The novel brings out some of the real problems teen boys face including pressure from parents, unrealistic expectations, and fear of failure. All these pressures are linked together by one universal theme—"boys must be boys." To prepare to write the novel Foon interviewed over a hundred teens in public and alternate schools, group homes, and drop-in centers. Foon was inspired by the book The Rites of Man by Rosalind Miles and the quote "Manhood training by its very nature creates the climate in which violence can flourish, and a society in which, despite its pious protestations, a level of violence is always tolerated, indeed expected" (235). Foon explains further:

the pressure 'to be a man' is universal. Boys put it on boys, fathers put it on sons, men place it on men: repress feelings, be overly competitive, aggressive, invulnerable. This imperative was a common denominator linking all the males I interviewed.

The novel takes a frank look at these unrealistic expectations and the endings for each of the four boys stays with the reader long after the story ends.

Friday Night Lights by H.G Bissinger, Bump & Run by Mike Lupica, and Crackback by John Coy are just a few of the many great football books out there. The most recent in this genre is Robert Lipsyte's shockingly realistic portrayal of high school football in Raiders Hi. This novel focuses on Matt, co-captain of his high school football team and all-around good guy. The novel depicts the all-consuming impact football has on a town and the unique life teen football players have. Matt "gets the girls," is in the "in" crowd and is well on his way to an all-expenses-paid ticket to college. Yet, when a team hazing goes extremely wrong, Matt has to question his perfect life. Lipsyte is critical of what football has become in high school.

Lipsyte's novel takes a cold, hard look not only at sports hazings, but steroid abuse, peer pressure, and parental expectations. The reality of what we live in a world where winning has become everything, and when that pressure is put on boys at a young age, the results are often catastrophic.
In Sebastian, Dorfman has created an amazingly complex, interesting and insightful protagonist. Dorfman explains: "The nearly crippling process of stepping into bigger shoes is something I believe most teenagers do have in common with Sebastian. The result, I suppose, is a complex teenage character doing all he can to deny his own inner network of complications and contradictions, as well those of the world. The nearly crippling process of stepping into bigger shoes is something I believe most teenagers do have in common with Sebastian."

The book also takes a look at some of the outliers of the school; students who don't fit in by choice or by status. These students bond together and form a club called GOD (Grace Order of Dadaists) whose goal is simply non-participation in anything that promotes school spirit. Ironically, by creating a club they found a social network that worked for them.

Ripslinger explains why he wrote this novel, "[t]eaching English in public schools for thirty-five years and saw many students like Stony, a kid with tons of wasted potential. The sight always made me sad. I wanted to write a story about such a kid, but this kid finally sees the light." To make the story believable, Ripslinger builds to a climactic ending with Wendell transforming from boy to man. Ripslinger explains why he wrote this novel, "I taught English in public schools for thirty-five years and saw many students like Stony, a kid with tons of wasted potential. The sight always made me sad. I wanted to write a story about such a kid, but this kid finally sees the light."
This ultimate coming-of-age novel will appeal to all teens on the doorsteps of adulthood as it honestly portrays the differences between being a man and being a boy. What also makes this novel stand out is the articulate and entertaining dialogue between characters. The conversations reveal insight into the characters that make them real, sincere and complicated. This characterization makes the reader like characters they would usually dislike and thus enhances the end message Dorfman presents. That message, like all great novels, is up to the reader to decipher as Dorfman himself suggests. “I’ve never given message much thought when it comes to writing. Whatever light those lessons may shine on readers is beyond my control.”

