

## *Boys will be boys*

A conversation with Tone C. Rønning\*

The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Company (NRK) reflects the gender relations in Norwegian society as it is mainly women who work in the channel's children and youth department. Women are a majority in the editorial offices of publishing companies targeting the young audience. In preschools and elementary schools the majority of the employees – in many cases more than 70 % – are women.

In the private arena, half of the marriages are divorced and many children grow up with single mothers. In contrast to adult life, female values predominate in childhood.

Girls do better in school and they are “more mature” than the boys. Boys tend to be more aggressive and more physical than girls. Boys read less books. Also, boys switch from public broadcasters to private channels more often than girls and also at an earlier age.

Public broadcasting companies have the responsibility to present positive characters and role models to the young audience. This was and still is the declared strategy of NRK's children and youth department which was in search of manuscripts for a new drama series at that time. We found it in: *Boys will be boys*. Imagine 4 friends forming a circle,

*Boys will be boys*, drama series (7 episodes of 25 minutes, NRK 2005) targets audiences between 10 to 14 years and their families on Saturday evenings. The series is written and produced by the writer Axel Hellstenius and producer Olav Øen (Monster Media), commissioned by the children and youth department in NRK.

The series is about a group of 4 12-year-olds who are testing the limits of their individual courage, their relations with friendship and with the adult world – it is a story about relationships in an action frame.

draw their bows and then let their arrows shoot straight up to the sky. Then, they stand there motionless and wait for the falling arrows while tautly watching each other to see who will back out first because he is afraid

to be hit by one of the arrows coming back down.

This is the opening scene of the script, and it is a metaphor for the whole series: Boys testing their own limits as well as the loyalty of the gang they form. The first scene also shows that these 4 boys differ in character and mentality, even though they are the same age and they have a similar social background.

Further on in the story, the physical education teacher reproaches the boys of being lazy. This accusation provokes one of the friends, Beaner, to bet him that he can carry all the school bags of the class, because he really wants to show that he is strong. However, he has hardly any chance to win the bet. Later, the physical education teacher of all people becomes his class teacher. Beaner reacts to this new situation with increased aggression that targets many of the people he encounters, including his friends. He convinces his friends to secretly follow the physical education teacher, who is taking part in a military manoeuvre, and to steal blank

cartridges. Our young heroes start experimenting with gunpowder and try to build bombs.

Since 4 young male characters who act out their aggression are in the centre of events in *Boys will be Boys*, we

namics within the whole group change.

There are girls involved in the story, but *Boys will be Boys* is not balanced in terms of male and female characters. This gives the 4 boys and their physical education teacher the possibility to illustrate many facets of male characters. Once the stage is opened up for more male protagonists in the story, they have the possibility to show the diversity and complexity of being male. Female characters must be given the same opportunity – but in a different programme.

The scriptwriter Axel Hellstenius would like to add that what counted for him at the age of 11 or 12 were other boys. He wanted to belong to them. Playing with girls was alright, but not as important. Without having scientific proof for it he is still convinced that at that age “boyhood” is at its peak and being a boy is the most important thing. His goal was to take on typical situations and events of his own childhood and to melt

them into the experiences of today’s children for the series. Looking around nowadays, there are many examples for boys just wanting to be boys...

No doubt: This series was very well received by the audience. Boys are thrilled, many also watched the reruns. *Boys will be Boys* is a programme that is being talked about in our target audience. Girls watch it and find it interesting.

The series inspired a few boys to copy the experiment with explosives. Par-

During his long stay in hospital, Arne made a list of activities he is going to try out with his 3 friends after his release. Among the activities listed are: shooting with bow and arrow, jumping from a 10-metre high rock into the sea and playing strip poker. Arne is not too keen on strip poker, but his buddy Beaner insists on doing it. Beaner’s mum has left the family and Beaner prefers not to talk about it, he’d rather challenge their physical education teacher. The teacher is also an officer in the army. The boys secretly follow him on a military manoeuvre. They get access to some blank ammunition containing powder, and they start experimenting with it ...

ents and teachers, however, reacted immediately and this experience will probably mark a turning point for them. Boys have done these kinds of experiments for generations, but it still leaves us with the dilemma of whether we are storytellers or caretakers.

In any event, stories can show us options for action in our own lives, whatever gender or age we are. Stories move people and people move their society. ■

at NRK faced some dilemmas, one of which is the gender-balance:

If the story was about building explosives, we wouldn’t have accepted it, but this is not what it is about. The 4 boys release a whole chain of events that affect themselves and others. They deal with internal and external conflicts, and they struggle to find individual solutions to their problems. This means they take on responsibility.

This is how not only the characters develop, but at the same time the dy-

\*Tone C. Rønning is an Executive Producer at the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK and Creative Leader at Westerdals School of Communication, Oslo, Norway.



She was born on March 8, the international day of women’s liberation.