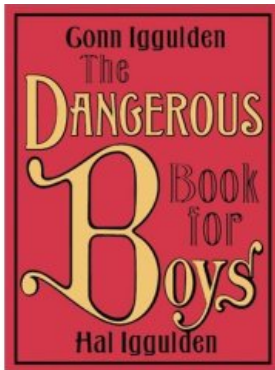


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The Dangerous Book for Boys

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What do boys need to know? That question led brothers Conn and Hal Iggulden to write *The Dangerous Book for Boys*, and boys of every age will love it. The book took Britain by storm last year, and arrives this year just in time for summer reading. A boy armed with this book will have a very fun summer indeed.

The book instantly recalls the great Victorian era of books for boys — books about boy heroes, adventurers, soldiers, and naturalists. Those books, often recognizable in their ornate cloth covers, were read and read again by boys as they grew older. *The Dangerous Book for Boys* is a worthy successor to that tradition.

This book will tell a boy how to read cloud formations, make a battery, make a periscope, and construct “the greatest paper airplane in the world.” Boys are told of the essential gear of boyhood — including Band-aids. Young adventurers will also learn of famous battles, the history of artillery, and how to understand girls.

On the subject of girls the authors warn that young females are likely to be “unimpressed by your mastery of a game involving wizards, or your understanding of Morse Code.” Boys are also soberly warned that girls, as a general rule, “do not get quite as excited by the use of urine as a secret ink as boys do.” This is important to know.

On the other hand, boys are told to help girls who need assistance. Take this sage advice, for example:

If you see a girl in need of help—unable to lift something, for example—do not taunt her. Approach the object and greet her with a cheerful smile, while surreptitiously testing the weight of the object. If you find you can lift it, go ahead. If you can't, try sitting on it and engaging her in conversation.

That advice will help a middle school boy greatly. It just might help a good many college-age boys, for that matter.

The Iggulden brothers believe that boys need to get away from the computer screen, go outside, and learn to enjoy the world and make their way in it. “Boyhood is all about curiosity,” they advise. Boys need to know how to build a treehouse and how to find north in the dark — and they need to know *that* they know these things. As the brothers explain:

How do latitude and longitude work? How do you make secret ink, or send the cipher that Julius Caesar used with his generals? You'll find the answers inside. It was written by two men who would have given away the cat to get this book when they were young. It wasn't a particularly nice cat. Why did we write it now? Because these things are important still and we wished we knew them better. There are few things as satisfying as tying a decent bowline knot when someone needs a loop, or simply knowing what happened at Gettysburg and the Alamo. The tales must be told and retold, or the memories slowly die.

Boys are introduced to Shakespeare, coin tricks, spiders, and “Latin phrases every boy should know.” They learn how to waterproof fabric, juggle, and understand rugby.

The book's runaway sales in Britain surprised the publishers, but not the authors. Here is how Conn Iggulden explained the book's success:

In a word, fathers. I am one myself and I think we've become aware that the whole "health and safety" overprotective culture isn't doing our sons any favors. Boys need to learn about risk. They need to fall off things occasionally, or—and this is the important bit—they'll take worse risks on their own. If we do away with challenging playgrounds and cancel school trips for fear of being sued, we don't end up with safer boys—we end up with them walking on train tracks. In the long run, it's not safe at all to keep our boys in the house with a PlayStation. It's not good for their health or their safety.

Expect the book to catch attention fast in this country as well — and for the same reason. Iggulden gets to the heart of the book's attraction to boys and their dads:

You only have to push a boy on a swing to see how much he enjoys the thrill of danger. It's hard-wired. Remove any opportunity to test his courage and they'll find ways to test themselves that will be seriously dangerous for everyone around them. I think of it like playing the lottery—someone has to say "Look, you won't win—and your children won't be hurt. Relax. It won't be you."

I think that's the core of the book's success. It isn't just a collection of things to do. The heroic stories alone are something we haven't had for too long. It isn't about climbing Everest, but it is an attitude, a philosophy for fathers and sons. Our institutions are too wrapped up in terror over being sued—so we have to do things with them ourselves. This book isn't a bad place to start.

As *The Wall Street Journal* reports, there are now over 400,000 copies of the book in print. The publisher now expects to sell as many as four million copies in the United States. Reporter Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg explains:

The unapologetic message is that boys need a certain amount of danger and risk in their lives, and that there are certain lessons that need to be passed down from father to son, man to man. The implication is that in contemporary society basic rules of maleness aren't being handed off as they used to be.

The book aims to correct that. It does so with a pretelevision, prevideogame sensibility, and also by embracing a view of gender that has been unfashionable in recent decades: that frogs and snails and puppy dogs' tails are more than lines in a nursery rhyme, and that boys are by nature hard-wired differently than girls.

But "The Dangerous Book for Boys" is also aimed at boomer dads, who nostalgically yearn for a lost boyhood of fixing lawn mowers and catching snakes with their fathers — even if that didn't really happen as often as they think it did.

Predictably, the book has detractors as well. Some feminists are unappreciative of its approach, its title, its intended readership, and the fact that the word "boy" is in the title. HarperCollins editor Matthew Benjamin is unmoved. "We initially thought that men nostalgic for their boyhoods would be the buyers, but people are also buying it for 12-year-old boys," he said. "This book teaches them it's OK to play and explore."

A rival publisher took the book home to his eight-year-old son, who promptly jumped up from in front of the television and talked his dad into testing paper airplanes long after bedtime. "That's the good news," the dad said. "The bad news is that he now expects me to build him a treehouse."

Jane Friedman, Chief Executive at HarperCollins and herself the mother of two sons and two stepsons, is sticking by the book. There is no plan for a girls' version, she said. "Boys are very different," she observed.

Yes they are, Ms. Friedman, and that is why books like this are important. Boys want to be taken seriously as boys, and taught how to become men. To reach this goal, they will need far more than the fascinating lessons found in *The Dangerous Book for Boys* — but this is a good place to start.

So put this book in your boy's hands and turn off the television and the PlayStation. Then get ready to watch the paper airplanes fly and the water bombs burst. And, to be honest, it wouldn't hurt to keep a few Band-aids handy . . . just in case.

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