toerien & Durrheim 2001:37).

Prince Duncan's narrative may therefore be interpreted as a physical and literary manifestation of a process that involves the individual's attempts to 'consciously deploy argumentative strategies that establish coherence, in order to construct a preferred image' (Andersson 2008:143). His treatise becomes the ultimate expression of hegemony through his ability to 'impose a definition of the

situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideals and define morality' (Connell 1987: 107; Morrell et al. 2013:4)

Moreover, Healy's text seems to be less preoccupied with an interrogation of instances 'where representations of masculine sovereignty show an awareness of its tensions, fragility, and elements of masquerade' (Mallan 2002:35) than with describing the means whereby marginalised masculinities can be reconstructed in order to maintain the status of hegemonic masculinity. *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom* functions, then, as a kind of manifesto delineating ways that men who subscribe to alternative constructions of masculinity can mitigate the effects of their disenfranchisement in order to reap the benefits of hegemony.

Thus, despite their various eccentricities and initial inadequacies, the Princes Charming, by asserting their independence and fostering the development of an apparently innate masculinity, prove themselves capable of negotiating the challenges they face in order to protect their deeply gendered inheritance. For that is, after all, the crucial common denominator. It is *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom* (my emphasis). These men are heirs to the heritage of patriarchy; supreme beneficiaries of the status quo. The ideals of hegemonic masculinity which seemed to be at risk at the beginning of the narrative have been reaffirmed and successfully performed. Like the nameless princes of the stories preserved by the Brothers Grimm, Princes Frederic, Liam, Gustav and Duncan are ready to enter into the royal inheritance reserved for them through the cultural politics of privileged masculinity. For theirs is still the kingdom.

2.12 Conclusion

Like Ben Knights' *Writing Masculinities*, the hypothesis upon which this research 'rests is that masculine identities and (stereo)typically male ways of being and acting are constantly being reinforced and re-enacted through social practices of communication among which narratives both oral and written, in speech, in films and on paper, figure prominently' (Knights 1999:17). In the chapters which follow, I will focus on the representation of 'those practices and ways of being that serve to validate the masculine subject's sense of itself as male/boy/man' (Whitehead 2002:4).

While it is true that 'masculinity, as part of the constructions of power and knowledge, has always been a crucial element in cultural texts, be they literary or otherwise' (Emig & Rowland 2010:8), the discussions in subsequent chapters will demonstrate that 'masculine identity is a cultural and historical phenomenon' (Toerien & Durrheim 2001:35)²⁹. Moreover, cognisance will also be taken of the fact that 'masculinities are multiple and plural, differing over time, space and context and they are enmeshed with variables such as race and ethnicity, class and age' (Robinson 2013:59).

Furthermore, the children's books which have been selected for analysis will be scrutinised with the intention both to identify and to question

conventional identities and their association with typical actions. In doing so we shall need to be aware that expression (even the apparently personal 'self-expression' we cherish so highly) is not just a neutral way of describing that which 'really' exists somewhere else. Even personal expression or the communication of individual experience depends upon and takes shape within pre-existing formulae and rhetorical strategies.' (Knights 1999:14)

²⁹ Merran Toerien & Kevin Durrheim in 'Power through Knowledge: Ignorance and the 'Real Man''

This kind of enquiry necessitates the suspension of assumptions about 'natural' and inevitable boy- and manhood in favour of a theoretical lens that views masculinity as 'a cultural project that has emerged historically, is open to change and that serves particular functions in society' (Toerien & Durrheim 2001:35).

It is my hope that bringing 'to the narratives we read awareness of the kind discussed here would be a potentially liberating act. To talk about versions of masculinity in fiction is simultaneously to enable talking about masculinity and gender issues outside fiction' (Knights 1999:20). This is partly because popular and children's texts often reflect current trends and concerns in society; it is also because, as Wannamaker (2008:23) asserts, there seems to be an implicit assumption held by some critics that 'children's identities are directly influenced by the texts they read, see, hear, and purchase'. The texts themselves become at once a means as well as a product of the circulation and perpetuation of discourse; the sites of potential contestation or reaffirmation in the 21st century masculinities arena.

CHAPTER THREE

‘The King Who Was and Will Be’: Mythmaking and the Perpetuation/Contestation of Masculine Hegemony in Crossley-Holland’s Arthur Trilogy³⁰

*‘I’m between my child-self and my man-self.
My squire-self and knight-self’³¹*

3.1 ‘At the Crossing-Places’³²: Background

*‘Between-places are never quite certain of themselves.
Think of dusk, between day and night.
It’s blue and unsure.’³³*

My thirteen-year-old son was a little blue and unsure last night – aching all over. That would be because of the spectacular bruising caused by the metal studs of a rugby boot driven into his leg by an opponent earlier and the fact that the tip of his nose may have a section of broken cartilage because of the blow he took to the face during the match. He moved about gingerly, wincing every now and again as I rubbed ointment onto his back. As he is in the

³⁰ Crossley-Holland (2003:372). Rosenberg (1987:142) reflects on the epitaph engraved on King Arthur’s supposed tomb in Glastonbury which has a similar meaning:

HIC JACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM, REXQUE FUTURUS, The Once and Future King. The phrase haunts us less for what it says than for what it leaves out, its total elision of an Arthurian present. The quick iambic trimeter – ‘The Once and Future King’ – propels us from Arthur’s remote past directly to his return in an unspecified future; it is tight-lipped about Arthur here and now.

³¹ Crossley-Holland (2001:191).

³² This is the title of the second instalment in Crossley-Holland’s Arthur trilogy.

³³ Crossley-Holland (2000:52).

middle of a countrywide first team rugby festival, a 'Celebration of Schoolboy Rugby'³⁴ as the organisers call it, recovery needs to take place as quickly as possible. Earlier last night, I overheard his parting words to an old friend. "Good luck for tomorrow's match," she said. "And try not to break anything." He gave her a rueful grin and said, "I'm broken already." His words stayed with me.

"I'm broken already." Yet, when the whistle blew at the start of the next match this morning, he was the first to catch the ball from kick-off and risk his body against the opposition. The defensive tackle was pretty much guaranteed and some measure of pain and injury, inevitable. Yet, he knew what the coach, the team, the headmaster, the school and the spectators expected of him. He charged ahead, following the advice his father had given him many years ago: "If you go in harder and faster, it'll hurt less." As a relatively talented sportsman in a boys-only school where rugby is compulsory, this almost self-sacrificial performance of ideal masculinity is seen as mandatory compensation for the glory and admiration that comes with pulling on that first team jersey.

"I'm broken already." No, the path to so-called ideal masculinity is not as natural nor as easy as it may outwardly appear. My son's ferocious tackling and apparently 'natural' aptitude for the game may not, in fact, reflect inherent aggression or undaunted courage. Rather, it may represent the way he deals with his own fear of being injured, an essential performance to ensure physical survival. Self-preservation, perhaps. Or maybe even a combination of all of these factors.

³⁴ Programme title page from the St. John's College Rugby Festival.

While the intensity and desperation involved in playing a rugby match cannot compare with the degrees of these emotions experienced in mortal combat, I am reminded of Arthur (whose story is contained in the trilogy under discussion in this chapter) and his description of battle-fever which seems oddly relevant:

Men say fighting is like catching fever.
You shiver and sweat, you glory, you curse [...]
That's just to begin with. It all gets worse.
You get the squits, your smile's a grimace,
And yet you're more alive than anywhere else.³⁵

3.2 Introduction

"Stories oriented to men and men's experience not only articulate for the future what it is to live and act as a man. They also act as blueprints for future stories."³⁶

In his review of *Arthur: The Seeing Stone*, Philip Pullman claims that Kevin Crossley-Holland's book is 'as bright and as vivid as pictures in a Book of Hours. Deep scholarship, high imagination, and great gifts of storytelling have gone into this; I was spellbound' (Pullman 2000:1). My own experience was no different. Crossley-Holland's intimate knowledge of his subject and his confident, poetic writing make this reinvention of the Arthurian myth a deep and compelling read. In this chapter, I will be exploring Crossley-Holland's representation of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table as a locus for the mediation and contestation of fictional, historical and contemporary realities. Particular emphasis will be placed on the reality of gender re-enactment and the re-invention of mythical masculinity. To

³⁵ Crossley-Holland (2003:40).

³⁶ Ben Knights (1999:17).

this end, the boy protagonist is portrayed as not only a receiver of the myth³⁷, but also as a subject for the potential propagation of the cultural constructs inherent in the Arthurian heritage. This chapter considers the reception and negotiation of these 'mythical truths' by the protagonist and the relevance of this kind of text to twenty-first century child readers.

In his article, 'Arthurian Films and Arthurian Texts: Problems of Reception and Comprehension', Bruce A. Beatie (1988:65) claims that 'current interest among young people in role-playing games and "sword-and-sorcery" fantasies has created an unusually receptive audience for tales of King Arthur'. The fascination with all things medieval has not waned since he wrote his article, as the resurgence of Arthuriana in popular media over the past decade illustrates³⁸. In *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, Stephens and McCallum question the possible reasons for this enduring popularity. They refer to scholarly suggestions that the legend contains, in essence, 'all the best ingredients for good stories – magic, action, adventure, clash of characters, jealousy' (Stephens & McCallum 1998:178). Also, that it depicts 'a time of dramatic change when the old wisdoms of magic and ancient religions were being replaced by the new beliefs of a modern society' and situations in which the laudable aspirations of characters are undermined by human frailty (Stephens & McCallum 1998:178). However, perhaps the legend's most attractive feature is its vague origin; a disputed and varied history adds to its adaptability. As Merlin comments to the protagonist of *The Seeing Stone*, the Arthurian legend 'is not what I say it is. It's what you see in it' (Crossley-Holland 2000:53).

³⁷ Andersson (2008:139) claims that from 'a psychoanalytical perspective, myths are understood to tap into people's inner life and their understanding of themselves as social beings'.

³⁸ An elementary internet search demonstrates the plethora of texts, literary and other, that are based on or inspired by the Arthurian legend. These include novels, movies, plays, animations, board games, video games and even anime.

Similarly, Stephens and McCallum (1998:176) observe that 'the history of Arthur functions as a frame within which other stories can be set, sometimes loosely, but often bound more closely by a consistent site of narrative enunciation and by metanarrative'. As such, each narration brings with it an inherent discursive paradigm which is influenced (I presume to say, inevitably) by the author's socio-political environment. Thus, representations of 'historical masculinity' written or produced in the twenty-first century are read, by child and adult readers alike, from a contemporary perspective. Whether these representations underpin or stand in direct opposition to modern constructions of ideal manhood, they remain open to comparative scrutiny. While scholars may embark on intertextual masculinities research, child readers will (consciously and/or subconsciously) compare the fictional gender models with those presented by the men around them, at home, at school and in the media.

Myths are, after all, intended to function as reference points, whether out-dated or not, that perpetuate cultural 'truths'; the truth about what it means to be a real man is just one of these. As Andersson (2008:139) notes in *Constructing young masculinity: A case study of heroic discourse on violence*, myths 'direct how people live their lives at an unconscious level and are related to culturally shared assumptions' and form 'a part of the meaning-making and symbolic systems in people's lives.' As such, they are instrumental in the propagation and preservation of discourses within a given culture, regardless of whether such discourses are in line with modern or more progressive ideologies.

Furthermore, Andersson (2008:139) points out that multiple masculine value systems intersect, in particular situations, 'creating a resilient, finely meshed cultural web at least one part of which consists of masculine characteristics enshrined in mythical heroes who live across generations'. Indeed, in terms of longevity and continued popularity 'across generations', or in this case, across centuries, King Arthur can have few rivals. In this chapter,

I will discuss one such 're-presentation' of the boy-king that achieved significant critical acclaim³⁹ and won The Guardian Children's Fiction Award in 2001⁴⁰.

3.3 'I am living in two worlds': Two Arthurs, Two Kings

'Once,' said Merlin, 'there was a king with your name.'
'Was there?'
'And he will be.'
'What do you mean?' I demanded. 'He can't live in two times.'
*Merlin looked at me. 'How do you know?' he asked, and his slateshine eyes were smiling and unsmiling.*⁴¹

Kevin Crossley-Holland's Arthur trilogy, which is comprised of *The Seeing Stone* (2000), *At the Crossing-Places* (2001) and *King of the Middle March* (2003), narrates the development of Arthur de Caldicot from boyhood to manhood, from the cataclysmic discovery of his illegitimate birth to his attainment of knighthood. It also reflects Arthur de Caldicot's development as a writer, a preserver of tales and a repository of the cultural memory of his people. Moreover, all of this is portrayed against the backdrop of the life of Arthur, High King of Britain, the miraculously vindicated master of the sword in the stone. In this chapter, I will generally refer to the protagonist of the trilogy as 'Arthur' and the mythical hero as 'King Arthur'.

Crossley-Holland connects the mythical world of King Arthur and his knights with the medieval world of Arthur de Caldicot, who lives on the border of England and Wales at the turn of the thirteenth century, by the inclusion of a mysterious and (according to Arthur)

³⁹ Anne Fine, Children's Laureate (2001-2003) wrote of *The Seeing Stone*: 'This is astonishing... a book that lasts has to create a world so real that you can run your fingertips over its walls, feel its morning frost bite at your throat, and remember the people who lived there for a lifetime. Crossley-Holland has done it and I am so, so jealous' (www.kevincrossley-holland.com/reviews/).

⁴⁰ The book also won the Tir Na N-Og Award, a bronze medal for the Smarties Prize and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year.

⁴¹ Crossley-Holland (2000:2).

magical character named Merlin. This enigmatic and purportedly heathen man comes and goes as he pleases and is by turn respected by Sir John de Caldicot (Arthur's foster father) as a trusted advisor and condemned by the parish priest as the vile offspring of a nun and an incubus⁴². Young Arthur, who has a deep-seated affection for him, remarks, 'I cannot remember when I didn't know Merlin. He lived here before I was born and when I look at his strange, unlined face I wonder whether he'll still be here after I'm dead'⁴³ (Crossley-Holland 2000:71).

The legend of King Arthur enters the narrative through a gift which Merlin gives to the young page, an object which forms not only the crossing-place between the mythical and fictional realities of the narrative, but also between the episodes of the trilogy and facilitates the introduction of the Arthurian legacy to modern child readers. On the crest of Tumber Hill, overlooking the 'trembling' (2000:52) crossing – place where England and Wales meet, Merlin presents Arthur with a 'flat black stone' (2000:53). Arthur's first impressions are significant:

It was four-cornered, and its span was just a little larger than Merlin's outstretched hand. One face of the stone was lumpen and covered with little white spots and patches, but when Merlin turned it over, the other side was smooth and glossy. [...] When I stared at the stone, I could see myself in it. It was black of black, and deep, and very still. Like an eye of deep water. [...]

⁴² It is evident that Crossley-Holland has drawn on several versions of the Arthurian legend to formulate an eclectic version of Merlin's past, present and future in the trilogy. Here he draws on genealogical theories propounded by Robert de Boron and Geoffrey of Monmouth. As Goodrich (1987:43) observes, 'this business of fiends, this association with demons or devils at one stroke of Robert's pen condemns Merlin's antecedents and the infant Merlin himself as outside the pale of Christianity. In fact, Robert's was a device usually employed by such orthodox writers to downgrade a famous person and to imply that he was excommunicate, heretic, and identifiable thereafter as pagan'. Much of the discussion surrounding this character in Crossley-Holland's books focuses on the problem of Merlin's identity as pagan or Christian.

⁴³ As Joseph Campbell puts it in the posthumous publication, *The Romance of the Grail: The Magic and Mystery of the Arthurian Myth*, 'the story of Merlin is, briefly, that of a boy whose mother had conceived him of a devil. Of course, in good Christian tradition, whenever you have a miracle that's not a miracle of God, it's a miracle of a devil' (Campbell 2015:132).

“It is made of ice and fire,” Merlin said. “Its name is obsidian.”⁴⁴

(2000:53)

When considered in a non-metaphorical sense, Merlin’s description of the obsidian would probably refer to the geological properties of this kind of volcanic glass which is produced when felsic lava expelled from a volcano cools rapidly to form extrusive igneous rock⁴⁵. Hence, it is ‘made of ice and fire’ (2000:53). Yet this description is equally true of its magical qualities. Arthur discovers that when the darkness of his obsidian clears, it shows him the life of King Arthur, from conception, through his glorious reign surrounded by illustrious knights, friends and traitors, to his entrance into the mountain that marks the beginning of his millennial rest. One does not have to look far in the legends of King Arthur, in the tales of passion, hatred and betrayal, to know that they too are ‘made of ice and fire’.

Moreover, the obsidian’s glossy, reflective appearance seems particularly suited to the portrayal of the Arthurian myth as ‘a spectral mirror to the enigma of the human condition’ (Bevan, 1993:4). The black volcanic glass, like myth, is ‘both transparent and opaque’ (Bevan, 1993:3), provocative and enlightening, and speaks of a time beyond the reach of living memory.

Arthur relates how he could see his own reflection in the obsidian, his red ears sticking out under his rabbit-skin cap and his ‘blob nose’, but as the seeing stone clears, and Arthur is given glimpses of King Arthur as a boy, he begins to associate himself with this mythical hero.

⁴⁴ Crossley-Holland’s choice of geological material and its description may have been influenced by the ‘Song of Ice and Fire Series’ by G.R.R. Martin of which *Game of Thrones* (1996) is the first installment. In this series, obsidian is also referred to as dragonglass.

⁴⁵ Definition drawn from Volcano Photoglossary.
<http://www.volcanodiscovery.com/photoglossary/obsidian.html>. Accessed 29 June 2012.

'I am living in two worlds' (2000:269), he claims. 'In my seeing stone I am riding east. Hundreds of knights are on their way to London. Kay is going to be knighted. And in Saint Paul's churchyard, ten knights are standing guard by night and day over the sword in the stone. But here at Caldicot, it is Christmastide!' (2000:269). In thus associating the protagonist with King Arthur, Crossley-Holland is clearly situating his character within the heroic tradition explored by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and, like the hero of myth delineated in this work, young Arthur seeks not only to 'prevail over his personal oppressors', but to acquire, through his coming of age, the knowledge and 'means for the regeneration of his society as a whole' (Campbell 2008:30).

As Arthur's attachment to the myth intensifies, he refers to the real and mythical aspects of his identity as 'my squire-self' and 'my king-self' respectively (2000:321). Without forfeiting his sense of reality, Arthur completely embraces the Arthurian myth as a precursor to his own lived experience which culminates in the eventual meeting that takes place between King Arthur and his biological mother. Like the boy-king, young Arthur discovers, in time, the truth about his illegitimate conception and yearns to meet his own mother. Hence, his account of the event he witnesses in his obsidian is phrased in the first person:

For one moment, for thirteen years, for time beyond time's hurt, Ygerna and I gaze at each other. My own blood-mother. Her own son. We are feasters, we are tremblers, inside-out somersaulters, dreamers waking, strangers, red-eyed and dissolving.

Needles of silver rain, drops of golden rain, pricked and burst inside my seeing stone. They began to rinse and blur everything. Then my stone went blind. I crouched over *my story*. My eyes stung with tears. (2001:15; my emphasis)

Arthur's reception of the myth is personal and possessive – he calls it *my story* – similar in some ways to the attachment expressed by several authors and poets. For example, John Steinbeck describes how the legends became 'deeply rooted in his childhood' (Meyer 1993:7; my emphasis):

One day an aunt gave me a book and fatuously ignored my resentment. I stared at the black print with hatred, and then gradually the pages opened and let me in. The magic happened. The Bible and Shakespeare and *Pilgrim's Progress* belonged to everyone. But this was mine – secretly *mine*. It was a cut version of the Caxton *Morte d'Arthur* of Thomas Malory.

Tennyson too, succumbed to what he described in early boyhood as 'the Passion of the Past' (Rosenberg 1987:147). This theme of loss, 'what he called the greatest of all poetical subjects', perpetually haunted him and brought about the conception of many of his greatest works (Rosenberg 1987:147). In his *Memoir*, Tennyson claims that 'the vision of Arthur as I have drawn him ... had come upon me when, little more than a boy, I first lighted upon Malory' (in Rosenberg 1987:148). This boyhood response is significant to my research in that it takes place, as mentioned in Chapter One, during 'the formative *stage*' of life during which boys respond to the 'modes of masculinity which are offered to them' (Medalie 2000:42).

3.4 The Boy as Writer: Recording and Interrogating Mythical Realities

*'I think time gives authority to words.'*⁴⁶

Like Tennyson and Steinbeck, the fictional protagonist of Crossley-Holland's trilogy is also a writer. 'I want to write my own life here in the Marches, between England and Wales. My own thoughts, which keep changing shape like clouds. I am thirteen and I want to write my

⁴⁶ These are Arthur's reflections on the words inscribed over little Luke's grave. 'In one hundred years, people will believe what this tombstone says, whether or not it is true. But I am alive now, and I need to find out' (Crossley-Holland 2000:281).

own fears and joys and sorrows' (2000:12). And when the obsidian clears (like Steinbeck's copy of *Morte d'Arthur* that opened its pages to let him in), Arthur relates the mythical events as part of his own reality, part of the truth of his experience. In this preservation of the elements that shape his existence, Arthur's writings become a repository of cultural knowledge, the archived response of a boy to his physical and intellectual awakening in a society riddled with what he often condemns as prejudice and injustice.

In his writings, Arthur records the details of his life as a page at Caldicot Manor, the bitter realities of the manor court for the peasantry as well as the elation he comes to associate with spiritual enlightenment. He observes the conflict between religious dogmas and culturally propagated superstitious practices and questions the fundamental tenets of the feudal system. Of critical importance to the narrative, moreover, is Arthur's uniquely positioned 'eye-witness' account of the rise and fall of Camelot which seamlessly connects the components of the trilogy and punctuates the text with thought-provoking, comparative allusions.

Although Arthur identifies with King Arthur and values the story as part of his own reality, the boy's reception of the myth is not unquestioning. Indeed, Arthur's response shares many similarities with reception theory which, among other ideals, seeks to 'focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalised or forgotten' (Hardwick 2003:4).

Arthur's determination to implement a process of ceaseless interrogation in every context is an attribute that Merlin has taken great pains to cultivate in his protégé. According to this

enigmatic character, the secret of enlightenment is to 'keep asking the right questions' (2003:387) and hence, the young boy's reception of the Arthurian myth is characterised by an insistence on evaluating the wisdom and morality of the decisions made by the characters and an application of the knowledge he gains to his own context⁴⁷. 'What are the questions I must ask if I'm to win the true answers?' (2001:216)

In situating his protagonist in this enquiring, yet ultimately vulnerable space, Crossley-Holland provides a platform for the discussion of the 'truth' of myth; a concept which, for Francesco Loriggio (1984:503), is bound up in the myth's efficacy, in its distinction as 'operative'. Mythical truth, according to this assertion, is vindicated in a myth's ability, as Clare Flanagan (2004:112) puts it, 'to explain, to reconcile, to guide action or to legitimate'. The truth⁴⁸ of the Arthurian legend for young Arthur de Caldicot, lies, then, in its ability to influence and inform his thoughts, his actions and his writing.

The boy's musings on the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table teach him the importance of weighing the implications and questioning the intentions of the choices that shape his existence. In *At the Crossing-Places*, the second instalment of the trilogy, Arthur observes that 'what happens in my life and what happens inside the stone are

⁴⁷ Some of the questions Arthur deals with early on in the narrative are concerned with issues of class and gender discrimination. For example, he questions the way the feudal system leaves little for the peasantry to survive on and he shows his concern by helping Gatty, the reeve's daughter, with unpleasant and difficult menial tasks. He is usually punished for his compassion as he is expected to maintain his dignity and avoid close association with the lower classes. He does, however, challenge his tutor and priest, Oliver when he says that 'we are all equal in God's eyes' (Crossley-Holland 2000:37). Arthur argues: 'You've told me that before, [...] but it can't be true. A few people on this manor are rich but most are poor. A few have plenty to eat, but most have almost nothing. That's not equal.' To this, the priest replies that 'poverty is part of God's will' (Crossley-Holland 2000:37). Later in *The Seeing Stone*, Arthur questions why Tanwen, the maid, is sent away from her home when she is found to be pregnant with Serle's child. Arthur questions the justice of this treatment of the girl when his foster-brother is required to do mere nominal penance for the same 'sin' (Crossley-Holland 2000:266).

⁴⁸ 'The truth always rises to the surface' Crossley-Holland 2003:42).

often connected like sounds and echoes, or like my left and right eye which overlap but can each see more than the other. What I see in the stone sometimes seems like a promise, sometimes like a warning' (2001:219).

Arthur's observation suggests that what he sees in the Arthurian myth has relevance for him and the choices⁴⁹ he is required to make as he enters manhood and assumes an influential role in the society in which he lives – as Merlin asks, "' But who are you? [...] And who are you to be? That's what matters'" (2000:319). By applying himself to searching out the questions embedded in his personal experiences, in the old stories he hears and in the significant episodes of King Arthur's life which are communicated to him through his obsidian, Arthur acquires the knowledge and wisdom he needs in order to become a leader, a 'King of the Middle March'⁵⁰. After witnessing the atrocities and hypocrisies of the Third Crusade, and, in his 'other world' having seen the betrayal and demise of the 'fair fellowship' of Camelot, Arthur observes: 'It's people [...], following each other like cattle, *never questioning*, never thinking for themselves, becoming numb to bloodshed and other people's pain, who turn our world into a wasteland' (2003:381; my emphasis)⁵¹.

⁴⁹ 'Half my life is choosing, this way or that way, honourable or not, impulsive or thoughtful, and each choice has its own consequence' (Crossley-Holland 2001:259).

⁵⁰ Although the trilogy does not extend to Arthur's marriage, we know that the tragedy of betrayal committed by Guinevere and Sir Lancelot against King Arthur will have a decisive impact on Arthur de Caldicot's eventual choice of bride. When he returns unexpectedly from the crusade, he discovers that his betrothed has become deeply attached to his half-brother, Tom. His deliberations on the subject seem to suggest that his knowledge of the story will make him wiser and less impulsive than the young King Arthur.

I remember when King Arthur fell in love with Guinevere, Merlin warned him that love can be blind. He told Arthur that he could find him a wife not only beautiful but loyal.

It will only be best for me to marry Winnie if she is loyal, and loves me alone. Like Guinevere, she's wilful and impatient; and first she blows one way then the other. [...]

Before I went on our crusade, I would have been exactly like Winnie now. Impatient and feverish and anxious. [...] Have I changed, then? [...]

My head, my heart: I'll keep asking them questions.

(Crossley-Holland 2003:346)

⁵¹ In a case of poignant dramatic irony, Haket, the priest at Holt whom Arthur publicly accuses of hypocrisy after it becomes known that this 'holy man' has blackmailed a young girl to satisfy his fiendish lust, once

But the seeing stone awakens Arthur to more than the moral desolation around him. In 'Deeper than Words' he claims: 'My whole life is changing and, in a way, my patient stone is showing me all the different parts of myself' (2001:28). In a process of self-discovery, Arthur begins to understand that what he sees within himself is not all uncomplicated good and that everything contains its opposite. The kind, yet angry eyes of a sculptured gift he receives from his foster father prompt him to similar deliberations. 'They make me think', he says, 'how I am only a little lower than the angels; but they also make me feel little better than a hideous beast. Beautiful and horrid. Both. How strange that is' (2001:34).

