

# Cool Books for Tough Guys: 50 Books Out of the Mainstream of Adolescent Literature That Will Appeal to Males Who Do Not Enjoy Reading

**Lawrence Baines**

Whenever I think of tough guys I have had in my teaching career, I usually think of James Meachum. James, who fancied himself a mix between heavyweight boxing champion of the world and Ozzy Osborne, showed up in my room after having been kicked out of two other schools in the district for fighting. By his third week, James had a nickname (usually an insulting one) for every student in class, had visited the assistant principal's office probably twenty times, and had yet to open a book.

At the time of James' transfer, my classes were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but James would have none of it. Usually, the conversation would go something like this:

"Come on, James. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a world-renowned book that has won all kinds of awards and prizes. Plus, you've gotta know it if you ever want to go to college."

"It's dumb, sir. I'm not reading nothin' about some stupid bird."

"The bird is just a symbol, James. It's not really about a bird at all. Besides, if you don't read it, you'll fail this class. You can't graduate from high school if you don't pass English."

"Big deal. I hate that book. I hate reading. I hate this stupid class."

The schools are filled with students like James who find little that interests them in the traditional offerings of books by authors who have been dead for decades (or even centuries) or in the stacks of adolescent novels that have survived the gauntlet of approvals from teachers, parents, principals, school boards, and librarians. A tough guy often finds absolutely nothing in print that appeals to him other than the sports page.

Teachers of English need to reach the tough guys out there, and they are probably not going to do it by prescribing another go at *The Sound and the Fury*. The problem is not so much that tough guys lack the brainpower to read: they simply do not want to.

Most teachers were not surprised when one National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report found that at all three grade levels assessed (4, 8, and 12), approximately half of the students reported reading 10 or fewer pages each day for schoolwork across the curriculum (Langer, 1990). Only about one in ten twelfth-graders said they checked out a book from the public or school library at least once a week. With a schedule that must accommodate school work, romance, participating in sports and extracurricular activities, watching television, hanging out at a game center in the mall, going to the movies, fooling around with friends, listening to music, and working part-time, adolescents claim they have no time to cram in a little reading,

too. And when they finally manage some free time, they tend to choose the video store over the library.

In the 1988 NAEP study over one-fourth of the eighth grade boys said they rarely or never read in their spare time (compared to about one-tenth of eighth grade girls) and about one-fifth of the twelfth grade boys said they rarely or never read in their spare time (compared to about fifteen percent of the girls).

Researchers exploring the relationship between the reading habits of adolescents and various assessments of achievement have concluded the following: (1) The amount of time a student spends doing leisure reading seems to be highly correlated with his/her reading comprehension (Anderson, Fielding, & Wilson, 1988; Southgate, Arnold, & Johnson, 1981; Greaney, 1980); (2) A student who often reads books usually has a more extensive vocabulary and performs better on standardized tests than a student who rarely opens a book (Anderson, & Freebody, 1981; Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986); and (3) A book's "interestingness" determines to a certain extent whether or not a student will read and understand it (Cox, 1991; Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1986; Matthewson, 1985; Asher, 1980; Asher and Markell, 1979; Asher and Markell, 1974).

The most popular young adult novels with students in classes that I have taught (or observed) have been these: Avi's *Wolf Rider* (1991), Arrick's *Chernowitz* (1984), Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), Childress' *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* (1973), Crutcher's *Running Loose* (1983), Cormier's *Fade* (1988), Davis' *Vision Quest* (1979), Duncan's *Killing Mr. Griffin* (1978), Hinton's *Rumble Fish* (1967), Irwin's *So Long at the Fair* (1988), Lipsyte's *The Contender* (1967), Myers' *Fallen Angels* (1988) and *Scorpions* (1988), Kerr's *Fell* (1987), Naylor's *The Year of the Gopher* (1987), Nixon's *Secret, Silent Screams* (1989), Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1988), Robert Peck's *Arly* (1989), Strasser's *Rock n' Roll Nights* (1982), and White's *Deathwatch* (1972). However, even with a classroom library bolstered by these books, some teachers have had a difficult time getting tough guys to read. That's where cool books come in.

