

# THE ACHILLES EFFECT

What Pop Culture is  
Teaching Young Boys  
about Masculinity

CRYSTAL  
SMITH



*"...an exceptionally well researched, organized, documented, and written piece which functions simultaneously as gender study and enlightening perspective on childrearing."*  
Editorial Review

## ABOUT THE ACHILLES EFFECT

When most people think about gender stereotypes and children, they envision princesses, dolls, and pink clothing. Few consider the warriors, muscle-bound action figures, and T-shirts covered in graffiti and skulls that are assumed to signify masculinity.

The pop culture environment that surrounds boys introduces them to a world where traditionally masculine traits—like toughness, aggression, and stoicism—are highly esteemed and where female influence is all but absent.

*The Achilles Effect* explores gender bias in the entertainment aimed at primary school boys, focusing on the dominant themes in children's TV shows, toy advertising, movies, and books: gender stereotypes of both sexes, male dominance, negative portrayals of fathers, breaking of the mother/son bond, and the devaluing of femininity. It examines the gender messages sent by pop culture, provides strategies for countering these messages, and encourages discussion of a vitally important issue that is rarely talked about—boys and their often skewed understanding of gender.

*The Achilles Effect* is a guide for parents, educators, and students who want to learn more about male and female stereotypes, their continued strong presence in kids' pop culture, and their effect on young boys.

The companion website includes a blog that discusses current issues pertaining to gender portrayals in children's popular culture, as well as a list of recommended books, television shows, toys, and films for boys.

*"It will be clear after you read this book that many, many producers of media for children are not interested in presenting healthy, positive, quality stories that will contribute to our children's development. Crystal Smith, a passionate and smart parent, lays it on the line, and shows us just exactly how those media producers are harming our boys.."*

Erin McNeill, [Marketing, Media and Childhood](#).





## WHO IS READING THE ACHILLES EFFECT?

Crystal has received responses to her book from parents, educators, activists in the field of media literacy, and men working to change views of traditional masculinity. She has heard from people around the world who have read her blog or bought her book—Australia, Germany, Thailand, France, the UK, Canada, and the US.

People are interested in this book because it sheds new light on the subject of gender portrayals in popular culture. By shifting the focus to boys, *The Achilles Effect* broadens the conversation about children's media and the gender stereotypes it promotes.

The book is not prescriptive—its intention is to raise awareness and get people talking about the way gender stereotypes affect young boys. It is clear that Crystal understands the challenges parents face when dealing with media and their children. The book is accessible, reading like a conversation shared by one parent with another.

Crystal's research is exhaustive. For her primary research, she watched 29 children's movies, read nearly 90 children's books, and watched countless hours of children's television programming. Additional research sources include academic studies from journals like *Sex Roles*, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *Journal of Sports Behavior*, and *Gender and Education*.

*"This is a valuable book for parents of both boys and girls. I strongly encourage dads to pick this up and read it. Too often, dads are not involved in the conversation about gender, stereotypes and sexualization. I don't think we can continue to ignore the powerful influence our pop culture has on kids, and especially its negative influence on how children understand and view gender."* Chris Singer, [bookdads.com](http://bookdads.com)



## ABOUT CRYSTAL SMITH



Crystal Smith is a social media and marketing writer who has spent many years working with non-profit agencies seeking gender equality and an end to discrimination against women. After being regularly disappointed by the film and television offerings available to her two young sons, she decided to write about the impact of kids' popular culture on young boys.

Crystal is a member of the Professional Writers Association of Canada. She has an Honours B.A. in History and French and a Master of Library and Information Science degree, both from the University of Western Ontario.

When not writing or blogging about boys and pop culture, she provides pro bono social media marketing services to the [Halton Women's Centre](#) and works as the volunteer Blog Editor for [The Pixel Project](#).

Crystal also created a website, [www.bibliospace.ca](http://www.bibliospace.ca) to promote the work of local, independent authors. She envisions the site being a central location for book clubs, bookstores, libraries, schools, and individuals to find books written by people in their community.

### Contacting Crystal

As a social media writer, Crystal maintains an active presence online in support of her book:

Email: [crystal@achilleseffect.com](mailto:crystal@achilleseffect.com)

Website and Blog: [www.achilleseffect.com](http://www.achilleseffect.com)

Twitter: [@AchillesEffect](https://twitter.com/AchillesEffect)

Facebook: [Achilles Effect](#)

GoodReads: [Crystal Smith](#)

YouTube: [AchillesEffect](#)

Skype: [crystalsmith3333](#)

### Sales Channels

*The Achilles Effect* is currently on sale at major online booksellers, including [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [amazon.ca](http://amazon.ca), [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com), and [chapters.ca](http://chapters.ca). It is available in paperback, hardcover, and e-book formats.



## EXCERPT FROM THE ACHILLES EFFECT

Boys will be boys. It's a loaded phrase and one that I hear frequently in the schoolyard, at birthday parties, at baseball practice—anywhere that young boys get together to socialize or play. My disdain for this phrase inspired me, in part, to write this book.

There is a lot to dislike about this expression. It carries with it a sense of inevitability, inferring as it does that boys are innately inclined toward stereotypically masculine behaviour—that nature trumps nurture, so to speak. It offers an excuse for the negative behaviours that are assumed to characterize boyhood—fighting, yelling, pushing, and shoving—while implying that aggression, rowdiness, and competitiveness are the truest signifiers of masculinity.