Understanding the 'beautiful and horrid' nature of the Arthurian myth leads Arthur to successfully negotiate the paradox of his human condition and realise the potential which lies dependent on his personal agency⁵². For Arthur, the message of the seeing stone, in other words, the message of the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, is that life is both wonderful and terrible (2003:386), and that our choices collectively shape our realities; we have the capacity to express either the beauty or the horror within.

As a boy growing up in the twentieth century, John Steinbeck was also struck by the paradoxical, yet undeniably human nature of the characters in *Morte d'Arthur*. He recalls his boyhood impressions in terms that suggest that his reception of the myth resulted in a conscious application of its fictional realities in his own context. In the Arthurian heritage passed down to him, Steinbeck found

all the vices that ever were – and courage and sadness and frustration, but particularly gallantry, perhaps the only single quality

taught Arthur that Christianity has become 'a wilderness, Arthur. A wasteland of the spirit. Many men are behaving like animals' (Crossley-Holland 2001:76).

⁵² Arthur questions the value of absolute obedience after witnessing the Arthurian legends of Erec and Enid and also of Sir Lanval. After seeing where blind obedience could lead, he asks, 'But is disobedience always wrong?' (Crossley-Holland 2001:259). For the enlightened Arthur, 'personal agency' includes the option of disobedience to direct figures of authority – like his biological father.

of man that the West has invented. I think my sense of right and wrong, my feeling of noblesse oblige, and any thought I may have against the oppressor came from this secret book ... in pain or sorrow or confusion, I went back to my magic book. Children are violent and cruel – and good – and I was all of these – and all of these were in the secret book. If I could not choose my way at the crossroads of love and loyalty, neither could Lancelot. I could understand the darkness of Mordred, because he was in me too; and there was some Galahad in me, but perhaps not enough. The Grail feeling was there, however, deep-planted, and perhaps always will be. (Steinbeck in Meyer 1993:13)

Several autobiographical texts illustrate the extent to which the stories of the Knights of the Round Table influenced Steinbeck's own writing. Of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, for instance, Steinbeck wrote: 'It has to do with morals. Arthur must awaken not by any means only to repel the enemy from without, but particularly the enemy inside. Immorality is what is destroying us, public immorality. The failure of man towards men' (Steinbeck in Meyer 1993:16). He even draws a parallel between true knighthood and the responsibilities of conscientious authorship by claiming that 'a writer – like a knight – must aim at perfection, and failing, not fall back on the cushion that there is no perfection. He must believe himself capable of perfection, even when he fails. So I come toward the ending of my life with the same ache for perfection I had as a child' (Steinbeck in Meyer 1993:16).

The boy protagonist in Crossley-Holland's trilogy expresses a similar yearning for perfection as he enters the service of Milon de Provins as a knight. Like the Sir Lancelot he knows from his obsidian, Arthur aspires to become a knight of the body and of the heart – a quest which manifests itself in the critically introspective and disillusioned nature of his writings. After his first experience of combat as a knight, for instance, Arthur is appalled by the cruel treatment of women and children during a siege. His biological father, Sir William de Gortanore,

observes that Arthur will grow accustomed to the atrocities of war, but Arthur's knowledge of the Arthurian myth enables him to articulate his feelings. 'I don't want to get used to it,' he writes. 'Used to the killing of children. Sir Lancelot said war is to protect children and women and other innocent people. I know we're going to fight and I'm ready to fight. Well, I thought I was. But not if it means killing children and attacking defenceless old men. There's no honour in that' (2003:207).

3.5 'I've never hurt like this before'⁵³: Wounded Masculinity⁵⁴

*'Who can fully live unless he's ready to die?'*⁵⁵

Arthur de Caldicot faces a dilemma. Since childhood he has yearned to become a knight – the epitome of masculinity in his world – and he strives to attain a level of proficiency in his 'yard-skills' in the hope that his father will allow him to follow his ambition. Moreover, he understands the societal 'reward' to be gained by embodying the most valued gender construct in his culture. In fact, although Arthur is a very intelligent and learned young boy, he employs a stratagem which he dubs 'The Art of Forgetting' so that his tutor and foster father will despair of his mental capacities and give up the idea of making him a 'schoolman'. Thus, for the sake of attaining the most culturally valued masculinity goals, Arthur chooses to sacrifice his (undeniably strong) scholarly tendencies and interests. He writes about his quandary:

What I think is this: I want to visit Wenlock Priory. Of course I do. I am interested in how manuscripts are made, and I want to hear the monks singing. But I don't want my father or Oliver to know this, otherwise they may

⁵³ Arthur is referring to not only physical injury here but also to the psychological trauma of witnessing the brutal murder of a little boy during a siege (Crossley-Holland 2003:208).

⁵⁴ 'The knightly ideal is intensely vulnerable' (Hodges 2009:28).

⁵⁵ These are Lancelot's words to Guinevere in Crossley-Holland (2001:169).

think that I'm suited to be a monk myself, or a schoolman. I am not. I want to be a squire, and then a knight, and I want to be betrothed to Grace⁵⁶.
(Crossley-Holland 2000:222)

Arthur is fully aware of the fact that, in his world, betrothal to the girl he loves is only possible if he subscribes to the requirements of hegemonic masculinity – regardless of his personal inclinations⁵⁷. His predicament is not unique. Countless men (and, indeed, women) have had to sacrifice their talents, interests, passions and convictions at the altar of hegemony. For most, early submission to the status quo secures a measure of happiness and acceptance in society. As Whitehead notes in a chapter called 'Masculinity – Illusion or Reality?':

[I]n undertaking any critical examination of men, it is important not to lose sight of the material consequences and political dimensions to masculinities and their associated myths and ideologies ... it is evident that, while masculinities may be illusory, the material consequences of many men's practices are quite real enough (Whitehead 2002:43)

Young Arthur understands the 'material consequences' of his performance of masculinity and thus he applies himself to his 'yard-skills' with renewed vigour⁵⁸.

In Chapter Two, reference was made to Emig and Rowland's assertion (2010:2) that, historically, 'the accomplishments of masculinity are usually the results of a process, typically one that involves some degree of physical or symbolic violence.' Arthur's painstaking (and, indeed, painful) journey to knighthood bears testament to this claim. In fact, merely being

⁵⁶ At this point in the narrative, Arthur does not know that Grace is actually his half-sister and not, as previously supposed, his cousin. The shock of the revelation is keenly expressed and Grace decides to enter a nunnery rather than marry someone else.

⁵⁷ In a letter to his betrothed written during the crusade, Arthur muses:

Love-sickness and battle-fear: are they the same?
Both painful joy, and both such joyful pain.

(Crossley-Holland 2003:40)

⁵⁸ Arthur's progress is slow as he is left-handed but Sir John refuses to allow him to follow his physical preference. He says to Arthur that 'no boy in this manor will do anything left-handed. It's not natural. You know that' (Crossley-Holland 2000:55).

able to move around in armour is strenuous and his foster-brother, Serle, is a hard and spiteful taskmaster. Arthur writes that

It's difficult to run around the track wearing a mail-shirt. As soon as I'm at all off balance, its weight pulls me further sideways or forwards. And when I'm carrying a lance as well ...

It was very hot, and I started to sweat before we reached the starting post.

Serle smiled his curling smile. "You're useless at this," he said. "God made a bad mistake with you."⁵⁹ (Crossley-Holland 2000:5)

Nevertheless, as Bonnie Wheeler (1992:7) suggests in 'The Masculinity of King Arthur from Gildas to the Nuclear Age', 'leaders are simultaneously projected onto and respond to their cultures by means of simplifying and energising masks'. For Arthur de Caldicot, this response is anything but natural, yet he desires, more than anything, to occupy the hegemonic space. Right at the beginning of the trilogy he says that 'what I hope with all my head and heart is that [my father] does mean me to be a squire, and that he will send me away into service. Nothing in my life matters as much to me as this' (Crossley-Holland 2000:4).

Therefore, Arthur responds to the expectations of his society and eventually acquires the skills deemed necessary within his undeniably violent discursive environment. Thus, in the process of trying to formulate his identity, the boy is required to make adjustments not only to his physique but also to his inner being. As Morrell et al. (2013:7) claim, masculinity is 'much less fixed than biological and common sense accounts would have us believe. Identity [...] is something we have to work at, something which is never complete, but always in process. Indeed, one of the key elements of masculine identities is the work that goes into establishing and maintaining them'.

⁵⁹ Even Arthur's foster-father, Sir John expresses his concern and says, 'I don't know whether we'll ever make a squire of you' (Crossley-Holland 2000:56).

Moreover, as Andersson (2008:139) observes in 'Constructing young masculinity: a case study of heroic discourse on violence':

There is no 'real' self or 'authentic' identity independent of the discursive environment; rather, people are positioned by particular discourses as coherent selves [...]. Simultaneously, individuals consciously deploy argumentative strategies that establish coherence, in order to construct a preferred image, which Wagner and Wodak call 'the enacted performance'.

Like most boys in his social milieu, young Arthur is very clear in his preference for both the image and the reward of being a knight and, after working through several 'argumentative strategies', he sets about the task of readying both his body and his mind for the role and its performance. Naturally, this includes preparing himself for participation in armed combat and accepting the probability of physical injury and even death. As Sir Lancelot says to Guinevere, "Men who fight expect to get wounded"⁶⁰ (Crossley-Holland 2003:35).

As previously mentioned, 'violence is a relationship between bodies that has been of great importance in the history of masculinities' (Connell 2005:82)⁶¹ and achieving the ends of hegemonic masculinity seldom comes without some form of physical and/or psychological mutilation. Arthur de Caldicot endures both during his journey from boyhood to manhood.

Central to the theme of physical injury in Crossley-Holland's texts is the reality of war and the morality of violence. Bonnie Wheeler highlights the significance of the fact that in some medieval texts, King Arthur is represented as the 'Christian against the Saracen and heathen' (Wheeler 1992:9). She points out that 'heroes in the ancient world may not have felt much need to justify their desire for conquest, but by the twelfth century, Christian thinkers were

⁶⁰ As Clinton Machann (2000:199) notes in 'Tennyson's King Arthur and the Violence of Manliness', the problem of male violence 'dominates the [Arthurian] narrative from beginning to end'.

⁶¹ In Connell, 'Globalisation, Imperialism and Masculinities,' (2005:82).

becoming preoccupied by problems of just war. Christian Europe developed the expedient of clever crusading propaganda to justify marauding ways' (Wheeler 1992:9).

It is significant, therefore, that the 'quasi-medieval' trilogy under discussion depicts Arthur grappling with these very ideas and trying to understand the 'justice' of the crusades. He describes how Fulk the Friar preaches the crusade, offering the indulgence of Pope Innocent to all who take the Cross: full pardon 'without penance for whatever sins he has committed during his life, his entire life, so long as he confesses them' (Crossley-Holland 2000:224). For the most part, this 'mystification of Christian crusading' (Wheeler 1992:10) serves its purpose and it seems possible that some knights may have believed in the religious cause presented by the revered leaders of the church. Scores of others, however, would have had purely mercenary ambitions. In fact, when Lord Stephen and Arthur take up the cross, the former looks around at the other candidates and voices his scepticism. "I do wonder," he said quietly, "why all these people are really here. Fervour? A sense of duty? Or is it the chance of rich pickings? A chance to escape, maybe. Or the love of adventure? Well, when the crusade begins, I'm sure we'll soon find out'" (Crossley-Holland 2001:349).

Similarly, Arthur questions the words pronounced by the cardinal who blesses him at his knighting ceremony. With uncanny deliberation that almost seems to sense Arthur's inner conflict, the cardinal proclaims that 'war is violent, war is cruel, but it is natural. It is natural and peace is unnatural. Love God, and win honour by destroying his enemies' (Crossley-Holland 2003:80). At this most auspicious moment in his life, Arthur finds himself questioning

the truth presented by the religious authorities of his day. 'Is that true, I thought. Is war really natural?'⁶² (Crossley-Holland 2003:80)

Arthur's scepticism at this point is merely the natural product of his relentless interrogation of ideas in pursuit of truth. In fact, in *The Seeing Stone* he asks Oliver, the priest, "But doesn't Saladin worship God? [...] Don't Saracens worship God?" (Crossley-Holland 2000:38). Oliver responds according to the dominant religious discourse of his time by reasserting ideas of Christian superiority over so-called heathen depravity. Yet, Arthur's foster father takes a broader, more tolerant view. Upon Arthur's asking him whether he agrees with Oliver's belief that 'Hell's mouth is waiting for Saladin', Sir John replies, "I doubt it. [...] Saladin and Cœur-de-Lion! They were both fighting a holy war. One called it a jihad, the other a crusade" (Crossley-Holland 2000:67).

Nevertheless, despite Arthur's broadminded outlook, he is bound by the rather more narrow constraints of his social context and his position as squire and he agrees to join the crusade in the service of his master, Lord Stephen⁶³. At first, he is drawn in and excited by the prospect of adventure and brave exploits in foreign lands, but this novelty wears off as soon as the reality of war begins to set in. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Arthur is disgusted by the senseless brutality and barbarism of the soldiers and he ends up being part of a war he doesn't believe in⁶⁴.

⁶² Bonnie Wheeler (1992:11) notes in 'The Masculinity of King Arthur' that in medieval depictions of this character, there is 'an ominous conflict between the king's insight and his actions. For [King] Arthur, violence remains morally and politically ambiguous'.

⁶³ Lord Stephen sees the crusade as 'an act of devotion' (Crossley-Holland 2003:30).

⁶⁴ Arthur observes that in the crusading army

We speak with so many tongues, not only the tongues of English and Normans and Picardians and Angevins and Germans and Italians and everyone else, but the tongues of high-born and low-born, of faith and zeal and ambition and self-interest and ruthless greed.

Moreover, Lord Stephen says that warfare 'isn't glorious, Arthur. It's not only parading on horseback and listening to trumpets. No, it's grim and ugly and vile. Some day you'll lead others, and may have to make difficult decisions, so it's essential you know the truth about it' (Crossley-Holland 2003:209). This ominous statement serves to remind the young knight that whatever he may think about the morality (or more particularly, the depravity) of war, he bears the responsibility of hegemonic masculinity to protect and defend those under his care.

In his controversial, yet pertinent, publication called *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*, David Benatar (2012:2) highlights some of the disadvantages suffered by men across the centuries. He observes that discrimination against male subjects is often so unrecognised that

the mere mention of it will appear laughable to some. Such people cannot even think of any ways in which males are disadvantaged, and yet some of them are surprised, when provided with examples, that they never thought of these before. Male disadvantages include the absence of immunity, typically enjoyed by females, from conscription into military service. Men, unlike women, are not only conscripted but also sent into combat, where they risk injury, both physical and psychological, and death. Men are also disproportionately the victims of violence in most (but not all) non-combat contexts. (Benatar 2012:2)

Although Benatar's claims are open for debate in a 21st century context, it is undeniable that, for Arthur, the obligation to fight is non-negotiable. It is seen as a 'natural' and largely uncontested part of the responsibilities prescribed by the dominant discourse of masculinity in his time. Arthur understands this 'duty' and thus accepts the probability of physical injury.

Mother Church herself speaks with many tongues, and some of them forked. (Crossley-Holland 2003:149)

Once again, his uniquely acquired knowledge of the Arthurian discourse surrounding mortal combat colours his perspective and refines his understanding.

In a delightfully thorough article on ‘Wounded Masculinity: Injury and Gender in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Mort d’Arthur*’, Kenneth Hodges (2009:14) claims that in the Arthurian context, ‘injuries are integral to masculinity as it is practiced’⁶⁵. He claims, moreover, that in order to understand the role of wounds in this discursive domain, ‘we must abandon the idea that knighthood depends on a construct of masculinity as whole and inviolate’⁶⁶ (Hodges 2009:14) and recognise, rather, the belief that ‘wounds are noble’ (Hodges 2009:15). Hodges points out that it is King Arthur’s ‘ability to bleed, although a liability in strictly practical terms’ that ‘highlights his bravery and commitment to his cause’ (Hodges 2009:17).

In Arthur de Caldicot’s story, the wound he sustains while protecting a defenceless woman against an armed man bears testament to his courage. The vicious cut that extends from the wrist beyond the elbow marks him as a man of action and honour – and proves that the bearer was prepared to face severe danger to protect another. In this sense, Hodges’ claim that injury is ‘essential to create meaning out of conflict’ (Hodges 2009:16) seems particularly apt. He clarifies his meaning by asserting that ‘if there is no injury, then the fight does not matter: neither side is forced to remember the conflict and neither side gives up anything for its beliefs’ (Hodges 2009:16).

⁶⁵ Although there are points of intersection between the two, there is a distinct difference between the discourse surrounding wounds in a medieval context and the perception of injury in a twenty-first century setting. I discuss the latter in depth in Chapter Five.

⁶⁶ Similarly, ‘not all wounds are symbolic castrations’ (Hodges 2009:18)

Arthur's wound, however, acquires great significance as it causes Lord Milon de Provins to decide to knight Arthur for his bravery⁶⁷. One could also argue, then, that Arthur's wound, acquired in honourable and potentially fatal combat, offers the squire a means of being accepted into the community of celebrated knighthood. Thus, in Arthur's world, injury does not represent 'the loss of masculine social capital. Wounds have their own social value' (Hodges 2009:30).

However, Arthur sustains another sword injury in *The Seeing Stone* which seems to fulfil another purpose. Hodges (2009:19) points out that injuries also 'educate young knights'. For this reason, in the Arthurian tradition,

... encounters between promising young knights and 'wily' older knights [show that] combat is more than just the young knights proving themselves. The combat in itself is an education, part of the process of creating (not just revealing) good knights. The young fighters have strength, eagerness, and courage; they must learn discipline, careful swordplay, and riding through painful experience. Gareth 'buys' his experience with his wounds, and so wounding becomes part of the educational process that makes a man. (Hodges 2009:20)

Arthur de Caldicot learns a different, though equally valuable, lesson when he engages in some 'friendly' sword-play with Sir William de Gortanore. In between bouts, while Arthur is distracted and preparing to re-engage, the old knight makes a foul pass and thrusts his sword into the boy's right shoulder. Sir William's behaviour seems all the more treacherous when it

⁶⁷ Lord Stephen claims that bravery is 'something deeper than thought. It's an instinct' (Crossley-Holland 2001:355).

becomes known that he is Arthur's biological father⁶⁸ 'who shovelled [Arthur] out of sight to suit himself' (Crossley-Holland 2001:123).

What the young boy learns from this encounter is that his father cannot be trusted and that he is 'like a force of nature, one moment harmless, the next vengeful and very dangerous' (Crossley-Holland 2003:174). As a result he has some, quite understandable, difficulty in following all of the Ten Commandments he has been taught:

'Honour thy father and mother ...' I began.

My father. How can I? How can I honour him? He's a murderer⁶⁹, and he beats Lady Alice. He wounded me in my right shoulder, and I think he may have meant to. (Crossley-Holland 2001:75)

Arthur's foster-father, Sir John de Caldicot, senses Arthur's turmoil and reminds him that 'Who we are isn't only a matter of blood; it's what we make of ourselves' (Crossley-Holland 2000:300). In this simple speech, Sir John helps the young boy regain his personal dignity by nullifying the claims of patriarchy and considering his identity as separate from his paternal lineage; 'tel père, tel fils'⁷⁰ is not inevitable.

Arthur draws some comfort from this, but for the remainder of the narrative, the boy's relationship with his father is fraught with tension, irritation, distrust and contempt. Yet again, Arthur gains understanding of his personal predicament by entering into the emotions

⁶⁸ Arthur's contempt for Sir William is evident in his description of him as an 'old man with white bristles sticking out of his nostrils and a ferocious temper and a booming voice. Who shovelled me out of sight to suit himself. This murderer. My own father' (Crossley-Holland 2001:123).

⁶⁹ Early on in the trilogy, Arthur discovers that his biological father murdered his mother's husband. The boy describes this as his 'third sorrow. Sir William is a murderer! My own father is a man-slaughterer!' (Crossley-Holland 2000:307)

⁷⁰ Crossley-Holland (2001:342).

of the colourful characters in Camelot. His dysfunctional relationship makes him think of Sir Mordred:

Mordred. Mordant. Morbid. Mordor. Murdered. His name-companions are vile.

Mordred knows his father did not want him, just as I know my father did not want me.

Mordred and King Arthur: son and father. They, too, must feel so torn.

(Crossley-Holland 2003:174)

Arthur's choice of the word 'torn' indicates that somewhere deep down is the desire to be able to connect with his father. Yet, Sir William's temperament and proclivity for violence make meaningful connections between father and son impossible. Arthur observes how Sir William becomes positively cheerful once the crusade gets underway and that his father seems to 'come into his true kingdom' (Crossley-Holland 2003:154) in times of war.

Unfortunately, Sir William's violent death does not improve Arthur's opinion of his father. In fact, he writes of his father's low-key burial: 'No, God did not welcome my father. Heaven spat into his grave, and a fierce wind blew from the north-east' (Crossley-Holland 2003:278). In this extract, Arthur shows not only his contempt for Sir William but also his summary dismissal of the validity of the pardon promised by Pope Innocent for all who take the cross.

Unlike his biological father in so many ways, Arthur hates warfare and feels sickened and defiled by its brutality. As is the case with most war veterans, the emotional wounds he sustains are the ones that hurt the most and take the longest to heal. This inevitable psychological mutilation takes its toll and when Lady Judith sees Arthur for the first time after he returns from the crusade she says, 'Sometimes, it takes a long, long time for a wound to

heal [...]. I've only to look at you, Arthur, to see what horrors you've faced'⁷¹ (Crossley-Holland 2003:323).

Arthur is well aware of the effect the crusade has had on him. In a poignant, and, in my opinion, climactic, chapter called 'Knowledge of Good and Evil', Arthur describes the scene he is privy to when arrives at Verdon unexpectedly. In his account, he mourns his loss of innocence and regrets his mental and physical scars.

It was as if I were looking into the garden of Eden, except that Winnie and Tom weren't naked, of course. [...]

They were so free. So ... at ease. They don't know how people tear each other to pieces. They haven't smelled death. They don't have nightmares that ride you when you sleep.

Winnie and Tom: they looked so young!

I wished I could be like them.

I wished I could just go away.

Tom was Adam and Winnie was Eve and I was the apple of the knowledge of good and evil, and I thought if only I could go away, and not trouble them with love and pain and guilt, they could stay in the orchard blind and innocent and delighted, and live for ever.

(Crossley-Holland 2003:335)

In order to give meaning to his state of mind, Arthur turns, yet again, to a story of mythical proportions. The original narrative, which Arthur, during the course of his religious studies would have encountered countless times, functions as part of what Crossley-Holland in *Tales, Tellers and Texts* (2000:15) calls a 'sacred history' that is 'panoptic' and 'assigns human beings their place within the entire order of creation [... and is] concerned with the welfare of women

⁷¹ Arthur describes some of the horrors that haunt him at night:

'I saw terrors,' [Arthur] said. 'A singing teacher cut to pieces. Women used and murdered.'

'Were they Saracens?'

'What does that matter? A little Christian boy trussed and catapulted over the wall.'

(Crossley-Holland 2003:369)

and men and men not only as social animals but as spiritual beings'. By likening himself to the 'apple of the knowledge of good and evil' Arthur acknowledges that the wounded, yet enlightened, being he has become is the product, the fruit, as it were, of the process of becoming a man whose way is, as his half-sister puts it, 'through the world' (Crossley-Holland 2003:369). Arthur regrets the painful and irreparable stripping of naivety, of untrammelled, childlike bliss, and yet he seems to understand that the knowledge he has gained from his experiences and his reception of the stories he encounters can help him embody the knightly ideal he aspired to as a boy.

One could also argue that Arthur's knowledge of various mythical social constructs and the purging act of writing jointly enable the boy to make sense of the confusion, pain and trauma he experiences and cultivate a self-knowledge that can inform his personal choices. After seeing King Arthur enter the hill, the young knight writes that the events he has witnessed in his seeing stone represent 'all I hope to be; all I must never be'(2003:382).

3.6 'I just write what I want to write'⁷²: The Masculinity of Mythmaking

*Some man who knew those days had to set down
the truth⁷³ about them in good black ink;
there are altogether too many tales of magical swords
and great round tables going about already.⁷⁴*

While Arthur's primary purpose in writing is to articulate his thoughts and feelings, Crossley-Holland's representation of the boy as a writer is significant in many other ways. The written

⁷² Crossley-Holland (2001:46).

⁷³ Stephens and McCallum (1998:215) note that in Finkel's version of the Arthurian myth, the narrator 'depicts degraded forms of existence'. Arthur de Caldicot seems similarly intent on realistic and faithful narration. His heart-wrenching depiction of the manor court sitting in which Lankin's hand is cut off for stealing a piece of mutton reflects the poverty and desperate realities faced by the peasantry.

⁷⁴ From George Finkel's *Watch Fires to the North* (1968) in Stephens and McCallum (1998:175).

product acquires a kind of permanence, a certain authenticity, simply through the creative process. Arthur exercises his personal agency through writing *what he wants to write*, acknowledging and thus validating his musings. In this, he has a powerful advantage over many of his fellows and, most notably, over the vast majority of women in his social milieu, who, like Winnie, can hardly write at all.

Moreover, in the trilogy, Arthur functions as a teller of tales, an archivist of medieval experience, but he also embodies that crucial historical figure that gives literary immortality to the oral traditions which, over millennia, become the myths that shape cultural consciousness and challenge academics and writers to interrogate their inherent mythological and historical truths. In this respect I am referring not only to Arthur's description of King Arthur and his knights from a thirteenth century perspective, but also to his painstaking preservation of the stories told by his Welsh foster-grandmother, Nain.

In the chapter entitled 'Blood on the Snow', Arthur writes down the story that Nain tells on Twelfth Night, seated before a yuletide blaze and surrounded by her grandchildren. It is the simple story of how Nain's late husband, a Welsh warlord, rescued their children from a barn that had accidentally caught alight. A straightforward narrative would perhaps have sufficed for the mere recollection of family history, but Nain embellishes the tale with suggestions of magic and the supernatural. She claims that young Lady Helen (Arthur's foster mother) had crouched in the inferno and tried to save herself by chanting the old words and sounds that cause fire to swallow fire. Moreover, in this instance, as in every other reference she makes concerning him, Nain calls her late husband 'the dragon' (2000:305), paying consistent, rich tribute to his strength and valour. Nain's insistence on attributing superhuman qualities to her late husband is perhaps indicative of Kevin Crossley-Holland's view of the origin of myth

and the way in which mere mortals achieve eminence in collective cultural memory. There are, indeed, those who suggest that medieval projections of King Arthur embody the result of a similar kind of 'secondary mythicisation', a process whereby 'a hero acquires supernatural status as his tradition evolves' (Thomas 1996:2).

