

Why We Must Read Young Adult Books that Deal with Sexual Content

At its very best, I find reading to be a totally engrossing experience; the characters and events live inside me even when the book is closed and sitting on a shelf. Because of this relationship, I sometimes have to read the ending first to find out if the dog dies. I understand self-censorship because there are some books just too violent, too intense for me. There are many reasons people self-censor—the topic makes us feel uncomfortable; it goes against our personal beliefs; we don't believe such things could happen; or maybe the book touches on a personal experience that is still too tender, too emotional to revisit just yet. Other people will only read happy endings, sighting there is enough sadness in the world already. I can admit to saying that.

Teenagers have different comfort levels and different interests than we, their teachers and librarians. I do not understand why some students like to exclusively read the extremely sad stories of people with abusive lives or fatal diseases, or stories with seemingly no hope. Others want to read about blood and gore; others still, monsters or psychopaths.

Some students want to read books that validate their experiences and that give them hope and comfort in their loneliness and school invisibility—because many

of our teens do not find themselves in the pages of the curriculum we are contracted to use. Books helped me define myself; it is the same for many of our students.

When I choose not to read an adult title, I am mainly making that decision for myself. But if I do not read these young adult (YA) books, then I cannot recommend them to students, blocking one more path to these books' rightful readers. Recommendations from teachers and librarians are often the only way teens hear about such books. I am not saying I would recommend any title to any young person, but rather that, as an adult who works with young people, I need to be aware of these often-controversial books, because such books may be exactly what one of my students needs.

As young adult literature grows and stretches its boundaries, more topics are being written about. Sex is always a controversial topic in young adult literature, with rape being one of the edgiest topics. Trying to pretend rape does not exist is dangerously ignorant. Though a few YA books do discuss rape, there are many YA books that focus only on the aftermath of rape, showing how the victim

struggles to reclaim her or his life. Four of the best YA books that deal with this topic are *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, *Target* by Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson,

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Inexcusable by Chris Lynch, and *Jailbait* by Leslea Newman.

Most people have read or at least heard about *Speak*, Laurie Halse Anderson's story of Melinda Sordino's freshman year after she has been raped by an upper classman during an end-of-the-summer party. While Melinda is calling the police for help, others at the party think she is turning them in for drinking. Melinda races home, showers away all physical evidence, and never reports the rape. Then she shuts down. During the next year Melinda slowly recovers from the trauma of rape while being ostracized by the entire school population. This book chronicles Melinda's odyssey. She connects with a few very special people, the art teacher and a few students in her art class, before she gets to the point when she realizes, "The time has come to arm-wrestle some demons." The beauty of this book comes from her return to health. She not only survives, she regains her self and her voice. How many of our female students need to arm-wrestle some demons and think it is too impossible to try? Imagine how Melinda's courage might inspire them.

Target is about male rape, a topic rarely mentioned in the teenage world because so few males believe it can happen. But sixteen-year-old Grady West is walking home from a concert when a van stops beside him and the man driving asks directions, while a second man comes up behind him. Grady is beaten, immobilized, and dragged into the back of the van where he is raped anally and orally before being dumped partially clothed on the street (This is the opening chapter in the book, then time switches to a year later). Like Melinda, Grady spends the next year trying to recover. Sure that the account published in the newspaper gave just enough details that everyone at school knew he was the tall, strong, young male who was raped, and that everyone will assume it was a homosexual encounter that turned violent, Grady transfers to another school. He cannot eat, because he still has trouble swallowing. He doubts his sexuality and himself in ways he never did before the rape. As does Melinda in *Speak*, he finds a safe space in art class and connects with a few students who also have secrets. Teenage boys are reckless and careless in their behaviors and beliefs. They are completely confident that rape can not happen to men, and if it does, it says more about the victim than the rapist. That attitude

parallels the attitudes women have fought nearly forever. Discussions generated from books like *Target* may save the males in our classes from their own macho bravado.

