

The Librarians' Lament (A horror story?)

A banner above the Perth Convention Centre reads,

The Children's Book Council Annual Conference.

April 1st - 4th

Why Boys Won't Read Books.

Ms Sheila Borgnine, the Minister of the Arts, is guest of honour at a conference in a ballroom full of children's librarians. Some are the usual stereotypes with knitted cardigans, glasses and hair buns but there are others who look like Pamela Anderson, Lara Croft, Salma Hayek, Johnny Depp and Pierce Brosnan.

The keynote speaker has just finished her closing remarks, "As long as boys are testosterone charged, there is no hope of them ever reading, especially as they reach high school."

An advisor whispers to the Minister, "A disgraceful state of affairs. This needs looking into. There might be questions in parliament. There could be an electoral backlash!"

The minister reacts with alarm. "Electoral backlash? Something must be done, immediately."

The most obvious way, therefore, the Minister decides, is to get rid of all that nasty, book hating, teenage testosterone... by surgically altering all thirteen year old boys and

turning them into girls.

The government immediately conscripts surgeons and then begins setting up De-penile Colonies. Huge scary women in black uniforms with black mobile collecting vans travel to schools and begin rounding up boys in Year 8 to take them to the camps ready for neutering.

The teachers watch them being carted away; the women with glee, the men no so sure. They stand with their legs crossed and pained, uncertain looks on their faces.

Richard Johnson, a Year 8 boy, is sitting under a tree in the grounds of Springfield High School eating his sandwiches and reading a book, *Bruce Lee: The Biography*, when several bullies come to tease him about reading. They are chanting, "Nerd! Nerd! Nerd!"

Before Richard can leap to his feet and Kung Fu the living daylights out of them a siren sounds and a black van squeals to a halt right next to them. The black clad guards-women jump out and haul him and the bullies into the back of the van.

De-penile Colony XVII is like a prison camp with guard towers, search lights, razor wire, fierce dogs, wooden huts and large white rooms with operating tables with stirrups and drums labelled *Discards*.

Large numbers of glum looking boys can be seen exercising in the prison yard using a wooden vaulting horse. Others are working behind the huts with picks and shovels.

Signs on the door of a wooden hut read, *Concert tonight 7.30* and *Escape committee meeting 8 o'clock*. A boy who looks a bit like Steve McQueen is trying to jump his BMX bike over a fence.

Sometime later, back at Springfield High School, the teachers are deliriously happy. No more farts in classrooms, no more toilet humour, no playground fighting and calls of Fight! Fight! Fight!, no smelly feet, no spitballs, smoking behind the bike sheds is dramatically cut down, no more cricket and broken windows, no footy, no weapons at school, swearing has almost ceased, the books in the 613 Women's Health section in the library are left intact, violent computer games are left unplayed, porn sites on the internet are left unaccessed, graffiti has stopped and the school has become a civilised and calm place of learning.

The sign above the school gates has been changed to *The Mr Darcy Memorial High School for Girls* and the lockers are painted tasteful shades of pink.

The school footy oval is overgrown and looking derelict, the goal posts have fallen down, the basketball courts have pot holes and the long jump pit has petunias growing in it.

The "New Girls" start arriving back at school looking very sheepish and walking very, very carefully. All have short hair and hairy legs but they are wearing pretty floral dresses.

The New Girls settle back into school and, unlike when they were still boys, begin constantly crowding into the library. This results in a huge new demand for books.

The New Girls also start to become obsessed with horses, relationships; who dropped who etc, Viggo and Orlando, they start learning music, ballet, jazz dancing, netball. The oval is now used at lunchtimes with groups of girls and New Girls all sitting in circles chatting and reading. *Dolly* magazine is in constant demand. Posters are stuck up all over the school reading:

Join the Saddle Club Book Club,

Join the Bronte Society

Sylvia Plath is a gas

Emily Pankhurst gets my vote

Send food parcels for Mary-Kate and Ashley now!

Jane Austen for Sainthood

Richard, looking very awkward, arrives at school dressed like Britney Spears in a very skimpy dress. The other New Girls can be seen wearing nail polish and jewellery and plastic butterflies in their hair.

