Boys of Unfortunate Circumstances
Problematic Masculinity in *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser

Anton Sjödahl
Abstract
This essay argues that *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser presents a story of men protecting their masculinity. In order to analyze the novel by Strasser contemporary documentation of the real life events have been used to examine if masculinity is to blame for the protagonists’ actions in the novel. In conclusion the men hide their weaknesses in the novel, creating a façade that when broken results in massive amounts of violence in order to protect their masculinity. Also the essay includes a didactic part which discusses how the novel *Give a Boy a Gun* may be used in the classroom.
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Introduction

*Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser was chosen due to its story about two boys and how they together plan and carry out a school shooting. In both fiction and in the real events that have occurred over the past twenty years a crisis of masculinity has been a major factor behind the school shootings (Kellner 15). The protagonists feel robbed of their manhood and the school shootings serve as their last stand against a society that expects them to act “like men”. In the novel *Give a Boy a Gun* the author Todd Strasser tells a story about two young boys and how they together plan and execute a school shooting. The main purpose behind the shooting is revenge towards the people who have made their lives a living hell. Although the story is fictional the events in the book are very similar to the events that took place at Columbine High School in Littleton Colorado in 1999 where Erik Harris aged seventeen and Dylan Klebold aged eighteen killed twelve students and one teacher and in the end took their own lives. The tragedy at Columbine High School left fifteen people dead and twenty three injured. The so called “epidemic” of school shootings in the late 1990s led to a series of investigations into shootings at schools in small towns and rural communities, places which had hitherto been assumed to be immune from that kind of violence. The literary text and the secondary sources are from the same time period, in this case the late 1990s and the early twenty first century. The texts all originate from this time period due to the “epidemic” of school shootings that occurred during the years 1996-2001.

Previous research in the subject mainly focuses on why these school shootings happen in the first place, the social and cultural aspects which set these young kids on a road to carnage. One of the most influential investigations was led by Professor Katherine S. Newman, the author of *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. This book is one of many investigations that followed the Columbine tragedy, which led to a provision to the “Missing, Runaway, and Exploited Children’s Act” which now requires that the United States
Department of Education study rampage shootings in schools. The question that this book set out to explain is why such tragedies were occurring in American communities that appeared to be safe. The book is based on 163 interviews with people in Heath and Westside along with neighboring communities, including families of the victims, students that were present during the shooting and also students who were not, teachers, administrators, lawyers, officials of the court, psychologists, newspaper and television reporters, and friends, family members, and fellow congregation members of the shooters.

Another author who has added to the discussion is Douglas Kellner whose book *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Virginia Tech Massacre* examines acts of societal violence and argues that they are symptoms of a crisis of masculinity and male rage in the American culture. He discusses this crisis in combination with the “out of control” gun culture and how the media portray violent masculinity and make celebrities out of murderers. The impact of masculinity is also highlighted in Stephanie Urso Spina’s book *Smoke and Mirrors: The Hidden Context of Violence in Schools and Society*. In this essay the chapter “Masculinity Matters: The Omission of Gender from High Profile School Violence Cases” from Urso Spina’s book will be used to expand and understand the complex construction of masculinity which is present in the novel by Todd Strasser. In *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children’s Literature and Film* John Stephens addresses the concern of how masculinity is reflected in these media, explaining how male identity is presented to young audiences through text and film and how difficult it can be for young adults to understand the great variety of masculine identities when the media present a very narrow image.

The aim of this essay is to use Kellner’s idea of a “crisis of masculinity” together with contemporary documentation of school shootings in order to investigate how masculinity is represented in the fictional novel *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser which
Anton Sjödahl

The term “crisis of masculinity” refers to the idea that there is a dominant societal connection between masculinity and being a tough guy, and that this works as a mask or facade covering the fact that men and boys are also vulnerable. These ideas about masculinity will be applied to the novel. Katherine S. Newman’s theory of “necessary but not sufficient conditions” will also be used to examine to what extent ideas of masculinity are to blame for the events that take place in the novel. Further, the ideology of “boys will be boys” taken from Urso Spina’s book will be used in order to see if the behaviors of the men in the novel are excused because of the fact that they are men. The goal is to investigate how ideas of masculinity and “the crisis of masculinity” affect the protagonists of the novel. This will be done by applying contemporary documentation consisting of the theories that emerged after the tragedy at Columbine to the novel by Strasser. Also theories about masculinity and the didactic use of the novel by Strasser will be applied.

The inspiration to the parallel reading of literary and non-literary text from the same time period, putting the novel within the framework of the ideas and assumptions in the era of when it was written came from the book Practicing New Historicism. The book is written by Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, where the latter is considered to be the founder of this literary theory. The authors argue that by reading contemporary literature parallel to a fictional novel, gives you the elements of lived experience that the author has put into his work (30). Since the novel by Strasser is written one year after the tragedy at Columbine, one may argue that society’s values and attitudes is imbedded within this fictional work and will in this essay be put in contrast to the theories that emerged after the shootings in the 1990s.