Inexcusable is about date rape told from the male's point of view. Keir Sarafian believes he is a good guy, a fairly decent student, starter on the football team, and popular with the "right" kids at school. He doesn't plan to rape Gigi Boudakian, whom he has loved from afar. He respects her and her relationship with her Air Force boyfriend stationed just too far away to make it home for prom. Keir has grown up in a loving though dysfunctional family. His best friend and drinking partner is his father. His two older sisters, who have protected Keir from family secrets, have gone on to college. A popular football jock, Keir is privileged at school and at home and has a sense of self that is not grounded in reality, particularly when he is drinking. He and Gigi have been friends for years, and he loves her. As the realities of his life start to become obvious, Keir turns to Gigi for support and believes her kindness is born of her need for him. The story is told in flashbacks, after the rape has happened. The author slowly reveals the story and the events that created Keir's misinformation about his own life and his relationship with Gigi. He keeps saying, "I couldn't have done what she says, I am a good guy. Just ask anybody." Keir has grown up the way some of our male students have, with a belief that they can do anything, that they deserve anything, can say anything, and have earned the privileges they take for granted. That, mixed with a misunderstood definition of date rape, can be very dangerous. *Inexcusable* provides the opportunity for much needed discussions on this topic for both our male and female students.

Jailbait deals with statutory rape, a topic teens need to be more conscious of. Andrea Kaplan is 15 years old and very lonely. The best relationship in her life is with her older brother who is away at college. Her parents barely communicate with each other or her. Andrea's mother seems caught in a valium-controlled depression, constantly worrying about her own weight and trying to monitor Andrea's. Her father is a dentist who works too many hours to be available. At school, Andrea is harassed because of her large breasts. To avoid the school bus and the taunts, she walks home, which is how she meets Frank, seem-

ingly just an older guy driving by who takes the time to wave to her each day. There is nothing special about him except he notices Andrea. They slowly develop a relationship that starts from that simple

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wave and progresses to groping in an abandoned model home. Frank is a master manipulator, and Andrea is extremely needy. The fact that she tells Frank her name is Vanessa proves she knows the situation was wrong from the beginning. Frank tells her how beautiful she is, how voluptuous her breasts are, as he un-

dresses her and caresses her. No one has ever said such things to her. Then Frank says they cannot have sex because it would be statutory rape. She begs him, saying she wants it and that should make it okay. After several months of meeting and touching, Andrea finally convinces Frank, and on her sixteenth birthday, they plan to have sex. As the reader realizes, Frank is a dangerous personality and the waited for event turns into a three-second rape with none of the tenderness and caring Frank has lavished on her for the past several months. The next time is worse. But Andrea keeps going back, fantasizing about the tender moments and making excuses for the violent ones, until Frank stops showing up. It is Andrea's inability to let go of what she knows is an unhealthy relationship that makes me believe this book must be read. This is rape of a willing but insecure and unknowing victim who never tells anyone until a year later when she shares it with her brother. How many of our female students easily fall into such a relationship? How many stay tied to that type of relationship and lose all sense of self? And how many carry this pattern into adulthood?

English teachers, of course, but also sociology/psychology teachers, social workers, counselors, facilitators in support groups, and librarians helping students find the right book need to know such books exist. These books can be used in several different ways. They can be used alone or in pairs, or in literary circles. *Speak* and *Target* make a logical pairing. Melinda and Grady each spend a silent year trying to

reenter the world, trying to recover from the violence done to them. Again, *Target* should be available to our male students because rape can happen to anyone, regardless of gender.

Some educators have suggested *Inexcusable* could be paired with *Speak*, but a very clear distinction must be made between the rape in *Speak* and the date rape in *Inexcusable*. Melinda, in *Speak*, did not have a relationship with her attacker. He was a perpetrator who violated several girls. Keir does not fit that role. He and Gigi have a longstanding relationship; there is a mutual attraction that played a part in the event. It was date rape, but Gigi has some responsibility in the event while Melinda does not. However, *Inexcusable* clearly shows the progression of circumstances that may lead to date rape. Every dating person, teen or adult, would benefit from reading this book.

Jailbait educates us on the dangers of inappropriate and secret partners. Caught in the idealized, romantic world of fifteen years olds, Andrea is lured by the excitement of an older man's attention and the intoxication of such a secret. She is very lucky Frank left before he caused her more pain. How many of our female students are easy prey for men like Frank? What could they learn from reading and discussing such a book? How would they define statutory rape?

