



Hal's Reading Diary - July 2010

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Hal's Diary and Baby Diary

Byline:

Roger Mills on the appeal of war stories to boy readers.

Why do small boys love war stories? Hal's father, psychodynamic counsellor **Roger Mills**, explains.

Hal and I found a great book recently, **War Stories for Boys**. A chunky 400 pager, it offers fictional 'autobiographies' of a Battle of Britain pilot, a sapper at El Alamein and a young infantry officer in the D-Day landings and we have both been pretty gripped. We share the reading between us, usually taking alternate pages, and the narratives are so exciting for Hal that there have been no whining appeals to be let off his turn. Being really interested also seems to make quite a difference to Hal's reading competence and he picks up hardish words ('intelligence' or 'battalion' come to mind) much quicker than I think he would if they were encountered along the way in an 'Astrosaur' tale.

Reading the war stories I've found myself wondering yet again about the appeal of military violence to a small boy's mind. One thing I am pretty sure it is not about is a genuine taste for violence. Hal always plays war games with his male friends. If a friend comes over for the afternoon, within ten minutes he and Hal are out in the garden sparring with sticks, enacting some kind of battle. But this is very much play violence.

Genuine violence, it seems to me, involves a quite different kind of aggression rooted in real hostility towards another person. A friend who was in the forces some years ago told me how, during their basic training, this kind of aggression was somehow inculcated into the recruits. When they went down the local town at the weekend, they were all fired up, hoping to get involved in a barney of some kind.

Small boys' battles though are fundamentally different. There is no genuine aggression or hate to them. Post bellum, Hal seems to have entirely affectionate relationships with his opponents and I detect no animus there at all.

So if the fantasy battles aren't about aggression what are they about? When I was a boy I went through very similar stuff to Hal as far as I can remember. I've mentioned before how one spring I fought a 'war' against massed ranks of daffodils in my parents' garden cutting them down line by line. I think that this felt sort of noble and valiant, and that it made me feel powerful, a vanquisher. This fantasy of power is, I think, the key to the question.

The child's lot is an odd one. Assuming home life is good enough you feel loved and valued and you sometimes get your own way with things too. But you also know that ultimately you have no power. An adult can, and frequently will, overrule your wishes. You are told to go to bed, to tidy your room, to eat up your dinner, to turn off the TV. You can't not be aware that your state is one of powerlessness. The adults call the shots.

In some ways this feels good. As kids we sense that we have neither the physical nor mental strength to provide for our most basic needs (the bits at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid* of human requirements like shelter and food) and that it is a good idea to have powerful adults around to do that for you. And yet there is a sting in the tale. The price you pay for being cared for as a kid is your powerlessness. This, I think, is the ultimate source of a boy's need for fantasy experiences of winning battles. He compensates for the discomfort of impotence by omnipotently destroying enemies in

his imagination.

Hang on though. What about girls? They don't seem nearly so keen on battle fantasies. But they are impotent too so what do they do? Only having a boy I've very little expertise here. But isn't it possible that the girl's fantasies of dressing up, being pretty and being a princess are about the same thing, except in this case beauty is the route to power. Warfare or make-up ? variations of a fantasy about power. And 20 years on when the kids have grown up into adults, what do you get? Football and shopping. Fantasies of a kind of power again, only this time adult style.

War Stories for Boys (978 1 417 10868 1) by Chris Priestley, Bryan Perrett and Jim Eldridge is published by Scholastic at £7.99. The 'Astrosaurs' series by Steve Cole is published by Red Fox.

* See **Motivation and Need** by Abraham Maslow (1954)

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