Furthermore, in order to bring the discussion into the English classroom, constructions of masculinity will be examined and put in the context of the society the
students live in today by using examples from the novel. The question will be raised if the actions of the novel’s protagonists may be seen as a product of society itself.

In the didactic discussion of this essay the aim is to investigate how the book *Give a Boy a Gun* may be used in the English teaching classroom and how it may help the students in receiving a wider view of masculinity with the help of literature. C. J van Dyk’s article “Exemplary Teaching: Some Possibilities for Renovating and Stimulating Didactic Practice” presents a way of teaching literature without the students having experiences in the subject or of the text being discussed. Van Dyk argues that it is possible for students to achieve this understanding when they are given clear examples from the text being examined such as specific passages or quotations. In this essay the focus is on how important masculinity is and how this is portrayed in the novel. Since one may assume that the students have little or no direct knowledge of the subject concerning masculinity in school shootings this approach was chosen due to its ability to work in areas where students have little or no previous knowledge. By giving students clear examples from the literary work being examined, it is possible to work with questions concerning subjects where the students have limited knowledge and to discuss those in the class.
**Theories and ideas about boys and masculinity**

R. W Connell argues in the book *Masculinities* that there is no “true” definition of the term masculinity. Masculinity is not an isolated object which can be studied without being part of a larger structure. First you need to find the structure and then you can examine how masculinities function within this specific structure (Connell 67). Also masculinity cannot exist without in contrast to femininity. Cultures or structures need to treat women and men as “bearers” of polarized character types; otherwise it would be impossible to find a concept of masculinity (68). Defining masculinity as “what-men-empirically-are” or “what men ought to be” within the structure will be investigated (69). This normative definition of masculinity allows men to approach the “standards” to different degrees (70). In this essay the structure being examined is the school and the people who study or work there, in order to see how masculinity is constructed and what the norm at this specific place is.

In the book *Ways of Being Male* by John Stephens the author brings forward evidence of the “ultra-masculine” behavior in both picture and text books. The traditional heroic ideals still exist and are in many ways promoted by popular men’s movements (35). Although there are versions of masculinity in some books which are softer versions which takes form of a hybrid of masculine and feminine ideals, these versions always stand as the opposite of masculinity. Male characters which are vulnerable, exposed, and sensitive do exist, the problem is to form characters who are both masculine and at the same time not. Creating a conception of masculinity that is all things to all people is impossible (35).

The novel *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser presents how the characters interact and how masculinity is constructed: both through the boys’ actions but also in how the other characters of the novel see these two boys. The problematic and “popular” construction of masculinity in today’s society accepts aggression and cruel behavior from
boys. The fact that aggression and cruel behavior is accepted makes it difficult to catch the shooters before the actual shooting takes place, since it is only the act of killing which is explicitly labelled as wrong (Urso Spina 147).

The idea of a “crisis of masculinity” is a “phenomenon that is occurring” and in his book *Guys and Guns Amok*, Kellner discusses its causes and effects. According to Kellner the “dominant connection between masculinity and being a tough guy, assuming what Jackson Katz describes as a tough guise, a mask or façade of violence assertiveness, covering over vulnerabilities” is the first step to this crisis (15-16). “The crisis erupts in outbreaks of violence and societal murder, as men act out in rage, which takes extremely violent forms such as political assassinations, serial and mass murders, and school and workplace shootings.” (16). Kellner highlights the problematic construction of masculinity and puts the actual events that took place in Columbine in that context. The term “problematic masculinity” is connected to the fact that the people committing these crimes in most cases came from middle-class neighborhoods and were white males, places not usually connected with violence. The book also reflects over the media and how both newspapers and television make a “spectacle” of the events and how this media constructs the view that is served to the public. Kellner does this by analyzing what the media said about some of these events and he focuses on the fact that the perpetrators were white middle-class males, not black gang members, which is much more common when the media are referring to violent crimes concerning shootings (3, 131). There is a direct link between what is considered masculine and what is not, portrayed by the media which the public adopt and use as a reference when dealing with maleness. Society’s expectations lead to the fact that men are willing to become extreme in the ways that they show dominance, in order to hide “flaws” to protect their masculinity (155).
Urso Spina’s *Smoke and Mirrors* calls attention to the ideology of “boys will be boys”, which confirms the popular assumption that acting cruelly and aggressively is normal for boys. This perception makes it acceptable for a boy to use violence to some extent and to make threats towards others since this is constructed as part of growing up and becoming a man in today’s society according to Urso Spina. In this essay the “boys will be boys” ideology will be used in order to see if this construction fabricated by society accepting violence and threats in small quantities may be the reason why behavior which could be seen as warnings of what is to come are neglected and never leads to the capture before the shooting. The question will be raised if the ideology of “boys will be boys” is the force of society (parents, friends, teachers, counselors and psychologists) that excuses behavior which is clear warning signals. As I will attempt to show in my discussion of the novel, this ideology protects both the “jocks” who torment and the boys – their victims - who later on become the shooters (147).

