

When I first started writing books for children I took a workshop with the acclaimed author Jane Yolen. During a manuscript review she said, “There are not enough picture books that address the genuine needs and interests of boys.” I am reminded of this each time I go to a library or bookstore, and I try to be conscious of it as I choose topics for my own work. It is commonly accepted that there are large numbers of youngsters, particularly boys, who are struggling with reading and writing. I am convinced that one of the ways to connect with these students is to address their genuine interests, and one of these interests is sports.

When I was a boy I played some sport almost every day. Football, basketball, and baseball were favorites, but if there was a ball involved I was interested, and I was competitive enough to want to do it well. I can’t begin to estimate the hundreds, thousands, millions of hours I spent throwing, chasing, or catching one ball or another. Sports wasn’t a mere hobby or pastime, it was an intrinsic part of who I was. Consequently, when I went to the library I liked to read about sports. But back then, as now, the variety and quality of books about sports was not as great as it was with other subjects. There was a gap between my interests and the books I was able to find, and I think this was one of the reasons I began to read less and was less excited about writing.

I remember this when I go into schools today to work as a writing teacher. Inevitably, there are some students who think they are not interested in reading and writing. For many of these students, sports can be a bridge between literacy and their personal experiences. Frequently these students can tell animated stories about the game they recently played. I tell them that writing is simply a means to take that story and put it down on paper. I ask them to tell the story of one particular game in their favorite sport. I encourage them to include the details, to write as quickly as they can, and to not worry about spelling. Often students are as surprised as their teachers with how much they can write within this simple framework. Once they have a first draft, they can then add sensory details, develop similes and metaphors, and work on revision with the rest of the class.

Sports can also serve as a metaphor for some kids to better understand reading and writing. Just as in sports, it’s necessary to understand fundamentals of the game. It’s necessary to practice over and over. It’s necessary to have an understanding of the rules of the game and also to know that there are occasions when it’s possible to soar beyond those rules to create one’s *own* unique statement.

What are some reasons for the lack of quality books for children about sports? One reason, I think, is the separation that occurs frequently between writing and sports. Most people who play sports don’t write stories about it and the stories that are written

by people who haven't played often don't ring true. To have more books that reflect the genuine interests of boys, I think we need to have more men write stories based on their *own* boyhoods. In gatherings of children's book writers, there is only a small percentage of men. This disparity has an effect on what gets written, what gets sent to editors, and what gets published.

Another reason for the lack of quality books about sports is the historical lack of opportunity for women to participate in competitive athletics. It is only within the last generation that girls have had access to a wide range of sports and have had role models of women as professional athletes. Consequently, girls now have a different relationship to sports and the larger culture than their mothers did. As these girls become adults and write books, we will see more stories reflecting their experiences.

Most of today's children's book editors did not have the same opportunity to play sports that exists now. When I was working on *STRONG TO THE HOOP*, a picture book about basketball, one editor told me that she had no interest in stories about sports. I appreciated her honesty and assumed it was a reflection of what opportunities she had growing up.

There is also a time lag about which sports stories are being written. When I was a boy, baseball was the first sport I learned and was the most popular. That is not the case in many parts of the country today. Basketball, football and soccer have become more popular. That popularity, however, is not yet reflected in children's picture books. There are still more books about baseball than other sports, even though many of today's youngsters are no longer listing baseball as their favorite sport.

If children don't find books that reflect their interests, it has an effect on their enthusiasm for reading and writing. For some boys, sports can be a means to increase their interest in books and writing. There are kids who have made such a separation between the sports they love and the reading they hate that they don't make any connection between the two. When presented with an interesting book about their sport, they can become so absorbed that they forget they are reading.

This reflects, I think, their basic sense of themselves. It's difficult to overestimate how large a part sports can be of some boys' self definition. If we acknowledge this, it provides a means to address their genuine interests. It provides a way to build bridges to the world of books and writing. It also provides a way for these youngsters to celebrate what they are passionate about in their reading and writing and to feel a sense of connection with others.

At a recent assembly of fourth and fifth graders, I asked for volunteers to read the parts of basketball players in *STRONG TO THE HOOP*. Students eagerly raised their

hands and I picked six students. One of these was a boy who asked me about a couple of words before the reading. He read his part in a strong voice, and at the end everybody in the audience cheered.

Later his teacher told me that although he's a big basketball fan, she couldn't believe he volunteered to read in front of a crowd. "He doesn't like to read," she said. When he finished and was accepting the applause with a smile, she said it brought tears to her eyes. For this boy, basketball was a strong enough draw to encourage him to try something new with reading. There are lots of boys like him, providing books that address their genuine interests can help open the world of books to them in new and surprising ways.