Oral sex is another topic not avoided in recent YA books. Many adults are uncomfortable with this topic and won't talk to each other about it; even fewer will talk with teens. But teenage oral sex has been talked about on Oprah and the Dr. Phil show with middle school girls sitting in the hot seat and saying, "It isn't sex, it is just something I do for my friend!" Casually or as the main theme, oral sex in being discussed in YA books. The two most recent books with this subject are *Rainbow Party* by Paul Ruditis and *Sandpiper* by Ellen Wittlinger.

Rainbow Party has caused the most buzz, because the term defines an oral sex party where each girl wears a different shade of lipstick and at the end of the party each boy's penis sports a rainbow of colors. Gin has invited six males and six females to her afternoon rainbow party, just enough time before her parents get home from work. There are many doubts in the two hours before the party, and the reader learns of each student's doubts as their voices alternate between the chapters. The value of this book comes from the realistic and honest discussion of

these doubts. Those who are invited are like the kids in our classes: they want to be popular and they want to do what is right. Unfortunately it is sometimes impossible to do both. In *Rainbow Party* only one male shows up. The rainbow party never happens—at least in this book—though it probably is happening in a school near you. At the end of the book, thirty-nine members of the sophomore class have gonorrhea, which is another reason we should read this book. The students in the book and in our classes are ignorant of the dangers of orally transmitted sexual diseases, as are many adults.

Sandpiper handles the topic of oral sex in a much different way and is a more teachable book. The main character, Piper, hears in the eighth grade that the best way to get a boyfriend is to offer oral sex, and so she did. She had boyfriend after boyfriend until she realized there wasn't anything else in the relationship. Now in ninth grade, she not only has a group of angry former boyfriends, she also has a terrible reputation that labels her as a slut. Not only does the whole school know, but Piper realizes so does her younger sister who has to live under that shadow. The book opens after Piper has made the decision to change. There isn't any oral sex in the book, just the consequences. Our students rarely think they will be judged by their actions; they do not believe in reputations unless they are talking about someone else. Piper earned a terrible reputation and at least one angry former boyfriend who decides to get even for being dumped. With the help of her other former boyfriends, he harasses her secretly and publicly. Nearly every one thinks she deserves it, and where can she go for help?

Would I teach *Rainbow Party* in my classroom? Probably not. It is not particularly well written, is pretty one-dimensional, none of the characters are very likeable, and though the party doesn't happen, there are descriptions of two other sexual events. But there is an immense value in the discussion it would raise around the issue of oral sex. Just discussing the characters' reasons for not attending the party validates the belief that our young people have morals and standards. *Sandpiper* could easily lead to such a discussion, but it offers much more. Piper sounds just like the girls on Dr. Phil's show, stubbornly insisting there aren't any consequences to oral sex. It really is just something one does for a friend. Or in her case, to get a boyfriend—and it worked, until Piper wanted a

relationship that wasn't just about giving him oral sex. Her actions have labeled her. Her reputation precedes her, isolates her, embarrasses her, and eventually haunts her. Many of our students are stunned by the reputations they earn as the result of their actions, actions they will defend but refuse to take responsibility for. That is one of the great values of this book. It is very well written and the characters are fully developed and likable. The plot does not just focus on how Piper earned her reputation, but on how she is now dealing with the aftermath. If Piper had been able to read *Rainbow Party*, I wonder if she would have made different choices? Perhaps reading *Sandpiper* will help our teen girls to make better choices?

These books and many like them can provide lifelines for some students. Offering them on a list of books for outside reading or extra credit reading provides awareness of these books but also offers choices for all students and parents. Sometimes it is as simple as carrying the book with your lesson plans and grade book while traveling from class to class to show you are reading it. Students see it, and ask about it, and an opportunity to share happens. Talking up the book with the local and school librarian often starts a cross communication about books they have read. Be sure to attend the YA literature sessions at the November NCTE conference, and of course, the two day ALAN workshop where each attendee gets a sack load of books and the chance to meet and listen to more than two dozen YA authors so that you can educate yourself about the newest books. There are books being written by insightful authors and published by courageous publishers that will never make it into the hands of the students who need them, unless we read them first.

C.J. Bott, a retired high school English teacher of 30 years, presently works as an educational consultant on *Young Adult Literature and Issues of Bullying and Harassment*. She is also the author of *The Bully in the Book* and in the *Classroom*, Scarecrow Press, 2004.

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