Arthur's role as a chronicler of 'the old stories' and the legendary events he witnesses in his obsidian is significant in that it mirrors, in some ways, the task undertaken by the first articulators of the Arthurian world, those early shapers of the mythical realities that have become integral to the Western literary heritage. It is part of Arthur's responsibility as a writer, as a preserver of his culturally informed experience, to narrate the sordid as well as the sublime aspects of not only his own life, but also those which he witnesses of King Arthur's life in his seeing stone. It is Arthur, the scribe, who gives literary being to Nain's dragon and his own namesake's Camelot.

Edward Burnett Tylor (2007:91) observes in *The Origins of Culture*, that language (and by extension the preservation of oral language in written form) 'has had a great share in the formation of myth. The mere fact of its individualising in words such notions as [...] war and peace, vice and virtue, gives the mythmaker the means of imagining these thoughts as personal beings'. It follows then that language 'not only acts in thorough unison with the imagination whose product it expresses, but it goes on producing of itself, and thus, by the side of the mythic conceptions in which language has followed imagination, we have others where language has led, and imagination has followed' (Tylor 2007:91). Tylor's theory, though based on a different argument, coincides to some extent with the theory of secondary mythicisation in that it asserts that while material myth constitutes elements of the primary formation, verbal myth gives impetus to the second formation.

In Crossley-Holland's trilogy, the boy protagonist is depicted as both the receiver and the maker of myth through his writing. He stands at the metaphorical junction of the primary and secondary phases in the formation of myth, a pivotal position which offers immense agency to the writer as a 'mythmaker' (Tylor 2007:91). In a thematically related poem, Ursula le Guin (1985:74) explores this unique positioning of the artist, in the broadest sense, and the role assumed by those who occupy this metaphysical space:

What do they do,
the singers, tale-writers, dancers, painters, shapers, makers?
They go there with empty hands,
into the gap between.
They come back with things in their hands.
They go silent and come back with words, with tunes.
They go into confusion and come back with patterns.
[...]
That is where they live,
where they get their breath:
there, in the gap between,
the empty place.

(Le Guin 1985:74)

Arthur's role as 'tale-writer' and mythmaker, according to this philosophical assertion, is to go 'into the gap between', to bridge the chasm between different realms of reality and to make sense of the human predicament, to identify patterns amidst confusion, to elucidate the mythical truths which influence our existence.

Moreover, in his discussion about the degrees of magic⁷⁵, Arthur emphasises the nature of his role as one who can access the source of art and the psychological state the mythmaker must cultivate in order to bridge 'the gap'. He asserts that

the third degree [of magic] is when a person concentrates and finds a force inside himself or within an object, and releases it. This is what happened when Arthur-in-the-stone pulled the sword from the stone. He stared at the sword, he stared into the sword, until nothing else in the world existed. There was no room for doubt or disbelief.

I think it's like this with my seeing stone too. Sometimes, when I look into it, it shows me nothing, because my mind and heart are already too busy. To see anything in it, I have to come somehow empty and ready. (2001:203)

Arthur stands, metaphorically, at a kind of crossing-place. As Loriggio (1984:520) observes, the mythmaker 'must arm himself with an aloofness which will dislocate him from the society he lives in. For better or for worse, the knowledge he gains is that of one who is outside by choice'. In the chapter called 'Crossing-Places' Arthur writes: 'When the hooded man [Merlin] told King Uther⁷⁶ that his son was the child of crossing-places, I remembered how Merlin said that between-places are always chancy. Our Marches and the foreshore and dusks and bridges: they're times and places where strange things happen. [...] In a way my obsidian is a kind of between-place: between me and everything I can see in it. And what about Nain? She's a crossing-place, too, whenever she tells us stories' (2000:131).

⁷⁵ In his article, 'Tennyson and the Passing of Arthur', Rosenburg (1987:143) claims that 'Tennyson more than once hints that Arthur is illusory, conjured into being by *magicians like himself*, just as Merlin, Arthur's architect and wizard, conjures Camelot into being' (my emphasis).

⁷⁶ Crossley-Holland uses the name Uther Pendragon for King Arthur's father in keeping with the tradition initiated by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Brittonum*.

In the light of Arthur's analysis I venture to ask, 'And what about Kevin Crossley-Holland?' This twenty-first century author and his books represent not only the process of communicating art through the use of mythological constructs, but they stand at the dawn of a new millennium, a chronological crossing-place. And here, at this junction, Crossley-Holland uses his trilogy, a figurative seeing stone, to bridge the gap and promote the influence of the Arthurian myth, along with its inherent gendered constructs, over a new generation of child-readers.

3.7 Conclusion

*A hopeless mixture! Memory of actuality and deliberate invention
which, at this late date, can scarcely be separated.
This is what legend is; and you and I, we have all created our own legends*⁷⁷

In Higham's (2002:8) *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, the author asks "What role was Arthur intended to perform, why was he utilised in texts of the central Middle Ages, and what did he mean to both authors and their audiences?" Higham (2002:8) explores 'the genesis of the *idea* of Arthur and his meanings as projected by different authors for themselves within their own time frames', and, similarly, the question arises as to the value and meaning of King Arthur for authors and readers in the twenty-first century. Crossley-Holland argues the relevance of the Arthurian legends to contemporary readers by clarifying the philosophical premise of his books. In *King Arthur's World* (2005:n.p.) he reflects: 'In my trilogy, Arthur de Caldicot discovers that King Arthur – and all he stands for – lies sleeping within him. The king in himself. I believe he waits and can be woken within each one of us.' This understanding is inextricably bound up in the heroic tradition that is fundamental to myth and one in which, as

⁷⁷ Crossley-Holland in Hodges, Drummond & Styles (2000:17).

Campbell (2008:30) observes, the 'powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time'⁷⁸.

For the modern child-reader to reach this point of enlightenment, of self-discovery, akin to that which the young protagonist experienced on his road to adulthood, a similar process of relentless interrogation is essential. The paper-and-ink 'obsidian' which the reader holds, becomes not merely a crossing-place for the Arthurian heritage to enter contemporary consciousness, but it functions as a locus for the contestation of cultural constructs, a platform for the suspension and re-examination of ideologies that shape our modern realities. 'Myth looks back, myth looks forward, myth explains and warns'⁷⁹.

Crossley-Holland's choice of subject suggests that the myth's representation of the beauty and terror of the human predicament is as pertinent today as it was when the exploits of King Arthur and his knights were first articulated. Its relevance lies, one may argue, in the very nature of myth. As Giraudoux (in Garnham 1996:35) enquires, 'are not myths at one and the same time both false and true, false in that they stand in contradistinction to the facts and details of history and, in our common parlance, are forever being 'exploded', but true in that they reveal to us greater insights than our dull reality can yield?'

In similar vein, Thompson (2002:311) observes in a chapter entitled 'Conceptions of King Arthur in the Twentieth Century' that

⁷⁸ In his discussion on 'Mythological Themes in Creative Literature and Art', Joseph Campbell (1997:186) observes in a similar vein that, 'in the modern West', the Grail 'has been shown to us, of the individual quest, the individual life adventured in the realisation of one's own inborn potential'.

⁷⁹ Crossley-Holland in *Tales, Tellers and Texts* edited by Hodges, Drummond and Styles (2000:15)

the power of the legend lies in its ability to inspire us with the same vision that inspired his followers so long ago. And that it will do as long as we continue to dream of a better and brighter world. Amidst the new Dark Age that seems forever rising, a darkness born of our own failure and despair, Arthur remains a beacon of hope⁸⁰, not of easy success, but of the ever-renewed determination of the human spirit to strive for a nobler way, regardless of the cost.

In his trilogy, Crossley-Holland presents this mythological truth, the 'ice and fire' of the Arthurian myth to question historical and contemporary realities in order to assess the morality of culturally accepted practices, to see prejudice and injustice for what they are and to lead the twenty-first century child-reader to an awareness of the power of personal agency.

When Merlin takes the 'seeing stone' back from Arthur, who is entering into his inheritance as a knight and lord of his manor, Merlin comforts him⁸¹ with the reflection that King Arthur's story 'will never end in you, will it? But there's always someone else just ready for this stone' (2003:386). Merlin's enigmatic speech suggests that there are other readers who are ready to receive the instruction, guidance, promise and warning of the Arthurian myth. In Crossley-Holland's hands this 'cycle of narratives'⁸² becomes the backdrop for the contestation and suspension of naturalised discourses, many of which are related to issues of identity. As Andersson⁸³ (2008:139) notes,

⁸⁰ As Matthews and Matthews point out in *The Complete King Arthur: Many Faces, One Hero* (2017:306), 'Arthur's world was always one of loss and the hope of recovery'.

⁸¹ In *At the Crossing-Places*, Arthur claims, 'But I don't think [Merlin] has gone into the earth, or thin air, or into the minds of schoolmen at Oxford. No, not even to an island of glass. I think Merlin's still here, a wise old spirit, hovering, and it's just we can't see him unless he wants us to' (Crossley-Holland 2001:297).

⁸² Crossley-Holland defines 'myth' in Hodges, Drummond and Styles (2000:15)

⁸³ In 'Constructing young masculinity: a case study of heroic discourse on violence'.

...who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made relevant and the subject positions made available within them⁸⁴.

In view of this, Arthur de Caldicot's relentless questioning of various 'ways of being male'⁸⁵ could prove useful as a model for readers who are in the process of responding to the modes of masculinity they encounter in contemporary society. As Arthur's bewildered musings prove, the construction, performance and maintenance of socially preferred masculinity can prove morally and ethically problematic for the enlightened male subject. Lord Stephen's advice to Arthur highlights the conflicting expectations of hegemonic masculinity when he claims that

... a knight should have two hearts: one adamant as a diamond ...'

'Adamantine, sir?'

'Unbreakable. And the other heart, he said, should be soft as hot wax⁸⁶. A knight should be hard and cutting when he's dealing with cruel men. He should give them no quarter. But he should allow himself to be shaped and moulded by considerate and gentle people. A knight must be careful not to allow cruel men anywhere near his heart of wax, because any kindness extended to them would be wasted. But he should never be harsh or

⁸⁴ Arthur de Caldicot claims that the Arthurian myth he is 'reading' through his obsidian has shown him 'dragons fighting and burning passion and magic and argument, wise words and foul plots, great kindness, cruelty. It's showing me what's best and worst, and right and wrong and I'm part of it' (Crossley-Holland 2000:320).

⁸⁵ Here I have borrowed the title of John Stephens' book, *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film* (2002) which I mentioned in Chapter One.

⁸⁶ Similarly, Sir John claims that 'A good knight should never be unbending; he must respond to circumstance' (Crossley-Holland 2003:357).

unforgiving to women and men who need care or mercy. (Crossley-Holland 2003:72)

It is significant that this description of ideal medieval masculinity bears an uncanny resemblance to the observations made by Kord and Krimmer (2011:4) in *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre and Politics*. In this relatively recent publication, in which they attempt to ‘capture the paradoxes of contemporary masculinity’ (Kord & Krimmer 2011:6), the authors claim that

The conflicting demands imposed on the new hero call for a skilled negotiation of the interface of masculinity and violence. In film after film, violence emerges as the crux of masculinity. How can men be both violent and loving, both sociable and competitive? Some films solve this conflict – or obfuscate it, as a less optimistic reading may conclude – by portraying aggression as essentially defensive, the flipside of a man’s duty to protect and serve. A good man will fight for his family and his country.

It would appear then, that present-day aspirants to hegemonic masculinity face a surprisingly similar dilemma to the one described by Crossley-Holland’s medieval man. While it is not within the scope of this study to discuss whether we should celebrate or mourn the fact that popular, secular contemporary masculinity shares several points of intersection with such dated constructions of manhood as the Arthurian legend describes, it is concerned with the manner in which the protagonist – and, by extension, the reader – questions and evaluates the gendered realities of his particular social context. In this sense, Arthur’s unremitting quest for answers encapsulates the idea behind Foucault’s claim⁸⁷ (discussed in Chapter Two) that dominant discourses and

⁸⁷ In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

... all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitely of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction, the rules of which must be known, and the justification of which must be scrutinised... (Foucault [1972]2003:28.)

Nevertheless, despite the challenging and often bewildering discursive landscape, Arthur, like the modern protagonists that will be discussed in the following chapters, possesses a desire to embody the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and is willing to invest physical, mental and spiritual capital to ensure a successful performance. No pain, no gain. At his metaphorical crossing-place between boyhood and manhood, Arthur articulates his decision to embody his masculine ideal. 'Yes,' he writes, 'this castle is like a fist. Upright and tight and knuckled. It's at the ready. And so am I.'⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Crossley-Holland (2000:338)

CHAPTER FOUR: MARKETING MASCULINITY

*... ‘ “male fiction-making” is perpetually engaged on the boundary
where the licence it extends to subjectivity [...] is always about to undermine its own stability⁸⁹.*

4.1 Background

The school theatre was packed to capacity at the English boys’ prep school in Pretoria, South Africa. For the past week, the boys had been eagerly anticipating the publicity talk by the widely published British author, Chris Bradford. Already loved by many of the boys as the creator of the *Young Samurai* novels, Bradford had come to South Africa for the launch of the third book in his new adrenalin stoked *Bodyguard* series. To start off the proceedings, two rather nervous looking schoolboys joined the author on stage and began to read out a welcome and introductory speech. Bradford had dressed in uniform black for the occasion and wore fashionable shades despite being indoors. The young boys stuttered their way through their lines, reciting Bradford’s achievements as an author and musician. Suddenly, the hall was filled with the deafening sound of gunshots and Bradford, immediately embracing the persona of a bodyguard, shielded the two boys from the imaginary shots and shepherded them into the wings of the stage. The audience was thrilled, entranced.

The rest of the publicity stunt continued along similar lines, usually involving volunteers from the crowd to demonstrate evasion, surveillance and close combat techniques. Even the usual ‘reading’ from one of his books took the form of a thrilling dramatic skit with the boys who volunteered to act

⁸⁹ Knights (1999:8).

receiving free promotional posters and bodyguard accreditation sticker badges. The display was convincing as this is one of the characteristics that sets Bradford apart as an author: before he wrote the *Young Samurai* series, he attained his black belt in Zen Kyu Shin Taijutsu. Recently, in preparation for his *Bodyguard* series, he trained as a close protection officer: a qualified professional bodyguard with an intimate working knowledge of the lingo, strategies and techniques used in the field.

The boys found Bradford's approach irresistible. By the end of the talk, the entire body of students divided into three groups: the first for boys who had brought money to buy books after the show, the second for boys who were lining up to order copies of the books, and the third for the fans who had brought their well-worn copies of Bradford's books to school for him to sign. The marketing strategy had proved overwhelmingly successful. As I leaned back in my seat in the gallery, I considered the possibility that what these boys were so eager to possess was not just a bundle of cracking good stories. The other commodity, the deeper attraction lay, perhaps, in the display of capable, skilled and confident masculinity, the enactment of a persona that takes danger, risk and pressure in its stride. As a children's literature scholar with a masculinities research profile, my interest was piqued.

4.2 Introduction

*'Bradford has combined Jack Bauer, James Bond and Alex Rider
to bring us this action-packed thriller.'*⁹⁰

Chris Bradford's bestselling books have been published in over 20 languages and have received several children's book award nominations. His hugely popular *Young Samurai* series tells the tale of Jack Fletcher, a twelve year old English boy with straw-blond hair and azure-blue eyes, who is

⁹⁰ Goodreads.com review.

stranded and orphaned in Japan in the year 1611. By good fortune, he is adopted by a noble samurai Masamoto who allows him to train as a samurai warrior. The ninth instalment in this series is due for publication later this year.

The *Bodyguard* series, Bradford's most recent set of publications, is set in the general present and will be the focus of this chapter. In reading order, *Bodyguard: Hostage* (2013), *Bodyguard: Ransom* (2014), *Bodyguard: Ambush* (2015), *Bodyguard: Target*⁹¹ (2016), *Bodyguard: Assassin* (2017) and *Bodyguard: Fugitive* (2018) follow the adventures of Connor Reeves, a British teenager with a particular talent for kickboxing. The first novel opens *in medias res* in the climactic moments of the UK Junior Kickboxing Championship final – aptly setting the tone for the fast-paced, adrenalin-charged action to come.

Connor is recruited by Buddyguard – ‘a secret close-protection organisation that differs from all other security outfits by supplying and training only young bodyguards’ (frontispiece Bradford 2014). The clientele is the growing class of young ‘starlets’, as well as the children of prominent politicians and billionaires. ‘The best bodyguard is the one nobody notices’ and that is why, the managers of this organisation claim, highly skilled Buddyguards are more effective than the typical *adult* bodyguard, ‘who can easily draw unwanted attention. Operating invisibly as a child’s constant companion, a Buddyguard provides the greatest possible protection for any high-profile or vulnerable young person’ (frontispiece, Bradford 2014).

One would ask, however, what would cause a young boy to put aside his international kickboxing ambitions and place himself, literally, in the line of fire. The reason is (partly)⁹² rooted in chivalric intentions: Connor’s father died in service to his country eight years before and, as a fourteen year

⁹¹ *Bodyguard: Target* describes the adventures of Charlotte Hunter, usually referred to as Charley. I will make reference to this book at a later stage in the chapter.

⁹² This question will be explored in greater depth later in the chapter.

old, Connor is not in a position to provide for his aging grandmother and his mother who is suffering from multiple sclerosis. The Buddyguard organisation, under the leadership of Colonel Black, offers to pay for a professional nurse to live with Connor's maternal relations and provide all the medical care they may require. It is an irresistible offer for a boy who sees himself as the only potential provider in the household and he agrees to attend the Buddyguard school and offer his protection services in return for these benefits.

Connor is later recruited by Buddyguard and earns his gold wings after his rookie mission to protect Alicia Mendez, the only daughter of the president of the United States. The novels are quick paced, with breathtakingly intense moments of crisis and suspense; yet, there are moments of reflection, even of tenderness, which endear the protagonist to the reader.

In this chapter I will ignore, for the most part, the glaring iniquity of employing a child as a bodyguard. To risk, knowingly, a minor's life to protect someone else's, even with the child's consent, cannot, I believe, be viewed as moral or ethical. In a related article, Ronald Paul (2009:10) observes that

while the use of child soldiers is generally condemned around the world, these budding agents of British imperialism are portrayed in the novel⁹³ as even more useful precisely because of their young age. In fact, their youthful anonymity appears to be their biggest asset.

Although Paul is referring to another text in the teenage fiction genre, his remarks are particularly applicable to the Bodyguard series. In fact, in a rather disturbing scene in *Bodyguard: Target*, we read that "Buddyguard is expanding to meet demand" (Bradford 2016:116) and one of the characters refers to the new recruits that arrive at the Buddyguard school as 'fresh meat' (Bradford 2016:116). Having witnessed Colonel Black's tendency to recruit children who are socially or

⁹³ Paul refers here to the first novel in the Cherub series by Robert Muchamore. It was published in 2004 and bears the title, *The Recruit*.

financially vulnerable into the organisation, one cannot but agree with this callous description. Nevertheless, as this is not the focus of my research, I will assume that the reader shares my deep-seated disapproval of the tactics employed by Colonel Black and focus, instead, on the gendered aspects of the narrative.

4.3 Young 'Musculinity'⁹⁴

*'Hit first, hit hard, then hit the ground running'*⁹⁵

According to Capdevila (2010:217), the heroes of recent adventure fiction aimed at adults 'are constructed with nostalgic reference to a past tradition of adventure and masculine ideals. They are virile, strong and valiant figures committed to action and the pursuit of a noble quest'. They are, furthermore, endowed with the characteristics that make up 'peerless and magnificent manhood' (Green 1993:95). Among these are 'courage, sagacity, energy and "musculinity"'; the latter signifying 'muscular physical power ... an expression of freedom and a form of protection, ... bodily invincibility' (Green 1993:133).

It is no coincidence, then, that we are introduced to our teenage hero in an undeniably masculine space: 'The fist caught Connor by surprise. A rocketing right hook that jarred his jaw. Stars burst before his eyes and he stumbled backwards. Only instinct saved him from getting floored by the left cross that followed. Blocking the punch with his forearm, Connor countered with a kick to the ribs' (Bradford 2013:11). Aged fourteen, Connor Reeves holds the UK title for the Under Sixteens Battle of Britain Kickboxing tournament. He has eight years of martial arts training under his belt and the physique to prove it.

⁹⁴ This term will be discussed later in this section.

⁹⁵ Bradford (2013:46).

From the start, it is obvious that the protagonist embodies the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. As previously noted, 'hegemonic masculinity' refers to 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 2005:77). Robinson (2013:61) notes that historically, there has been a move to recognising 'hegemonic masculinities', and asking how 'particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance' (Brod 1987:92 in Robinson 2013:61).

From the outset, it would appear that Connor's performance of masculinity conforms to the aggressive-protective kind that sets manly heroes apart and he seems well equipped for the daunting task set before him. Moreover, as Swain (2005:224) observes, 'sporting success [...] is a key signifier of successful masculinity' and here, at least, Connor's ability appears unparalleled.

4.4 Inheriting Masculinity

*'It was in his blood. He was born to be
a bodyguard.'*⁹⁶

In her article on postcolonial masculinities and the politics of visibility⁹⁷, Stephanie Newell concurs with Sara Ahmed when she claims that bodies 'are capable of remembering "histories, even when we forget them"'. Our bodies proceed through particular historical trajectories and identifications, sometimes in spite of our "selves"' (Newell 2009:243). For Connor Reeves, the decision to become a bodyguard and the capacity he finds within himself to excel in this field signals a journey of personal and paternal rediscovery.

⁹⁶ Bradford (2013:421).

⁹⁷ 'Introduction: Postcolonial Masculinities and the Politics of Visibility' in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

In trying to recruit Connor to the Buddyguard organisation, Colonel Black is quick to point out that, “You would be following in your father’s footsteps” (Bradford 2013:31). The information unsettles Connor as he had always believed his father, who had died several years before, to have been a regular soldier in the Royal Signals regiment. According to Colonel Black, however, Justin Reeves was “actually in the SAS Special Projects Team, responsible for counter-terrorism and VIP close protection” (Bradford 2013:32).

At first, curiosity to understand his father’s way of life plays a decisive role in Connor’s choices. While training to become a bodyguard, he senses a nearness to his deceased father that he never experienced before. Moreover, his first assignment is to protect the daughter of the man his father died to save. He only discovers this link after his arrival at the White House. His internal musings are, perhaps inevitably, founded upon the ideological premise of self-sacrifice sometimes being necessary ‘for the greater good’:

Losing a father was a pain no one should have to bear. But, in his father’s case, could it possibly be deemed ‘worth it’? He’d saved the life of a man who went on to become the President of the United States. A leader who was being hailed as a new dawn for America, according to what Connor had read about him. A visionary who could steer the country to peace and prosperity. And all this was possible *only* because of his father. Connor felt an immense sense of pride in him. (Bradford 2013:140)

Connor responds to this knowledge by trying to make his father similarly proud. Initially, however, he struggles to achieve his goal and he seems to feel that in failing to do his duty as a bodyguard, he is not living up to his late father’s expectations. At one of his lowest points he looks at the photograph of his father which he carries around like a talisman and whispers, “I’m sorry, Dad. I hope I’m not a disappointment to you [...]. Maybe I’m just not cut out to be a bodyguard” (Bradford 2013:274).

Connor's subsequent success, however, allays his fear and he discovers, within himself, the apparently intuitive sense for danger that his father possessed as well as the self-sacrificial courage that characterised his father's last moments. In fact, when, after his first successful mission, the President of the United States compares Connor to his heroic father, the boy realises the extent of his emotional dependence on his father's memory:

Connor smiled gratefully at the President's words. The bruising on his chest had disappeared and his leg, although stiff, was almost fully healed. But now another wound was beginning to heal too – the one in his heart caused by his father's death. Being compared to his father was as close as Connor could get to actually being with him again. And that meant a great deal. (Bradford 2013:417)

In fact, by the third book, *Bodyguard: Ambush*, 'Connor felt as if he was walking side-by-side with his father. He'd come to appreciate why his father had dedicated himself to protecting others – that sense of pride and purpose in keeping someone safe' (Bradford 2016:49). In a sense, Connor's development as a bodyguard is presented as the rediscovery of an apparently inherent and inherited masculinity.

This idea is, of course, in direct opposition to the performative theory of gendered discourse. Connor's masculinity would rather, according to recent theory, be seen as constructed through his re-enactment of the performances required to identify with the desired gender type⁹⁸. The protagonist seems, however, to draw strength and comfort from the perception that his proclivity for the occupation stems from his paternal legacy. Nonetheless, this heroic heritage carries with it both the privilege and the responsibility of hegemonic domain⁹⁹.

⁹⁸ This will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

⁹⁹ As David Benatar (2012:2) points out in *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*, males often face the disadvantage of compulsory military conscription and a higher likelihood of death by violent crime.

4.5 Making Masculinity

*'To recognise gender as a social pattern requires us to see it as a product of history, and also as a producer of history.'*¹⁰⁰

Morgan (in Murphy 1994:n.p.), in his praise for the book *Fictions of Masculinity* claims that 'we are just beginning to understand masculinity as a 'fiction' or a localizable, historical, and therefore unstable construct'. Essentially, the notion that gender is not inevitable but constructed and performed has become the basis of research that analyses the way people interpret their identity and re-enact gendered performances in the context of societal expectations. In masculinity studies, these performances may be seen as an indication of the type of masculinity a subject subscribes (or, more often, aspires) to. Connell (in Swain 2005:224) summarises the concept by claiming that 'masculinity does not exist as an ontological given but comes into existence as people act'.

Gender performances that align with traditionally hegemonic male behaviour situate the subject in the general playing field with the consequence that successful re-enactment usually results in increased physical currency and acceptance, while failure may (and often does) lead to marginalisation. The successful performance of dominant masculinity is thus critical for those men and boys who wish to reap the benefits of the hegemonic domain, for those who seek acceptance and validation as a man amongst men.

¹⁰⁰ Connell (2005:81).

Owing to the fact that 'the social and material practices through which, and by which, boys' masculine identities are defined are generally described in terms of what boys do with or to their bodies', several researchers have 'embraced the concept of embodiment' (Swain 2005:224).

Connor's relationship with and control over his body is central to his identity and capability as a bodyguard and all the years of martial arts training pay off in situations where he is required to perform at an almost impossibly high level of precision and speed. The following passage, for example, shows Connor in action as he attempts to protect the US president's daughter, Alicia (who is not yet aware of Connor's status as personal protector), from two muggers:

Gold Tooth snatched for his prize. Connor instinctively stepped in to protect Alicia. [...] The situation demanded an all-or-nothing approach and he drove the edge of his hand into Gold Tooth's throat. [...] Connor immediately followed up with a hook punch to the solar plexus, then a lightning-fast upper cut to the jaw. There was a bone-jarring crunch and the gangster's gold tooth flew from his mouth. Over in less than five seconds, the final punch knocked the former Gold Tooth unconscious and he collapsed to the sidewalk in a heap. (Bradford 2013:229-230)

Yet, the heroics are not over. No sooner has Connor disposed of this threat than he is stabbed in the side by Gold Tooth's accomplice. The reader is aware, by now, that Connor has developed the habit of wearing stab-resistant T-shirts (supplied by Buddyguard to its recruits), a circumstance which makes Connor's survival plausible (to a certain extent, that is). In this first real attempt upon his life and that of his Principal (the person he is assigned to protect), Connor

felt a sharp stab of pain in his ribs as the blade hit its mark. But the adrenalin blocked out the rest of the damage. Battling now for his own survival as well as Alicia's, Connor fought with the fury of a tiger. He palm-struck Crew Cut in the face, stunning and weakening his opponent. Then, grabbing the gang member's hand that held the knife, he spun himself under Crew Cut's arm. The whole series of joints

from wrist to shoulder twisted against themselves. The effect was instantly crippling. [...] Connor then finished off the gang member with a strike to a pressure point at the back of his skull. Crew Cut ceased screaming and crumpled to the ground.

