



Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men

By Michael Smith, Jeffrey D Wilhelm

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The problems of boys in schools, especially in reading and writing, have been the focus of statistical data, but rarely does research point out how literacy educators can combat those problems. That situation has changed. Michael Smith and Jeff Wilhelm, two of the most respected names in English education and in the teaching of reading, worked with a very diverse group of young men to understand how they use literacy and what conditions promote it. In this book they share what they have learned.

Through a variety of creative research methods and an extended series of interviews with 49 young men in middle and high school who differ in class, race, academic achievement, kind of school, and geography, the authors identified the factors that motivated these young men to become accomplished in the activities they most enjoyed-factors that marked the boys' literate activities outside of school, but were largely absent from their literate lives in school. Their study questions the way reading and literature are typically taught and suggests powerful alternatives to traditional instruction.

Building their findings on their understanding of the powerful and engaging experiences boys had outside of school, Smith and Wilhelm discuss why boys embrace or reject certain ways of being literate, how boys read and engage with different kinds of texts, and what qualities of texts appeal to boys. Throughout, the authors highlight the importance of choice, the boys' need to be shown how to read, the cost of the traditional teaching of difficult canonical texts, and the crucial place of meaningful social activity.

The authors' data-driven findings are provocative, explaining why boys reject much of school literacy and how progressive curricula and instruction might help boys engage with literacy and all learning in more productive ways. Providing both challenges and practical advice for overcoming those challenges, Smith and Wilhelm have produced a book that will appeal to teachers, teacher educators, and parents alike.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #168548 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Heinemann
- Published on: 2002-03-12
- Released on: 2002-03-12
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.20" h x .49" w x 7.40" l, .95 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 248 pages

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Prompted by research showing that girls as a group consistently outperform boys in tasks related to literacy, the authors attempted to determine the possible reasons behind this disparity, using a variety of techniques with a group of 49 boys of various socioeconomic levels, races, ages, educational histories, etc. The result is an evenhanded examination of boys' opinions about and approaches to literacy. The authors acknowledge the limitations of their research and discuss how their data may reflect these shortcomings but still reveal interesting tendencies within their group. The findings are related closely to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on "flow experiences." The authors concede that their conclusions could conceivably apply to girls as well as boys, suggesting that addressing student needs by gender may not be the most productive tactic in establishing and promoting literacy. Still, this clear, easy-to-follow text is worth a look, in large part due to its exploration of student approaches to literacy in school and out and how those attitudes can be applied to develop more effective methods of teaching.

Alison Ching, North Garland High School, Garland, TX

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About the Author

Michael Smith is coauthor with Jeffrey Wilhelm and Michael Smith of *Get It Done!; Oh, Yeah?!*; and *So, What's the Story?*. Michael, a professor in Temple University's College of Education, joined the ranks of college teachers after 11 years of teaching high school English. He has won awards for his teaching at both the high school and college levels. His research focuses on understanding how experienced readers read and talk about texts as well as what motivates adolescents' reading and writing out of school. He uses that understanding to think about how to devise more effective and engaging reading and writing instruction for adolescents in school. Michael has cowritten or coedited three other Heinemann books, *Going with the Flow*; *Reflective Teaching*, *Reflective Learning*; and *"Reading Don't Fix No Chevys"*. For *Chevys* he and coauthor Jeff Wilhelm received the NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. When he's not working, Michael's likely to be watching or talking about sports, reading, or playing with his granddaughter.

Jeffrey Wilhelm is coauthor with Michael Smith and James Fredricksen of *Get It Done!; Oh, Yeah?!*; and *So, What's the Story?*. Jeff has cowritten or coedited four other Heinemann books, *Going with the Flow*, *"Reading Don't Fix No Chevys"*, *Strategic Reading*, and *Imagining to Learn*. For *Chevys* he and coauthor Jeff Wilhelm received the NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. Jeff is an internationally-known teacher, author, and presenter. He is driven by a desire to help teachers to help their students to more powerful literacy and compassionate, democratic living. What he most wants for teachers to get out of his work is motivation, a vital passion and impulse to continue experimenting and learning about teaching, as well as ways to frame instruction so it is meaningful and compelling to students. A classroom teacher for fifteen years, Jeff is currently Professor of English Education at Boise State University. He works in local schools as part of a Virtual Professional Development Site Network sponsored by the Boise State Writing Project, and regularly teaches middle and high school students. He is the founding director of the Maine Writing Project and the Boise State Writing Project. He has authored or coauthored numerous books and articles about literacy teaching and learning. In addition to the Russell award, his *"You Gotta BE the Book"* won the NCTE Promising Research Award. Jeff has worked on numerous materials and software programs for students including Scholastic's e21 and ReadAbout, and has edited a series of 100 books for reluctant readers entitled *The Ten*. Jeff enjoys speaking, presenting, working

with students and schools. He is currently researching how students read and engage with non-traditional texts like video game narratives, manga, horror, fantasy, etc. as well as the effects of inquiry teaching on teachers, students, and learning. Jeff grew up on a small strawberry farm in Northeastern Ohio. He loved the Hardy Boys as a boy, and has continued to love reading ever since, progressing through Hermann Hesse, John Steinbeck, and James Baldwin as literary mentors. In high school he was named a Harrier All-American for cross-country and track. He was then a two-time Small College All-American in Cross-country. He has competed Internationally in cross country, track, and nordic skiing. He now enjoys marathon nordic skiing and whitewater kayaking.

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