Katherine S. Newman also highlights masculinity in school shootings in *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. She provides five factors, “the necessary but not sufficient conditions” which need to be present in order for a rampage school shooting to take place, based on the research conducted on Heath and Westside. Several hypotheses have been used to explain why rampage school shootings take place including media violence, bullying, gun culture, family problems, mental illness, peer relations, demographic change, a culture of violence, and copycatting. The name of this theory “necessary but not sufficient conditions” was chosen due to the fact that most previous research in the subject contained elements of truth but Newman and her team wanted to understand which combinations of factors need to be present in order to produce this type of violence. Newman argues that the individual parts of the theory are not novel since variants of them have been proffered before but this approach is useful since it combines several elements of the perpetrators lives, take
away one of them and the shooting at Heath and Westside should not have happened (229).
Together with Douglas Kellner’s idea of a “crisis of masculinity” these factors will be applied
to the novel in order to determine whether the main characters Brendan and Gary and their
environment are indeed representative of at-risk boys who are let down by their local
communities. The five conditions are:

1. The shooter perceives himself as extremely marginal in the social world that
   matters to him.
2. School shooters suffer from psychological problems that magnify the impact
   of marginality.
3. The shooter believes that unleashing an attack will resolve his dilemmas.
4. The failure of surveillance systems, the lack of reports of threats that are
   issued in advance. (From Teachers, peers, counselors and other staff)
5. The availability of guns (Newman 229-30).

In *Ways of being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children’s Literature and Film* John Stephens addresses the concern that boys in today’s society are raised in a double
standard. Men should be sensitive, but still cool and tough. According to Stephens “the boy
code” is constructed as a set of assumptions regarding how boys should hide feelings of
empathy, aesthetic sensitivity and vulnerability and express only “manly” ones of rage and
anger (10). It is still a dominant trend in children’s literature that society is represented as
admiring the heroes, who are nearly always males bravely confronting danger, many times
living outside the law and committing acts of violence. Paradoxically, society at the same time
despises “the boy code” which involves emotional detachment since boys should be able to be
who they are, but preferably masculine according to Stephens (10). The common assumption
is that real men are not born, they are made and to prove this statement Stephens uses the old
phrase “I am going to make a man out of you” (10). Being able to be who you are, showing
emotions and being a nice person works as a contradiction since the media is showing a very different view, in several media masculinity is working as a force opposing law, manners and the social fabric in society (10-11). In a similar way Professor Ben Knights explores masculinity in his book *Masculinities in Text and Teaching*. He focuses on the simultaneous production of masculinities within the text, how masculinity is presented and portrayed but also on the importance of performance upon the stage of teaching and the pedagogical aspects that need to be taken into account when masculinity is discussed in the classroom (Knights 2).
Masculinity in Give a Boy a Gun

One of the things I used to like about writing books for young people was that it wasn’t necessary to deal with murder, adultery, and various other immoral or criminal activities that seem mandatory in adult novels these days. I find it sad and frightening that this is no longer the case. One of the things I dislike most about guns in our society is that, like violence and sex in the media, they rob children of what we used to think of as a childhood. The story you are about to read is a work of fiction. Nothing – and everything – about it is real. (Strasser 5)

The novel *Give a Boy a Gun* is the story about two boys and how they together take revenge on the school and students of Middletown where they have been bullied and harassed for several years. The two main characters of the novel are Brendan Lawlor and Gary Searle and the whole novel is narrated in the form of quotations from classmates, teachers and family members who knew them, as they are being interviewed after the events. Together these quotations give the reader an image of what led these two young, seemingly good hearted boys to turn violent but also how the person talking felt about the boy/boys.

Brendan did not move to Middletown, the town where the school shooting takes place, until the middle of the seventh grade. Both boys are described as good students with the only difference that Brendan is a bit more vocal than Gary in their early years before they met. The story begins with some information about the boys from that time. Gary’s elementary school teacher describes him as:

a very sweet little boy with slightly reddish brown hair and, big round eyes. He was polite and quiet and always did what he was told. I do recall that some of
the students teased him about his weight. But you know how kids are at that age.