After years of watching and listening to male nonreaders cruise the shelves of the library looking for a book, I have learned that a tough guy utilizes certain criteria in selecting a book worthy of his attention. A cool book must possess at least some of the following characteristics: (1) a decent title, (2) a cover that will not embarrass the person carrying it around (machismo is favored, but a sophisticated-looking book is okay too), (3) medium to large typography, (4) some photos or illustrations, and (5) a sufficiently high gross quotient (that is, at least a modicum of sex, violence, and nasty incidents told in intricate, sickening detail somewhere in the story).

While the number of pages in a book might play an important role in the selection processes of some slow readers, I have been surprised frequently by students who fearlessly take on enormous volumes in a subject area that interests them. In fact, there seems to be some prestige in carrying around a thick book from class to class.

Perhaps the biggest boon for any book in the eyes of a tough guy is its film tie-in -- was a film going to be made about the book, had one been made, could one be made? A few years ago, one of my friends had her eleventh grade remedial and regular English classes tackle the 501 pages

of *The Firm* (1991) while the film was in production. She insisted that it was the one book that every one of her students actually read.

The first time I used a cool book in one of my classes, it was with James Meachum. I was frustrated. James had just screamed a particularly vulgar obscenity at me for disturbing his sleep during class, and I held him after for a few minutes. When the room cleared, I pulled Piri Thomas' touching autobiographical account of battling drugs, crime, and gangs in New York City, *Down These Mean Streets*, from my desk drawer and handed it to him.

"You need to keep quiet about this. Seriously," I said. "This book has been banned in a lot of schools, and I probably shouldn't be giving it to you."

"\*%!@#, look at how big it is," James said, flipping through the book. "356 pages!"

"Yep, 356 pages. That's 356 pages of cursing, sex, and violence. Is it too hard for you, James?"

James lifted the book in the air like he was weighing it. "Just between you and me, okay?" I said.

Two weeks later James got into yet another fight and was transferred to an alternative high school. When he came by my room to check out, he asked if he could keep the book. Encouraged that such a comment might indicate that James was reading, I told him, "Of course, but you have to write to me and tell me what you thought about it." Although he never wrote me back, I did run into James some ten years later at a shopping mall. I remember the moment vividly.

"Hey, remember that book, that Thomas book?" was what he said after "Yo, teach!"

"Yeah, I remember. I never got it back," I said.

"One of the best books I ever read," James said laughing. "I read all the time now."

Many of the books that I suggest for tough guys may not be considered great works of literature. But motivating some complacently aliterate students to open a book and read the printed page requires guerrilla tactics. The function of a cool book is to provide the initial step in getting a tough guy to read. Great literature can come later.

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## **Fiction**

Benchley, Nathaniel (1972). *Only Earth and Sky Last Forever*. Harper Trophy. 191 pages, medium typography, no illustrations. A young Indian (Dark Elk) battles the white menace and attempts to win the heart of his love, Lashuka. No film.

Benchley, Peter (1979). *The Island*. Bantam Books. 273 pages, small typography, no photos. A tale of modern day pirates who raid pleasure boats in the Caribbean, the book is filled with gore, betrayal, death, cursing, and some sex. Film (1980), rated R.

Block, Lawrence (1982). *Eight Million Ways to Die*. 296 pages, small typography, no photos. Matt Scudder, private eye, ex-alcoholic is the detective for today. Tougher than Hammer, but more humane than Marlowe. Block has written several books in the Scudder series. (Also see books by Ross McDonald, such as *Blue City*). Film (1986), rated R.

Crichton, Michael (1990). *Jurassic Park*. Ballantine Books. 397 pages, small typography, some drawings. A bestseller that details how plans for a prehistoric amusement park go awry. Related film (1993), rated PG.

Crichton, Michael (1992). *Rising Sun*. Ballantine Books. 399 pages, small typography, no photos. A novel that involves murder, trade with Japan, and the costs of doing business. Film (1993), rated R.

Eastman, Charles (1969). *Little Fauss and Big Halsey*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 163 pages, large typography, loaded with photos. A great screenplay about two motorcycle riders who journey from race to race in hopes of getting the big payoff (which never materializes). Film (1970), rated R.