Ensuring that there were no other immediate threats, Connor pulled Alicia to her feet.

'Are you hurt?' he asked. (Bradford 2013:231)

If this had been a James Bond movie, this would have marked the moment when the main female character falls hopelessly and distractedly in love with the hero and, yes, this is exactly what happens to Alicia. After witnessing Connor's selfless and flawless performance, she begins to consider him in a romantic light and the narrative gains interest on an emotional level.

Connor is caught in a moral dilemma. Upon entering his duties as a bodyguard, Connor had sworn, under oath, not to become 'involved with' (Bradford 2013:255) his Principals. Yet he is deeply attracted to Alicia. Part of the 'action' now involves a physical and emotional balancing act in which Connor must remain close enough to Alicia to allow him to fulfil his mission as her protector, and yet not go against his commitment to the professional code of conduct. While dancing with Alicia at her school prom, Connor reflects that

He certainly enjoyed her company and to say that Alicia was attractive was an understatement. But such feelings were close to the line no bodyguard should cross. Indeed, Colonel Black had threatened dismissal of any buddyguard who entered into a relationship with their Principal. It was a matter both of security and of client confidence.

The President's daughter was now dancing toe-to-toe with him. Connor could smell her perfume and with each passing moment, he found his resolve weakening. (Bradford 2013:253)

While this provides impetus and dynamics for the narrative, the episode presents another underlying message: the successful performance of masculinity puts one in line to receive the recognition and benefits of hegemony; a prize which Connor undoubtedly, and the young male reader, potentially, seeks. Connor seems not only to embody, but to epitomise the ‘muscular physical power ... an expression of freedom and a form of protection, ... bodily invincibility’ that Green (1993:133) refers to in his book, *The Adventurous Male: Chapters in the History of the White Male Mind*.

Picking up on Green’s apt term, it is, moreover, Connor’s ‘musculinity’ that gives him the dominant position in this extract. Notably, he reaches down to lift Alicia to her feet after defeating the attackers; his bearing is confident and controlling. By contrast, Alicia is depicted as frozen with fear at the start of the fight and she eventually succumbs to ‘brain fade’¹⁰¹ (Bradford 2013:229), a temporary, yet natural reaction to unexpected danger which bodyguards are trained to avoid. In effect, there are three potential dangers in the episode above: two strong assailants and one terrified Principal whose reactions could jeopardise the success of the protagonist’s efforts.

While it may seem that Bradford presents a rather helpless image of femininity here – the typical (and often warranted) catalyst for reactionary feminist commentary – it must be admitted that this implied incompetence does not characterise all the girls and women in Bradford’s books. In fact, another one of his female Principals, the teenage daughter of a French ambassador to Central Africa, saves Connor from a black mamba and later joins him in fighting a particularly strong poacher who attempts to hold them hostage:

In the second that Connor took to consider his next best target, Amber stepped up and kicked Muscleman straight between the legs. The poacher’s eyes bulged and he bent double, expelling a pained gasp. Then she hammer-fisted him in the temple.

¹⁰¹ The constant use of occupational jargon in the series makes the narrative more believable. Bradford uses the information he gained during his training as a close-protection officer to lend authenticity to his writing.

Muscleman went down like a felled buffalo. Connor stared at Amber in stunned admiration. (Bradford 2015:279)

It is refreshing to see a girl character who is actively involved in protecting herself and her (momentarily stunned) protector. There is certainly no evidence of 'brain fade' in Amber's reaction to danger here, with both bodyguard and Principal working with the common goal of survival in view. It is significant that the girl is able to defeat her male assailant by striking him at his weakest point – a point which, ironically, has symbolised (time out of mind) the phallic dominance of the male body.

4.6 Girl Guards¹⁰²

'You can be a rose yet still have thorns.'¹⁰³

Another notoriously feisty female character is one of Connor's fellow bodyguards, a girl called Ling, who fights every bit as hard as Connor despite the fact that she has not yet earned her Buddyguard wings. We are told that although Connor 'was a black belt in jujitsu and kickboxing, that didn't mean he took a match with Ling lightly. At their very first encounter, she'd demonstrated she was a supremely tough combatant. In Amir's words, "Ling *always* wins her fights"' (Bradford 2014:45). Connor respects Ling's skill and, upon her request, does not hold back in his attack in deference of her gender. In one instance, Ling challenges Connor to a knockout to chastise him for a comment which she deems sexist. In the kickboxing ring, she channels her frustration into her fight moves:

Like a whirling dervish, Ling came at him with a flurry of kicks and punches. Connor fought hard to defend himself. He ducked her spinning back fist, blocked her cross and evaded her crescent kick. As he retreated from Ling's relentless onslaught, Luciana goaded him from the ringside, "Some champion you are, Connor!"

¹⁰² Bradford (2016:436) claims, 'My books have always included strong yet feminine heroines'.

¹⁰³ Bradford (2016:65)

Needled by the taunt and wanting to get a word in edgeways with Ling, Connor now went on the attack.

“Ling, I meant you got the job,” he replied with a blistering combination of jab, cross and upper cut, “because ... our two Principals ... are girls. It therefore makes sense –” he almost floored Ling with a back fist – “to have a *female* bodyguard. [...] You can go places I can’t. [...] And their protection is supposed to be low profile, so a *girl* bodyguard will be even less noticeable than a boy.”

Connor grunted as Ling thrust a front-kick into his gut, forcing him backwards.

“Is that low profile enough for you?” grinned Ling, relishing the buzz of the fight.

Although this extract demonstrates Ling’s physical and mental strength, it also highlights the fact that, in order to gain the dominance, acceptance and respect she craves in this traditionally masculine space, she must perform and excel in the activities which define its hierarchy.

Another female protagonist who faces this challenge is Charlotte Hunter, the protagonist of the fourth book in the series, *Bodyguard: Target*. She calls herself Charley – a significantly androgynous name – and features in the series as the first girl recruit to enter the organisation. Although she was at one point a top junior Quiksilver surfer in California, a series of tragedies left her orphaned and troubled, struggling to cope with her bereavement in foster care. Charley accepts Colonel Black’s offer of employment and starts a new life in a new country as a bodyguard trainee. It does not take her long to realise her insignificant status in this traditionally male space. Her instructor suggests that she should ‘fight smarter, not harder’ (Bradford 2016:65) to compensate for her relatively light and slender physique.

In order to gain acceptance in the organisation and to be recognised as more than ‘the girlfriend’ or ‘the secretary’, Charley must excel in the activities that hold the most masculine capital. Eventually, she manages to ‘run the gauntlet’ and take down every one of her male colleagues in unarmed

combat class: 'Behind her, the sports hall was littered with groaning and injured boys. Charley couldn't help but smile at the sight. All her hard work and extra training had paid off' (Bradford 2016:103). Thus, the successful re-enactment of conventionally masculine performances within this confrontational space secures, even for a female body, a degree of respect, even reverence.

This episode brings to mind Jean Bobby Noble's book, *Masculinity without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions* (2004). In this publication, Noble references Halberstam's expressed desire to 'make masculinity safe for women and girls, even heterosexual women' (2004:xxxvii)¹⁰⁴. In the context of the narrative, it is not only desirable, but necessary for Charley to assimilate and imitate the masculine performances that dictate the gender hierarchy of the institution.

4.7 Schooling the Body(guard)

*'Although bodies have agency, many of the opportunities to achieve peer group status in boyhood (and also later in life) are largely conditioned by the shape and physical attributes of the body.'*¹⁰⁵

According to Reardon and Govender (2011:79), 'the male body has come to symbolize masculine characteristics such as power, control and invincibility. [...] Not only the body's size and shape, but also the skills and movements it is capable of all constitute ways in which masculinity is performed through the male body.' They further claim that 'the use of the body in aggressive and intimidating ways within peer relationships is a key means through which adolescent boys define and affirm their masculinity' (Reardon & Govender 2011:79).

¹⁰⁴ As female masculinity falls beyond the scope of this research, I mention this only in passing.

¹⁰⁵ Swain (2005:225), 'Masculinities in Education'.

Apart from the 'musculinity' required on the field during a mission, the dynamics between the male bodyguards training at Buddyguard school also give rise to intense displays of aggression to prove status and gain validation. In this sphere, Connor's main competition is Jason, a young Australian boxer who takes it on himself to make sure that the newbie kickboxing champion doesn't get too high an opinion of himself. Although their 'friendly' sparring and training sessions sometimes flare up into actual fights, they generally maintain a decent façade for the sake of the (aptly named) Alpha Team they both support in a professional capacity. Connor, however, recognises Jason's antagonism as a bid to maintain his position in the school. He reflects that 'although their relationship was still fractious, Connor had come to realise Jason wasn't a bad lad in himself. Just neither of them wanted to be second best' (Bradford 2014:101).

Nevertheless, as Swain (2005:215) notes, 'schools are invariably hierarchical and create and sustain relations of domination and subordination; each orders certain practices in terms of power and prestige as it defines its own distinct gender regime' (2005:215). Inevitably, then, in this school, perhaps more so than in any other, the boys are

consciously concerned about the maintenance of their bodies; they can be seen learning to control their bodies, acquiring and mastering a number of techniques [...]; and they can be seen using them in the appropriate ways that being a boy demands. Moreover, they are aware of the body's significance, both as a personal (but unfinished) resource and as a social symbol, which communicates signs and messages about their self-identity'. (Swain 2005:224)

Even in this arena, where young boys have been handpicked on the grounds of their suitability as bodyguards there are the (arguably oversexed) topdogs, the less assertive underdogs and the middling class of boys who recognise the unstated hierarchy. As Connell observes, 'in every setting [...] there will be a hierarchy of masculinities, and each will generally have its own dominant, or

hegemonic, form of masculinity, which gains ascendance over and above others; it becomes “culturally exalted” (Connell in Swain 2005:220).

When, after the success of his rookie mission, Connor is awarded his gold wings, he immediately becomes the target of renewed attempts by the other boys to reaffirm their own positions despite their officially subordinate status. The situation merely plays in Connor’s favour, however, as he, in turn, is challenged to ‘up his game’ even more and hone his skills in order to save face; the rivalry serves as an unofficial aspect of the curriculum at this unique school that serves to toughen the recruits for the more malicious threats that await on assignments.

Connor, as a winner in the game of masculinity, understands the rules and dedicates himself with renewed energy to his training, pushing his body to, at times, seemingly insane limits. According to Swain (2005:224), this is typical of the workings of the hegemonic domain where ‘for much of the time, boys define their masculinity through action, and, [...] the most esteemed and prevalent resources that boys draw on to establish status are physicality and athleticism, which are inextricably linked to the body in the form of strength, toughness, power, skill, fitness and speed’¹⁰⁶.

Swain’s observation supports the concept of embodiment mentioned earlier, in which ‘the social and material practices through which, and by which, boys’ masculine identities are defined’ (Swain 2005:224) position boys as ‘embodied social agents, for they do not merely have a passive body that is inscribed and acted upon; they are actively involved in the development of their bodies throughout their school life’ (Swain 2005:224).

¹⁰⁶ This tendency is particularly evident in historical boys’ school stories. In the controversial book, *The Loom of Youth* by Alec Waugh, published in 1917, Gordon (the boy protagonist) ‘went to Fenhurst with the determination to excel, and at once was brought face to face with the fact that success lay in a blind worship at the shrine of the god of Athleticism. [...] He who wished to get to the front has [sic] to strive after success on the field, and success on the field alone’ (Bristow 1991:88).

Moreover, as Connell suggests, bodies are both the ‘objects and agents of practice, with the practice itself forming the structures within which bodies are appropriated and defined’ (in Swain 2005:224). For example, in Connor’s world of close combat and high profile protection, the physical demands on masculinity are necessarily high, yet it is these very expectations and the means employed to meet them that produce both the object and the practice of this construction. More importantly for the concept of embodiment, Connor is an active participant in his development, an agent in control of his own body and its actions. After all, as Whitehead and Barrett (2001:17) observe, ‘masculine power’ is largely exercised through self-regulation and self-discipline – a process of ‘identity work’.

4.8 Marketable Masculinity

‘[H]uman bodies have become an increasingly visible locus of the highly personal needs and desires that have accompanied the institutionalisation of consumer capitalism.’¹⁰⁷

For Connor, the attainment of ‘strength, toughness, power, skill, fitness and speed’ (Swain 2005:224) is not merely a matter of status; it is a means of survival. These are necessary skills in his profession, ones that could mean the difference between life and death. Connor realises this and, immediately after his first encounter with danger, he decides to train harder:

He pummelled the bag. *Jab, cross, jab, hook!*

His hands began to tremble under the effort. But he had to ensure his combat skills were up to scratch. From now on, he vowed to do extra martial arts training every morning. Not just for his own safety, but for Alicia’s too. (Bradford 2013:238)

In this extract, it is clear that Connor’s survival instinct, and, consequently, his splendid and admirably capable physique, equip him for his career as a bodyguard. His desire to survive,

¹⁰⁷ McKay et al. (2005: 280)

combined with his almost fanatical training routine, make him a desirable and viable asset to the privileged client who seeks protection.

In “‘Gentlemen, the lunchbox has landed’”: Representations of Masculinities and Men’s Bodies in the Popular Media’, McKay, Mikosza and Hutchins build on the concept of masculine embodiment. They concur with Featherstone when he asserts that ‘our inner and outer bodies are, in fact, ‘conjoined’ in consumer culture, with the aim of inner body maintenance being the improvement of outer body appearance and the cultivation of ‘a more marketable self’. Thus, bodies now have an important exchange value’ (in McKay et al. 2005:280).

Featherstone’s observations take on a rather ominous light in the context of the boy bodyguard. He is training his body, fine-tuning his reflexes to become a better bodyguard – more marketable, in a sense – a body whose services can not only be bought but who is expected to place himself as the final shield, the last point of defence for the significant and vulnerable Principal. The body that he has trained to execute actions with flawless precision can, in fact, be read as a marketable commodity for the comfort and safety of illustrious clients¹⁰⁸.

In his profession as a bodyguard, Connor’s body actually takes on a physical ‘exchange value’, and is potentially expendable. In extreme cases, for example, the bodyguards are trained to provide body cover to their Principals; in effect, to place themselves between the client and the threat. Over the course of the first three novels, Connor frequently does this; the first serious episode of this kind

¹⁰⁸ While Bradford does not problematize this on an ethical level, the concept (and its attendant challenges) of hiring children to protect others becomes a central aspect of the plot interest in *Fugitive*, the most recent instalment published in 2018. Nevertheless, at the end of this series, when the Buddyguard organisation has fallen apart, MI6 offers the main child protagonists employment in their covert operations department under the ‘Guardian’ project. Although Connor initially turns down this offer in order to recover from his missions, the likelihood of him eventually joining MI6 is presented as high:

[Connor] was long over due a break and had no wish to dive headlong into another covert operation, especially when he had no idea what the Guardian role might entail. Yet he could already feel a familiar pull, a yearning for the ‘combat high’ that came from being in the field. It was an irresistible draw that his father had experienced and often succumbed to, and that Connor craved too. (Bradford 2018:353)

being when he takes two bullets for Alicia in an assassination attempt. Having sensed and identified the threat just seconds before the attack, Connor launches Alicia out of harm's way and is shot in the chest and the leg. His bullet proof shirt prevents a fatal upper body wound but he takes some time to recover from the flesh wound in his thigh. It's all part of the job, it seems, and Connor is dubbed 'Bullet-catcher' (Bradford 2013:414) in his 'get well' card from Alpha Team at headquarters.

Earlier in the novel, Connor deliberates about the potential consequences of becoming a Bullet-catcher (as some bodyguards are indeed called) and he wonders whether this is a risk he is willing to take and whether he would even 'have the guts to throw himself in the line of fire' (Bradford 2013:102). He discusses the issue with Amir, one of his buddyguard teammates, who asks a poignant question: "[W]ho's to say another person's life is worth more than mine?" (Bradford 2013:103.) Here again, is the question of personal capital. Connor is unable to answer Amir's question and side-steps the real issue by quoting a notoriously over-used (and abused) argument. "I suppose it's about standing up for what is right," said Connor. "The strong protecting the weak" (Bradford 2013:103). As this is one of the creeds of his paternal indoctrination¹⁰⁹, it is, perhaps, understandable that Connor should embrace this ideology and strive to embody its ideals¹¹⁰.

After proving to himself and others that he is indeed capable of deliberate self-sacrifice, Connor suffers from the trauma of the experience, reliving the shooting in grotesque nightmares; even then, however, his main fear seems to be that he could so easily have been too late to protect his Principal. He tells his fellow buddyguard, Charley,

"I keep reliving Alicia's assassination attempt."

"Near-death experiences can do that to you." A haunted look entered her eyes but was gone so quickly that Connor could have been mistaken.

¹⁰⁹ 'The strong have a duty to protect the weak, his father had taught him' (Bradford 2013:18).

¹¹⁰ Unlike the main character in the *Alex Rider* series discussed in the next chapter, Connor does not entirely dismiss this patriotic ideology.

“But in my dream I’m always *too late*,” he explained.

“It was a close call. You got shot. So such anxiety is understandable. But you *did* save her.” [...]

Connor let out a weary sigh. He felt the mounting pressure of his forthcoming mission. The responsibility of protecting another person was overwhelming. “But what if next time I don’t react quickly enough?” (Bradford 2014:20)

In this extract, it is clear that Connor’s fear of failure to perform his duty outweighs his fear of personal injury¹¹¹. He has become, in fact, an ideal military recruit. In *Fictions of Masculinity*, Murphy (1994:25) points out that the success of military endeavour is often characterised by a strong emphasis on honour. He claims that,

like any conception of manhood, an emphasis on honor [sic] functions ideologically, which is to say, as a social fiction constructed by empowered constituencies to extend their power, yet felt as a natural and universal law. It shames individual deviance to protect the group, making men more fearful of losing the respect of other men than of losing their lives in battle. (Murphy 1994:25)

It is significant that Connor’s sentiments coincide with those mentioned above when he has to explain to his commander and team why he has been called off Operation Hidden Shield¹¹². However, Connor channels his feelings of shame into trying to reclaim his reputation and acquits himself by performing above and beyond the call of duty to protect the organisation’s client.

Ultimately, it is evident that the protagonist’s entire being – physical, psychological and ideological – has been conscientiously groomed, prepared, to meet with market demands. His body and mind, so

¹¹¹ ‘Connor’s greatest fear was that he would fail. That at the moment of an attack he would react too late – or, worse still, not react at all’ (Bradford 2013:117).

¹¹² ‘Connor had been dreading this call [...]. He knew the colonel had pinned high hopes on him. A successful operation for the United States government would have boosted the reputation of his organisation dramatically’ (Bradford 2013:274).

trained, have acquired a certain value for the privileged 'consumer'; on the close-protection market, his masculinity is an asset.

4.9 Conclusion

*'The dominant patterns of masculinity are often linked to the physical capital of the body, and for many boys, the physical performative aspect of masculinity is seen as the most acceptable and desirable way of being male.'*¹¹³

In an article entitled 'He comes back badder and bigger than ever!', Capdevila (2010:217) claims that adventure novels allow heroes 'to stand tall among lesser men and to stake out the space of action and adventure as their own manly turf'. She relates Neal King's comment that it is in the realm of adventure that the hero 'can throw his head back and howl while knives skewer thighs, fists pound faces, and bullets rip flesh. [Heroes] call this manly turf their own. They earn it by killing criminals and playing to live another day' (King 1999:201).

Connor Reeves performs his masculine role in this harsh environment with flair. Whether battling pirates in the Seychelles or wrestling a crocodile in Central Africa, the hero stakes his life on the belief instilled in him by his father that the strong should protect the weak. By the third novel, he seems to have embraced his inherited occupation and come to love the thrill of potential danger.

Connor was yearning for an[other] assignment himself. Nothing compared to the 'buzz' and heightened perception that came from protecting a Principal in the field. Colours seemed brighter, sounds sharper and sensations stronger. He could now understand what his father meant when he'd referred to the "combat high" that

¹¹³ Gilbert & Gilbert (in Swain 2005:220)

soldiers experienced during battle. Connor experienced a similar “protection high”¹¹⁴. (Bradford 2015:49)

The protagonist seems to be completely at home in this overwhelmingly masculine domain, surviving, even craving, what ‘lesser men’ (Capdevila 2010:217) would choose to avoid. The hegemonic hierarchy is patently reinforced, and the value of ‘musculinity’, deliberately reiterated. Moreover, like the late nineteenth-century adventure tradition which was, in Richard Phillips’ words, thoroughly ‘committed to the continuous reinscription of dominant ideologies of masculinity’ (1997:5; in Capdevila 2010:216), the *Bodyguard* series validates the manly hero’s ability and therefore, his right, to assume physical and political ascendance over all other gender configurations.

It would appear, furthermore, that Chris Bradford has harnessed the marketability of hegemonic masculinity and capitalised on a (perhaps initially latent) desire in 21st century young male readers to experience, albeit in a surrogate capacity, the thrill of the masculinity game and the triumph of invincible ‘muscularity’ over every form of opposition. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, bodies are ‘capable of remembering “histories, even when we forget them.” Our bodies proceed through particular historical trajectories and identifications, sometimes in spite of our “selves”’ (Newell 2009:243). Thus, the hegemonic heritage has a tendency to reassert itself.

The popularity of the *Bodyguard* series is significant, particularly considering the current social and political agendas of gender activists who seek to destabilise and reinvent the masculinity hierarchy. In many cases, these awareness campaigns have made considerable progress in shaping new, less exclusive, expectations for gendered performances. Nevertheless, as the millions of young *Bodyguard* fans across the globe prove, the muscular male body still has market value; there is still money in masculinity.

¹¹⁴ In Chapter Three, Arthur referred to this as ‘battle fever’ (Crossley-Holland 2003:40).

Chapter Five: Bond is Back

*'Being a man is as much a matter of style,
of intentionally or unintentionally reproducing collective power,
as it is one of innocently inhabiting a particular kind
of consciousness'¹¹⁵.*

5.1 Background

I recently attended my son's drama production at school. He was all eagerness and secrecy as the boys had been divided into groups and instructed to write their own plays. Lines, props, costumes, stage choreography and sound tracks were decided by the boys with only small amendments made by the drama teacher. As this is an all-boys school with the actors between ten and eleven years of age, I should, perhaps, have been prepared for the kaleidoscope of action, courage and stunts on display. The theme of the evening: James Blonde.

Double-dealing, high-speed chases, suicidal commitment to duty, and even a 'girl' in a blonde wig and struggling to cross the road in heels, all made an appearance. While the 20th century James Bond does not form part of my son's reference in the home, the basic character traits of the legendary superspy seem to have filtered down to him. For my son, I could see, the highlight of the evening was wearing dark sunglasses and concealing a toy revolver¹¹⁶ under a smart suit jacket. Things are not what they seem – or perhaps they are. And so the legend lives on.

5.2 Meeting Baby Bond

*"The name's Bond. James Bond.
Who are you?"¹¹⁷*

In his insightful article 'Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain', Ronald Paul (2009:3) laments the 'ideological revamping' of historical values in recent publications

¹¹⁵ Ben Knights (1999:14) in *Writing Masculinities*.

¹¹⁶ I admit that the novelty may have been greater for him due to the fact that toy guns are not permitted in our home.

¹¹⁷ In *Blood Fever* (Higson [2006] 2012:243)

aimed at boys. Amongst the texts he discusses are the Young Bond¹¹⁸ series and the Alex Rider series, both of which have proven unexpectedly successful in the market. While these texts are not by any means identical in terms of their ideological premise, there are some obvious similarities in terms of casting and political agenda. Paul's analysis of the Alex Rider series is limited as he bases his claims, exclusively, on the first release of the series – a publication which does not reflect the complicated, and evolving, convictions of the boy spy; I will pay particular attention to this in due course.

Nevertheless, Paul's claim that the Young Bond series shares 'the same reassertively patriotic subtext' with 'a whole range of other new secret agent stories for teenagers' is abundantly substantiated by even the most casual perusal of the latest releases for this age group. The Young Bond series is published under the jurisdiction of the Ian Fleming Estate and is intended to introduce the arguably outdated hero to 21st century child readers. Charlie Higson authored the first five books¹¹⁹ *Silverfin* (2005), *Blood Fever* (2006), *Double or Die* (2006), *Hurricane Gold* (2007) and *By Royal Command* (2008) as well as a dossier of James' adventures that includes 'A Hard Man to Kill' (2009). *Silverfin: The Graphic Novel* was published in 2008. Despite early predictions of failure, the series has sold over 5 million copies with the books translated into 25 languages. Steve Cole¹²⁰ is the author of the subsequent books, *Shoot to Kill* (2014) and *Heads You Die* (2016), *Strike Lightning* (2016) and *Red Nemesis* (2017).

It is, according to Paul (2009:9), 'a sign of these troubled times that one of the most ideologically antiquated figures in postwar popular culture – James Bond – is now being repackaged' for today's young readers. The back blurb promises the reader insight into the superspy's background 'before the name became a legend ... before the boy became the man. Meet Bond. James Bond'¹²¹.

With reference to the first Young Bond release, Paul (2009:9) remarks that 'it seems at first highly improbable that such an outworn, male chauvinist stereotype as Bond could ever be transformed into a younger version that would be suitable for teenage consumption'. And indeed, there is an

¹¹⁸ In children's literature circles this series is frequently referred to as the 'Baby Bond series'.

¹¹⁹ All of Higson's Young Bond titles used in this research are 2012 editions. Throughout the rest of this chapter, references to these publications use the following codes: SF (*Silverfin*), BF (*Blood Fever*), DD (*Double or Die*), HG (*Hurricane Gold*) and BRC (*By Royal Command*).

¹²⁰ Steve Cole took over authorship of the Young Bond series while Charlie Higson focused on his young adult zombie series comprising *The Enemy* (2009), *The Dead* (2010), *The Fear* (2011), *The Sacrifice* (2012) *The Fallen* (2013), *The Hunted* (2014), and *The End* (2015).

¹²¹ This slogan appears on all of Charlie Higson's Young Bond novels.

element of surprise involved when one is introduced to the young James Bond in his Eton top hat and tails with pale blue eyes and an unruly lock of hair that ‘dropped down over his right eye like a black comma’ (Higson SF 2012:17). By positioning him thus, at the start of the first novel, hesitant and unsure of himself on his first day at this exclusive school, it seems that Higson is less concerned about validating James’ suitability for the role of super hero as in securing our appreciation of his superior social status. Bond is initially bewildered by his new surroundings and bothered by the combined smell of sweat and sour breath produced by his fellow schoolmates. He submits, to some extent, to bullying and does not appear to be a particularly bright scholar. His redeeming quality, however, is his ability to run – far and fast.