(12)

This indicates that Gary is a target of bullying from an early age, with his weight in focus. The quote also excuses the bullying with the last sentence, as though being cruel is part of being a child. Boys doing cruel things, as well as boys being expected to be tough enough to take a bit of cruelty have often been considered normal and according to Urso Spina, accepting cruel behavior in boys is fundamental in the ideology of “boys will be boys” (146). The divorce of Gary’s parents is also highlighted since this seems to have affected him heavily. One of Gary’s friends explains how Gary never could get over the divorce and the fact that his father just left without any phone calls or child support. This is what later led to Gary’s mother taking him to a psychologist in order for him to open up and talk, but without any success. Gary’s mother says:

It was an ugly divorce. All that yelling and fighting. Arguing over money. Gary was caught in the middle, and sometimes I guess I used him to get what I thought I needed. What we both needed. It’s a terrible thing to put a child through, but I didn’t know what else to do. (13)

Newman argues that family structure is not one of the key variables in school shootings (244). However when analyzing the recent school shootings beginning from the 1990s, one hundred percent of the perpetrators could be linked to at least one of the following categories, “came from dysfunctional homes”, “were suicidal or depressed” or “suffered from major mental illness” (245). The quote from Gary’s mother clearly indicates that the relationship did not work out between her and her husband. The novel illustrates a picture of a quiet boy that after the divorce isolates himself even more than before. To what extent the absence of a father will make a difference in a child’s life is impossible to tell but one can be certain that the absence
of a male role-model, or the fact that the father was a destructive male role-model, does affect many children since they feel that they cannot relate to other children and their situations (Newman 245).

In the early years, before Brendan and Gary met in the seventh grade, Brendan seems to have been an “accepted” member of the class. There is nothing that indicates that Brendan should have been bullied or harassed in any way. The differences are that Brendan could be quite hard to handle since he could be very angry and sometimes refused to get out of bed and go to school. Unlike Gary, Brendan is not portrayed as the quiet guy by his former teacher:

Brendan was one of the more vocal boys in the class, but also a very good student. He always had his homework and projects in on time. He was very good at expressing himself on paper, although his grammar and spelling were atrocious, which is often the case with boys his age. He could be temperamental, but that’s also not unusual. (19)

In the novel one of Brendan’s friends remembers how angry Brendan could be, especially when he encountered something which he thought was not right. The example the friend uses in the novel is when they played football together; the friend of Brendan emphasizes the fact that Brendan always fought injustice and could go “ballistic”, acting like a madman in his quest for justice, if for example, the referee ignored something he thought was wrong (20). Another friend depicts him as a little bit weird, a person you could not really understand. Brendan “never seemed comfortable. He was always a little on edge, a little wary. It was like his brain couldn’t stop, even when we were just having a good time” (20).
In the first two weeks in Middletown Brendan was very quiet and just sat in the back of the classroom. Brendan and Gary did not really get to know each other until the middle of the eighth grade, but after that, they were together all the time. In the novel at the time that Brendan and Gary got to know each other in the eighth grade that’s when the harassment from the other students started to get more serious. One of the reasons for the increase of aggressive behavior from many students may be the fact that by the time of the eighth grade the coach from the high school (starts at year nine) visited the school football team’s practices and the players noticed that they were being watched and evaluated. Also one member of the team mentions that the fact that they were being watched made them feel important, more important than the rest of the students. Here, notions of masculinity play an important part. According to these notions, to be a man is to be physically dominant, competitive and powerful in the eyes of others. A man exerts control and never admits weakness, acts more and talks less according to Newman (144). The cultural projections which this derives from are found everywhere in today’s society such as film and literature. Stephens explains that in many cases society shape, change and manipulate boys to become what we want them to be. Literature is just one way of giving the boys an image of what we, the society is expecting from them, a quite narrow picture that show certain forms of manliness (10). Idolized versions of the male body such as the body of Superman is pushing towards a vision of manhood that is just as impossible to achieve for men as the body of a Barbie doll is for women. High School boys cannot claim the status of Superman so they claim the thing closest in approximation to it, in an area which they do have access, sports (144). The boys in the football team may be seen as the “blueprint” of the norm of masculinity at Middletown, since they are the ones who are privileged and have the freedom to harass other students without consequences (Connell 70). They are the supermen of Middletown.
Brendan and Gary have a different approach in the way that they deal with the harassment of the football players that takes place in school. Gary stays silent accepting the fact that he is a “loser”, never fighting back. Brendan on the other hand becomes known as the boy who will not step in line, not following the social hierarchy in school accepting the behavior of the players of the school football team. The fact that Brendan does not follow or accept the social hierarchy in the school is one of the early warning signs in the novel. Not accepting the hierarchy in school and the bullying that comes with it is crucial for Brendan. Peer relations and the position in the pecking order and other forms of social exclusion are recipes for marginalization and isolation concludes Newman, also it is the first of the five “the necessary but not sufficient conditions” (229). One of the other major concerns of the protagonists (except standing up against the harassment) in the novel is that the teachers do nothing in order to correct the bad behavior of specific students in the school, especially members of the football team. Sometimes “masculine” behavior is actually encouraged by some of the teachers by not interfering. One example of this masculinity promotion takes place at the gymnasium where the teacher let the bigger football players face the smaller “nerds”, always resulting in a painful and embarrassing moment for the “not” so masculine boys. This is just one example of many in the novel concerning violence directed at the protagonists while under the surveillance of a teacher, which also is a strong warning signal. Newman explains the importance of the teams in small communities and highlights several positive attributes: “Teams bring a great deal of positive spirit to their schools and communities, serving as a magnet for loyalty and an opportunity for intergenerational engagement in an institution most would agree is central to the health of any community” (284). Newman also highlights a number of possible negative aspects of giving high school students a celebrity status, one of which is the free access of harassing other students. She explains the fundamental problem with teachers and adults not reacting to such behavior, which actually can be seen as an encouragement. Furthermore, Newman argues that teachers
who fail to discipline flagrant behavior should be removed from a position of authority since this jeopardizes the safety of the students. It is the teacher’s job to create a social space where students can be different (284). At Middletown High School it seems like the harassment of “weaker” individuals was part of the everyday life and nothing to be considered special or awkward, as one of the students explains the situation in school:

