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Captain Underpants Is Not the Enemy, UNH Professor Says in New Book on Boys and Literacy

By [Erika Mantz](#)
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DURHAM, N.H. -- Thomas Newkirk, professor of English at the University of New Hampshire, says popular culture should not be seen as the enemy of literacy, but as a learning tool, in his new book, "Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture."

Many boys perceive the reading of fiction as something girls do, as a "girl thing." Newkirk notes that men are often brought up to think the same way. "What better way to disguise Superman than turn him into a writer? No wonder Lois can't figure out who he is."

Newkirk interviewed 100 boys and girls in third, fourth and fifth grades in New Hampshire schools for the book, and discovered that sports, movies, video games and other venues of popular culture are a powerful way to encourage young boys to read and write. In his book, Newkirk argues against the simplistic stereotype of boys, showing that rather than mimic violence, boys most often transform, recombine and participate in storylines, and resist the unreality of popular culture. "We're misreading these kids," he says. "The kids say they know the difference between what's real and what's not. Most don't like graphic violence like 'Saving Private Ryan' or 'Pulp Fiction.' They are attracted to more cartoonish and stylized forms of violence."

"We need to be aware of the world today's kids live in," Newkirk continues. "Boys have always wanted to play as more powerful than they are, and for a kid who isn't the best athlete or great in the classroom, video games might be the only place they succeed. It's foolhardy to think we will be effective if we ignore it -- or worse,

automatically disapprove."

In the late 1990s, a lot was being published about schools failing girls and after the school shootings in Columbine in 1999, there was a big focus on boys and violence, but it didn't match what Newkirk was perceiving. Statistics show that boys are slower to develop biologically than girls, and their action-oriented, competitive learning style works against them learning to read and write. At many state universities, including UNH, the enrollment ratio approaches 60 percent female, 40 percent male, and a look at most top 10 student lists in the area will find a majority are females.

"I don't want to imply that males don't dominate females in the classroom discussion, but they do have other disadvantages," Newkirk says. "The argument that schools are set up to favor boys really got to me. If schools were set up for boys, they wouldn't be set up the way they are. There would be far more opportunities for action and movement."

"We need to be more open to different kinds of stories in the classroom," Newkirk says. "Boys in my generation became readers on 'Mad' magazine, and today it may be 'The Adventures of Captain Underpants' that gets boys going. I want kids to have the real experience of reading, of being lost in a book, of loving books that seem written just for them."

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