Gaines, Ernest (1983). *A Gathering of Old Men*. Knopf. A group of old black men take responsibility for the murder of a white man on a Louisiana plantation. Film for television (1987), rated PG.

Gent, Peter (1973). *North Dallas Forty*. Signet Books. 294 pages, medium typography, no photos. A view into professional football's steamy side, written by the former Dallas Cowboy. Film (1979), rated R.

Goldman, William (1974). *Marathon Man*. Dell. 268 pages, small typography, no photos. A brilliant student and runner discovers that his brother worked for the CIA. After his brother is murdered, the student becomes entangled in his brother's troubles. Film (1976), rated R.

Grisham, John (1992). *The Firm*. Dell. 501 pages, medium typography, no photos. A recent law school graduate thinks he reels in the ideal position in a law firm until he begins investigating the firm's mysterious past. Film (1993), rated R.

Harrison, William (1975). *Roller Ball Murder*. Warner. A collection of strange science fiction/fantasy/horror/suspense stories usually set in the future. Related film: *Rollerball* (1975), rated R (derived from a 16-page short story in this collection).

Hillerman, Tony (1982). *The Dark Wind*. Avon. 214 pages, small print, no photos. A Navajo Tribal Police officer investigates a gruesome murder that white men can't seem to understand, let alone solve. No film.

Houston, James (1971). *The White Dawn*. Signet. 266 pages, small typography, some maps and drawings. In 1896, three survivors of a shipwrecked whaleboat must adjust to Arctic culture after they are rescued by Eskimos. Film (1974), rated R.

Lawton, Harry (c1960). *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*. Award Books. 218 pages, medium typography, no photos. Based upon the 1909 manhunt of Willie Boy, a Paiute Indian who murders a man and kidnaps his sixteen-year-old love, Lolita. Film (1969), rated PG.

Marc, Karen (1984). *Tuff Turf*. Signet. 139 pages, large typography, no photos. Morgan, a preppy high schooler from Connecticut, falls in love with the girlfriend of the leader of the Tuffs (a gang) and must face the unpleasant consequences. Film (1985), rated R.

Marshall, James (1971). *Walkabout*. Belmont Publications. 158 pages, medium typography, contains some photos from the film. A story of the chance meeting between a couple of stranded, proper Australian school children, and an Aborigine youth in the Outback of Australia. Film (1971), rated PG.

McInerney, Jay (1984). *Bright Lights, Big City*. Vintage Books. 238 pages, medium typography, no photos. A fast-living yuppie in New York City hangs out in bars with a sleazy friend and thinks constantly about his ex-wife, Amanda (a fashion model), a dying mother, and the value of living a virtuous life. Film (1988), rated R.

McMillan, Terry (1992). *Waiting to Exhale*. Pocket Star Books. 400 pages, small typography, no photos. Tracks the adventures of four black women in their searches for love, life, and the meaning of true friendship. No film (yet).

Mohr, Nicholasa (1975). *El Bronx Remembered*. Harper and Row. 179 pages, medium typography, no photos. A collection of twelve short stories about growing up in the South Bronx between 1946 and 1956. No film.

Pike, Robert (1963). *Mute Witness* (later changed to *Bullitt* upon release of the film). 144 pages. Small print. A white police lieutenant and a black medical pathologist team up to solve a murder in the big city. Film -- *Bullitt* (1968), rated PG.

Ponicsan, Darryl (1973). *Cinderella Liberty*. Bantam. 182 pages, small typography, no photos. A navy man's records are lost -- he can't be discharged, return to his ship, or be paid. So, he fools around and marries a prostitute, and inherits a family. Film (1973), rated R.

Salassi, Otto (1987). *Jimmy D, Sidewinder and Me*. Greenwillow. 150 pages, small typography, no photos. Told in the form of twenty-five letters to a judge, the book is about a 15-year-old con artist Dumas Monk, who shoots pool, plays poker, and eventually has to kill a man in self-defense. No film.

