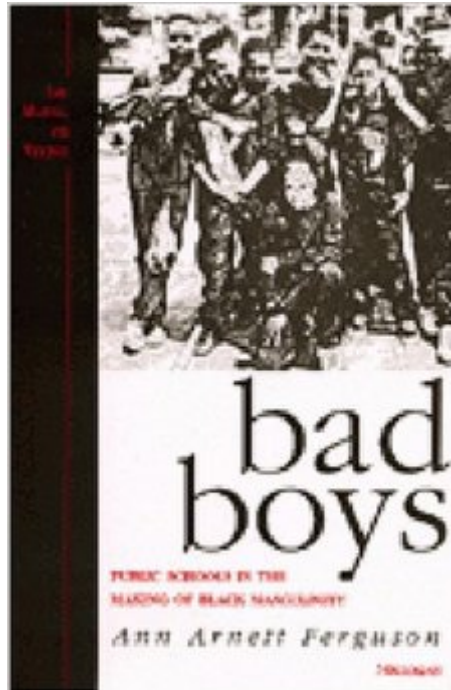


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# Bad Boys: Public Schools In The Making Of Black Masculinity (Law, Meaning, And Violence)



## Synopsis

Statistics show that black males are disproportionately getting in trouble and being suspended from the nation's school systems. Based on three years of participant observation research at an elementary school, *Bad Boys* offers a richly textured account of daily interactions between teachers and students to understand this serious problem. Ann Arnett Ferguson demonstrates how a group of eleven- and twelve-year-old males are identified by school personnel as "bound for jail" and how the youth construct a sense of self under such adverse circumstances. The author focuses on the perspective and voices of pre-adolescent African American boys. How does it feel to be labeled "unsalvageable" by your teacher? How does one endure school when the educators predict one's future as "a jail cell with your name on it?" Through interviews and participation with these youth in classrooms, playgrounds, movie theaters, and video arcades, the author explores what "getting into trouble" means for the boys themselves. She argues that rather than simply internalizing these labels, the boys look critically at schooling as they dispute and evaluate the meaning and motivation behind the labels that have been attached to them. Supplementing the perspectives of the boys with interviews with teachers, principals, truant officers, and relatives of the students, the author constructs a disturbing picture of how educators' beliefs in a "natural difference" of black children and the "criminal inclination" of black males shapes decisions that disproportionately single out black males as being "at risk" for failure and punishment. *Bad Boys* is a powerful challenge to prevailing views on the problem of black males in our schools today. It will be of interest to educators, parents, and youth, and to all professionals and students in the fields of African-American studies, childhood studies, gender studies, juvenile studies, social work, and sociology, as well as anyone who is concerned about the way our schools are shaping the next generation of African American boys. Anne Arnett Ferguson is Assistant Professor of Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies, Smith College.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an excellent book and anyone interested in the future of not only black children but all children in the public school system must read it. Ferguson reintroduces us to a world many of us have long left behind and almost forgotten-elementary school. But more importantly she gives us a new perspective on the plight of young black men. Looking specifically at how the public school system constructs and imagines young black boys as troublemakers, Ferguson reveals how well intentioned educators contribute and reinforce negative and racist stereotypes about black men. Ferguson, however, is at her best when she demonstrates how young black boys through daily resistance (understood by teachers as making trouble) attempt to challenge a system that devalues their ways of knowing and expressing themselves. Read this book and give it to a teacher, a mother, a father, a grandparent, anyone who is interested in making sure that all children get a quality education.

Bad Boys by Ann Arnette Ferguson was an amazing book. I appreciated the ways that the theory that I have been reading flowed out of it. The book reminded me of the experiences that I have had teaching, in particular the school I taught at last year. Last year I taught at a school which was attended by predominately African American students. Many of the children's experiences that Ferguson described were extremely familiar to me. I thought that she did an excellent job of illustrating the ways that cultural and social reproduction is espoused in schools. The descriptions of the forms of discipline within schools and the ways in which teachers are expected to regulate discipline were very familiar to me. In fact this book addressed the very reasons that it was hard for me to be a teacher within our current education system. The job description of "normalizer" did not fit my personality. The pressure that I felt from the principal of my school was very much in line with the following quote from page 43. One of the systemic pressures making for more oppressive, punitive relations for African American children is the fear that white middle-class families will increasingly pull their children out of the public school and send them to private schools. Pressure is felt by the student specialist and "Jail Keeper" to contain, suppress, and conceal damaging

behavior that could contribute to the school's reputation as a hostile environment. This pressure in my school was not limited to the people who had the specific job description of disciplinarian (which there were three of, not including the principal), it was put onto every teacher within the school. From an outside perspective everything had to have the appearance of running smoothly, even if that meant that children were not learning in the most effective manner. The discussion of student's resistance was interesting and slightly hilarious to me (in an ironic way). Some of the descriptions reminded me of students in my classroom and things that happened both in my classroom and in my school. Ferguson spoke of "the rewards that children might actually gain from getting in trouble" (92) and reputations. In my second grade classroom I had a student named Diandre who was significantly below grade level standards in all academic subjects. In fact he wrote his first and last name backwards. Diandre was like Horace in the book who had a reputation that preceeded him. Students talked about the things he did, as well as teachers. Diandre had learned before he entered my classroom that if he "acted out" he didn't have to do his school work. My goal was to help him. However, other students understood my behavior in a way that I gave Diandre more attention because he was "bad". As a result one student in particular started "acting out". When I sat down to talk to her I came to understand that she was doing what she was doing so that she could get my attention. Overall I felt that the book was powerful and motivating. I also think that this book is an important piece of work in that it gives these African American male students an outlet to speak about their experience that they would not have had access to. I appreciated what Ferguson said at the end of the book on page 234, "My hesitation to propose solutions comes from a conviction that minor inputs, temporary interventions, individual prescriptions into schools are vastly inadequate to remedy an institution that is fundamentally flawed and whose goal for urban black children seems to be the creation of "a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society". I stand convinced that a restructuring of the entire educational system is what is urgently required. This book gives an excellent account of the ways in which our society uses our education system to reproduce our children to fit the molds assigned to them. It specifically speaks of the experience of African American male students and the systemic things that cause this. This book will either reinforce what one knows about this experience or open one's eyes to what is going on in our schools for African American students. I recommend this book to everyone!

Some will not like the content of this book because it disturbs their "post-racial" world view of United States society. Some will not like it because they themselves stand indicted. Others will weep or nearly weep as did I, because Dr. Ferguson affirms that what was hoped to be a local, misread

problem is exactly what it appears to be. If you look at the inner-city and wonder what are the roots of the chaos, mayhem and poverty, you will find a major root in this book - the administration of public education in Black and Latino communities. Education is the one humanly administered faculty that can level the playing field for all people. It is an indispensable foundation for true democracy, creating intellectual capital in the form of invention, creativity, industry and prosperity. Unfortunately, public education as an institution has been used to deform and debase the intellect and potential of some, a device to manipulate self-esteem, achievement and to create a class of underlings and slaves. I can say no more than you must read this one and Dr. Raymond Winbush's "The Warrior Method: A Parents' Guide to Rearing Healthy Black Boys" .

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