Brendan and Gary got picked on. That’s a fact. We all did. Little guys; fat guys, skinny, gangly, zit-riddled guys like me. Anyone who wasn’t big and strong and on a team got it. You’d even see big guys on the football team push around some of the smaller players. Middletown High is big and crowded, and you’ve got a billion kids in the hall at once. Maybe if it’s an all-out, knock-down-drag-out fight, some teacher will notice and try to stop it. But if it’s just some big jerk shoving you into a locker, who’s gonna see? (37)

Physical bullying is one violent way that boys use in order to demonstrate their masculinity. Smaller boys which are physically ineffectual are singled out and targeted which makes it possible for the more powerful boys to show their superiority. In addition to the physical bullying, verbal abuse is common in order to degrade the victim’s masculinity, making the victim feel worse about himself. Newman continues with the fact that teachers and other adults have become more aware of the importance of cracking down on physical bullying but this has led to an increase in verbal teasing. Being labeled as “gay” is one of the most powerful stigmas for an adolescent boy according to Newman, boys’ reputation is immeasurable and the place on the social ladder becomes compromised even if a smidgeon sticks (144-45).

In the novel, the high school counselor specifically asked to have Brendan as one of her students. She had been told from a teacher that Brendan was having a hard time
and that he was in need of support. At the meeting with Brendan he told her that everything was fine and that he did not have any problems with other students. The counselor can see that something is wrong but she does not know what to do when he is not willing to accept any help (38). This may be seen as the failure of surveillance systems of the school which Newman is talking about as one of the crucial elements which needs to be present in order for a school shooting to take place. The unwillingness to get help is deeply imbedded in the masculine behavior that society has constructed, which expects that you should be able to handle everything by yourself (230). Furthermore the problem is that in many cases such as in the case in the novel, counselors have access to a lot of information regarding “problematic” students, but this important information gets filtered out since the counselors are not required by law to pass along what they know. The confidentiality is also important since no one would talk to them if they knew that the information would circulate (Newman 88).

The description of Middletown High School suggests that it is only the strongest who survive in the hallways and classrooms. There is a big difference in the way the teachers interact with the “popular” students; there are several examples in the novel regarding the difference in the treatment the students get from the teachers dependent on “the popularity” when it comes to disturbing the class during teaching. If one of the popular students disturbs the class, the teacher would just ask that student to be quiet, on the contrary, if it the student is not popular the teacher would stop the class and just stare at the person together with the whole class. The conclusion becomes that popular students gets a slap on the wrist and the unpopular kids face public humiliation (62). Thus, behavior that can be seen as masculine, such as showing your strength by force in the hallways of the school, in the gymnasium or at any other place in the school actually gets encouraged as long as you are popular (62).

The crisis of masculinity approach that Kellner highlights puts great emphasis on the fact that in order to deal with problems of mental health, school and societal violence,
society needs to reconstruct male identities through critique of masculine socialization and identities (154). According to Kellner today’s young men have to renounce these ultra-masculine ideas and the behaviors that come with it and create alternative notions of masculinity (155). Overcoming aggressive and violent “macho behavior” provides what he explains as:

a vision of manhood that does not depend on putting down others in order to lift itself up. When a man stands up for social justice, nonviolence, and basic human rights – for women as much as for men-he is acting in the best traditions of our civilization. That makes him not only a better man, but a better human being. (Kellner 155)

Kellner presents possible sources of violence in society, cultures where traditional masculinity reigns: poverty, masculinist military, sports and gun culture, ultra masculine behavior in the corporate and political world, high school bullying and fighting; general societal violence reproduced by the media and in the family and everyday life, and in prisons, which are schools for violence (155). The conclusion that Kellner draws is that in any of these cases, ultra-masculinity may explode and produce societal violence. The one thing that may end this is a new conception of what it is to” be a man” that include intelligence, independence, sensitivity, and the renunciation of bullying and violence. Otherwise we will see an increase of societal violence (155).

Brendan and Gary are very close friends in the ninth grade but they still socialize with a few other people who are “outcasts”, both male and female. They socialize with the only people who accept them for who they are, ignoring the people who follow the “norm” at school glorifying the football players. Professor Newman explains that most of the rampage shooters only had a few friends and they most often came from outcast cliques, they are a marginalized group with low status in the social hierarchy. Newman highlights that
many of the popular students also have serious problems but they tend not to direct their anger out on the school because of the fact that the pecking order in school has served them well (239).