Of all the teen novels I have ever read, the most intriguing premise comes from the new novel 13 Reasons Why. Jay Asher’s debut novel is a dark journey though the life of Hannah Baker, who committed suicide two weeks before. Before she died, she made seven cassette tapes, each side with a story; a story that in some way affected her and led to her fatal decision. The tapes are passed along to each individual that is somehow responsible for Hannah’s fatal decision. The novel focuses on the day and night Clay Jensen receives the tapes. Clay is Mr. Nice Guy and does not know how he fits into the big picture. Clay narrates the complex story as he listens to the shocking tapes and slowly learns why Hannah decided to end her life; Hannah also narrates the novel as we hear her thoughts, pains and insecurities as Clay listens to the tapes. The devastation of Hannah’s life is heard through each story and the tone is set early as Hannah gives the listener two rules: “Rule number one: You listen. Number Two: You pass it on. Hopefully, neither one will be easy to you” (Asher 8). The double narration is very effective as Asher explains, “I wanted characters who were two sides of the same coin, Hannah has been torn down by a list of people. But, in the end, she alone is responsible for her decisions . . . and she knows that” (Asher 2007). By the end of the last tape, Clay (and all the others who hear the tape) will never be the same. Clay will see Hannah, his peers, and his life in a whole new light. The novel stays with the reader long after it is done as the reader realizes that one’s actions all have consequences whether we notice it or not. Asher explains, “in the book, Hannah states that no one knows exactly what’s going on in another person’s life. Yet we like to believe that our ‘little’ comments or actions won’t have a ripple effect. So, if anything, I hope it makes people take notice of those little things we do that tear other people down. And maybe . . . hopefully . . . we’ll start to notice before we do those things” (Asher 2007).

In the end, Asher has written one of the most provocative debuts in teen literature, a novel that should be required reading for all teens.

Staying with the dark theme comes one of the most compelling reads ever. Debut novelist C.G. Watson has created a shocking and powerful story about the pressures of high school and, like Asher’s 13 Reasons Why, how the smallest of things can have devastating results. Watson’s Quad chronicles the lives of sixteen teenagers stuck in a quad as a school shooter lurks outside. The story masterfully shifts from past to present as the story slowly unravels how every character is a suspect and every character has motive. Creating characters from a variety of high school cliques, Watson intriguingly blends together jocks, preps, techies, drama queens, freaks, and choir boys in a realistic depiction of the ups and downs of high school life. Watson, a teacher, explains the reason she wrote this riveting novel:

What motivated me to write this book was a situation that occurred one of my classes in one of my first years, as I watched the way my own students psychologically disintegrated one of their classmates. My attempts at intervention fell completely flat; they just didn’t get it. After one particularly brutal day, I remember driving home and thinking, ‘So, what happens to a kid who gets pushed to his limits? And what if the other kids don’t see where the limits are—what happens if they push one step past that? It was from that question that the story of Quad evolved. (Watson 2008)

In Quad, C.G. Watson has written a future classic that is maybe best concluded by the words of a boy who thanked her by saying that Quad was “the tightest book ever.”

For boys who are reading substantially below grade level, there are a number of Orca Books that are of high interest and low reading level. The books generally have limited character development, but interesting and fast paced plots. Most of the books discussed are for boys who are grade-level equivalent readers. For boys who are reading substantially below grade level, there are a number of Orca Books that are of high interest and low reading level. The books generally have limited character development, but interesting and fast paced plots. Although there are quite a few available, I have found a few to be especially appealing to young readers. Juice, by Eric Walters, looks at the pressure to do “whatever it takes” to win; L.D., by Vicki Grant, is an intriguing look at the downward spiral of a boy unwilling to adapt to his current life; Yellow Line, by Sylvia Olsen, is a racial commentary on what happens when a white girl falls for an Indian boy; Bang, by Norah McClintock, is a cautionary tale about what happens when two boys go too far in their attempt to be cool; Blazer Drive, by Sigmund BREWER, is a layered mystery story wrapped up in a hockey novel; and lastly, Thunderbowl, by Lesley Choyce, tells the story of a boy who plays a mean guitar and his priorities change as he gets his first success, but at what cost? At a reading level of grade 4 or lower and generally being just over a hundred pages in length, these books will have students feeling a lot less intimidated than if they were given The Grapes of Wrath. I cannot finish without mentioning Walter Dison Myers’ courtroom novel MIDNIGHT. Sixteen-year-old Steve is in jail and on trial for murder. The story is told in diary entries and in movie script form as Steve decides to make his life story into a movie. The unique style makes the novel a smooth and simple read that keeps the reader on the edge of his seat to the very last page.