Nevertheless, a character sketch that is based exclusively on the first instalment would not by any means do justice to young Bond¹²². By the time the second book opens, he is leaping over the rooftops of Eton, evading the guard and rescuing damsels in distress. By the fifth, he has single-handedly saved the British monarchy as well as the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians. He is innovative, violent, subtle, reckless, and he is attractive¹²³.

There are countless examples of young James Bond’s inventive approach to situations, all of which see him succeeding against enemies as diverse as crocodiles, Nazis, female serial killers, communist assassins, scorpions and raging psychopaths. He even has a run-in with members of the *Hitler-Jugend* during a skiing trip in Austria¹²⁴. The main interest of the narrative lies in discovering how the protagonist will extricate himself and how symbolic good will, eventually, triumph over evil. The uncritical reader desires, above all, to see James Bond exercising personal agency in a manner that controls not only his own, but the world’s, destiny. Lack of agency amounts to impotence in narratives of this kind and thus it is not surprising that Chapter One of *Blood Fever* opens with the words, ‘James Bond hated feeling trapped’ (Higson BF 2012:15).

Maintaining and regaining agency frequently involves violence and James proves to be a relentless fighter¹²⁵. In the boxing ring he is a formidable opponent¹²⁶ and he can be awfully effective in a street fight. Yet, his views on violence are not entirely uncomplicated. He despises bullies and, in one particular instance, despises himself for taking out his own frustration and anger on the notorious

¹²² Most scholarly analyses of these texts do not take the entire series into consideration and therefore end up with an, at times, inaccurate description of the protagonist and his ideology.

¹²³ Unlike Alex Rider, James Bond frequently becomes romantically involved with female characters. In *Double or Die*, he even becomes involved with a female street gang leader called Kelly Kelly.

¹²⁴ One of the German youths later confides to James that “‘Gerhardt and the others [*Hitler-Jugend*] will be confused. We have been told many times that the English are weak and ineffective” (Higson BRC 2012:25). The political agenda in this comment is clear.

¹²⁵ I will discuss this in more detail in the comparative section which follows.

¹²⁶ In *Blood Fever* (Higson BF 2012:215)

bully who has been making the younger boys' lives miserable¹²⁷. For the most part, James resorts to violence only in self-defence¹²⁸ – and even then, there is usually someone else whose life depends on James' effective retaliation.

Wherever possible, however, James employs a more subtle approach. He becomes adept at double-dealing and prevarication, playing the nerve-wrecking game of chance with fate in which a false step could lead to disaster. In *Hurricane Gold* he assumes the persona of Angel Corona, a Mexican thief, in order to join the gang that has kidnapped an American war pilot's children. It is James' attachment to the pilot's daughter that causes his cover to be blown, but not in the way he expects. The bloodthirsty ringleader, Mrs Glass confronts James and says,

'I've been watching you, Corona. You can't hide anything from me. I know what you're up to.'

James put on a big, foolish grin. 'I'm not up to anything, señora,' he said.

'Sure you are,' said Mrs Glass. 'You're not just a thief, are you, Corona?'

'Well, I –'

'You're a lover too, aren't you, kid?' (Higson HG 2012:176)

And here lies the crux of the matter. Even at fourteen, the boy that becomes the man James Bond holds a seemingly irresistible attraction for young female protagonists. Without seeming to seek or even care for their approbation, James is capable of evoking blind, even dangerous, devotion. For example, before leading Precious Stone¹²⁹ into the treacherous rat run that is their only hope of escape James asks her

'Do you trust me?'

'No,' said Precious, 'but I'd follow you to hell and back.'

'Then let's go,' said James. 'Satan's waiting for us.'¹³⁰ (Higson HG 2012:339)

Nevertheless, the most disturbing evidence of James' physical attractiveness is probably the scene in which James is introduced to the shrivelled and aging Contessa Jana Carnifex¹³¹ in *Blood Fever* (Higson BF 2012:138):

¹²⁷ This particular instance is significant of James' development into the ruthless secret agent he becomes and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

¹²⁸ As has already been mentioned in previous chapters, self-defence is the most commonly cited justification for violence in this children's literature genre.

¹²⁹ The female protagonists in this series suffer under the bane of dreadfully stereotypical names. Precious Stone, Wilder Lawless, Amy Goodenough and Roan Power all become passing love interests for young James Bond.

¹³⁰ This kind of pseudo-sensationalism is unusual in children's literature. It is, in my opinion, the lack of such over-dramatisation that makes the Alex Rider series a more plausible and accessible read.

‘You have a pretty face,’ she said, staring deep into his eyes.

James didn’t know what to say. He felt uncomfortable and embarrassed in just his swimming shorts, but he couldn’t get away. Jana held him fast in her talons, smiling at him possessively.

‘You will break many girls’ hearts,’ she said. ‘Though you have a cruel mouth.’ As she said this she ran her dry fingers over his lips and he drew back from her.

‘I think I’d better go and put some clothes on,’ James mumbled and backed out of the room, Jana’s throaty laugh following him down the corridor.

In this scene, the boy’s body is subjected to the critical gaze of another character and, by extension, to the scrutiny of the reader. James senses the intrusiveness of this gaze and seeks to avoid it. In a sense, it may be his preference for being the one who beholds that causes him to withdraw. As James admits in *Blood Fever* when he is looking down at his housemaster from the skylight in the roof, ‘it gave [him] a feeling of power to be up here, seeing but not being seen’ (Higson BF 2012:21). James savours the moment as he contemplates the seemingly pointless existence of this man who introduced himself to James as ‘your father, your priest and your God’ (Higson SF 2012:18) only a few months before. The tables are turned, however, when James becomes an unofficial spy. The observer, the gazer, assumes dominance over that which he looks upon.

5.3 Through the eyes of a spy

‘Before the name became a legend ... before the boy became the man.

Meet Bond. James Bond’.

This overtly propagandist slogan is enough to alert the reader to the fact that the Young Bond series offers insight into the process that culminates in the purportedly desirable man the young protagonist will become. A semantic response to the slogan, moreover, suggests that the boy in question will become ‘the man’ – a statement that could imply not only his physical development into an adult but, more importantly, ‘the man’ that embodies the legend, the myth of invincible and desired manhood.

¹³¹ Yet again, another blatantly suggestive name for a female character.

'The man' that James Bond becomes emerges, essentially, from the boy and the experiences that shape him. The horrors he is forced to witness, the torturous pain he has endured and the emotional hurt he has had to come to terms with as a boy, all play a part in explaining the ruthless, often reckless behaviour in the man. In a way, the Young Bond series could be seen as a kind of apologetic treatise – a detailed and personal defence of the adult James Bond's ideological, personal and political convictions.

Even the adult spy's controversial and often offensive treatment of women is given a background in the teenager's experiences. After having become romantically involved with several girls, James, aged fifteen, runs away from Eton with Roan Power, a beautiful young communist activist who has been briefed to kill him. Although she eventually has a change of heart and takes a fatal bullet to save him, her dying disclosure that she was married to James' enemy causes him to reflect that

There were ways of dealing with the world. There were ways of understanding it. James would learn the best way. His body was bruised and battered. He was covered in cuts and scratches, each one reminding him of some part of what had happened since his return to Europe. But his body would heal. [...] He knew, though, that it would take much longer for his heart to heal, and for his mind to hide away the bad memories

He would protect his heart better in the future. He would grow a tough shell round it. Because he was painfully aware, sitting here, all alone, like some eagle in his eyrie, that this was his position in the world.

Alone.

(Higson BRC 2012:344)

Despite this rather overt attempt to justify the life James Bond goes on to live and the underlying attempt to evoke sympathy for his subsequent life choices, Higson's description of James Bond's position in society seems particularly apt from a gender research perspective. Within the masculinity hierarchy, James has already reached the top. As a privileged, albeit lonely being, exalted to the pinnacle of young manhood, James' physical and metaphorical elevation serve to further empower him. Like an all-seeing eagle, James is capable of gaining perspective over the world and its petty dealings; his hegemonic stature granting a dizzying view of the comings and goings of others¹³².

Moreover, James' reflections take on a distinctly sinister tone when one considers his earlier thoughts while traveling up the Alps in a cable car. As the town recedes below him, James is struck

¹³² This is yet another illustration of the masculine myth of the unconstrained ego so prevalent in this genre.

by how it shrinks ‘until he felt he could reach out and take control of it, like a child playing with toy houses and cars’¹³³ (Higson BRC 2012:343). His adventures, up to this point, have indeed seen him taking control of destinies, lives and even the future in a manner disturbingly akin to a child at play. This larger-than-life figure is, after all, only a boy. Yet, he already knows the exhilaration of speeding down the road in a sports car¹³⁴ and the ‘comfort’ of holding a gun in his hand¹³⁵. These considerations lend particular poignancy to Paul’s remark that in ‘depicting a manichean world of good and evil, these books also help promote an uncritical view of British imperial policing in which young people are seen as natural recruits with a future license to kill’ (Paul 2009:10).

In the next section, we will discuss another, possibly more popular, boy who is not (like the young James Bond) almost accidentally caught up in deep political intrigues. On the contrary, he is sent, at the age of fourteen, for Special Services military training and granted Special Status on police records by MI6. The missions he embarks on are official and his ‘licence to kill’, unquestioned. His name is Alex Rider.

5.4 Introducing Alex Rider

‘Horowitz is pure class, stylish but action-packed ...
Being James Bond in miniature is way cooler
than being a wizard’¹³⁶

This glowing review of Anthony Horowitz’s *Stormbreaker*, the first in the Alex Rider series, holds some important chronological clues. The reference to Harry Potter contextualises children’s reading at the time when Alex Rider¹³⁷ made his debut. With its 2000 publication date, Horowitz’s book was entering a market that was caught up in the phenomenon of a widespread Muggle fascination with an exotic and tantalising, albeit fictional, alternative magical dimension. Harry Potter’s adventures

¹³³ The young James Bond seems to show a strong tendency to megalomania in many of his musings.

¹³⁴ James seems to have inherited not only a car but also a love of driving from his Uncle Max. During their last conversation James claims that Max is ‘still a demon behind the wheel of a car’ (Higson SF 2012:219).

¹³⁵ In *By Royal Command*, James manages to retrieve a pistol from the rotting corpse of a man who had accidentally hanged himself outside the prison where James is being held. ‘Finally he lifted the gun and looked at it. He turned it in his hands and smiled. Round one to him’ (Higson BRC 2012:314)

¹³⁶ Praise for Alex Rider in the *Daily Mirror*. Bear in mind that the first Alex Rider book was published five years before the first Young Bond book.

¹³⁷ There may be some intertextual reference implicit in the protagonist’s name as ‘Alex’ may refer to the legendary warrior youth and ‘Rider’ may be a reference to H. Rider Haggard, the author of several adventure stories like *King Solomon’s Mines*. In both cases, the name suggests a tendency to revere historical, arguably out-dated, hegemonic masculinity.

were captivating young readers in unprecedented ways and harnessing the collective imagination in an almost cultish manner.

The *Daily Mirror* review implies a comparison of the two protagonists and concludes that Alex Rider is 'cooler' than Harry Potter¹³⁸ – a brave statement indeed. Nevertheless, when read from a masculinities perspective, the assertion has some value. Being 'cool' in this context of teenage boy-oriented fiction entails, amongst other desirable characteristics, assuming a degree of dominance and control over oneself and those around you. 'Coolness' in the boy subject is identified, characterised and maintained by the successful re-enactment of a set of stereotypically masculine performances which reaffirm the boy's status in the gender hierarchy. While one could argue that Harry Potter's magical ability forms an inherent part of his being and in this way contributes to his overall gendered characterisation, his physical presentation¹³⁹ in the novels is not calculated to position him, initially, as hegemonically empowered¹⁴⁰. Alex Rider's case, as we will soon see, is quite the opposite.

Moreover, the reviewer's description of Alex Rider as 'James Bond in miniature' is significant because Alex Rider was introduced to the children's literature world a full five years before the Young Bond series hit the shelves¹⁴¹. It might even be safe to assume that the Young Bond series benefitted from a readership that had been established by Alex Rider's popularity. What is evident to a critical reader, however, is the many ways in which the Young Bond series echoes the earlier Alex Rider books in terms of style, plot, action and even characterisation.

Also, while the Young Bond books may carry a more widely-known name brand, the Alex Rider series holds the upper hand in terms of novelty and, more importantly, suspense. This is because of the physical and socio-political uncertainty of the boy-spy's position in Horowitz's books. While the young James Bond, like Alex Rider, is caught up in a variety of thrilling and potentially fatal adventures, the reader knows that Bond will survive and go on to become the most popular super-spy in the commercialised Western imagination. Most readers – and even the very young – have some idea of the type of man James Bond becomes. His future is irrevocably determined. Not so with Alex Rider. There is no certainty about his destiny. His guiding ideology, his political allegiance

¹³⁸ I analysed various aspects of the representation of Harry Potter in a previous doctoral thesis.

¹³⁹ 'Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. [...] Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair and bright-green eyes' (Rowling 1997:20).

¹⁴⁰ It could be argued that this is one of the reasons for the boy wizard's popularity with a wide range of readers. His masculinity is not as exclusionary nor as demanding as the male gender constructions discussed in this chapter. It is possible that this makes the Harry Potter character accessible to a diverse audience.

¹⁴¹ It may be that the enormous success of the Alex Rider books was seen as an indication that the resuscitation of the actual James Bond as a teenage boy-spy would prove financially feasible. The added benefit of using Ian Fleming's legendary character would make the books instantly recognisable and therefore enhance marketability.

and, essentially, his personal identity, are yet to be discovered¹⁴². The author has the freedom to explore the various concerns and qualms that may assail the young spy and even, on occasion, to indulge in a blatantly unpatriotic rant.

Moreover, while Horowitz claims that his childhood fixation with James Bond had everything to do with his desire to create a teenage spy, he set clear distinctions between his protagonist and the legendary spy:

[A]lmost at once I realised that I had a problem. There is a very thin line between imitating something you admire (in literary terms, it's called a "homage") and simply ripping it off. [...] So even as I started work on the first book, I made conscious decisions. James Bond was a patriot who enjoyed working for the Secret Service. My hero would be recruited against his will and wouldn't trust the people he worked for. (Horowitz SB 2015:245)

Horowitz's protagonist was well received and soon featured on the bestseller shelf. By 2006, before the release of *Ark Angel* and the premiere of *Operation Stormbreaker* (a full-length movie based on the first book), 9 million Alex Rider books had been sold worldwide¹⁴³. This number increased by a further 10 million units by 2017¹⁴⁴.

This chapter will make reference to the Alex Rider collection in its 2015 edition. The reading order is as follows: *Stormbreaker* (SB)¹⁴⁵, *Point Blanc* (PB), *Skeleton Key* (SK), *Eagle Strike* (ES), *Scorpia* (SC), *Ark Angel* (AA), *Snakehead* (SH), *Crocodile Tears* (CT), *Scorpia Rising* (SR) and *Russian Roulette* (RR). The most recent addition to the series, *Never Say Die*, was published in 2017.

5.5 Current Crime

"The perfect hero ...
genuine 21st century stuff"¹⁴⁶

In *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Cawelti (1977:40) claims that

¹⁴² This will be explored in greater detail as the chapter progresses.

¹⁴³ Publishers Weekly website: www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20060925/5317-alex-rider-riding-high.html

¹⁴⁴ Latest sales figure from Publisher's Weekly.

¹⁴⁵ These abbreviations will be used to clarify in-text references to the 2015 collection.

¹⁴⁶ *The Daily Telegraph*.

specific adventure formulas can be categorised in terms of the location and nature of the hero's adventures. This seems to vary considerably from culture to culture, presumably in relation to those activities that different periods and cultures see as embodying a combination of danger, significance and interest. New periods seem to generate new adventure formulas while to some extent holding on to earlier modes.

Therefore, while Higson is necessarily constrained by chronological factors to place his teenage James Bond in the mid-1900s, Horowitz's decision to situate his young protagonist in the approximate present is, arguably, a significant factor in the latter series' success. While young Bond is concerned with saving the British monarchy and preventing open warfare between countries, Alex Rider is tasked to grapple with modern societal concerns like cloning and the politics of commercial space travel.

In *Stormbreaker*, for example, Alex prevents the spread of the deadly R5 virus to all the school children in the United Kingdom through a digital network of modified computers. While there is obvious play on the context of the word 'virus' in relation to computers, the narrative deals, in fact, with advanced biological warfare. The similarly topical *Point Blanc* offers a challenging perspective on cloning. When an eccentric scientist clones himself sixteen times and uses plastic surgery on the bodies he has produced in order for them to resemble the fourteen year-old sons of prominent billionaires, the scene is set for a spine-tingling and deeply unsettling narrative. Modern conspiracy theories and media sensationalism play their part in making the narrative not only possible, but plausible. The potential threat of nuclear warfare forms the plot basis in *Skeleton Key* while the imminent danger of government approved weapons of mass destruction are central to the action in the significantly named, *Eagle Strike*.

In *Scorpio*, the reader is introduced to a different kind of biological weapon that is injected into the human body along with a routine vaccine. The weapon, called Invisible Sword, uses nanoshell technology in which microscopic gold capsules are filled with cyanide and released into the bloodstream. A protein, attached to the nanoshell, guides the deadly golden bead to settle in the heart of the victim. A strong terahertz beam can then be activated at a set time to cause instant disintegration of the nanoparticles and the absorption of the poison. Horowitz (SC 2015:np) claims that while the weapon may sound fantastical, 'the technology exists and could be used at any time. I didn't make it up. That's what makes it so scary'¹⁴⁷.

¹⁴⁷ This puts one in mind of Margaret Atwood's observations on speculative fiction in her essay collection entitled *In Other Worlds*, first published in 2011. In a more recent interview, Atwood said that she is 'sorry to have been so right' (Transcription of an interview published on 20 January 2018 in *The Guardian*).

Furthermore, the politics and ethics of commercial space travel make an appearance in *Ark Angel* (which is named after the astro-hotel in the book), while environmental concerns and the threat of eco-terrorism are brought to the fore in *Snakehead*. A thought-provoking investigation into fraudulent international charities characterises *Crocodile Tears*, along with a frightening description of the potential threat caused by the irresponsible genetic modification of crops.

It is clear, from the examples above, that Alex Rider is, indeed, involved in ‘genuine 21st century stuff’¹⁴⁸. Moreover, by including relevant, topical issues in his children’s books, Horowitz creates a subtle, non-didactic platform for ethical discussion.

5.6 The reluctant spy

The first Alex Rider book, *Stormbreaker* (2000), opens with a chapter called ‘Funeral Voices’ in which the police bring the news of Ian Rider’s death in a car accident. Ian was Alex’s uncle and had also been his guardian since the death of the boy’s parents when he was only a few weeks old. Alex had been raised by his uncle and an American housekeeper-cum-nanny called Jack Starbright in a house in Chelsea. Alex remembers his uncle with affection but realises that despite living with him, Alex knew very little about Ian’s work life:

A banker. People said Alex looked quite like him. Ian Rider was always travelling. A quiet, private man who liked good wine, classical music and books. Who didn’t seem to have any girlfriends ... In fact, he didn’t have any friends at all. He had kept himself fit, had never smoked and had dressed expensively. But that wasn’t enough. That wasn’t a picture of a life. It was only a thumbnail sketch. (Horowitz SB 2015:12).

Shortly after the funeral, Alex discovers that his uncle had been employed as a spy by MI6 and that the fatal car accident was merely a cover story – Ian was assassinated on a mission in Cornwall. This information is key to understanding Alex’s entry into the secret world of espionage and, more importantly, the difference between this character and the young James Bond.

Earlier in this chapter, Ronald Paul’s article on ‘Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain’ received particular attention. As was noted, he makes several thought-provoking remarks about the Young Bond books. When comparing them with the Alex Rider books, however, he fails to notice the glaring differences between them and tars Horowitz’s series with the

¹⁴⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*.

same brush, claiming that Alex Rider is a 'more-than-willing-teenager-turned-secret-agent' (Paul 2009:10). An epithet that would be further from the truth is hard to imagine¹⁴⁹. Alex is not at all willing or eager – he is thorough, capable and successful, yes, but he certainly does not volunteer for the job.

In fact, in order to get Alex to go on his first mission, MI6 have to drug him and take him to an unknown location. When he recovers and they ask him to help them out with the mission in Cornwall he refuses:

“No,” Alex said.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s a dumb idea. I don’t want to be a spy. I want to be a footballer. Anyway, I have a life of my own.” He found it difficult to choose the right words. The whole thing was so preposterous he almost wanted to laugh. (Horowitz SB 2015:60)

Alex’s response, though he feels it is inadequate, shows that he understands one of the challenges one faces when one entering the secret service. He says, ““I have a life of my own””. He does not wish to relinquish his future, his autonomy, into the hands of others. However, he soon discovers how easily MI6 can get its way. The Chief Executive of Special Operations, Alan Blunt, responds to Alex’s refusal by explaining that, since Ian Rider’s death, MI6 controls Alex’s trust fund and can determine his future. The alternative they place before him is a life spent in an orphanage¹⁵⁰ and the deportation of Jack Starbright, whose visa is about to expire. Bearing in mind that Jack is the only mother figure that Alex has ever known, it is obvious that MI6 could make him lose everything he cares for if he does not agree to help them.

“You’re blackmailing me!” Alex exclaimed.

“Not at all.”

“But if I agree to what you ask ...?”

Blunt glanced at Mrs Jones [Head of Special Operations]. “Help us and we’ll help you,” she said.

Alex considered, but not for very long. He had no choice and he knew it. Not when these people controlled his money, his present life, his entire future. (Horowitz SB 2015:62)

¹⁴⁹ Only a very superficial skimming of the first book could yield this impression.

¹⁵⁰ ““You’ll be sent to an institution. There’s one I know just outside Birmingham. The Saint Elizabeth in Sourbridge. Not a very pleasant place, but I’m afraid there’s no alternative”” (Horowitz SB 2015:62).

While it may seem an insignificant detail, the fact that MI6 effectually blackmails Alex into working for them is a powerful narrative tool and one which adds significant interest to the series. One can hardly call Alex a 'more-than-willing-teenager-turned-secret-agent' (Paul 2009:10) when he constantly abuses MI6 for his predicament¹⁵¹ and even returns to England, in *Scorpio*, to assassinate Mrs Jones¹⁵².

Alex's reluctance to play the spy and his evident distaste for a life that consists of lies and 'nothing but lies' (Horowitz SB 2015:56), set him apart from the general boy spy character type and colour his difficulties with an unprecedented level of sympathy from the reader. He is a victim of circumstance, not a prying, patriotic¹⁵³ busybody. Despite his reluctance, however, Alex has a strong survival instinct and acquits himself of his unwanted tasks with unprecedented flair. That he ultimately becomes a 'James Bond in miniature' is less a matter of personal choice than one of physical aptitude and success in the field.

In fact, when he refuses, in *Ark Angel*, to work (for the second time) as a temporary agent for the CIA, the head of American operations asks,

"What's the matter, Alex? Are you scared? Is it because of what happened with the sniper¹⁵⁴?"

Alex felt a twinge of pain in his chest. It happened every time anyone reminded him of his bullet wound. Perhaps it always would. "I'm not scared," he said. "I just don't like being used."

"We only use you because you're so damn good," Byrne replied. (Horowitz AA 2015:194)

Predictably, the American secret intelligence service manages to coerce Alex into cooperating with them by tampering with his passport expiration date, thus placing him at their mercy. Yet again, Alex displays incomparable strength of body and mind in his attempts to survive and simultaneously thwart the evil machinations of the villains.

Even his arch enemy, the Russian contract killer Yassen Gregorovich, comes to admire Alex's apparently natural aptitude for undercover operations. In *Eagle Strike*, after Alex has managed to escape a nightmarish ordeal (that had been carefully designed to kill him in an excruciatingly painful

¹⁵¹ The chapter which follows his 'recruitment' opens with Alex cursing Alan Blunt 'using language he hadn't even realised he knew' (Horowitz SB 2015:64).

¹⁵² In the end he does not kill her but here, again, Alex sees how he is being used and brainwashed by secret organisations that have their own agendas, not his wellbeing, at heart.

¹⁵³ A later discussion will show how little patriotism has to do with Alex's decisions.

¹⁵⁴ Alex is left for dead at the end of *Scorpio*. The assassination attempt comes as a result of Alex's dealings as a double agent.

and inhumane manner) and later retrieve a crucial flash drive, Yassen¹⁵⁵ observes to his client that he had suspected Alex might succeed against all odds.

“Why?”

Yassen considered. “Because he’s Alex,” he said simply.

“Then tell me about him!”

“There is only so much I can tell you.” Yassen stared into the distance. His face gave nothing away. “The truth about Alex is that there is not a boy in the world like him,” he began, speaking slowly and softly. “Consider, for a moment. Tonight you tried to kill him – and not just simply with a bullet or a knife, but in a way that should have terrified him. He escaped and found his way here. He must have seen the stairs. Any other boy – any man even – would have climbed them instantly. His only desire would have been to get out of here. But not Alex. He stopped; he searched. That is what makes him unique, and that is what makes him so valuable to MI6.” (Horowitz ES 2015:205)

Nevertheless, despite his apparent talent in the field, Alex becomes increasingly bitter towards MI6 as the narrative progresses through the series. He experiences disillusionment and betrayal at the hands of the secret service as early as the second book¹⁵⁶. By the sixth, his views are clear.

Did Crawley really think he [Alex] would ever work for MI6 again? If so, he was very much mistaken. The strange thing was, he could think of dozens of boys at Brookland School who probably dreamt about being a spy. They’d imagine it would be fun. Alex had discovered the unpleasant reality. He’d been hurt, threatened, manipulated, shot at, beaten up and almost killed. He’d found himself in a world where he couldn’t believe anybody and where nothing was quite what it seemed. And he’d had enough. (Horowitz AA 2015:95)

While it may be argued that this cautioning against romanticising the life of a spy in a teenage spy novel is almost outrageously disingenuous, it is certain that many of Alex’s experiences do not seem to be calculated to promote admiration for the profession. While Alex seems, initially, to have the luck of the devil, this appears to have run out by the penultimate novel. In fact, his pitiful situation near the end of the series¹⁵⁷ gives dark significance to his reluctance, and, albeit futile, refusal, to

¹⁵⁵ Yassen Gregorovich’s unique attachment to Alex Rider will be discussed at a later stage.

¹⁵⁶ After escaping the horrors of Point Blanc school, Alex confronts MI6 on their lack of response to his call for backup. At his debriefing he says, ““You left me in there. [...] I called for help and you didn’t come. Grief was going to kill me but you didn’t care”” (Horowitz PB 2015:271).

¹⁵⁷ This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

enter the secret service at all. It is, perhaps, Alex's position as part-hero, part-victim that elicits the interest and sympathy of the reader.

Moreover, Horowitz's construction of Alex had this particular object in view. He claims to have decided that the boy hero would be 'a *reluctant* spy. He would never be taken on a mission because he wanted to save the world. [...] I'm often asked about the success of the Alex Rider books and I always reply that it's this reluctance that may be the secret. I think we'd like him less if he wanted to be a hero'¹⁵⁸ (Horowitz SB 2015:245). As Alan Blunt, the fictional Chief Executive of Special Operations at MI6, observes "'It's rather odd. [...] Most schoolboys dream of being spies. With Alex, we have a spy who dreams of being a schoolboy'¹⁵⁹" (Horowitz PB 2015:272).