According to the friends of Brendan and Gary there was a significant change at the end of the ninth grade. Brendan started to get interested in guns and also buys a gun. One of the closer friends stated at the time when Brendan bought the gun that “Brendan was changing. Definitely getting darker and angrier, although sometimes he'd be the old Brendan, funny and charming and goofy” (72). After the purchase of the gun, Brendan also started shooting out from the window of a female friend's car window, towards railroad signs as she was driving without warning. At the same time in the novel Gary tried to get hold of a gun, asking his own mother if she could get her hands on one which he could buy. She declines his request and also admits that “I'd be lying if I said it didn't cross my mind that he might use it on himself” (75). The “darkness” that was beginning to show in Brendan is also now visible in Gary. Gary is considered by his friends to be the one of the two who is more sad and lost than angry but at the time of the ninth grade he also took this turn for the worse.

Since the novel is told from the time after the shooting took place there are instances in the book which discuss what could have been done differently to change the outcome and also which one of the boys is “more guilty” than the other. The people closest to the shooters agree that Brendan is the more outgoing of the two and also the one who shows his anger, but there is the possibility that Gary would act by himself. The friends are anyhow sure that the two of them together definitely fed the hate towards the people of the school, both students and teachers leading up to the tragedy. In the novel Brendan buys a gun from another boy in school and the rest is stolen from a neighbor. The bombs are made by Gary from purchasing firework and extracting the gunpowder in order to make the pipe bombs (Strasser 104). The easy access to weapons is a vital part in order for a school shooting to take
place. Most weapons used in school shootings were taken from home, a relative or a friend if the guns were not bought by the shooters themselves (Newman 259).

After reading a newspaper at the local McDonalds Gary wondered how people could make the bombs that were used in the bombing of an abortion clinic which was one of the headlines. He told his female friend a few days later that he needed to go to the library to look something up. She asks him why he does not do that at home by using the internet and his answer is that he does not want anyone to trace it back to his computer. A few days later he tells her that he found everything that he was looking for at the public library, how to make bombs (102). This is one argument that changes Gary’s role from just being a follower to actually take active part in the planning before the shooting. The friends agree that Gary was the only one of the two capable of building a bomb and he is also the one buying the fireworks used for building the bomb which they later on test in the woods. They bring their friends to the woods, telling them that this was an “announcement”. At the test they hang up big sheets of paper surrounding the blast zone in order to see the blast pattern. At the way home from the woods Gary and Brendan talk about who they are going to blow up and the other friends are quite baffled at the situation (104-109). The Second Amendment gives people of the United States the right to own weapons and also practice with them. The fact that they are out in the woods practicing with their new weapons does not actually indicate that something is wrong; it just makes them a part of the large masculine community which are fascinated by guns (Kellner 12).

Before shootings take place at schools, three-quarters are advertised in advance by the shooters to one or more individuals. The theories behind the advertisement lies in the shooters self-consciousness, wanting to change their social status by threats in order to become someone to fear, in other words masculine according to the “boys will be boys” ideology. Also the theory suggests that when the threats are made, there are no turning back
since a failure to act will only confirm the shooters weak character. Furthermore the theory of threats issued in advance goes hand in hand with the actual designing of the rampage, which is also one of the primary characteristic before a school shooting takes place. The shooters learn and practice with their new equipment (Newman 251-52).

Disturbing conversations take place by e-mail between Gary and Brendan but also with their friends. The protagonists together with some of the other “outcasts” talk on an online private chatroom which they have done since the eighth grade. They discuss things other young boys and girls in their age would do, people they do not like and what is happening at school. But in the novel these chatroom conversations evolve into something much more dark and sinister than other “normal” conversations. From hatred towards the “jocks” at school to the glorification of the Columbine shooters these conversations may be seen as a look from the inside of the protagonist’s minds. In one of the conversations online Brendan asks: “13 kids went down in Littleton. Who do U remember?” Gary answers “Klebold and Harris”. Brendan ends the conversation with “I rest my case” (84). In the same way that the teachers accept the behavior of the “jocks” in the novel arguing that they are boys and that this is part of growing up, the friends of the protagonists rationalize their behavior and the threats that they make towards the school and fellow students with the same ideology of “boys will be boys” accepting aggressive and violent behavior (Urso Spina 146).