The novel has many themes including bullying, peer pressure and many more, yet Watson explains her novel’s underlying theme and the reality of high school life in 2008:

Quaid is about bullying and high school relationships, yes, but it’s also about the unseen power of our words and actions on others. At the risk of waging Darwinian here, high school life in 2008 is about survival of the fittest. It’s about living every day on the offensive because if you don’t, you’re the next victim. What’s so sad is that, even though kids pretty much have to play along in order to survive, there isn’t one kid out there who doesn’t hate this game. The good news is, it truly doesn’t have to be that way. (Watson 2008)

There are a lot of other books that will fit well for reluctant readers, obviously. Laurie Halse Anderson’s first male protagonist novel Twisted, Janet Tashjian’s funny and satirical The Gospel According to Larry, Joyce Sweeney’s wrestling drama, Headspin; Alex Flinn’s vivid account of teen date abuse, Breathing Underwater; Will Itch’s coming of age story, Catch; Chris Crutcher’s portrayal of the ultimate friendship, Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes; Rob Thomas’ multi-narrated commentary on high school, Save Day; Michael Scott’s multi-layered science fiction-end of the world shocker, The Alchemist; Gordon Korman’s popularity novel, Jake, Reinvented; John Green’s boarding school drama, Looking for Alaska, and road journey comedy, An Abundance of Katherines, just to name a few.

Lastly, I started with Chris Crutcher and I will finish with him. Crutcher is one of the most talented novelists of this generation. The novel is a powerful story about senior Ben Wolf who learns just before school starts that he has leukemia and has less than a year to live. Instead of fighting the disease, he decides to live his final year as normally as possible and does not tell anyone. After one particularly brutal day, I remember driving home and thinking, ‘So, what happens to a kid who gets pushed to his limits? And what if the other kids don’t see where the limits are—what happens if they push one step past that? It was from that question that the story of Quad evolved. (Watson 2008)

In conclusion, this list is hardly conclusive, but it is a start. As a lifelong learner, I too am always learning, so if you have novels that you have read that are great for reluctant boy readers (or is just a good novel) please drop me a line; I would love to hear from you.

Dwayne Jeffery is an English and History teacher in Lloydminster, Saskatchewan, Canada. He is the writer of the one-act play The Puppet Master (currently under publication consideration) about the impact of goop in high school. Dwayne loves to read young adult novels, write plays and short fiction and spend time with his wife, Poppy, and their two children: Trinity and Ryder.

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Reaching reluctant readers – a downloadable magazine from Random House. Readkiddoread.com – author James Patterson's site with book reviews, many by kids. The truth about boys and reading – this Guardian article refers to UK studies indicating that boys 'typically read less thoroughly than girls'. What kids are reading and how they grow – a US 2017 report giving a clear picture of the fiction and nonfiction students seek out for reading practice. Includes the webinar, Reaching the reluctant reader. Ideas for getting boys into reading – a chapter from Boys and books by author and former teacher librarian James Moloney. Me read? And how? (pdf, 5.3MB) – Ontario Ministry of Education report on how to improve boys' literacy skills. The must-read “Connecting with Reluctant Readers” by Patrick Jones, Maureen L. Hartman and Patricia Taylor states that 43% of boys don't read or only read what they have to, while 57% enjoy reading. Such numbers disprove the stereotype that boys won't read. The fact is boys will read if we put the right book in their hands. They need books with male protagonists, honesty and, most of all, books with characters and stories they can relate to. Teen author Laurie Halse Anderson says, “Teens are not 'reluctant' readers, they are 'discriminating' readers.” Often, a reluctant reader isn't a child who simply doesn't like to read – it's a child who hasn't discovered books they love yet. If getting your child to start (let alone finish) a new book feels like a daily struggle, try a few titles from this list. It includes exciting books that kids in grades 3 to 5 love, ranging from relatable chapter books to action-packed graphic novels. Once they're ready, check out these book lists and recommendations for kids ages 8 to 10. Shop books for reluctant readers in grades 3 to 5 below now! You can find all books and activities at The Scholastic Store. Want even more book and reading ideas?