5.7 Boys and their toys

"I'm too old for toys," Alex said.

"Not these toys."¹⁶⁰

Another of Horowitz's resolutions which he set down as fundamental to his new teenage spy series was that Alex would not be given gadgets. He felt that the inclusion of spy tools would be 'a straight steal' (Horowitz SB 2015:246) from James Bond. In another publication he claims that 'originally I wasn't even going to have gadgets in the books – I thought it would be too close to the films. I only added them in the second draft of *Stormbreaker* because whenever I visited schools, people were always disappointed because there weren't any' (Horowitz 2008:10).

Horowitz ends up equipping Alex with spy tools that are disguised as items any teenager might possess¹⁶¹. A highly sophisticated pencil box (that conceals a flash disc, an electronic lock picking system and pens containing mild explosives) and a 'Zit-Clean' facial cream (that is harmless when applied to the skin but which corrodes any metal it comes into contact with), are just two examples of the various 'age appropriate' gadgets Alex takes with him on missions.

¹⁵⁸ From the Afterword published in *Stormbreaker*, written in 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Alex is granted a five month respite from spy missions between the eighth and ninth novels. During this time, he manages to catch up with his school work and become involved in the extra-curricular life of Brookland Comprehensive. He even develops a tolerance for the school's discipline enforcement system. 'One term it had been crooked ties and untucked shirts. The next it had been chewing gum. Now it was timekeeping. It was good to have such little things to worry about' (Horowitz SR 2015:135).

¹⁶⁰ Mrs Jones responds to Alex's comment in *Stormbreaker* (Horowitz SB 2015:86).

¹⁶¹ Mr Smithers is responsible for equipping Alex with gadgets from the first book to the ninth. One of his favourite inventions is a specially formulated bubblegum called BUBBLE 0-7. "'It blows rather special bubbles. Chew it for thirty seconds and the chemicals in your saliva react with the compound, making it expand. And as it expands, it'll shatter just about anything'" (Horowitz SK 2015:101).

For Horowitz, however, the most important aspect of the gadgets is that they are all credible¹⁶². He recalls that he ‘really hated the James Bond films that had completely impossible gadgets – X-ray spectacles, matchbox-sized oxygen tanks or, worst of all, the invisible car in *Die Another Day*. How can you believe a story when it’s got something that’s obviously absurd in the middle?’ (Horowitz 2008:9). Horowitz seems to think that Alex’s asthma pump that doubles up as an underwater detonator and his modified yo-yo that can carry his body weight and winch him up to the underbelly of a plane are more credible gadgets.

Furthermore, while Horowitz insists that all Alex’s gadgets are ‘non-lethal’, it soon becomes evident that, in the hands of a resourceful spy, these gadgets are, in fact, deadly. Alex uses his modified gel pen to ignite a barrel of aviation fuel in *Crocodile Tears* to engulf Reverend McCain ‘in a pillar of flame that roared into the sky’ (Horowitz CT 2015:399) and Mr Grin plummets to his death in *Stormbreaker* when Alex’s seemingly innocuous Nintendo smoke bomb causes him to lose control of the plane he is flying. I suppose one might argue that the gadgets themselves are non-lethal, but as a weapon in the hands of MI6, Alex Rider is quite the opposite.

Another of Horowitz’s pre-production resolutions was that ‘Alex would never have a gun’ (Horowitz SB 2015:245). The publishers were also concerned about equipping a fictional teenager with firearms. In his introduction to the *Alex Rider: Mission Files*, Horowitz explains that

Guns and kids don’t go well together. You only have to look at the horror stories coming out of America – high school shootings, etc. – to understand why they [the publishers] were so nervous. Anyway, when I saw this was one argument I was never going to win, I decided to make a virtue out of necessity. Alex wants a gun¹⁶³ but never gets one. All his gadgets are non-lethal. And though he does fire guns later in the series [...] he never actually hits anyone. (Horowitz 2008:8)

How Horowitz was able to publish this statement defies explanation. In the very first book, although the boy spy is not actually armed with a gun by MI6, he acquires one and, in the climactic scene, uses it to accomplish his mission. Hanging from the cables of a parachute, Alex assesses the scene before him and realises he has no choice but to shoot the network-linked activation mouse on the

¹⁶² As proof that his gadgets are credible, Horowitz claims that ‘a library in the north of England actually banned *Alex Rider: The Gadgets* because they believed kids might use it to create their own lethal weapons!’ (Horowitz 2008:10)

¹⁶³ Alex wants a gun because he is expected to face adversaries who are fully equipped with the most efficient firearms. He feels that a gun provides him with some form of defence. (Horowitz SB 2015:207) In *Point Blanc*, Mr Smithers says “No guns! Mr Blunt is adamant. He thinks you’re too young.” “Not too young to get killed though,” [said Alex]. (Horowitz PB 2015:116)

podium if he is to save the millions of school children who are about to be infected with the fatal R5 virus. He does not only damage the electronics.

Alex had also drawn his gun, pulling it out from the waistband of his combats. Maybe he could explain why he was here before Sayle or the Prime Minister activated the Stormbreakers. But he doubted it. Shoot first and ask questions later was a line from a bad film. But even bad films are sometimes right.

He emptied the gun. [...]

The first bullet went nowhere. The second hit the Prime Minister in the hand, his finger less than a centimetre away from the mouse. The third hit the mouse, blowing it into fragments. The fourth hit an electrical connection, smashing the plug and short-circuiting it. Sayle had dived forward, determined to click on the mouse himself. The fifth and sixth bullets hit him. (Horowitz 2015 SB:224)

While one could argue that Alex did not intend to shoot Sayle or the Prime Minister, they were undeniably 'hit' by the bullets from his gun. Not only does this episode from the first book contradict Horowitz's pacifist claims, but the seemingly haphazard nature of the shooting underlines the fact that Alex is too young and inexperienced to have such a dangerous weapon at his disposal.

Nonetheless, by claiming that 'even bad films are sometimes right', Horowitz (SB 2015:224) seems to suggest that the worthy end, in this case preventing the certain death of millions of school children, justifies the means. Moreover, Horowitz does not question the justice of killing one human in order to save others. None of the antagonists in the Alex Rider series is ever arrested to stand trial in a court of law; all of them die violent, often gruesome deaths. Thus, the reader is led to believe that the death of the villain is 'right'; this remains an unchallenged discourse in the black-and-white world of the spy novel. This 'choice of truth'¹⁶⁴, this perception of what is 'right', is thus effectually repeated, renewed and reproduced.

However, some blurring of the line separating good and evil does occur in the fifth novel when Alex receives an offer of employment from the head of a criminal organisation known as Scorpia. In this interview, the dazzlingly beautiful Mrs Rothman says

"Alex, you have to grow up a little bit and stop seeing things in black and white. You work for MI6. Do you think of them as the good guys, the ones in white hats? I suppose that makes me the bad guy. Maybe I should be sitting here in a wheelchair with a bald head and a scar down my face, stroking a cat." She laughed at the thought. "Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that any more. Not in the twenty-first

¹⁶⁴ Foucault [1970]1981:70).

century. Think about Alan Blunt for a minute. Quite apart from the number of people he's had killed around the world, look at the way he's used *you*, for heaven's sake! Did he ask nicely before he pulled you out of school and turned you into a spy? I don't think so! You've been exploited, Alex, and you know it."

"I'm not a killer," Alex protested. "I never could be." (Horowitz SC 2015:130)

Due to the fact that, at this point in the series, Alex is directly responsible for the deaths of several antagonists, his response seems ridiculous. What he means, however, becomes clear when one considers his thoughts after acquiring a gun in *Stormbreaker*. Alex deliberates that 'it would have been easy enough to shoot the guard right then. [...] But Alex knew he couldn't do it. Whatever Alan Blunt and MI6 wanted to turn him into, he wasn't ready to shoot in cold blood. Not for his country. Not even to save his own life' (Horowitz SB 2015:207).

Three books later, when Alex holds a Grach MP-443 a mere centimetre from the sleeping Yassen Gregorovich's temple, he realises that he cannot kill even this ruthless assassin. Yassen wakes up and seems to sense that Alex will not pull the trigger.

"You have my gun," Yassen said.

Alex took a breath.

"Do you intend to use it?"

Nothing.

Yassen continued calmly. "I think you should consider very carefully. Killing a man is not like you see on the television. If you pull that trigger, you will fire a real bullet into real flesh and blood. I will feel nothing; I will be dead instantly. But you will live with what you have done for the rest of your life. You will never forget it". (Horowitz ES 2015:50)

The boy is frustrated by the fact that Yassen 'seemed to know Alex better than Alex knew himself' (Horowitz ES 2015:51) and yet, the contract killer's words become increasingly significant as Alex's story unfolds¹⁶⁵.

5.8 Fatal attraction

'Brown eyes and a slightly hard, narrow mouth.

The sort of face that would have attracted plenty of girls

¹⁶⁵ The final book in the series, *Russian Roulette*, tells Yassen Gregorovich's life story.

if the boy had only lived a little longer.

The boy had a name: Alex Rider.¹⁶⁶

In direct and pointed contrast to the typical James Bond character, Alex Rider has no 'philandering' tendencies and there is practically no romantic interest in any of the novels. While the Young Bond character seems to have as many girls as he has adventures, Alex encourages the friendship of only one girl, Sabina, whom he meets at the beginning of the third book. Sabina shares Alex's love of sport and although she is slightly older than him, she invites him on holiday with her family on several occasions. This, of course, leads to her involvement in some of the action¹⁶⁷ and, eventually, to her discovery of Alex's secret occupation. We never know the extent of Alex's affection for Sabina but when she is kidnapped by Damien Cray's men to prevent Alex from divulging information about Operation Eagle Strike to MI6, he shows his willingness to sacrifice his own freedom for her sake. Together, they manage to prevent widespread destruction and Sabina is required to sign the Official Secrets Act. For the most part, however, Alex operates alone.

This is not because other girls do not find him attractive; Alex is simply not interested in entertaining a passing fancy. In fact, in one particularly telling excerpt, Alex has just saved the proud but beautiful Fiona Friend¹⁶⁸ and her horse from being killed by a train in a tunnel when she decides to initiate an intimate relationship. When the danger has passed, she says,

"You're really great. And I know we're going to be friends now." She half closed her eyes and moved towards him, her lips slightly parted. "You can kiss me if you like," she said.

Alex let go of her and turned away. "Thanks, Fiona," he said. "But frankly I'd prefer to kiss the horse." (Horowitz PB 2015:110)

While appearing attractive to the opposite sex adds, undoubtedly, to one's hegemonic status, it may also be argued that the ability to reject the advances of a billionaire's daughter suggests a security, an independence, which merely strengthens the idea of undisputed masculinity. Alex does not need her approval for self-validation.

Nevertheless, Horowitz does not present Alex in such a way as to suggest that he is unaware of traditionally feminine charms. On the contrary, when he comes across Fiona swimming in the

¹⁶⁶ Horowitz (SC 2015:355)

¹⁶⁷ Their friendship is strengthened by the fact that Sabrina rescues and resuscitates Alex after a surfing accident.

¹⁶⁸ Fiona is the fifteen-year-old daughter of a billionaire, Sir David Friend. Sir Friend has agreed to help MI6 by allowing Alex to pretend to be his 'troubled' son. Fiona treats Alex with contempt until he saves her life.

conservatory he observes, rather dispassionately, that ‘her body was well-shaped, closer to the woman she would become than the girl she had been. She was going to be beautiful. The trouble was, she already knew it’ (Horowitz PB 2015:74). In this extract, it is clear that Alex is granted a superior vantage point – the position generally accorded the male gaze in hegemonic cultural constructs. He is able, from this privileged position, to assess Fiona’s female body according to prevailing standards of beauty without any apparent evidence of being pleased or even much distracted by the spectacle. His disinterest serves, in this case, to strengthen his superior position by emphasising his independence and portraying him as impervious to flattery.

This image is reinforced by the description of Sabina who becomes one of Alex’s best friends. *Eagle Strike* opens with Sabina and Alex relaxing together on a beach in the south of France. Alex looks across at her and thinks that ‘she was the sort of girl who had probably swapped toys for boys before she hit eleven. Although she was using factor 25, she seemed to need more sunscreen rubbed in every fifteen minutes, and somehow it was always Alex who had to do it for her. [...] She was wearing a bikini made out of so little material that it hadn’t bothered with a pattern’ (Horowitz ES 2015:21). In *Skeleton Key*, Sabina encourages intimacy between them by kissing him and saying, “‘You’re much cuter than James Bond’” (Horowitz SK 2015:72). Despite this obvious encouragement, Alex does not, initially, take Sabina’s advances seriously and prefers to take a rather self-deprecating view of himself. When, in the penultimate novel, Alex and Sabina are officially ‘seeing’ each other (Horowitz SR 2015:132) he still considers it a strong possibility that she will fall in love with an American football player. His apparent diffidence and reluctance to become romantically attached indicate not only an instinctive knowledge of the danger such a relationship would place any girlfriend of a spy in, but also a conscientious contrast to the reckless and rather haphazard love interests of the legendary James Bond character.

5.9 Dead meat¹⁶⁹

The subtitle I have chosen for this section on Alex’s physical appearance and his gendered embodiment of the boy spy is somewhat disingenuous. It seems to me, however, to be particularly apt to use as a point of departure, the paradoxical difference between the way Alex feels about his body and the way his body is represented. After succumbing to the pressure brought to bear on him by MI6 and agreeing to continue investigations where his late uncle left off, Alex describes himself as

¹⁶⁹ Horowitz (SB 2015:63).

‘dead meat’¹⁷⁰ (Horowitz SB 2015:33). Representations of his body are (for the most part) however, quite the opposite.

Alex Rider’s body is presented to the reader as young, strong and virile. In fact, it would be difficult to imagine a more vital, fit or competent male teenage body than Alex’s. He is a brilliant footballer, snowboarder¹⁷¹, surfer, skateboarder, cyclist, scuba diver and mountaineer. He is described in the first book as ‘fourteen, already well-built, with the body of an athlete. His hair, cut short apart from two thick strands hanging over his forehead, was fair. His eyes were brown and serious’ (Horowitz SB 2015:9). He owes his splendid physique to an active lifestyle¹⁷² and many years of *karate* training. Alex is already a first grade *Dan*, a black belt’ (Horowitz SB 2015:33). In *Studying Men and Masculinities*, David Buchbinder points out that

Today, the idealised athletic male body, whatever it owes to genetic inheritance, also usually owes a great deal to specialised diet and, particularly, to many hours per week spent in exercise. Ironically, the muscular male body, which until comparatively recently signified the working class body, used to be the *byproduct* of physical labour. It is now the *goal* of physical effort performed in gymnasias, on home machines, and so on. All of these imply as well as require leisure time in which to accomplish the exercise, together with the financial resources necessary to purchase gym memberships or exercise equipment. The athleticism and muscularity of this body consequently now tend to signify a subject who is no longer working class. (Buchbinder 2013:125)

Alex’s lithe, strong body is, indeed, the result of conscious conditioning; the product of voluntary physical activity and training. Moreover, although he attends the local government comprehensive school, this was his uncle’s preference and not dictated by economic means. Apparently, ‘Alex could have gone to any of the smart private schools around Chelsea, but Ian Rider had decided to send him [to Brooklands Comprehensive]. He had said it would be more of a challenge’ (Horowitz SB 2015:21). Alex is thus not working class, but neither is he educated in such a style that he could think too highly of himself and his social status¹⁷³. His body reflects his economic situation.

¹⁷⁰ It is perhaps significant that Alex, after being coerced into joining MI6, likens himself to the *carré d’agneau* (roast rack of lamb) on his plate. The image of a lamb being sent to the slaughter is particularly apt when one considers that the very next chapter positions Alex in the middle of gruelling and relentless military training.

¹⁷¹ ‘Alex was balanced perfectly. Snowboards, skateboards, surfboards, they were all the same to him’ (Horowitz SK 2015:136).

¹⁷² Alex rides a bicycle to and from school. Again, this is Alex’s healthy lifestyle choice and not one based on economic status.

¹⁷³ James Bond’s exclusive, private education at Eton stands in strong contrast to Alex’s humbler, arguably more realistic, training.

More importantly, in terms of the narrative, Alex's athletic pursuits seem to have been strongly encouraged by his uncle. It was Ian Rider who took Alex for his first karate lesson at the age of six and who took him on holiday to locations where he could acquire rarer skills. Early in the series, Alan Blunt and Mrs Jones discuss Alex's unique and varied upbringing:

Mrs Jones stood up as if to leave. But at the door she hesitated. "I wonder if it's occurred to you that [Ian] Rider may have been preparing him¹⁷⁴ for this all along," she said.

"What do you mean"

"Preparing Alex to replace him. Ever since the boy was old enough to walk, he's been in training for intelligence work ... but without knowing it. I mean, he's lived abroad so he now speaks French, German and Spanish. He's been mountain-climbing, diving and skiing. He's learned karate. Physically he's in perfect shape." She shrugged. "I think Rider wanted Alex to become a spy."

"But not so soon," Blunt said. [...]

"He's fourteen years old! We can't do it."

"We have to." (Horowitz SB 2015:80)

Ignoring, for the time being, the moral problem¹⁷⁵ of sending a child into a potentially hazardous environment¹⁷⁶ to do surveillance work, let us consider the ethics of preparing a boy, from infancy, for a life in the secret service. As a successful spy, Ian Rider would understand the dangers of the profession. His view of intelligence work would not be the romanticised daydreamings of the uninitiated. He knows that it is a cruel, cut-throat career with extreme disadvantages and few benefits¹⁷⁷. Yet, he does seem to have been preparing Alex to follow in his footsteps. As Ian Rider

¹⁷⁴ Alex's early training is undeniably unique:

It had been Ian Rider, of course, who had taught him the basics of pickpocketing. At the time it had just been a game, shortly after Alex's tenth birthday, when the two of them were together in Prague. [...] It was only much later that Alex had discovered that all this had been yet another aspect of his training; that all along his uncle had secretly been turning him into something he had never wanted to be. (Horowitz ES 2015:110)

¹⁷⁵ I discussed this issue in detail in Chapter Four. In *Never Say Die*, the eleventh instalment in the series, the new Head of Operations comments that she was always against employing Alex as a spy. She claims that

'Alan [Blunt] knew he'd found the perfect weapon when he sent you after Herod Sayle and, of course, you proved him right, not just on one occasion but time and time again. But I was always concerned. You were a child! Quite apart from anything else, there were the security implications to consider. It would have been quite difficult for us if anyone had noticed that we were employing a minor!' She paused and Alex wondered whether she had said more than she intended. (Horowitz 2017:127)

¹⁷⁶ I dealt, in passing, with this issue in Chapter Four.

¹⁷⁷ Even Yassen Gregorovich, the Russian contract killer, tries, initially, to protect Alex from the world of espionage. At the end of *Stormbreaker* he tells the boy to "Go back to school. Go back to your life. And the next time they ask you, say no" (Horowitz SB 2015:237).

dies a few hours before the first book begins, a conclusive analysis of his intentions is not possible¹⁷⁸. It may be, however, that Ian Rider was merely giving Alex his best shot at survival. Considering that the boy's father had a military career¹⁷⁹ and his uncle was a spy, Ian Rider may have thought it best to prepare Alex for any violent predilection he may have 'inherited'.

While some societies still cling to the dictum, 'boys will be boys', which suggests that the inherent (usually aggressive or reckless) masculinity of the male subject will manifest itself regardless of cultural conditioning or restraint, the idea of inherited masculinity is rejected by recent theorists. Modern gender research rejects this ascendance of 'nature' over 'nurture', claiming that expressions of gender are constructed and reinforced through performative behaviours. Hence, as Epstein (1998:50), previously mentioned in Chapter Two, suggests, gender is seen as 'inscribed on the body through continual performance'. Also, 'that gender is not something stable, which leads to a person behaving in certain ways or doing particular things. Rather, [...] gender is something people perform, a performance which takes place in time, which is often fragile and needs to be defended, and which is produced both within oneself and for other people' (Epstein 1998:50).

When viewed from this perspective, Ian's initiation of, for example, Alex's martial arts career, could be seen as an active attempt to equip his young charge with the skills necessary to perpetuate the legacy of hegemonic masculinity in the next generation of Riders. If, as Butler (1990:140) claims, gender is constituted through 'a stylised repetition of acts', then Alex's intense, early training has effectively, if not consciously, furnished him with a full arsenal of acts which can be symbolically read to signify unquestionable and indomitable masculinity.

In discourse theory terms, one might say that Alex's physical appearance is both produced and productive. It has been produced, in part, by the 'stylised repetition of acts' that are deemed masculine by society; yet, it is simultaneously productive of the manifestation of the discourse of hegemonic masculinity within his gendered being. This expression of masculinity is then perpetuated as a desirable 'way of being'. Thus, Alex's body, like that of every other human being in society, becomes a site for the production and reproduction of gender specific discourses.

¹⁷⁸ At one point in the narrative, Alex expresses his bitterness regarding his uncle's decisions. In *Eagle Strike*, his friend, Sabina, asks, "Will you work for MI6 again?"

"No."

"Do you think they'll leave you alone?"

"I don't know, Sabina. It was my uncle's fault, really. He started all this years ago and now I'm stuck with it."

(Horowitz ES 2015:330)

¹⁷⁹ Alex Rider's father led a short but eventful life. An essential aspect of the overall storyline is Alex's quest to discover John Rider's actual identity. I will discuss this in greater depth later in this chapter.

The discourses of masculinity and athleticism share a long and varied history. From the gracefully proportioned *Discobolus* (or discus thrower), who for many Ancient Greeks encapsulated the essence of perfect manhood, to the most recent men's deodorant commercial to be aired on television, masculinity and athleticism seem inextricably intertwined. Moreover, while in some literary cases the male protagonist's physical prowess may function as discursively adjunctive, it is essential to the representation of the hero in adventure literature where the ability to run like the wind or fight your way out of a tight corner could mean the difference between life and death.

Whether his survival is dependent on the perfect execution of an *Ushiro-geri*¹⁸⁰ or the ability to create a lethal slingshot from a physiotherapist's elastic and a medicine ball, Alex's body is able to respond, with almost flawless precision, to the situation. Indeed, the care Alex Rider takes of his body and its condition helps him survive extreme situations. For example, in *Ark Angel*, Alex is kidnapped from the hospital where he was recovering from a near fatal bullet to the chest. He manages to escape and returns to the hospital where the doctor observes: "It's lucky that you keep yourself fit [...] All those shenanigans could have caused you serious damage, but it looks as if your stitches have held and you're generally in one piece" (Horowitz AA 2015:88).

As the above extract indicates, Alex Rider sometimes gets hurt. Despite his martial arts training and the military experience he gains with the SAS (Special Air Service), Alex sustains some serious injuries and even suffers severe personal loss¹⁸¹. He is not invincible and he is not immune to pain. In fact, the scene in which Alex receives the (abovementioned) bullet wound is written in surprisingly sparse yet poignant manner, thus emphasising Alex Rider's vulnerability – and his mortality. In this scene, a sniper is waiting on a roof in Liverpool Street with his rifle trained on the pavement below.

The door opened and the target appeared. If he had wanted to, the sniper could have seen a handsome fourteen-year-old boy with fair hair [...] A boy wearing a grey hooded sweatshirt and baggy jeans, and a wooden bead necklace (he could see every bead through the scope). [...] The boy had a name: Alex Rider. But the sniper didn't think of that. He didn't even think of Alex as a boy. He was a heart, a pair of lungs, a convoluted system of veins and arteries. But very soon he would be nothing at all. That was why the sniper was here. To perform a little act of surgery – not with a scalpel but a bullet. (Horowitz SC 2015:355).

Dead meat. With a single bullet, that is all Alex Rider's splendid physique and handsome face would amount to. In this extract, it seems as if Horowitz is consciously subverting the discourse of invincible

¹⁸⁰ Karate back kick in *Stormbreaker* (Horowitz SB 2015:33)

¹⁸¹ This is a significant aspect of the series that reminds the reader of the hero's mortality and which plays a key role in the development of the greater narrative.

masculinity. The sniper conscientiously deconstructs the image of the boy he sees through the scope of his rifle by stripping him of his name, his appearance, his gender, his age – by removing from ‘the target’ every vestige of discursive or cultural trappings that might prevent the fatal pull of the trigger. Destroying the end product of this deconstruction does not pose a moral dilemma. The sniper aims at the symbolically disembodied heart and ‘the target’ falls to the ground.

There are no heroics involved. Alex’s ‘muscularity’ cannot save him from the effect of the deconstruction of his cultural being. All he feels is intense confusion as the world begins to topple around him and the front of his chest turns crimson. And then the admission: ‘Alex was starting to feel scared’ (Horowitz SC 2015:358). When the body is stripped of its cultural meaning, it is, perhaps, at its most vulnerable.

5.10 A Marked Man

‘Bodies are never naked;
they are always clothed with meaning’¹⁸²

Although the above quote may seem, at first glance, to contradict my observations in the previous section, deeper contemplation elicits a paradoxical truth¹⁸³. Having considered how Alex’s body is systematically deconstructed and stripped of its culturally acquired significance by the sniper, let us consider how it has been indelibly inscribed by external forces. While it may be argued that cultural constraints play a part in ‘marking’ all bodies according to their particular position in society, Alex’s case is unique in that a certain amount of physical mutilation bears testament to his unsolicited career.

In *Skeleton Key*, when Alex is out surfing with his friend, Sabrina, she asks, “‘Why don’t you tell me the truth? [...] There was a rumour that you were involved in some sort of fight. And that’s another thing. I’ve noticed you in your swimming shorts. I’ve never seen anyone with so many cuts and bruises’” (Horowitz SK 2015:69). Alex tries to fob her off by claiming that he gets bullied at school. Later, in *Ark Angel*, Alex is again subjected to the scrutiny of a peer.

¹⁸² R.W. Connell, ‘Globalisation, Imperialism and Masculinities,’ *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, ed. (London: Sage, 2005), 82.

¹⁸³ I use the term ‘truth’ in the sense of what is considered true within a particular discursive framework and not as a universally immutable fact.

Alex was lying on his back, enjoying the warmth of the setting sun. He glanced sideways and noticed Paul staring at his bare chest. The scar left by his surgery [after the aforementioned sniper's attack] had healed quickly but it was still very red.

"You must have really hurt yourself," Paul said.

"Yes." Alex was reluctant to talk about his fake bicycle accident.

"You've got lots of other cuts and bruises too."