Both Gary and Brendan show signs of depression and/or “mental illness” in the novel. Gary have been seeing a psychologist since an early age due to the divorce of his parents and Brendan is taken in for counseling since teachers notice how angry and sad he is at school. Conditions such as depression or mental illness serve as a magnifier which increases the impact of their marginalization in school. Gary has problems within his family with the father absent though out his childhood and Brendan tends to suffer from depression due to the severe bullying at school. Both kids have the sufficient conditions to fall under the
second of Newman’s five “necessary but not sufficient conditions” theory, which needs to be present in order for a rampage shooting to take place (243-44). The friends of the two notice their behavior as odd and how they through the years have entered a downward spiral that have escalated to buying guns and making bombs together with threats issued in their online chatroom. The cultural scripts which Kellner describes as ultra-masculine, such as the gun culture, may protect the protagonist in the novel. Brendan and Gary have guns just like many other young men their age, even though they are too young in terms of the law.

One of the events that really made an impact on both Brendan and Gary in this late stage of the novel is when Brendan got severely beaten at a party whom one of the football players had. One of Brendan’s other friends followed him to the party wondering what they should do there since there were almost only popular kids. Brendan was attacked buy one of the football players and the rest stood and watched as he was beaten mercilessly for some time. It was not until the neighbor dragged the other player away that the beating stopped. People said that Brendan was asking for it but the “friend” who hosted the party defends him and says: “I think it was more like Rosa Parks. He was tired of sitting in the back of the bus.” (114). The fact that Brendan went to the party although he knew that it probably was a bad idea considering the people who were there may be him trying what Newman argues is one of the last attempts to change one’s social position. When feeling ignored or mistreated by peers teens often try to change their social position by testing new strategies. As in the case of the novel this is rarely successful and instead of going to an adult for help they come up with their own solutions to the damage done to their masculinity (246).

On the day that the shooting takes place in the novel, Brendan called one of his friends whom he had not talked to in about a year. He asked her if she was going to the school dance. She says no, Brendan’s response was that he was glad that she would not go to the dance and that he had always liked her. He also told her that he had been rejected from a
military school which he had applied to the week before he was beaten at the party. The friend considered the fact that “[…] somewhere inside he knew he was headed for big trouble, and he must have believed that military school might be the way to save himself. And if I’m right, then when he was rejected, it was like he lost his last lifeline” (118-19).

The day that “it happened” was just like any other day with the popular kids at the dance and the unpopular were somewhere else. One of the witnesses recalls the event as an unfortunate combination of poor building design and “a couple bright minds ingenious to take advantage of it” (120). Brendan and Gary, heavily armed rushed in and “booby-trapped” the gymnasium, preventing anyone to escape. They fired their weapons in the air as they forced everybody onto the floor. They wore masks to disguise their identity, looking like “commandos” but everybody knew who they were as it all started. They tied the students’ hands behind their backs and were now in charge of everything that happened.

The tragedy at Middletown “only” resulted in one casualty, Gary who took his own life. Both the teacher and the student who got shot at the school dance survived. The student who was shot was the same person, who violently attacked Brendan at the party. The teacher was one of the teachers who encouraged the violent behavior at gym class, letting the bigger boys use the less fortunate ones to be tackled and humiliated. In several cases concerning school shootings the perpetrators target members of a sport team. The answer to why athletes and people working with the athletes are being targeted lies in the special treatment that they in many cases received from school staff according to Newman (139). Attacks should not just be seen as the shooters expressing their anger towards the jocks, which in the case of this novel are the worst bullies but as an attack on the position that the school granted them. It is their revenge on the institution that failed to protect them in a place where they should be safe (Newman 139).
In most cases concerning school shootings the shooters target the adolescent social hierarchy, but in some cases, as the case in the novel *Give a Boy a Gun*, the teachers are also targeted. When the shooter/shooters target the teachers of the school it is the authority, discipline and a failure to protect or teach that is being attacked. The crisis of masculinity is present since the school shooters feel trapped and in need of a “manly exit”. According to Newman their other options seemed to be gone and they could not see past this crisis which left them with only one option in their opinion to keep their “manhood” (247). However cultural scripts formed by society do more than just provide the shooters with a range of possible solutions to their crisis, they also design and shape the rampage. As in most cases of school shootings the perpetrators have used their weapons before, practicing and planning their attack. In today’s society inspiration can be found anywhere, violent videogames, literature, song lyrics and movies. After the Westside and Columbine rampage school shootings, young adults could also find inspiration from these previous tragedies. This “copycat” approach to the shootings provides one of the more sustainable explanations to the rise in the school shootings (Newman 252). Brendan and Gary feel marginalized in the school where they go but Brendan is the one of the two who fights back against the hierarchy which oppresses them before the shooting takes place. Gary still chooses to take active part in the shooting and also he is the one who manufactures the bombs. The feeling you get while reading the book is that Gary is a sad confused young boy, Brendan on the other hand is angry seeking violent revenge. Despite the fact that they are very different, they become a deadly combination with different approaches to the harassment from peers and ignorance from teachers. Taking what they believe is revenge.
Reading *Give a Boy a Gun*

