

**“I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?”: Reflections on learning about boyhood through *Stand By Me*.**

**Victoria Cann**

### **Abstract**

This piece offers reflections on the 1986 movie *Stand By Me*, drawing on some of the main themes and contextualising them in relation to my own childhood as a girl growing up in the 1990s. I reflect on how in my rewatch of the movie I was struck by how the class positions of the boys echoed my own experiences of transition and liberation through education. I also reflect on the significance of seeing boys cry and be scared – feelings that the boys at my school were policed out of performing in public.

**Keywords:** boyhood, masculinity, representation, film, working-class

*Stand By Me* (Rob Reiner, 1986) is a story about friendship, of growing up, grief, and bravery, but perhaps most importantly it is a story of boyhood. Released in the year of my birth, 1986, it was also a story that was ever-present in the household in which I grew up, and popular catchphrases from the film like “I don't shut up. I grow up”. And “when I look at you, I throw up” and “that’s so funny I forgot to laugh” were often uttered as sardonic responses by one of my two sisters, or myself. In this reflective piece I work through my own responses to the film *Stand By Me*, and how, as a cisgender girl growing up in an all-female household, the movie offered an important site for the representation of boyhood. In fact, in reengaging with the text now as an adult, I am struck by how significant this representation must have been for me as a child – the movie was perhaps the first time I had really seen the fullness of boys’ emotional capacity – boys were just like us, they cried, they laughed, they had soft and sharp edges, they too choreographed dance routines and sang songs.

For those unfamiliar with the text, *Stand By Me* is a movie adapted from the 1982 novella *The Body* by Stephen King. Released in 1986 but set in 1959, the story follows four 12-year-old white boys (Vern, Chris, Gordie, and Teddy) from the small town of ‘Castle Rock’, Oregon, USA. As is common with coming-of-age movies (see Cann and Horton, 2015), this is their last summer before they transition to different schools; the middle-class Gordie is expected to attend an academic institution, while the working-class Vern, Chris and Teddy are expected to take a ‘shop’ course in an institution more vocationally oriented. Despite being removed

from these boys in a number of ways: gender, geography, time-period, and family circumstance, I still related a lot with them. I was poor, lived close to the countryside and often went out to play with friends, I had experienced familial loss, liked to tell stories and go on adventures, I too had anxieties for the future. And so, what I want to do in this piece is reflect on the story that is told in *Stand By Me*, and offer a sense of how it brought with it a fuller understanding of what it meant (and means) to be a boy – especially for me as a girl growing up in the 1990s.

When coming to write this piece I rewatched *Stand By Me*, and despite the old VHS being replaced by a streaming service, the trailers and adverts removed, the crackled bits of the tape where we paused and rewound the film replaced with a neat and tidy copy provided by this digital age, I felt an instant hit of nostalgia. This little town in Oregon thousands of miles away from where I grew up, set in a time of which I had no experience, was still so familiar to me I could feel it in my chest. Sari Knopp Biklen (2006: 721) writes that “adults have memories of many events, feelings, and interactions that we bring with us and re-work when we research youth” and so in my writing here I must be understood as an adult, looking back. For example, there is a sadness in the film that I know I identified at the time of being a girl – but only now I can see with the emotional maturity of being an adult that having lost my father as a pre-teen allowed me to relate to the pain that Gordie was feeling at the loss of his brother. As an adult, I can now appreciate that while I was not used to boys crying in the films I watched, in the case of Gordie’s pain it was something that I could find completely believable. I also related to the hopelessness that Chris felt at his future already being pre-determined for him, and I don’t think it was until I rewatched the movie for this piece that I really appreciated the feeling that education could liberate oneself from a small-town. A conversation between Chris and Gordie at the campfire exemplifies such possibilities:

Chris: Junior High. You know what that means. By next June we'll all be split up.

Gordie: What're you talking about, why would that happen?

Chris: It's not gonna be like grammar-school, that's why. You're taking your college-courses and me Teddy and Vern will all be in the shop-courses with all the rest of the retards making ashtrays and birdhouses. You gonna meet a lot of new guys. Smart guys.

Gordie: Meet a lot of pussies is what you mean.

Chris: No man. Don't say that, don't even think that.

Gordie: Not going to meet a lot of pussies, forget it!

Chris: Well then you're an asshole!

Gordie: What's asshole about wanting to be with your friends?

Chris: It's asshole if your friends drag you down! You hang with us, you'll be just another wise guy with shit for brains.

There's a lot going on in this excerpt in terms of masculinity – already one can identify notions of educational success as “compliant and feminine” (see Ward, 2014: 709) in some way incompatible with authentic masculinity (as explored by Reay, 2002). In addition to this, misogynistic and ableist language provides a discursive framework for policing the parameters of acceptable masculine behavior. However, the film offers hope and possibility for both its young protagonists as well as its young viewers. It's not just that in the movie we see that Gordie has achieved much as a writer (this was never really in question as the film opens with him as the narrator) but also that Chris made it out of the small town as well, transcending his small-town expectations and becoming a lawyer.

Girls don't feature in the film at all, and on my rewatch I noticed they were mentioned in two contexts – in the first instance girls are used as an insult to tease each other, and in the second instance, girls are positioned as a distraction from the purity and potential of young masculinity. In one scene the voiceover of Gordie reflects “We talked into the night. The kind of talk that seemed important until you discover girls”. As such the film fails to pass The Bechdel Test<sup>1</sup> but is nevertheless remains a significant site for the representation of gender. Girl-led stories were not common in my childhood – besides from the Disney princess films that I watched, the vast majority of films I loved when I was a child foregrounded boy protagonists. But what was offered to me in *Stand By Me* was a picture of boyhood that was complicated, that was soft in places, and contradictory and messy, what I saw in *Stand By Me* was a group of boys who had all of the same sorts of fears and worries that I had. Everything about boys and masculinity was ‘alien’ to me as a child and yet through *Stand By Me* I was able to go on an adventure with them, and realise they weren't so different from me after all. The freedom of their adventure might have been afforded them because of their gender and their race – it would be a long time before we would see an all-girl cast in this sort of movie (the closest perhaps being 1995's *Now and Then* and even that centred boys within the girls'

story) and only now are representations opening up to folks of color, but this film nevertheless provided me with a depiction of boys that allowed me to see the boys in my own life a little more differently.

**Dedication:** *This piece is dedicated to Dionne, my big sister and the person who brought this film into my life.*

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Dr Victoria Cann (she/her) is an Associate Professor of Humanities in the Interdisciplinary Institute for the Humanities at the University of East Anglia, UK where she is Course Director of the MA Gender Studies programme. Her research explores contemporary youth gender identities and politics in the UK and is author of the book *Girls Like This: Boys Like That* released by Bloomsbury in 2018. Further work can be found in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, *Girlhood Studies* as well as numerous edited collections.

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### **Filmography**

Reiner, Rob, dir. 1986. *Stand By Me*. USA.

Glatter, Lesli Linka, dir. 1995. *Now and Then*. USA.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bechdel Test is a tongue-in-cheek test developed by Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008) that can be used on any movie to assess the presence of women. The test has the following three rules: 1. The text has to have at least two women in it (these two women must have names) 2. These women with names must talk to each other 3. And what they talk about must be something besides a man.