Alex didn't even look. Every time MI6 had sent him out on a mission, his body had come back with more souvenirs. He sat up and reached for his T-shirt. (Horowitz AA 2015:213)

It is clear, from his reaction in this passage, that Alex does not pride himself on these injuries (as boys are sometimes prone to do). He chooses, rather, to avoid looking at them as they seem to remind him of the grudge he bears towards MI6 for using him (or his uniquely positioned male teenaged body) to serve its own end. Towards the end of *Eagle Strike*, for example, Alex is sitting on a bench beside the Thames near Richmond when 'an au pair, pushing a pram, walked past on the towpath. She noticed Alex, and although her expression didn't change, her hands tightened on the pram and she very slightly quickened her pace. Alex knew that he looked terrible, like something out of one of those posters put out by the local council. Alex Rider, fourteen, in need of fostering. His last fight with Damian Cray had left its mark' (Horowitz ES 2015:323). Alex's bitterness is obvious; he resents the fact that his body has been manipulated, altered, set apart, by forces outside of his control.

'According to Peter Brooks in *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, the theorist who best understood the 'difficult dialectics of privacy and invasion, and who most clearly perceived that at stake is ultimately the place and meaning of the body, was Jean-Jacques Rousseau' (Robertson 2015:11). He suggests that

in viewing the body as 'a place where meaning is enacted', Rousseau develops the idea of the body as 'semiotic: it becomes a sign, or the place for the inscription of multiple signs. In turn the body thus semiotised becomes a key element in narrative meanings; it carries the burden of significance of a story.' (Robertson 2015:11)

Alex's body is discursively inscribed in various ways. Earlier in this chapter, the cultural and psychological 'construction' of Alex's body through repetitive, traditionally masculine, acts was discussed with particular reference to the theory of performativity. Before the narrative gets underway, the protagonist is singled out by his appearance – a cumulative product of genetics and

gendering. This being, already culturally 'inscribed' is then subjected to the 'narrative meanings' put forward by the text.

Alex Rider is forced to become an undercover agent. The superficial masking of personal identity that accompanies this role suggests, in itself, an (albeit external) alteration of the character. Very soon, however, MI6 expects Alex to submit to more rigorous disguise procedures. His assumed persona in *Point Blanc* as the troubled son of a British millionaire is perhaps most telling.

Alex had been dressed in purposefully provocative clothes. He was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, skinny jeans – frayed at the ankles – and Nike limited edition trainers that were falling apart on his feet. *Despite his protests*, his hair had been cut so short that he almost looked like a skinhead and his right ear had been pierced. He could still feel it throbbing underneath the temporary stud that had been put in to stop the hole closing. (Horowitz PB 2015:72; my emphases)

In this excerpt, Alex's passivity is significant; despite his protests, he has 'been dressed', his hair has 'been cut' and his right ear has 'been pierced'. It seems incongruous for this paragon of young hegemonic masculinity to be viewed as a malleable object and subjected to, sometimes permanent, manipulation by an apparently all-powerful subject. Even the body's natural attempts to heal itself are frustrated by the stud that is intended to 'stop the hole closing'. Alex's comment shortly after his makeover bears testament to the identity struggle he faces with his altered appearance. He says, "I don't look very much like myself either" (Horowitz PB 2015:77).

Further inscription of Alex's body occurs almost as a matter of course throughout the narrative. His body carries the 'burden of significance' (Robertson 2015:11) of the story, bearing the signs of his demanding career which can be 'read' even by other characters in the book. In *Ark Angel*, for instance, the villains confirm Alex's identity as an MI6 spy after seeing his sniper bullet wound. His history can be read on his semioticised body.

By the eighth book, Alex is painfully aware of the way he has changed since MI6 sent him on his first mission. In a chapter called 'Reflections in a Mirror', the boy spy, on his way to a black tie event, 'took one last glance in the mirror, then stopped and looked a second time. It was strange, but he wondered if he recognised the boy who was looking back' (Horowitz CT 2015:27). After some moments he concludes that he looks like a 'young James Bond. He hated the comparison but he couldn't avoid it. It wasn't just the clothes' (Horowitz CT 2015:28). Finally, he observes

And that was it really, wasn't it? That was what the boy in the mirror was trying to tell him. He was still only fourteen years old but this last year – a year whose end

they were about to celebrate – had almost destroyed him. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel Major Yu’s walking stick smashing into the side of his head, the crushing weight of the water under the Bora Falls, the punishment he had taken in the Thai boxing ring in Bangkok. And those were just the most recent in a string of injuries. How many times had he been punched, kicked, beaten, knocked out? And shot. His wounds might have healed but he would still be reminded of them every time he undressed. [...]

Had it changed him? Of course it had. Nobody could survive all this and stay the same. (Horowitz CT 2015:29)

Even at this point, Alex is mature enough to realise that the greatest changes in his being have been emotional. His psychological being has been scarred by his experiences, even more so than his physical being. He knows ‘the memory of pain’ that ‘never leaves you’ (Horowitz CT 2015:29) and the betrayal of those appointed to protect him. But this pain has a physical manifestation too. In *Ark Angel*, when Alex is recovering in St Dominic’s hospital, the nurse takes mental note of his appearance. ‘He was a very handsome boy, she thought. He had fair hair and serious brown eyes that looked as if they had seen too much. She knew that he was only fourteen, but he looked older. Pain had done that to him’ (Horowitz AA 2015:19).

Some of this hurt is picked up by Mrs Jones in her debriefing session with Alex towards the end of *Skeleton Key*. Later, in a private discussion with Alan Blunt, she airs her concerns. She reports that Alex is

“...not the same. I know, I’ve said this all before. But I was seriously worried about him, Alan. He was so silent and withdrawn. He’d been badly hurt.”

“Any broken bones?”

“For heaven’s sake! Children can be hurt in other ways! I’m sorry, but I do feel very strongly about this. We can’t use him again. It isn’t fair.”

“Life isn’t fair.” (Horowitz SK 2015:322)

As this dialogue takes place in the third of ten books in the series, it is obvious that Blunt succeeds in overriding Mrs Jones’s protective position¹⁸⁴. Whether mentally or physically, Alex is repeatedly hurt and set apart as a marked being.

¹⁸⁴ The lengths to which he goes to achieve his ends are, even according to his own assessment, monstrous. (Horowitz SR 2015:427)

Perhaps one of the most intrusive and disturbing manipulations of Alex's body occurs in *Crocodile Tears*. In this book, Reverend McCain and his sadistic sidekick, Dr Myra Bennett, drug Alex in order to smuggle him out of England to Kenya in order to find out just how much MI6 has learned about their criminal activities. However, they do not simply, and implausibly, bundle him into a sack and carry him off in a private jet. Their methods are more subtle. After sedating him with a hypodermic syringe, the antagonists set Alex up with a fool proof disguise. By inserting another needle into his arm, this one attached to a small machine that administers regular, metered doses of a horridly sophisticated poison into his body, they render him physically helpless. To any casual onlooker, Alex would look like a severely handicapped young man in a wheelchair. Alex catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror and is shocked by what he sees. 'His hair had been cut so badly that he looked two years older than his true age and completely pitiful. The tracksuit was a nasty shade of purple. It was one size too big and covered in stains, as if he was unable to feed himself. [...] The glasses he had been given were deliberately ugly: black plastic with thick lenses' (Horowitz CT 2015:268).

Nevertheless, these external modifications are minor when compared with the intrusive, internal aspect of the 'disguise'.

The drug had attacked his muscles, paralysing him and somehow changing the shape of his entire body. His jaw was hanging open and his eyes were glazed. Alex knew exactly what they had done. They had turned him into a foul parody of a disabled person. They had made him look brain-damaged ... but, worse than that, they had stripped away his dignity too. In a way, it was a brilliant disguise. People might glance at him in the street but they would be too embarrassed to look twice. Bennett was taking their prejudices and using them to her advantage. (Horowitz CT 2015:268)

The disguise works exactly as Dr Bennett intended and Alex Rider is wheeled through passport control and the security checkpoint at Heathrow airport by his 'nurse'. Even the officials are too embarrassed to look at Alex, especially when Dr Bennett makes a show of talking to him 'as if he were six years old' (Horowitz CT 2015:269) and, later, when she attempts to feed him baby food with a spoon. For a boy who has spent years fine-tuning the movements of a well-developed body, this invasive manipulation is particularly galling. He is acutely aware of his loss of dignity and he burns with anger at his public humiliation.

Whether intentional or not, Horowitz, through the narrative, gives the reader some insight into the possible emotions and thoughts that assail genuinely disabled persons who are sufficiently aware of

how they may appear to others¹⁸⁵. Alex, along with the horrified reader, experiences (for a few hours) the butt of societal prejudice towards persons who appear to be mentally or physically disabled and gains some insight into the unavoidable realities faced by so many special needs persons every day. For Alex, release comes with the removal of the incapacitating drug. For millions of others, there is no escape.

It is evident, from the description above, that Alex, for the time being, loses his ability to control, not only his environment, but even his bodily functions. He is unable to say his name; he is not in control of his own identity¹⁸⁶. As the focus of this research is the representation of hegemonic masculinity, I will make only passing reference to the politics of gender and disability¹⁸⁷ as it is particularly relevant to this section of the Alex Rider series. In their insightful article, 'The Dilemma of Disabled Masculinity', Shuttleworth, Wedgewood and Wilson (2012:174) observe that 'a much-cited point by those who study the intersection of gender and disability is that masculinity and disability are in conflict with each other'. This is because 'disability is associated with being dependent and helpless whereas masculinity is associated with being powerful and autonomous, thus creating a lived and embodied dilemma for disabled men' (Shuttleworth et al. 2012:174).

Alex experiences, albeit in a temporary situation, the helplessness and dependence that is in direct opposition to the strong, capable masculinity that characterises him at the beginning of the series. Yet, in a way, his complete powerlessness here is merely an extension of the vulnerability that has been exhibited at various stages of the narrative when his body has been marked and manipulated by external agents.

In Alex's contemplations of his physical and emotion markings, we sense his exasperation at his lack of agency, his frustration that he cannot always protect his body from harm. There is a suggestion of violation, of penetration even – in the case of the sniper's bullet, the ear piercing and the debilitating injection¹⁸⁸ – that renders Alex symbolically impotent. It could be argued, hence, that this 'marking' affects the representation of the boy's masculinity. Every time his body is placed in a vulnerable, disempowered (historically feminine) position, Alex's hegemonic status is called into

¹⁸⁵ 'Other passengers were passing him, carrying their hand luggage. He saw them glance in his direction. Each time the reaction was the same. Puzzlement, the realisation something was wrong, then pity, and finally a sense of embarrassment. The drug was making his knee twitch. His hand, resting on the knee, was doing the same' (Horowitz CT 2015:270).

¹⁸⁶ 'Alex wanted to tell the passport officer his real name. But nothing resembling a word came out' (Horowitz CT 2015:270).

¹⁸⁷ This is a specialised field that falls beyond the ambit of this study. Significant work has been done by researchers to understand, and possibly assist in, the perceptions of masculinity and its relation to the disabled male subject.

¹⁸⁸ Alex is also injected with a fatal 'vaccine' in *Scorpio*.

question. It is only by surviving these attacks and recovering sufficiently to annihilate the forces responsible for his temporary subjugation that his heroic status is restored.

5.11 Military Men

‘Besides, we are men, and after all it is our business
to risk our lives’¹⁸⁹

According to Barrett (2001:80), various studies of military training ‘reveal that the military persuasively bounds off the recruit from civilian life in an effort to socialise ‘boys to be men’. Recruits [...] come to value conformity and obedience, and learn display rules for exhibiting aggression and courage in the face of risk’. It is significant that Horowitz opts to send his boy spy for military training even before his very first mission. Once MI6 have successfully blackmailed Alex into ‘helping’ them out with a mission, they immediately send him off to the Special Air Services training centre. Here, Alex is subjected to basic training and the kind of mental conditioning required in order to prepare recruits for active service.

In many cultures across the globe, there exists a firm belief that military training makes men out of boys. This consideration puts one strongly in mind of Emig and Rowland’s assertion (2010:2)¹⁹⁰, referred to in several contexts within this study, that, historically, ‘the accomplishments of masculinity are usually the results of a process, typically one that involves some degree of physical or symbolic violence.’¹⁹¹ In this context it is abundantly clear that achieving the ends of hegemonic masculinity seldom comes without some form of physical or psychological mutilation.

Furthermore, implicit in this ideology, is the acceptance of a discourse that views violence as a necessary and inevitable aspect of human interaction. In boys’ literature, this ‘truth’ has been acknowledged and even propagated by texts that seek to inculcate a sense of national entitlement and loyalty in young male readers. For example, part of the Victorian boys’ literature agenda was the production of texts that would inspire young men to embrace the discourse of fighting as a just and inescapable duty in order to ‘man the empire’ and aid the dissemination of imperial values across the globe. In fact, arguments propounding the benefits of acquiring a desirable level of skill in order to combat one’s enemies often feature as scarcely veiled propagandist texts couched in the

¹⁸⁹ *The Three Musketeers* by Dumas ([1844] 2011:397).

¹⁹⁰ As this observation is central to understanding the topic under review in this thesis, I have referred to it in previous chapters as well.

¹⁹¹ Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland, *Performing Masculinity* (London: Palgrave, 2010)

purportedly harmless sphere of children's literature. In Tom Brown's Schooldays, for instance, the author edifies his reader with the following encomium:

After all, what would life be without fighting, I should like to know? From the cradle to the grave, fighting, rightly understood, is the business, the real, highest, honestest [sic] business of every son of man. Every one who is worth his salt has his enemies; who must be beaten, be they evil thoughts and habits in himself, or spiritual wickedness in high places, or Russians, or Border-ruffians, or Bill, Tom, or Harry, who will not let him live his life in quiet till he has thrashed them. (Hughes [1857]1971:218)

Implicit in this extract is the conscious 'glamorisation of violent physical aggression' (Jones & Watkins 2000:11)¹⁹² that has come to characterise the heroic figure in boys' literature. It is one that still pervades the Western imagination and forms the basis of many 21st century cultural productions. It could be argued that widespread dissemination and general acceptance of such notions shape history and play a part, however small, in the cultural conditioning of successive generations. Discursive beliefs, once fully embraced, tend to linger in posterity despite possible changes in the social and political landscape.

Of particular significance, therefore, is Alex's apparent lack of interest in military affairs despite his being the only son of a man who had 'been in the army' and 'looked like a soldier' (Horowitz SC 2015:11). Perhaps it is because his father died before he was old enough to remember him that Alex seems unaffected by his military heritage. Nevertheless, it is evident from the start that Alex, like his secret agent uncle, has 'never been one for waving the Union Jack' (Horowitz SB 2015:16). Unlike Connor Reeves (the bodyguard hero discussed in the previous chapter¹⁹³), Alex does not hold to the (arguably antiquated) dictum that the strong should protect the weak¹⁹⁴. On the other hand, his seeming disinterest could be seen to reflect the apathy of a generation unaffected by world wars¹⁹⁵ and global economic depression. Whatever the reason, Alex does not embrace a patriotic ideology and he knows in retrospect that when he risked his life, 'he hadn't done it for his country'¹⁹⁶ (Horowitz SR 2015:140).

¹⁹² In *A Necessary Fantasy? The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture*.

¹⁹³ On 'Marketing Masculinity'.

¹⁹⁴ History bears testament to the way 'strong' countries have protected the 'weak' out of pure self-interest. This laudable statement has frequently masked exploitation and conquest.

¹⁹⁵ In *Scorpia*, when Alex is asked whether he is a patriot, his response lacks nationalist fervour:

Alex shrugged. "I like Britain," he said. "And I suppose I'd fight for it if there was a war. But I wouldn't call myself a patriot. No."

¹⁹⁶ This is yet another distinct difference between Alex and the Young Bond character of Higson's making.

5.12 Like Father, Like Son

‘Discovering the truth about John Rider
would be the same as finding out about himself.’¹⁹⁷

According to Epstein, ‘men become particular kinds of men through their own histories and the histories of the societies they live in. Different masculinities become relevant, common, or even possible, in different historical times, in different places, and in different political situations’ (Epstein 1998:50). Epstein’s observation is particularly valuable in terms of an analysis of Alex’s gendered identity.

At the end of the fourth book in the series, Yassen Gregorovich (Alex’s nemesis) tells the young spy something about his past that effectively turns his world upside down. In his dying moments Yassen informs Alex that

“I couldn’t kill you. [...] I would never have killed you. Because, you see, Alex ... I knew your father.”

“What?” Despite his exhaustion, despite all the pain from his injuries, Alex felt something shiver through him.

“Your father. He and I. [...] We worked together.”

“He worked with you?”

“Yes.”

“You mean ... he was a spy?”

“Not a spy, no, Alex. He was a killer. Like me. He was the very best. The best in the world. I knew him when I was nineteen. He taught me many things ...”

“No!” Alex refused to accept what he was hearing. (Horowitz ES 2015:319)

Alex’s horror and initial incredulity at this unexpected revelation is mirrored in the sympathetic reader who, like the protagonist, is forced to reassess the paradigms that govern perceptions of right and wrong. Moreover, Yassen’s further explanation that MI6 was, in fact, responsible for John Rider’s death adds to Alex’s sense of betrayal.

The main interest of the narrative from this point on is Alex’s attempt to reconstruct his own history. As he comes to terms with Yassen’s disclosure, he questions how it affects his image of himself.

¹⁹⁷ In *Scorpia* (Horowitz SC 2015:12).

‘Because, if his father really had killed people for money, what did that make him? Alex was angry, unhappy ... and confused’ (Horowitz SC 2015:12).

In the fifth novel, Alex explores this aspect of his past and even agrees to work for a criminal organisation, Scorpia, in an attempt to piece together the fragments of his father’s story. He spends several weeks training as a contract killer and accepts, as his maiden assignment, the assassination of Mrs Jones who, he discovers, gave the order to shoot John Rider. In spite of this personal vendetta and the mental conditioning he is subjected to at Scorpia’s training centre, Alex realises – at the crucial moment – that he is not a killer¹⁹⁸. Even as he is handcuffed and led away from the scene, however, he regrets having ‘failed Scorpia’, ‘failed his father’ and ‘failed himself’ (Horowitz SC 2015:231).

Nevertheless, despite having to accept the undeniable evidence of his father’s occupation as a contract killer, Alex comes to understand, finally, that his own identity need not be irrevocably bound up in his father’s. While following in John Rider’s footsteps affords Alex a hitherto unknown sense of paternal proximity, he needs to reject the claims of patriarchy in order to forge his own identity according to his own set of truths.

It is only after he has reached this painful conclusion that he finds out that John Rider was not, in fact, murdered by MI6 but that his execution had been staged in order to bring him home to his wife and infant son after he had successfully infiltrated Scorpia as a double agent. He had been working for MI6 all along and the ‘plane crash’ that had eventually claimed his parent’s lives had been Scorpia’s act of revenge. Alex is understandably bewildered by his constantly shifting personal history.

On the one hand he was grateful. His father hadn’t been an evil man. He had been the exact opposite¹⁹⁹. Everything Julia Rothman [of Scorpia] had told him and *everything he had thought about himself* had been wrong. But at the same time there was an overwhelming sadness, as if he was mourning his parents for the very first time. (Horowitz SC 2015:350; my emphases)

Alex’s sense of bereavement is augmented in *Snakehead*, when he discovers that his own godfather, Ash, planted and detonated the bomb in the luggage compartment of the plane John Rider and his wife were flying in. With an uncle who poses as a banker but is actually a spy, a father who assumes

¹⁹⁸ Although he fired a bullet at Mrs Jones, analysis of the scene of crime revealed that he did not aim at her despite being less than two metres away.

¹⁹⁹ On several occasions, John Rider had placed his life at risk to save others.

– albeit temporarily – the persona of a contract killer and a godfather²⁰⁰ who murders his best friend to prove his loyalty to a criminal organisation, it is not surprising that Alex puts little faith in paternal figures.

Nevertheless, while Alex consciously rejects certain aspects of the ideologies embraced by his uncle and his father, it is clear that he has, perhaps unwittingly, ‘inherited’ a construction of masculinity that equips him, admirably, for the role he is set to perform. Like his father and his uncle before him, Alex has acquired, through a ‘stylised repetition of acts’ (Butler 1990:140), the gendered identity of his forebears. The construction appears so ‘natural’ and the performance so incredibly flawless that Mrs Jones observes to Alex, “That’s what makes you such a great spy. It isn’t that you were made one or trained to be one. It’s just that in your heart you are one. I suppose it runs in the family” (Horowitz SC 2015:351).

5.13 Conclusion

‘One bullet. One life.

The end starts here.’²⁰¹

Heroes ‘are cultural constructs, their ideal masculine virtues are the products of history, expressions not of some universal essence of manliness but of ideological configurations of gender, class, “race” and nation, in which versions of “the masculine” are defined, propagated and contested (Dawson 1996:146)²⁰². This chapter explored the various aspects of ‘being James Bond in miniature’²⁰³ – a paradoxically misleading phrase that does not in any way reflect the epic expectations the role demands. The Young Bond series by Charlie Higson served as a point of departure and this was followed by an analysis of the Alex Rider series with particular emphasis on aspects of characterisation that influence the fictional construction and performance of masculinity. As Butler (1988:191) suggests, ‘the effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self’.

²⁰⁰ Even before he learns of Ash’s treachery, Alex despises his godfather’s lack of self-discipline in terms of smoking and drinking alcoholic beverages. Alex perceives this as a sign of weakness and poor self-image.

²⁰¹ Back blurb of *Scorpio Rising*.

²⁰² Cited in Jones and Watkins (2000:12).

²⁰³ Cited earlier in this chapter.

For the most part, these gestures position the boy spy at the epitome of the gender hierarchy with only occasional hints at potential vulnerability. In Alex Rider's case, however, Horowitz allows his hero to be subjected not only to the will of the antagonist but also to the (frequently permanent) violation of his body. This representation of strong yet vulnerable masculinity presents a more fluid, susceptible construction of gender than the traditional model of invincible manhood.

In fact, while young James Bond at the end of *By Royal Command* is portrayed as deeply attracted to a life dedicated to espionage, Alex Rider's final mission for MI6²⁰⁴ fills him with desperation to escape its nightmarish realities. Although he succeeds in foiling the antagonist's plan, he is forced to witness the murder of his caregiver, Jack Starbright – the only maternal figure and the closest friend he has ever known. Alex is overcome by grief and, as the head of the CIA observes, 'the light [has] gone out of his eyes' (Horowitz SR 2015:396). When Sabina's father, Edward Pleasure, sees Alex's condition he reflects that

there was something terrible about the silence that had taken hold of him like some sort of illness. He showed no interest in food and barely ate. If he was asked something, he would respond politely. But he never volunteered anything and there were long minutes when he didn't seem to be in the room, when his eyes were somewhere else. At their first meeting, it seemed to Edward that that something inside Alex had broken and would never be repaired. (Horowitz SR 2015:430)

This poignant description of the boy hero's attempt to come to terms with his loss and the innate fragility of his broken being subverts, at the deepest level, the traditional image of masculine stoicism and invincibility. His seemingly indomitable spirit has been crushed; his luck has, finally, run out. He reaches the end of his adventures a different boy to the one who said, at the outset, "'It's a dumb idea. I don't want to be a spy'" (Horowitz SB 2015:61). In his acknowledgements for *Scorpiia Rising*, Horowitz observes:

Certainly I'm aware that [Alex is] a lot less jaunty and carefree than he was in *Stormbreaker*. This is something I discovered with each new book – it's been impossible to ignore all the deaths and the danger; the way Alex has been manipulated time and again; the terrible things he's witnessed. The fact of the

²⁰⁴ I refer here to his last official mission described in *Scorpiia Rising*. In *Never Say Die*, Alex Rider goes against official instructions to try to piece together his life and find Jack Starbright.

matter is that, without any help from me, he's grown up. And now he's gone. I'll miss him²⁰⁵. (Horowitz SR 2015:433)

By the end of the series, however, Alex has not merely 'grown up'. The world of espionage, the secret sphere that James Bond sees as his playground, has broken, traumatised and altered the boy²⁰⁶. The reader shares not only in his grief, but also in the sense of disillusionment that comes with the realisation that his seemingly invulnerable masculinity has failed to protect him from physical and emotional harm. Unlike the young Bond character, whose infallible manliness and ingenuity admit no defeat, Alex Rider bears in his mind and on his body the evidence of violence and violation.

In the Introduction to this chapter, I referred to Ronald Paul's article on 'Imperial Nostalgia: Victorian Values, History and Teenage Fiction in Britain'. I echoed his concern regarding the 'ideological grooming of prospective James Bond fans' (Paul 2009:10), highlighting the ways in which the Young Bond novels support the 'reassertively patriotic subtext' (Paul 2009:10) of postwar popular culture. While maintaining my position that the Alex Rider series differs in several significant ways from the Young Bond books, it is, nonetheless, concerning that texts of this kind have become part of the 21st century literary landscape. In a scathing article published in *The Guardian*, Tom Kelly observes that

The reinvention of the "boys' own adventure" genre for the 21st century seems to have taken the media by storm. It has the hazy glow of nostalgia for a simpler world, a world where everyone knew their place in the white, male playground. Problem is, that world no longer exists, if it ever did, and in reinventing the ripping yarn genre (whose most enduring example is Biggles), some of the problems of the original have reappeared. Beneath the surface are racial tension and xenophobia, cultural traits that were institutionalised during the colonial era.

We are offering up a fast food menu of impoverished stereotypes to our sons, based on rigid class systems and exclusion. The thought of filling 21st century boyhood with the same stale old guff on evil foreigners and government-sanctioned assassins makes me feel tired and more than a bit concerned. (Kelly 2007:n.p.)

Nonetheless, if heroes are, indeed, cultural constructs, we should perhaps be asking why these books with their controversial protagonists have met with such success. What are the discursive constructs that have given rise to their popularity? Society bemoans the dropping literacy levels

²⁰⁵ Although Horowitz was adamant that *Scorpia Rising* was Alex's last adventure, he seems to have given in to popular demand and published *Never Say Die* after he made the above statements.

²⁰⁶ There is a strong link here to the 'wounded masculinity' discussed in Chapter Three.

amongst boys and then evinces disgust at the texts these reluctant readers consume. If we are to label the boys' adventure genre as 'fast food' (Kelly 2007:n.p.), we should perhaps consider why it is that boy readers seem to consider other (undoubtedly more substantial and morally nourishing) texts unpalatable.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

... being alive is no answer to the problem of living.

To be or not to be is not the question.

The vital question is: how to be and how not to be.²⁰⁷

6.1 Background

It is not often that a school circular contains content worthy of rigorous academic debate. I was, therefore, much taken aback by the miniature masculinity treatise published in the March 2018 edition of my eldest son's boys-only high school newsletter. It would seem that issues of bullying had given rise to some discussion regarding the type of boy the school wishes to produce. The headmaster claims, in the communication released to the parent body, that a community of teenage boys 'sometimes behaves in a manner that is strange to us as adults. Boys need physical activity and boys love teasing each other. Boys love a challenge, love a dare and often see overcoming a physical obstacle as a rite of passage on the way to manhood. Yet in all of this, there has to be a sense of humanity, justice, kindness and empathy. We have to negotiate through the mass of male-ness and combine that with gentleness' (Reeler 2018:4).