The novel *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser is a work of fiction which deals with a fictional school shooting. In many ways the novel follows the events of the Columbine school shooting that took place in 1999 in Littleton Colorado, which still is one of the worst shootings at a school today. By using C J van Dyk’s didactic approach from “Exemplary Teaching: Some Possibilities for Renovating and Stimulating Didactic Practice”, which suggest that you should give your students clear examples to work with, will make it possible to use the book by Todd Strasser. Van Dyk explains that “Exemplary teaching” is formed in order to give the students the essence of a lesson theme, providing possibilities in order to successfully implement the essential conditions for educative and formative tasks:

This gives teaching a depth where originality is pursued at the expense of completeness. In practice the aim is to use a particular example to give pupils the opportunity to experience the essence of a matter or phenomenon. Exemplary teaching does not force the learner to master vast quantities of factual knowledge. As a fundamental didactic form it presents a solution to rigidity in teaching, as well as to the problem of over-burdening the pupil. (van Dyk 127)

The example which the students should focus on is the problematic construction of masculinity and how this is portrayed in the book. The students should read the whole book but the teacher should bring up specific sections which highlight “problematic” situations concerning masculinity. Since the students themselves are going to school they are the teacher’s greatest asset in terms of knowledge of what they think is the cultural norm of society today. Do they think that they need to act in a specific way in order to be accepted by their peers? Is it possible to be masculine without being aggressive and violent? What can the schools do in order to help individuals who feel marginalized? These questions are really important since not only do they make the students question the labels that society has created but also what Connell calls “our culture’s blueprint of manhood” which actually is society’s
vision of the ultimate man. A standard, which few men can live up to, in terms of toughness and independence like the strong men on television. The students should discuss this paradox, how can this blueprint be normative when hardly anyone meets the standard of the norm? (Connell 70). In the book the jocks consists of members of the football team, which in the book are seen as the norm which other young men should follow, what is the norm in the Swedish society and in our schools? Since the reading capacity may differ between students, this didactic approach is flexible in terms of what needs to be read in order to still take active part in the discussions. Students who struggle with reading the whole book could focus on the passages which highlight masculinity. These questions concerning masculinity should be discussed in the classroom with the teacher present. Jeremy Harmer the author of *The Practice of English Language Teaching* argues that the presences of the teacher together with clear instructions are vital in order for the students to understand the purpose of reading. The teacher works as the organizer, explaining the purpose of the specific teaching sequence and later giving the students clear instructions of what is to be done. As in this case, reading the novel in order to later on take part in class/group discussions with peers. Also the teacher should provide the students with feedback during the discussions, expanding the conversations in a direction which raise the problematic constructions that our society has created (286).

The Swedish curriculum for Upper Secondary English states that “Concrete and abstract subject areas related to students' education and societal and working life; current issues; thoughts, opinions, ideas, experiences and feelings; ethical and existential issues.” (National Agency for Education 2011) should be part of the content which should be discussed in the English classroom. Contemporary literature such as *Give a Boy a Gun* may be used in order for the students to investigate how attitudes towards masculinity are presented through the structure and context (National Agency for Education 2011).
cultural scripts of today’s society are present in every media, promoting a picture of violence and aggressive behavior and that is why this is important to discuss in the classroom in order to give an alternative image to what it is to be a man (Kellner 155).

Children and young adults are exposed to a large amount of stories from a very young age. Stories enable them to experience things which they have not encountered before and in some cases guidance is necessary (Lundahl 404). Ben Knights the author of *Masculinities in Text and Teaching* highlights the fact that masculinity varies across cultures, through history. Over the course of time there may be changes in what is considered to be masculine among men within one culture. Because of this the author argues that you cannot speak of masculinity as it were a constant, singular, universal essence but instead should be seen as an “ever changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors” (6).
Conclusion
The crisis of masculinity becomes apparent in the protagonists when analyzing the events of the novel while applying Newman’s theory of “necessary but not sufficient conditions”. The five conditions mentioned are all present in the novel and the actions of the “jocks” and the shooters are excused before the shooting by the ideology “boys will be boys”. The climax of a “crisis of masculinity” is the actual event of a school shooting and every warning signal is not taken seriously. In the novel both Gary and especially Brendan are working from cultural scripts which glorify violent masculinity. The shooting at the school dance solves several problems at once, it provides them with an exit which they desperately seek, and it also attacks and overturns the social hierarchy at the school which has tormented them for so long but also it targets the teachers who have failed to protect them. The attack is also a statement that they are not weak and defenseless. In their mind they did not just fail at being popular at school, they failed at being men. The solutions to the robbery of their manhood of being bullied and abused is part of today’s society through the cultural scripts in several different media such as, violent videogames, literature, song lyrics, newspapers and movies in which men should fight back. The script of the ultra-masculine which the protagonists tend to follow tells them to not ask for help since “men” should handle their own problems, never be pushed around, only act and not talk. Once they have told their friends of their violent fantasies, the cultural script of today’s society tells them to act, resulting in a school shooting where all the unfortunate circumstances from the past leaves one of the two boys dead, without no masculinity to protect any more.
Works cited


