

Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, eds: *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*. Wayne State UP, 2005

By Kyle Frackman, University of Massachusetts, USA

1 In *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth* (2005), Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward have collected articles that make an important contribution to inquiries into cinematic depictions of boys in the twentieth century. The volume's lucidly written introduction begins with the editors' wondering what exactly is connoted by the word "boy" beyond the definition of "males who have not yet reached adulthood" (1). Noting that publications in the field of gender studies have more often (reasonably) focused on girls and women, Pomerance and Gateward write that

a truly progressive agenda, which is implied in some way or made explicit in most studies of gender and cinema, surely requires attention to boys-not only in terms of the pathways by which they come into adult male agency, the transformations by which their vulnerabilities become empowerments, or the way gender role expectations restrict, reshape, and corrupt masculinities but also in terms of how boys' power affects girls. (1)

Maintaining that masculine power and its exercise often go unobserved and hence uninterrogated, the book's editors describe the need for critical examination of "screen images of boyhood for clues about the wider social world, its gendered social structure, and the process of building masculinity in the modern world" (2).

2 The editors expose lingering tropes of helplessness or hopelessness underlying an intricate façade of displayed "masculine prowess" within film's contemporary construction of male gender(s) (3). In late capitalism, they note, "adolescent boyhood is extended, in a kind of unending consumer dream state, with a vast population of physically mature males being denied the full responsibilities of adult citizenship in order that their activities might be made the more predictable, the more controllable, and the more exploitable" (3). Furthermore, "it becomes increasingly difficult to find the line where boyhood actually ends" (3). "Boys" and "boyish" characters like those in *WarGames* (1983), *The Lost Boys* (1987), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Toy Soldiers* (1991), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000), and the *Harry Potter* films are both located in development of cinematic male figures over the course of film history and examined as dynamic archetypes that have special relevance in today's culture. We live in a culture in which youth is revered. In particular, the "boy" has become an increasingly popular figure in film, though the editors also observe that the "cinematic boy" has long held the attention of film audiences.

3 In multiple cinematic references in the introduction, Pomerance and Gateward demonstrate the usefulness of the "boy" category to cinema studies. Over five pages, they list the appearances of relevant "boy" characters in films stretching from the silent era to 2003. The editors' goal is clear: one can see that filmgoers have been captivated by the "boy" and "boyish" characters since the beginning of film history. Given this longstanding pull toward such characters and thematic material, Pomerance and Gateward are right to add to the relatively small amount of scholarship on "boyhood" and "cinematic boyhood." Their contribution comes in the form of a volume that treats "the intersections of boys and class, boys and race, boys and gender identity, [and] boys and social power" (9).

4 Following the introduction, the book is divided into three parts: "Archetypes and Façades," "Bonds and Beatifications," and "Struggles and Redefinitions." The first and second sections contain seven essays each; the third and final section contains six essays. In "Archetypes and Façades," the contributions examine "well-recognized, historically central typifications of boyhood" in a culturally critical context (9). An example is the "southern boy," a character that evokes recollections of a particular American past, reminiscence, and coming of age. Mary B. O'Shea examines this archetype in her contribution, "Crazy from the Heat: Southern Boys and Coming of Age." O'Shea's article focuses on the "southern boy" and his status as a vehicle for or impetus to a reactionary nostalgia for an imagined past that is patriarchal and less than accurate. The "Huck Finn figure," as O'Shea labels him, moves about in the American landscape of memory as he both partly "innocent" like "our forefathers" and an antiauthoritarian "trickster" (83, 85).

5 The book's second section, "Bonds and Beatifications," is devoted to those very important interpersonal relationships that play key roles in boys' self-definition and identity construction and in the ways in which boys express themselves. This part contains John Troyer's and Chani Marchiselli's essay, "Slack, Slacker, Slackest: Homosocial Bonding Practices in Contemporary Dude Cinema," which, among the other contributions, makes evident the entire volume's relevance to contemporary culture. As the editors have done in their introduction, Troyer and Marchiselli scrutinize a genre of film that exemplifies many of masculinity's mystifying and coded elements, like homosocial and homoerotic bonding practices that are paradoxically contradictory, while making evident some of the characteristics of present-day, gendered culture, like "parental rejection, the formation of sexual identities, and the recuperation of lost memory" (264-265). Indeed, the authors argue that the "dude" stands allegorically for much of "America's adolescence," caught between

boyhood and adulthood and attempting to fill an absence with homosocial bonding and a reclamation of "masculinist, Western history and its projected futures" (264, 275, 276).

6 In "Struggles and Redefinitions," the book's third and final section, six essays analyze "boys who attempt to resist the constraining definitions of young manhood imposed by social structures" (15). One intriguing contribution from this section is Steven Jay Schneider's essay, "*Jerkus Interruptus: The Terrible Trials of Masturbating Boys in Recent Hollywood Cinema.*" Schneider investigates the cinematic trope of interrupted masturbation scenes in such films as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *American Pie* (1999), and *Spider-Man* (2002). Described as "case studies in pop cinematic sadism," the masturbation scenes play on societal anxieties about self-pleasure (378, 382). The scenes that Schneider describes activate the cultural shaming of this activity through their humiliation of the masturbating subject, while simultaneously speaking to a need to demystify or make more public this ubiquitous behavior.

7 The book ends with a twenty-page combined index of film titles, persons (including actors, directors, and scholars), and concepts. The index seems to be sufficient, though it is surprising that "gender" and "masculinity" have only two page references each and that "gay" and "queer" do not appear at all. Each article including the introduction ends with a list of works cited. Though the anthology is intended mainly as a contribution to scholars' methodological knowledge within cinema studies, the volume's utility in courses could have been enhanced by either a combined bibliography at the back of the book or an additional section of recommended works.

8 *Where the Boys Are* is a well-edited volume that addresses a wide variety of topics and films within the area of the book's declared subject. The editors' introduction especially could be useful as an explanatory and introductory text in a course in which the students encounter and practice the critical handling of gender(s) in cultural productions, though several of the films listed here would be unfamiliar to present-day college-age students. Pomerance and Gateward explain their goals for the anthology as well as the need for such a volume. Reading through this collection, one confronts the following image at the beginning:

The boy we meet in cultural narrative is typically brash and dirty, covered with oil and grease or burrs or straw, freckled and wide-eyed, innocent in a way the most innocent girl can never be, physically agile, fond of the outdoors or at least comfortable there, a follower of snakes, snails, and puppy-dog tails. (2)

This image of the "boy" is demonstrated to be rather complicated over the course of the anthology's following twenty articles. *Where the Boys Are* makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on the development of male gender in cultural productions. As a companion to

the same editors' other volume, *Sugar, Spice, and Everything Nice: Cinemas of Girlhood* (Wayne State University Press, 2002), this book fills a gap with unique scholarship that is recommended for those who are interested in or who utilize cultural theory in their research and teaching.