The phrase “boys will be boys” also draws a proverbial line in the sand, with boys on one side and girls on the other. Yes, girls and boys interact and play together and some may become good friends. But by the time they enter school, kids have learned that boys and girls are fundamentally different and that the behaviour that is accepted in one group is not okay for the other. From choices about toys and clothes to their reactions to stress, children understand early on that there are certain expectations attached to their sex.

For boys, those expectations are based on a very restrictive view of masculinity, defined by psychologist Ronald F. Levant as including: “the requirement to avoid all things feminine; the injunction to restrict one’s emotional life; the emphasis on achieving status above all else; the injunction to be completely self-reliant; [and] the emphasis on toughness and aggression...”

The impact of this view of masculinity can be seen at a very young age in boys who are embarrassed to show affection, reluctant to admit they are scared, or ashamed to cry when hurt. As boys get older, stereotyped behaviours become further entrenched, as any observer of a schoolyard can tell you. Watching kids interact on the playground, it is not unusual to see boys using intimidating language and postures to show toughness and dominance.

The situation does not improve for grown men. The emotional restraint they were taught as children often carries into adulthood, leaving them few outlets for their stress. Men feel consistent pressure to take on the role of provider. They are socialized to see their careers as the most important aspect of their lives and taught to believe that full-time employment is a sign of “successful masculinity”—a belief that many women share...

Traditional masculinity, as described by Levant, has deep roots. Family therapist Olga Silverstein and writer Beth Rashbaum note in *The Courage to Raise Good Men* that this narrow view of manhood has been with us since ancient times, first appearing in the stories of mythical heroes like Hercules, Jason, and Achilles.



## Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

### **What made you write this book?**

Two factors motivated me: the glaring sexism in programming aimed at young children and the lack of focus on boys and gender issues. There is, justifiably, plenty of talk about the impact of gender stereotypes on girls. When I started writing this book, there was virtually nothing being said about boys, and especially younger boys. I decided to add my voice to the conversation about the impact of media on children.

### **You are a first-time author. Did you draw inspiration from other writers in this field?**

The first book that really got me thinking about gender issues, at least from the female perspective, was *Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice* by Jack Holland. Not only was the subject matter of interest, but he was a fabulous writer. The next big inspiration would be *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Little Girls and What We Can Do About It* by Gigi Durham. Her book laid out the issues without being reproachful, and it was filled with relevant examples that we see every day. Reading her book made me ask: "What about boys?" It also made me strive to answer that question.

### **Has the conversation about gender stereotypes become more inclusive of the male experience?**

I think more people are aware of the gender straitjacket we consciously and subconsciously place on boys, but I think there is still a long way to go to bring this conversation into the mainstream and even further to go before boys are freed from the restraints of male gender stereotypes. It is rare that I go to a gathering of children—schoolyard, baseball diamond, birthday party—without hearing some kind of stereotypical comment. For example, I recently attended a baseball game and when the weather got chilly and a boy complained, his mother told him "You're a boy. You've got to suck it up." She was joking to some degree, but still, the message was a very negative one.

### **What made you decide to self-publish?**

The common misconception with self-published books is that the author was rejected by traditional publishers. That is not the case with me. I self-published by choice. I was anxious to get this book out there and, frankly, did not have the patience for the submissions process. I knew my book was timely and would find an audience, so I decided to go ahead on my own rather than wait for publishers to decide its fate.



## Q&A Continued

### **What kind of response has the book had?**

The response to the book and blog has amazed me. I get over 5,000 website visits per month. I have made a lot of valuable connections through Facebook and Twitter, engaging in real conversations with others working in the field of media literacy, all of whom have been incredibly supportive of my book. The book and blog have been my entrée into an activist community of individuals who all share the goal of raising awareness and, hopefully, ending gender bias in children's media.

### **Do you have any other projects in the works?**

I am very busy with my blog and with a side project, called bibliospace.ca, that I started to publicize local, independent authors. I have the kernel of an idea for another book, but I am currently researching it and seeing if there is enough there. It will follow one of the threads from *The Achilles Effect*. I also have lots of ideas about expanding *The Achilles Effect* into the educational system, perhaps some seminars, and maybe a website for boys. All are still in the idea phase, but will hopefully come to fruition one day.

### **What is the connection to Achilles?**

Long story, but the idea formed when I read *The Courage to Raise Good Men* by Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum. The authors note that restrictive views of manhood first appeared in the stories of mythical heroes like Hercules, Jason, and Achilles. Hence one reason for the link to Achilles: he is a character who epitomizes the traditional view of real men as aggressive and physically dominant.

In my book I also talk about the devaluing of femininity in children's popular culture, including the tendency to remove a mother character from a boy's life and then replace her with a male role model. This separation, as Silverstein and Rashbaum argue, is made to ensure that a boy is not softened by the feminine influence of his mother. This is the second reason I chose Achilles (as opposed to someone like Hercules or Jason): he had a stereotypically overprotective mother whose attempts to safeguard her son are widely known.

### **What is the key message your book offers to parents of boys who are concerned about gender portrayals in pop culture?**

Be engaged and talk to your children about what they are watching and reading. There is so much negative imagery in today's popular culture and it is starting to affect boys in many of the same ways it affects girls: body image problems are becoming more common among boys and stereotypes (the tough guy, the brat, the wimp) affect boys' self-perceptions. The best way for parents to combat the impact of pop culture imagery is to know what their children are seeing, encourage them to ask questions, and help them decode the messages that pop culture is sending.