Having taught for some time at this school, I can well relate to the idea of negotiating 'through the mass of male-ness'; reaching one's class without having spilled a drop of tea and having made one's way past hundreds of adolescent males is a feat worthy of some praise. The headmaster, however, seems to be referring here to the intrinsic and apparently unavoidable masculinity that was called into question in the very first chapter of this thesis. He claims that this 'male-ness' needs to be

²⁰⁷ A.J. Heschel in Seidler (2006:ix), *Transforming Masculinities*.

combined with gentleness; in other words, gentleness is not – according to this statement – an attribute found in primal or basic ‘male-ness’. It must needs be cultivated in the male subject, along with ‘humanity, justice, kindness and empathy’ (Reeler 2018:4).

While it is not my object to discuss or comment on the headmaster’s personal perspective on gender and performativity, I consider his opinion an apt reflection of what certain sectors of society expect of masculinity. Parents send their sons to particular schools for various reasons and often the kind of man the institution claims to ‘make’ of the boy is the deciding factor. Several ideologies, along with their attendant practices, combine within the relatively controlled environment of the school to promote the perpetuation of the discourses venerated by those who uphold them. This is particularly true of ‘boys only’ schools where the attainment of so-called desirable masculinity is presented as one of the main objectives of the schooling. In such institutions, the ‘production’ and ‘performance’ of gender is conscious, deliberate and largely prescriptive.

Yet, there is a definite sense of conflict, a suggestion that outwardly ‘opposed’ modes of performance ought to be combined in the correct ratio to produce the ideal modern man. This seeming paradox has been discussed at length in various sections of this thesis and will be revisited in the concluding remarks.

6.2 Findings

‘Still, is courage a virtue, or is it simply
testosterone poisoning?’²⁰⁸

Chapter Two explored the salient aspects of masculinity theory, placing particular emphasis on the relevance of this theoretical lens to children’s literature. The arguments of prominent theorists in

²⁰⁸ John Skow (Time, 28 June 1993:73) is quoted by Bonnie Wheeler in her article ‘The Masculinity of King Arthur: From Gildas to the Nuclear Age’ Vol 2 No 4 pp1-26: 1992:1.

the field were critically evaluated and current masculinity studies trends were discussed. The point of departure was Balswick's claim (1992:12) that '[t]hroughout most of history it was taken for granted that men acted like men because that was their nature'. However, through a careful analysis of a wide range of historical and contemporary texts (literary and other) it became evident that issues of masculinity and identity have never been as uncomplicated as this perception suggests. Yet, as Emig and Rowland (2010:1) note, 'the common observation that what is pervasive in society and culture often remains invisible also holds true for masculinity'.

The literature review went on to illustrate that masculinity studies has come a long way in debunking the myth surrounding the inevitable naturalness of masculinity, and, in some cases, even highlighting the dangers implicit in such preconceptions. In fact, in many of the autobiographical texts written by males in various time periods, a strong sense of bewilderment came to the fore which served to underpin the argument that socially and culturally desirable performances of masculinity are by no means inevitable in the male subject. This was seen to be particularly true of men who live in a global village that has been sensitised to gender issues and in a period characterised by changes in societal roles and expectations.

A significant portion of Chapter Two dealt with hegemonic masculinity, a concept that, according to Connell (1987: 183), is 'centred on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women'. However, as Connell's many subsequent research publications demonstrate, this is just the broad outline of the situation; a surfeit of personalities and performances, male and female, occupy the space between the oppressor and the oppressed in the gender hierarchy.

Moreover, as research indicates, being born male does not necessarily guarantee societal ascendance in every case as there are unspoken rules which govern the enactment of the role that leads to gender dominance. Chapter Two highlighted the fact that some men find the negotiation of these standards difficult or undesirable and are subsequently marginalised or rejected on this basis. Hence, Ben Knights' observation (1999:6) that, 'Men are themselves the victims of patriarchy and the

heterosexual presumption' is central to understanding the discursive premise of this academic enquiry.

Moreover, a concept of hegemonic masculinity that allows for the historicity of gender to be taken into account, as well as the idea that gender is shaped by context, could be described as a gendered construct that embodies 'the currently most honoured way of being a man'. This construct implicitly requires men to 'position themselves in relation to it', thus legitimating, on an ideological level, a global dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:832). As I pointed out in Chapter Two, in different social settings and in different historical milieus, different kinds of masculinity may be regarded as most desirable. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that although 'most men do not correspond to the hegemonic model', it could be argued that 'most men are complicit in sustaining it' (Robinson 2013:61).

The chapter continued with an exploration of the theory of multiple masculinities, a concept which is superbly conveyed by Epstein (1998:50) who claims that 'the science of gender is itself socially produced and, in turn, produces different practices of masculinity, different ways of "doing man"'. She clarifies her meaning by elaborating that 'men become particular kinds of men through their own histories and the histories of the societies they live in. Different masculinities become relevant, common, or even possible, in different historical times, in different places, and in different political situations' (Epstein 1998:50).

The literature review culminated in a discussion of performativity in the Butlerian sense in which gender is viewed as the result of countless and repetitive performances which, of themselves, recreate and reaffirm various ways of re-enacting identities for gendered beings. This follows on from the ideology that 'gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the

imitation itself' (Butler 1997: 306). This notion of performativity is central to the analyses which followed in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

Chapter Two also demonstrated the clear link between discourse theory and masculinity studies and the value of both approaches as a lens for examining texts. A combination of the two create a platform for research into 'the way social being and individual identity are produced through cultural performances' (Knights 1999:13). Consequently, throughout the thesis, 'I refer to hegemonic masculinity as a dominant discourse whose perpetuation depends on its continued re-enactment and reinforcement by the performers for the maintenance of its privileged status' (Robertson 2013:3).

The latter part of Chapter Two presented a discussion of gender representations in general children's literature, as well as a case study that explored Healy's negotiation of masculinity in the context of a 21st century child audience in *The Hero's Guide to Saving Your Kingdom*. The study found that, despite a promising start, Healy's text seems to be less preoccupied with an interrogation of instances 'where representations of masculine sovereignty show an awareness of its tensions, fragility, and elements of masquerade' (Mallan 2002:35) than with describing the means whereby marginalised masculinities can be reconstructed in order to maintain the status of hegemonic masculinity.

Chapter Three explored Crossley-Holland's representations of masculinity in the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table as a locus for the mediation and contestation of fictional, historical and contemporary realities. Particular emphasis was placed on the reality of gender re-enactment and the re-invention of mythical masculinity through the character of Arthur de Caldicot. In this chapter, I demonstrated how Crossley-Holland's trilogy functions as a locus for the contestation of cultural constructs, a platform for the suspension and re-examination of ideologies

that shape our modern realities. Although the young hero is placed in the distant past, closer analysis brought to light the fact that Crossley-Holland's gender representations and concerns have much in common with contemporary discussions around masculinity.

Like the modern protagonists that were discussed in later chapters, Arthur possesses a desire to embody the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and is willing to invest physical, mental and spiritual capital to ensure a successful performance. However, Arthur de Caldicot's relentless questioning of the various 'ways of being male' presented to him could prove useful as a model for readers who are in the process of responding to the modes of masculinity they encounter in contemporary society. Moreover, as noted in the concluding remarks of the chapter, and demonstrated by the main protagonist of the trilogy, the construction, performance and maintenance of socially preferred masculinity can prove morally and ethically problematic for the enlightened male subject.

Chapter Four followed through on the discussion around the construction, performance and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, but this time, in relation to the modern day protagonist of Chris Bradford's immensely popular *Bodyguard* series. It became evident in this chapter that the boy's relationship with and control over his body is central to his identity and one which takes on dark significance as the series progresses. The chapter went on to cite Reardon and Govender (2011:79), who claim that 'the male body has come to symbolize masculine characteristics such as power, control and invincibility. [...] Not only the body's size and shape, but also the skills and movements it is capable of all constitute ways in which masculinity is performed through the male body'.

However, one of the central tenets of the analysis of the series was brought to light in an extract from "'Gentlemen, the lunchbox has landed': Representations of Masculinities and Men's Bodies in the Popular Media'. Here, the authors describe the concept of masculine embodiment by claiming

that 'our inner and outer bodies are, in fact, 'conjoined' in consumer culture, with the aim of inner body maintenance being the improvement of outer body appearance and the cultivation of 'a more marketable self'. Thus, bodies now have an important exchange value' (McKay et al. 2005:280).

Therefore, as Chapter Four illustrated at some length, hegemonic masculinity is seen to hold a certain capital in society; masculinity seems, in some cases, to be a marketable commodity. This is not only true for the protagonist whose body takes on a monetary, quantifiable exchange value when he works to protect illustrious clients, but also for the author whose books are consumed by boys who are eager to participate, albeit in a surrogate capacity, in the production and performance of this kind of masculinity.

The chapter concluded that the popularity of the Bodyguard series is significant in the light of current social and political agendas of gender activists who seek to destabilise and reinvent the masculinity hierarchy. While it is true that awareness campaigns and many other socio-political projects have made considerable progress in shaping new, less exclusive, expectations for gendered performances, it seems that traditional hegemonic masculinity still holds the upper hand. It seems that the muscular male body still has considerable market value, and there is still money in masculinity.

Chapter Five followed on from this discussion of the capital appeal of masculinity by analysing the gendered representations of young James Bond and the superspy, Alex Rider. As mentioned in Chapters One and Five, this latter series had sold an estimated 19 million units by 2017²⁰⁹. As such, it

²⁰⁹ Sales figure from Publisher's Weekly.

can be said to have a significant impact on the general child reader population, thus justifying a measure of academic scrutiny.

The chapter explores the 'ideological revamping' (Paul 2009:3) of historical values in these books; the idea of brave (or precocious – depending on your perspective), white boys holding the destiny of the world in their hands is certainly an out-dated one. Nevertheless, this megalomania seems to have captured the young male imagination afresh, with boy readers eagerly consuming each consecutive instalment as soon as it hits the shelves.

Quite predictably, the presentation of young James Bond places the hero right at the top of the masculinity hierarchy. He is privileged, superior and capable of determining the fate of the universe. By contrast, the representation of Alex Rider is far more complex; throughout the series, his agency fluctuates between supreme power over someone else's life and complete lack of control over even his own bodily functions. Hence, the characterisation is layered and multifaceted. Nevertheless, Alex Rider generally occupies the hegemonic space and the representations of his body and its capabilities are similar to those attributed to Connor Reeves in the previous chapter.

What sets Alex's body apart, however, is the depiction of the young male hero as vulnerable, even violable. The chapter emphasised this and also dealt at some length on the deconstruction of Alex's identity and the effect this has on the portrayal of the character. A 'semiotic reading' of the boy's body highlighted the 'constructedness', and simultaneous productiveness, of the discourses which shape the perceptions of the male protagonist. As Connell (2005:82) observes, 'Bodies are never naked; they are always clothed with meaning'²¹⁰.

²¹⁰ R.W. Connell, 'Globalisation, Imperialism and Masculinities,' *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities*, ed. (London: Sage, 2005), 82.

6.3 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

*'There is no such thing as a politically innocent book for kids.'*²¹¹

This study focussed on the representation of masculinity in texts that fall within the ambit of adventure fiction as this is a genre which has long been characterised by its promotion of hegemonic or privileged masculinity. I was, as I mentioned before, eager to see whether there have been any significant changes in this historically stereotyped and deeply gendered field; I was curious to see how the 'politically enlightened' modern boy hero looks, thinks and behaves.

However, due to several factors, the children's book market in South Africa does not offer much locally relevant reading matter for the male teen reader who is drawn to adventure texts. While much laudable work has been done in producing appealing and diverse 'home-grown' literature²¹² for younger South African readers²¹³, there is an apparent lack in the age group and genre my research is primarily concerned with²¹⁴. The research is based largely, therefore, on British

²¹¹ From Kathy Short's chapter called 'Why Do Educators Need a Political Agenda on Gender?' in *Beauty, Brains and Brawn: The Construction of Gender in Children's Education*, edited by Susan Lehr (2001:186).

²¹² Elinor Sisulu, a writer and human rights activist, 'stresses the importance of decolonising' children's literature in South Africa and encourages 'the use of local traditions, culture and folklore in storytelling' She claims, moreover, that 'developing afro-centric children's literature is an important and deeply political project' and crucial to 'ensuring that our children's education will no longer be an alienating experience' (Eusebius McKaiser Blog on Cape Talk, 24 November 2016).

²¹³ The Golden Baobab Prize initiative has done much to raise interest in high quality, African literature.

²¹⁴ One of the most exciting 'up-and-coming' South African writers is Bontle Senne. She published the first two instalments of her *Shadow Chasers* series in 2016. While these books may appeal to readers beyond the 9-12 years indication given by the publishers, they fall within the fantasy adventure genre and deal extensively with interactions with the supernatural. One of her aims is to reacquaint modern readers with the myths of their ancestors as she claims that 'South African children know to be scared of vampires and werewolves but would laugh at the idea of the tokoloshe and blink in confusion at the mention of Mami Wata' (Sunday Times Bookslive interview transcript 2016). While this is an exciting development in local children's literature, it falls outside the ambit of my particular field of research.

Moreover, while there are award-winning books like Jenny Robson's *Because pula means rain* (2000), Lutz van Dijk's *Stronger Than the Storm* (2001), Peter Slingsby's *Jedro's Bane* (2002) and Reviva Schermbrucker's *Am I a Lion that Eats People?* (2004) on offer to South African readers, these also do not fall within the adventure story genre.

Moreover, while there are some graphic novels that draw on local themes, like *The Adventures of Themba and Bizza: The Seven Mthombothi Beads* by J. Delannoie (2003), these also fall beyond the scope of this study and are not readily available in book stores. Dystopian novels such as Edyth Bulbring's *The Mark* also fall outside the ambit of this research.

publications that enjoy significant popularity amongst South African readers from various cultural backgrounds and which are on sale in general book stores. While I acknowledge this as a potential limitation of my research in a local context, it does highlight the fact that there is a relative dearth of equivalent and/or readily available²¹⁵ South African texts in this particular genre. As Bontle Senne, a promising South African author of children's literature claims, 'the absence of relevant, engaging, local and accessible literature is something that is improving pretty slowly'²¹⁶.

Moreover, due to the myriad of international, English publications in this genre, I restricted my research to certain 21st century best-selling children's books with a male protagonist who is approximately thirteen years old at the start of the series. While my main interest was in the presentation of gender in these books, I was equally curious to understand the type of content that seems to appeal to male readers in order to encourage reading in other, potentially more 'ethically wholesome', genres. While a literary analysis of the books most voraciously consumed by boys can offer some insight into what triggers a desire for reading in generally reluctant male readers, an empirical study including a quantifiable, widespread and representative survey may provide more definite results regarding the nature of the South African children's reading landscape.

Other authors who have contributed, in various genres, to South African children's literature include Zukiswa Wanner, Sindiwe Magona, Niki Daly, Gcina Mhlophe Christopher Gregorowski, Marguerite Poland, Jenny Seed, Cicely van Straten, Bob Leshoai, I.D. Du Plessis, Phyllis Savory, Pieter W. Grobbelaar, Diane Case, Lesley Beake and Diane Stewart. (Robertson 2013:91)

(As an aside, the African Books Collective website offers valuable access to books published by African authors across the continent. It is a great pity that many of the texts advertised online are not available in general South African bookstores and have relatively high retail prices. The ebook versions are often not much more cost-effective.)

²¹⁵ Availability is crucial in terms of my research. For example, Janis Ford wrote *The Street Detectives* series which is set in South Africa, but I only happened to come across my copy of *The Harbour Adventure* because of my tendency to trawl through children's sections of musty, second-hand book stores. Texts that are so difficult to come by cannot be said to have a significant ideological impact on the general reading population. By contrast, texts that are available in most bookstores and in libraries across the country have the potential to shape the perspectives and discourses embraced by larger numbers of boys. This would have a greater impact on society at large.

²¹⁶ (Sunday Times Bookslive interview transcript 2016).

Such a study, although perhaps unrealistically ambitious, could provide knowledge that could be used to shape curricula and trends in writing for young male readers. Aspirant children's writers could draw on knowledge gained from such a study to write politically aware, uplifting, locally and socially relevant, books which boys would enjoy.

Moreover, the survey could indicate something about the reception of various children's texts by readers. Of particular interest would be whether modern boy readers experience a sense of intimidation or validation, of association or marginalisation, when encountering boy protagonists that display 'muscularity'²¹⁷.

Another area of potential research that became apparent during the course of this study is the recent development of the adventure literature genre and its attendant discourses in girls' fiction. While significant work has been done on historical teenage girl heroes like Nancy Drew and the like, I find some of the more recent publications in this genre particularly interesting. Ally Carter's *Gallagher Girls* series, for instance, which starts off with *I'd Tell You I Love You But Then I'd Have To Kill You*, first published in 2006, tells the story of Cameron Morgan, a fifteen-year-old operative in training at a girls' spy school. The first instalment was followed up by *Cross My Heart and Hope to Spy* (2007) and *Don't Judge a Girl By Her Cover* (2009)²¹⁸. Carter combines mystery, subterfuge and teenage romance to create texts that challenge prevalent perceptions of girls on many levels. Unlike her literary predecessors, however, Cameron and her fellow schoolmates are not content to be 'as good as any guy'. On the contrary, their ambition is 'to kick James Bond's butt and assume his double-o ranking' (Carter 2010:9).

What is of particular interest to me is the way in which Carter portrays her teenage girl protagonists as refreshingly capable (even lethal) despite their deceptively traditional and feminine appearances. Beneath their cool and manicured exteriors, these girls display the characteristics we have come to

²¹⁷ This term was explained in Chapter Five.

²¹⁸ The latter instalments, *Only The Good Spy Young* (2010), *Out of Sight, Out of Time* (2012) and *United We Spy* (2013), complete the series.

associate with the archetypal boy hero; they are courageous, ruthless, loyal and, like young Bond, they are willing to flout the law to make sure justice has the final word. As Cammie, the central character remarks, in this business, ‘we do bad things for good reasons, and for the most part, we can live with that’²¹⁹ (Carter 2010:27).

It seems possible then that similar concerns regarding out-dated discourses and skewed perspectives could be raised in response to this type of girls’ literature as Kelly raised with reference to the Young Bond series for boys when he claims that we must not confuse children ‘with mixed messages of violence as courage and reaction as quest’ (Kelly 2007:1). Therefore, while the representation of girls in this series may seem culturally liberated in terms of gendered expectations, there are other, potentially harmful, discourses at work which may be seen as ethically problematic in this genre.

6.4 Concluding remarks

‘In a way each of us is a story, and all the stories we hear

become parts of our own story ...’²²⁰

In Chapter One I mentioned that the hypothesis upon which my research rests is that ‘masculine identities and (stereo)typically male ways of being and acting are constantly being reinforced and re-enacted through social practices of communication among which narratives both oral and written, in

²¹⁹ Perhaps one of the most disturbing instances of taking the law into one’s own hands occurs in the penultimate book in the series when Cammie shoots and kills an assassin who is hell-bent on fulfilling his mission. Later, she discusses the event with her psychologist:

“I killed a man,” I said.

“Yes, you did.”

“He was going to stab Bex, so...I killed him.”

“And how does that make you feel?” It was an excellent question – one the Gallagher Academy had never really taught me how to answer. I was tired and confused, guilty and relieved. But most of all, I felt nothing. And nothing, as it turns out, is one of the scariest feelings of all. (Carter 2012:101)

²²⁰ Crossley-Holland (2001:293)

speech, in films and on paper, figure prominently' (Knights 1999:17). Hence, an analysis of the representation of masculinity in these texts as well as 'those practices and ways of being that serve to validate the masculine subject's sense of itself as male/boy/man' (Whitehead 2002:4) can offer valuable insight into the most culturally prized performances of gender²²¹.

Moreover, as I mentioned before, the consideration that 'children's identities are directly influenced by the texts they read, see, hear, and purchase' (Wannamaker 2008:23), makes an investigation of this nature relevant and crucial to understanding the discourses and ideologies that are shaping the performances and perceptions of the next generation of young men. As Wannamaker (2008:3) points out, these texts themselves become at once a means as well as a product of the circulation and perpetuation of discourse; the sites of potential contestation or reaffirmation in the 21st century masculinities arena.

In Chapter Three, I referred to Bonnie Wheeler's article, 'The Masculinity of King Arthur: From Gildas to the Nuclear Age'. In this publication she claims that 'cultures typically express and enact their views of power and heroism by the ways in which they construct ideals and norms of masculine identity. The most powerful men construct, express, and perform their local culture's ideology of masculinity: masculinity is transacted most completely through heroic leadership' (Wheeler 1992:1). It is not surprising, therefore, that, in the same boys' school newsletter cited at the beginning of this chapter, the headmaster's deliberations surrounding the issue of masculinity and ideal manhood should introduce the heroic paradigm, albeit in startlingly out-dated imagery. He claims:

I want our boys to be tough, to be able to take on challenges both physical and emotional. I want them to ride into the sunset on a dusty horse having

²²¹ According to Wheeler (1992:1), gender is 'absorbed by a culture through its stories: modes of power and gender are inscribed in a story, sustained by language'.

saved the day!²²² But I also want them to be able to cry and show emotion, to be able to be who they are deep inside, to show compassion for those less strong, to be gentle and to truly understand those around them. Some may say this is not possible – you cannot have toughness with kindness. I disagree and this is the modern man I would like our school to produce. The man who can withstand physical and emotional challenges and walk out stronger yet someone who is acutely aware of others' needs and rights.²²³

(Reeler 2018:4)

The similarity between this 21st century exposition of desirable masculinity bears an uncanny resemblance to the ideological, physical and emotional characteristics of Arthur de Caldicot, the main protagonist discussed in Chapter Three. Arthur's dilemma consists in having to combine, in one bodily experience, the attributes of 'two hearts: one adamant as a diamond' and the other 'soft as hot wax' (Crossley-Holland 2003:72). One could argue that this is merely another example of the various, arguably dated, archetypes of perpetuated patriarchy and 'heterosexual presumption' (Knights 1999:6) still prevalent in residual discourse. Moreover, as Ben Knights observes in *Writing Masculinities*, in order 'to collude with a system of power it is not necessary to be objectively a beneficiary of that system, only to be persuaded that you are a beneficiary. Such persuasion is of course the task of ideology' (Knights 1999:6).

Chapter One stated that the proposed, broad aim of this study was to delineate different representations of masculinity in the respective texts through an analysis of the various discourses that these texts represent, propagate and, at times, subvert. By using discourse theory as a lens to complement the masculinity studies approach, the subsequent research investigated the questions posed under the problem statement and found that the gender models presented in the texts are, for the most part, cast in 'the masculinist and patriarchal conventions that characterised imperialist adventure' and 'helped to confirm adventure as a "masculine" genre' (Capdevila 2010:216). The

²²² One could argue that this narrative adds to the myth of masculinity in that acts which are performed in the service or interests of others can also be ego-inflating. Moreover, as shown in Chapter Three, 'stories oriented to men and men's experience not only articulate for the future what it is to live and act as a man. They also act as blueprints for future stories' (Knights 1999:17).

²²³ The publication and distribution of this newsletter is significant because 'utterance', in its broadest form, 'takes place in a social context and generally has a *regulatory* and *normative* function' (Knights 1999:14; my emphases).

findings coincide with Capdevila's related research which focuses on adult adventure fiction and which is presented in her article entitled 'He comes back badder and bigger than ever!' Readapting the masculine and negotiating the feminine in treasure-hunting adventure fiction'. Here she claims that recent

social and cultural developments have done little to challenge [the genre's] patriarchal and masculinist ideology. While the impact of second-wave feminism — together with later postmodern reconfigurations intent on transgressing old patriarchal gender-role expectations — have brought about significant transformations in genres such as romance, science-fiction and detective fiction, adventure remains essentially reluctant to accommodate a liberal discourse. (Capdevila 2010:216)

The children's adventure genre seems to be similarly tardy in keeping with the times²²⁴. However, if texts are indeed cultural productions of their contexts, it may be that one should rather bemoan society's ideological lethargy. The extracts from the headmaster's newsletter presented in this chapter contain incontrovertible evidence that some sectors of society still see the hero²²⁵ as 'a pervasive symbol of manhood'²²⁶ (Andersson 2008:139).

Nevertheless, as Toerien and Durrheim (2001:36) point out, masculinity is no longer regarded as a particular way of being, but 'as a field of conflict that men have to traverse in a quest for coherence'. Similarly, Kord and Krimmer (2011:134) claim in a chapter called 'Spies, Paranoia, and Torture' that

Even though the hero, be he Ethan Hunt, Jason Bourne, or James Bond, is represented as the answer to all political, criminal and terrorist problems, the contradictory demands on his masculinity — the simultaneous quest for tenderness and toughness — present a challenge that remains largely unresolved. The world is saved; the hero remains conflicted and alone.

²²⁴ For the same reasons, Martin Green (1993:n.p.) claims, in *The Adventurous Male: Chapters in the History of the White Male Mind*, that this type of fiction generally 'goes against the grain of our political culture' because it defends hegemonic masculinity 'in a culture that has become increasingly hostile to these values (though they survive, at least in attenuated form, in our popular culture)'.

²²⁵ It is important to remember that the hero will look and behave differently according to his historic and social contexts. According to Jones and Watkins (2000:12), in *A Necessary Fantasy?: The Heroic Figure in Children's Popular Culture*, 'the ideological discourses operative at a particular historical moment within a particular culture determine, in part, the way that culture defines "heroism"'.

²²⁶ As mentioned in Chapter Four, Gilbert & Gilbert emphasise that 'the dominant patterns of masculinity are often linked to the physical capital of the body, and for many boys, the physical performative aspect of masculinity is seen as the most acceptable and desirable way of being male.' (in Swain 2005:220)

Another challenge that 'remains largely unresolved' in this genre is the implicit double-bind imposed on boy readers who are invited to appreciate and admire the model of masculinity displayed in the texts but are prohibited, on account of their youth, from embodying the ideal set before them. Chapter One made reference to John Stephens's observation, cited in *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film* (2002:x), where he claims that a problem for boys, both in narrative fictions and in the world, is that hegemonic masculinity 'appears simultaneously to propose a schema for behaviour and to insist on their subordination as children, to conflate agency with hegemonic masculinity, and to disclose that, for them, such agency is illusory'.

When considered from this perspective, it is evident that the texts under discussion in this study do not, in most cases, present workable gender performance models for emulation in a 21st century context. In fact, Tom Kelly (2007:1) claims that 'such stories offer no advice on how to survive and thrive in our increasing complex and accelerating culture, while fostering an unhealthy fear of otherness'.

Nevertheless, there is a crossing-place; it lies, ironically, in uncertainty. A latent hesitancy, a questioning, and a sense of bewilderment, connect Arthur, Connor and Alex with the boy reader. Unlike many of their presumptuous predecessors, these adventure-prone protagonists are often confused, frightened and wounded. Hence, like his literary heroes, the reader is conditioned to believe that 'contemporary masculinity is defined by its ability to navigate between the threat of betrayal and the challenge to trust, between the splendour of heroic individualism and the need for cooperation and community, between killing and caring' (Kord & Krimmer 2011:5)²²⁷.

This is the crossing place. It's trembling and irresolute and malleable because

between-places are never quite certain of themselves.

Think of dusk, between day and night.

It's blue and unsure.²²⁸

²²⁷ In *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre and Politics*.

²²⁸ Crossley-Holland (2000:52). This quote opened the discussion on masculinity and gender performance in Chapter Three of this study.

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