Stone, Oliver and Richard Boyle (1987). *Platoon and Salvador: The Original Screenplays*. Vintage Books. 255 pages, medium typography, several photos from the films. Two screenplays

with a forward and an afterward by Stone. Related films, *Platoon* (1986), *Salvador* (1986), and *Below the Volcano* (1984), a documentary by Boyle about the country of El Salvador.

Walton, Todd (1978). *Inside Moves*. Signet. 217 pages, medium typography, no photos. Two friends, a Vietnam vet and an aspiring pro basketball player, meet regularly at Max's Bar, talk about their dreams, then do their best to make them come true. Film (1980), rated R.

Webb, Charles (1963). *The Graduate*. Signet. 160 pages, medium typography, no photos. Twenty-two year old Benjamin's life seems boring until he gets into squabbles with his parents, has an affair with a long-time friend of his parents (Mrs. Robinson), and begins courting Mrs. Robinson's daughter. Film (1967), rated PG.

Wheeler, David (1989). *No, but I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*. Penguin. 412 pages. Large typography, no photos. A collection of short stories that inspired films such as *High Noon*, *Bad Day at Blackrock*, *Don't Look Now*, *The Fly*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Psycho*, and others.

## **Nonfiction**

Adler, David (1989). *We Remember the Holocaust*. Henry Holt Co. 147 pages, medium typography, many photos. Gives a chronology of the Holocaust with oral testimonies from those who experienced it firsthand.

Ashabranner, Brent (1987). *The Vanishing Border: A Photographic Journey Along Our Frontier with Mexico*. Dodd, Mead & Company. 175 pages, large typography, many photos. A compelling combination of statistics (over 400,000 illegal immigrants are apprehended every year in the San Diego sector, alone, although immigration officers there estimate that 4,000,000 more escape capture), interviews, and personal experience.

Bryan, C. D. B. (1992). *In the Eye of Desert Storm: Photographs of the Gulf War*. Harry Abrams. 160 pages, large typography, many photos. A riveting collection of photographs with comments from soldiers and some data about the war.

Caputo, Philip (1993, c1977). *A Rumor of War*. Ballantine Books. 328 pages, medium typography, no photos. A young marine infantry lieutenant fights a war of terror and lunacy in Vietnam. Television film (1980), rated PG.

Cohen, Daniel (1979). *Famous Curses*. Dodd, Mead and Co. 127 pages, very large typography, many photos. Genuine, famous curses that have been placed on unfortunate individuals throughout history.

Crichton, Michael (1988). *Travels*. Ballantine Books. 416 pages, small typography, no photos. A collection of essays from Crichton's medical school days and his extensive travels around the world.

Dardik, Irving and Denis Waitley (1984). *Quantum Fitness*. Pocket. 191 pages, small typography, many photos. The exercise program, visualization strategies, and diet regimen of Olympic athletes is presented in clear language.

Del Tredici, Robert (1987). *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*. Harper & Row. 192 pages, small typography, many photos. Represents six years of research on the bomb in America. Contains visits to bomb factories and interviews with influential scientists and survivors of Hiroshima.

Gardner, Robert (1992). *Crime Lab 101: Experimenting with Crime Detection*. Walker and Company. 120 pages, large typography, many drawings. Reveals how science and technology are used to solve crimes. Contains several explanations of how some actual crimes were solved.

Hardy, Gordon (1988). *Words of War: An Anthology of Vietnam War Literature*. Boston Publishing Company. 192 pages, small typography, loaded with photos. Includes text from speeches by John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Lyndon Johnson and others, excerpts from several books about Vietnam by former soldiers, and a section on films about Vietnam.

Hargreaves, Clare (1992). *Snowfields: The War on Cocaine in the Andes*. Holmes and Meier. 202 pages, small typography, three maps. Hard-hitting book about the boom in cocaine production in Bolivia. Contains interviews with drug barons, coca farmers, drug addicts, drug runners, members of the Bolivian and American military, members of the local Bolivian and American city police officers, and agents of America's Drug Enforcement Agency.

Hoffman, Ethan and John McCoy (1986, c1981). *Concrete Mama: Prison Profiles from Walla Walla*. 196 pages, medium typography, loaded with photos. An incredibly moving look inside prison walls by two men who spent four months interviewing inmates, guards, and prison personnel. Memorable quote: "Prisons are cauldrons of murder, assault, homosexual rape, extortion, and general brutality" (page vi).

