

1st Time Contributor to
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Using Norma Fox Mazer's *Out of Control* to Reach Kids Where They Hide

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Leaders and followers become the main topic of discussion in my sophomore class every year. Fortunately, literature is filled with an abundance of leaders and followers. We start out the year with *A Different Drummer*, by William Melvin Kelly, a very good start for talking about leaders and followers. Other core literature is *Othello*, *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *The Catcher in the Rye*—full of leaders and followers. But probably the book that helps them with this lesson most personally is Norma Fox Mazer's *Out of Control*. After we finish that book, leaders and followers are not only clearly defined in the “teen” vocabulary, but each student can pick out examples in his/her daily life. Such is the magic of YA literature. It finds them where they are hiding. Our early discussions examine two types of leaders and two types of followers. There are wise leaders and ignorant leaders, and there are wise followers and ignorant followers. After they have defined each type, I ask my students which of the four is most important in a community, whether in a school or a town or a country, and then I sit back and listen to their thoughts and watch as they struggle through some adult reasoning. They usually start our choosing the wise leader as most important. “So,” I ask, “how many leaders can we have?” “Oh, that’s true.” And how is a wise leader chosen? By the followers. Okay, what kind of followers?

There is responsibility in following. Most of their lives, my students have heard, “Be a leader! Don’t be a follower!” and have felt guilty when it wasn’t as easily done as ordered. Ignorant followers choose blindly, irresponsibly, and are swayed by hype and packaging. It’s hit-or-miss randomness. Ignorant leaders make their decisions based on narrow reasoning, not considering the over all situation and the long term effects of these decisions. We talk about how wise leaders have to make choices, decisions based on thought and knowledge; so do wise followers.

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Rollo Wingate, in *Out of Control*, has been an ignorant follower and now must pay the consequences. Rollo introduces himself:

“I don’t know what to call it. It wasn’t what my father said. It wasn’t an assault. We didn’t beat her up or rape her or anything. It wasn’t like that. It was just. . . it was something we did and, like Candy said, it got a little out of hand.”
(*Out of Control* 2)

Rollo loves being part of the “Lethal Threesome” made up of himself and Julian Briggers, AKA Brig, and Kevin Candrella, AKA Candy. They are the stars of the Junior Class. The school newspaper refers to them as Mr. Stomp of the Football Team (Rollo), Mr. Star Pitcher and Mr. Prez of Honor Society (Brig), and Mr. Prez of Student Senate (Candy).

They are privileged males who are rarely challenged. Life is a good old time. Rollo loves hanging out with these two; they are his best friends, his buddies. Their unity gives him the security of belonging. He lets Brig and Candy make the decisions—Rollo is along for the ride; his favorite word is

“whatever”: “I love the word. You can just . . . say it. . . . You don’t have to think about anything. You don’t have to think about . . . her. You don’t have to figure out is what you did was right or wrong. You can just sort of blank your mind and go . . . whatever” (*Control* 7).

Rollo would never call himself a follower—or a leader. He would just say he was one of the guys. In the cafeteria, the guys play a stare-down game. They choose a target, a girl, usually a pretty one, and then bet on how she will react to their staring at her. It’s a form of intimidation, a bully tactic. They purposely make a person feel uncomfortable. Rollo doesn’t think about if it is right or wrong, he is just one of the threesome doing what they do. Interestingly, he never targets the girl he has a crush on.

This is where I start a discussion about bullying. I use that term rather than “harassment” because the language is less sensitive and I don’t want to lose anyone yet. Every one of my students has a bully story. In fact, as a whole class, they share a few common memories: When they were in elementary school, there was a boy that was always picked on—they give names and retell incidents and all their heads nod in agreement. After a particularly bad day, that boy decided to run away. He was hit by a truck and died. Everyone remembers and everyone carries a little bruise of guilt, even though some of these events happened six or seven years ago. In her book, Norma Fox Mazer has opened a door that allows my students, with their sophomore maturity, to revisit past behaviors. I pull from Allan L. Beane’s book, *The Bully Free Classroom*, and we talk about the myths around bullying. We look at the recent shootings in schools around our country and the evidence that 2/3 of these were done by kids who were alienated because they were different. We look at our school’s “Acceptance Not Harassment” poster and it becomes something more than just words on the bulletin board. Suddenly a stare-down game played by three guys during lunch does not look so innocent.

One day the Lethal Threesome picks on the wrong girl and she fights back. Valerie Michon is not in their clique. She’s a serious art student and focuses her whole being on art instead of on trying to fit in. She doesn’t dress in the accepted styles, though she lives on the wealthier side of town; she tutors and has a secret crush on Mark, a guy from the “other side of town.” Valerie does not shy away from the Lethal Threesome. When they target her in the cafeteria, she marches up to them and calls them “Morons”—something none of them had bet on or even imagined. When Brig pretends to grab at her breasts in the hallway and Rollo and Candy snicker, Valerie calls Brig at home and tells him to leave her alone (a dangerous move, as we are no longer in a time when confronting the bully is a good idea). Brig is not used to being challenged, and transfers to Valerie the frustration he has from breaking up with his girlfriend. That harassment escalates and one day, while the rest of the student body is watching a Christmas play in the auditorium, the three boys follow Valerie up to the third floor art rooms. No one else is around. The boys’ six hands grab at Valerie and her clothes, grope her body and push her to the floor, where Brig climbs on her back. The bell rings (I really like Mazer’s timing, it is as if she is saying, “Go back to your corner!”). Then they “walk down the hall tucking in their shirts.” The attitude in that line particularly irritates my students. The boys WALK. They don’t run or sneak or slither away, they simply walk and tuck in their shirts. Again, I just sit back and listen to my students debate that scene. Mazer has given the reader just enough. Some of the students are not sure it was such a big deal—like Rollo they want to believe “things just got a little out of hand.” Others want to know if Valerie was raped. The passage is read again, inspected word by word, and they are hooked. If they haven’t read one page before, they start reading at that point.

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The book was written in 1993, at the beginning of the decade when schools started awakening to sexual harassment and school liabilities. Some systems are still in slumber. The principal in the book bungles the job and again my “aware” students get angry. How can Mr. Ferrante only give the boys TWO WEEKS SUSPENSION? It must be because they were the privileged upper clique in the schools, their fathers were important in the community—one was a senator. How could Mr. Ferrante suggest Valerie transfer to another school? Isn’t that punishing the victim? The discussion goes on and my students share tales of such happening in our school, as there are similar stories in all schools. (Mazer explained in an interview how she got the idea for *Out of Control*. “I was in a school talking to kids when three boys grabbed and sexually assaulted a girl. I didn’t know anything about it until the librarian told me at the end of the day. I was upset hearing it, in the way one is after hearing bad stuff, but I had no intention of writing a book. Then, after talking for some time

about her concerns around this, the librarian said, ‘And you know, it all happened in less than thirty seconds.’ That statement sent a shock through me. I immediately took my pad out of my pocket and wrote ‘30 seconds that changed the world.’ It was the idea of the swiftness with

which people’s lives can change through an act of stupidity or carelessness or thoughtlessness or viciousness that fascinated me. Which was why I created Rollo as a good hearted follower. He never meant to do harm, but he did” (Gallo interview, www.Authors4Teens.com).

While we are reading the book, each student keeps a reader’s journal with quotations from the text and personal responses. This book does not need worksheets. For some, the reader’s journal is done because it must be; for others it is a disclosure of similar incidents, personally experienced. Sometimes a student needs a private conference; sometimes appropriate referrals are needed. This is a book that can uncover buried memories (which will scare away some teachers).

As the book continues, both Valerie and Rollo search for answers. Valerie has to heal from the experience and deal with the attitudes at school. Slowly, other girls who have had similar experiences seek her out and an informal support group is formed. One of the best things about the book is that Valerie does recover. She is a success story. It certainly isn’t easy; there are flashbacks, nightmares, blaming accusations, snide remarks and blatant insensitivities. She is robbed of “. . . her sense of safety in the world.”

Rollo, a “whatever” kind of follower, does some heavy soul searching. The other two boys are whisked off for family holidays until the whole thing blows over, but Rollo’s father is appalled. When he confronts Rollo and asks for the truth, Rollo uses some of Brig’s words. “We didn’t attack her. It wasn’t like that. . . . We just sort of, we sort of shoved, we . . . It was no big deal, I don’t know what everybody’s getting their knickers in such a twist about” (135). Rollo’s father goes appropriately ballistic. But in Rollo’s head, he

wants to tell, "... about being with his friends and how good it feels and how you never want that good feeling to stop and how that's why you do things sometimes that maybe aren't so smart" (137). Every student in my classes would agree with Rollo. Mazer has made Rollo incredibly human.

Here is the other important theme in the book: being part of something, that peer pressure we all accept when we follow our friends. Rollo's family has suffered: his mother was killed by a drunk driver, his older sister has Down's syndrome, his father is a hardworking accountant doing the best he can but he isn't always accessible to his son. With Brig and Candy, Rollo feels accepted, important and complete. Isn't that good?

That is the dilemma everyone has to face. Each of my students understands or craves the feelings Rollo has when he is with his two best friends. Each one thinks that if he or she could just be in the popular clique, all would be right with the world. Those are the kids who never seem to have problems. Everything falls into place for them, doesn't it? Rollo, they realize, is proof to the contrary.

In an attempt to deal with his guilt, Rollo tries to talk with Valerie. He wants to explain, but most of all he wants her to accept his explanation. She meets him for a cup of hot chocolate. Wanting to apologize but unable to speak the words, Rollo asks Valerie if she wants to hear his story. Not surprisingly, she refuses, incredulous that he even thinks he has a story. She does ask him why he did it. Lamely he starts, but "... he can't say what he's thinking. Not to her face ... Can he say that he followed Brig without thinking ... and that he loved following him? Can he say that she was nothing to him but a pain-in-the-ass girl who was getting on their nerves?" (*Control* 170). When he stays silent, Valerie asks him what he would do if it happened to him, if he was surrounded by too many to fight back, too many who could do what they wanted to him, to humiliate him. All Rollo can say is that he'd fight. "He doesn't want to answer. He doesn't want to think about being helpless. But she's forcing him to think about it. Forcing him to think how humiliated he'd be, how his cheeks would burn and his heart pound a mile a minute" (*Control* 180). Perhaps he now understands what they did to Valerie. Then one of the female students will ask the guys in our class what they would do in a powerless situation. Just like Rollo, they have trouble seeing that they could be so vulnerable, so much a victim. Our culture has not allowed women a similar luxury.

Rollo starts his recovery. He and his dad have several serious talks and Rollo starts to think about his choices and his past behaviors. "One thought he has is that he was a go-along. A follower. Someone who didn't ask questions or think for himself. It's kind of scary to have that thought; the only good part about it is that he has another thought: I'll never be a go-along again" (200).

In choosing to no longer be an ignorant follower, Rollo is ready to accept some responsibility and decision making. As the book ends, we get the impression that Rollo will be a loner—at least for awhile. Maybe his new maturity will be recognized by others and give him the confidence he needs to be a leader, hopefully a wise leader. Maybe he will be what the world needs most, a wise follower who chooses carefully whom to support, who chooses wise leaders and who holds both himself and that leader accountable.

Out of Control can work with middle school and early high school kids. The reading is accessible, the content appropriate, the message essential. One sophomore boy told me it was the best book he'd ever read in his life. Angelia wrote "... [this is] a subject most teachers avoid talking about." Evieana thought, "It showed how harassment in school is really handled ... the principal really didn't do much to punish the boys." Greg noted, "It was believable and showed how people become followers." Terryl summed it up when he said, "It dealt with real problems in school life." Again, that magic of YA literature, brought to us this time by Norma Fox Mazer, sensitive observer, gifted writer, and wise magician.

Works Cited

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