The boys' toilets are closed through lack of use, cobwebs grow across the doors.

An Industrial Arts teacher sits on his bench staring quizzically at half finished shoe racks, jewellery boxes and spice racks.

The Sports Coach stands shaking his head as two lone girls try out for the entire Aussie Rules footy team.

Mr Percy Harmer, the Principal, becomes very worried. With the enormous new use of the library, Ms Marian Carnegie, the librarian, a most formidable woman, has been demanding that additional funds be found to build a new modern, much bigger library and stock the dramatic increase in the number of books that has become necessary. Predictably, Principal Percy Harmer stubbornly refuses.

The Springfield Primary School principal, Ms Hattie Bigg, is alarmed at the increased numbers of boys in Year 7 failing so they can repeat and not graduate to Year 8. Classes become hugely overcrowded and six foot tall monsters in little grey shorts and tiny t shirts can be seen playing on the swings and monkey bars.

Businesses in Springfield start to go under; the video game arcade, the surf shop, the dirty magazine shop, computer game shop, the Nike shoe store, the glue factory and the sports & hobby shop all have *For Sale* signs in the windows.

The principals of all the schools across Western Australia get together to protest. They are enraged. Their school budgets can't stretch far enough to include the extra books needed. More important things, like renovations to the administration offices, new technology labs, new staff cafeterias, teachers' uncover car parks and Professional Development days on Rottnest will have to suffer.

Hundreds of principals gather in West Perth and led by Percy Harmer and Hattie Bigg, storm Parliament House, demanding that Minister Sheila Borgnine stop the De-penile Programme immediately. With much shouting and waving banners, they rush up the steps of Parliament House carrying placards reading,

Save our budgets.

Bring back boys!

Borgnine cocks up!

Sheila is one-eyed over boys!

Sheila gives boys the willies! Oh no she doesn't!

The scene on the steps degenerates into a full blown riot between the Parliamentary Protection Police, armed with water cannon, and the school principals until eventually the principals are carted off in paddy wagons.

Principal Percy Harmer's last defiant words as he is carried away by the police are, "It's a disgrace! A disgrace! I'd rather go to gaol than spend extra money on books!" The other principals all cheer, agreeing enthusiastically.

The West Australian Newspaper, Monday Headline: *Minister to review girls-only policy.*

"Decision has nothing to do with adverse opinion polls", says Sheila. "The only poll that counts is the one on er, er, election day."

The West Australian Newspaper, Tuesday Headline *Cabinet reshuffle expected. Has Sheila*

cut off more than she can chew?

The next scene is a long line of New Girls lined up outside the camp hospital operating theatre while inside a doctor in a white coat and with a puzzled look on his face is saying, "Now whatever did I do with that drum of discards?"

Alley cats can be seen snooping round a row of rusty old drums at the rear of the hospital.

A drunk looks into one of the drums, gulps and runs away screaming.

In the hospital canteen, off duty staff are looking very warily at today's \$6.95 special; Traditional English lunch of bangers and mash, followed by spotted dick and custard.

Back at *Mr Darcy Memorial High School*, Britney / Richard Johnson, hasn't gone to the hospital. She is again sitting under a tree, this time reading *Give a Girl a Spanner*. She says to her friend, "I'm not going for the operation. I have decided to remain a girl after all. I've realised boys are just plain silly. I never really did like footy or science fiction or Anthony Horowitz books that much. And Andy Griffiths' books are just rude and stupid. And what's more, the clothes are better now and no-one ever picks on you for being a nerd and reading at lunchtimes. And besides, girls don't have to care if Holdens are better than Fords or not....even if they are."

Principal Harmer is standing in the dock in a courtroom before a judge and jury, looking

guilty. The gallery is full of jeering school kids all waving books in the air. The judge is peering over the top of her glasses as she is addressing him, ".....a man of your position in society....an example to young and impressionable minds.....as a warning.....an example has to be made SIX MONTHS HARD LABOUR!"

The final scene is a despondent Principal Harmer, dressed in a striped convict uniform, stamping books for a very long queue of eager borrowers in the Canning Vale Prison Library.