Jackson, Florence (1972). *Blacks in America 1619-1790/1791-1861/1861-1877/1877-1905*. Franklin Watts. Each volume is around 90 pages long. Large typography, loaded with photos. An excellent four-book series filled with illustrations and photos and primary source documentation.

Lauber, Patricia (1985). *Tales Mummies Tell*. Scholastic. 118 pages, medium typography, loaded with photos. An archeological look at the how and why of mummies. Students will pore over the photos.

Lehrack, Otto (1992). *No Shining Armor: The Marines at War in Vietnam, An Oral History*. 398 pages, medium typography, many photos. Reflections by soldiers from the third Battalion, third regiment of marines, gathered by a logistics officer over a period of years.

Light, Ken (1988). *To the Promised Land*. Aperture Foundation. 95 pages, large typography, loaded with photos. A book of photos taken along the U.S./Mexican border with oral histories recorded by Samuel Orozco, an essay by Mary Jo McConchey, and an introduction by Richard Rodriguez.

Maas, Peter (1975). *King of the Gypsies*. Bantam Books. 210 pages, medium typography, some photographs. A book about gypsies living in America, much in the same fashion that they have been living for the past two hundred years. Fascinating, but some Romany scholars absolutely loathe the book. Film (1978), rated R.

Marston, Elsa (1986). *Mysteries in American Archeology*. Walker & Company. 113 pages, medium typography, many photos. Covers a variety of topics including "Who really discovered America?"

Mooser, Steven (1980). *Into the Unknown*. J.B. Lippincott. 116 pages, very large typography, loaded with photos. Contains nine stories about persons who have had experiences with UFOs, a woman with ESP, a person who claimed to have been reincarnated, and other strange events that someone out there claims to be true.

Rodriguez, Richard (1981). *Hunger of Memory*. David R. Godine. 195 pages, medium typography, no photos. Rodriguez's moving, controversial account of being caught between the worlds of the Chicano and mainstream America.

Terry, Wallace (1984). *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*. Random House. 311 pages, medium typography, some photographs. Searing, uncensored interviews with black veterans of the Vietnam War who spare no details.

Thomas, Piri (1974). *Down These Mean Streets*. Vintage. 354 pages, small typography, no photos. A potent, at times harrowing, look at life in Harlem through the eyes of a Puerto Rican male.

Thomson, Peggy (1991). *City Kids in China*. HarperCollins. 114 pages, large typography, loaded with photos. Looks at the lives of elementary age children in Changsha, China. Covers such interesting topics as resting eye exercises, getting a haircut and a shave, chopsticks, food, and the "one child" rule.

Urrea, Luis (1993). *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. 191 pages, medium typography, some photos. Powerful, point blank look at the poor's struggle to survive in the garbage dumps of Tijuana.

Wells, Tim and William Triplett (1992). *Drug Wars: An Oral History from the Trenches*. William Morrow and Company. 272 pages, medium typography, no photos. Interviews with recreational drug users, drug dealers, police officers, addicts, prisoners, and survivors of drug-rehabilitation programs.

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Books, books, books. They will increase your lifespan, lower your stress and boost your intelligence. They will give you fuller, thicker hair. Job satisfaction comes and goes, partners enrapture and abscond, but you can always fall back on the timeless ability of literature to transport you to a different world. From Jane Austen's mannered drawing rooms to the airless tower blocks of 1984, novels do something unique. They simultaneously speak to the heart and mind. They teach you about the history of our world, the possibilities of our future and the fabric of our souls. The majority of these books are books teachers can read aloud to students, though this list features some early readers. Early readers are books that are perfect to help students decode words and read on their own. They have short sentences, and picture clues help first graders decipher words all by themselves. Just so you know, Bored Teachers may get a small share of the sales made through the links on this page. The true story of Favio Chávez, a music teacher in Paraguay who makes musical instruments out of trash for his students. Chávez's recycled orchestra goes on to play shows around the world.

40. One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia.