

May I Recommend Three Brand New, Stunning YA Books for Your Summer Reading List

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Big Mouth and Ugly Girl, by Joyce Carol Oates (HarperCollins, to be released May, 2002)

This is the first young adult novel that prolific novelist and Princeton professor of creative writing Joyce Carol Oates has written. While the genre is new to Oates, the issues she addresses in *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, including teens' struggle to balance self-loathing with self-acceptance, the imperative of peer relationships, and the reality of the threat of violence in today's high schools, are familiar to readers of contemporary adolescent/young adult fiction. Matt Donaghy is a well-liked class clown whose reputation and links to friends are ruined when he is accused of threatening to blow up his high school. Although he has been kidding when he made the threat, two sisters—the daughters of a local fundamentalist preacher—overhear him and report him to school administrators. Matt is suspended pending investigation, and his parents are incensed; they decide to sue the school for injury to Matt's reputation. It is the tall, socially-awkward, and powerfully athletic Ursula Riggs who, without promoting, steps in to speak on Matt's behalf. Although he is allowed to return to school, he is ostracized and becomes so despondent that he contemplates suicide. Again, fortuitously, Ursula shows up and, noticing that he is teetering on the ledge of a cliff, coaxes him toward safety.

Matt refers to himself as "Big Mouth," for obvious reasons. Ursula takes pride in her private sobriquet, "Ugly Girl." The use of these believable self-imposed labels by the two protagonists is one of the most interesting features of the story. Adolescent girls will understand that Ugly Girl's aggressive and abrupt manner is a shield behind which she hides the fact that she is not the traditional kind of young lady whom her mother and sister expect her to be. Big Mouth kicks himself with his moniker, reminding himself that he tends to carry jokes too far, and that he inadvertently causes miscommunication. Through a series of emails and telephone calls, the two misfits become comrades in the fight against their classmates' rejection and hypocrisy, then they become real friends. The positive, affirming ending of this story may disappoint readers who see themselves as Ugly Girl or Big Mouth, since their own conflicts are not so easily resolved. Some might even read Oates' ending as indicative of a problem with adults: we think we can provide pat answers to teens' complicated problems. Perhaps, though, adolescent readers will also find hope in the notion that they, too, can define friendship on their own terms, and learn to accept others and themselves.

Oates, in her first novel for adolescents, writes with a style that YA advocates might recognize as a blend of Francesca Lia Block and Chris Crutcher—she creates off-center, charmingly different characters who have a host of realistic teen dilemmas.

Breaking Point, by Alex Flinn (HarperTempest, to be released May, 2002)

This book is terrifying in its potent portrayal of social realities in some adolescents' worlds. Paul Richmond narrates, from within the walls of a juvenile detention center, the story of his year at an exclusive private school in Miami—the year in which his life was forever changed. Paul is not rich enough to attend the school, but he is given a tuition waiver because his mother works in the main office. Home-schooled by his overly-protective mother after his father left the home, Paul is uncomfortable in every situation. His greatest wish is to be able to make a few friends.

When a school icon, Charlie Good, pays attention to him, Paul is overwhelmed with gratitude. He begins to define right and wrong in terms of what Charlie asks him to do; as an initiation into Charlie's group of friends, for example, Paul bashes mailboxes while riding in Charlie's car, swigging hard liquor with the rest of Charlie's gang. When Charlie asks him to break into the school to change a

grade that mars Charlie's otherwise perfect record, Paul reluctantly agrees. Despite serious misgivings, Paul is so caught up in the idea that he is becoming popular, that he is willing to sacrifice his own sense of right to Charlie Good.

Flinn introduces a kid named David, a strange outcast and the son of the school's groundskeeper and a cafeteria worker, as a shadowy figure who serves as a warning to Paul about what can happen when someone gets too close to Charlie Good—and when someone crosses him. David, we learn, had been accepted into Charlie's group the previous year, but this year, his life is miserable and isolated; somehow, he denied Charlie and is now suffering the consequences of continual taunting, and worse. When David's dog is killed, in revenge for its habit of using the bathroom on the school's tennis court (where Charlie reigns as king), Paul recognizes the fact that Charlie and his group are trouble. Again, though, he pushes aside his misgivings in order to revel in Charlie's attention. Even David's suicide, which Paul witnesses, is not enough to force Paul to denounce Charlie as a friend.

Finally, Charlie manipulates Paul into helping him plant a bomb in the school. He assures Paul that the bomb is designed only to scare the biology teacher; they use plans they find on the internet, using Paul's password on Charlie's computer, to build it. When the bomb is discovered, short of exploding, Paul and Charlie are questioned. Paul confesses; Charlie, wrapped in the protection of his powerful and rich father, denies any connection to the plan, and is found guiltless. Charlie, of course, rejects Paul; finally, when he is sent away to serve two years in a detention center, Paul realizes that the friendship for which he had sold his soul was a sham. Flinn paints a bleak picture of a teen who is willing to do anything to be popular and accepted. Though it may read as an extreme case, her warning to teens and those of us who work with them is right on target.

Hole in My Life, by Jack Gantos (Farrar Straus and Giroux, to be released April, 2002)

For those of us who know successful, popular YA novelist Jack Gantos through books like *Jack's Black Book*, *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* and *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, *Hole in My Life* will come as a shock.

This is the autobiographical account of Gantos' six years in prison, where he served a sentence for his role in sailing a ship loaded with tons of hashish from the Virgin Islands to New York City, and for selling the drug in the city. As a reader, it was difficult for me—as it will be for others who are fans of Gantos' fiction—to reconcile the image I have of funny, light-hearted Jack Gantos with the image of him in a prison uniform, enduring such a troubling situation. This is a significant book, though, and one that teenagers will read and return to for many reasons. Gantos does not sugarcoat his story; he presents himself, during his late teen years, as a prospective loser, someone who was more interested in drinking and dreaming about writing a novel than in producing any creative work, someone for whom a day job in a restaurant was sufficient. He was easily bored with his life, and dismayed when the family moved to the Virgin Islands upon the hopes of his father, who built houses, that the economy of the Virgin Islands would bring relief to the family's financial drought. At this time, Gantos acknowledges, he was easily won over into illegal dealings by a smooth-talking, educated acquaintance, one who used money as a tool to seduce Gantos into service on the drug ship. The good news of this book, and the message that Gantos must be sending, is that early mistakes, even if they mark someone for life, do not have to define him for life. It was during his time in prison, while he was working in the clinic, that he finally began to write.