

“Today I’m going to meet a boy:”

Teachers and Students Respond to *Fifteen* and *Speak*

One of the remarkable things that literature has to offer its readers is the opportunity to closely observe a slice of constructed reality; a book can be read, reread, analyzed and dissected, and used to compare it to other realities. The idea of pairing books to examine different societies is certainly not new. High school teachers have found it very helpful to pair adolescent literature with classic texts to help young readers see themes and ideas that persist throughout history. For example, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* can be taught alongside Bette Green’s *Summer of my German Soldier* to examine the theme of doomed young love.

Another way that literature is used is to reveal alien cultures, to provide a window into a world that is very different from the readers. Teenagers reading *Shabanu*, by Suzanne Fisher Staples, have a chance to peek into the world of nomadic Pakistani tribes in the latter decades of the 20th century, and compare it to their lives.

The thoughtful teacher who introduces these texts always prefaces them by explaining that they are the author’s view of the constructed reality, not reality itself. Good teachers pose questions that force readers to research whether the purported culture is authentically portrayed, and what the agenda is of the author. Nevertheless, the opportunity to contrast different worlds, especially

when one of the worlds is the reader’s own, is of great help in developing adolescents’ critical consideration of their role and participation in that world.

Those of us who are concerned about adolescent girls constantly look for ways to help them understand what is happening to them. One report suggests that, compared to boys, adolescent girls experience greater stress, are twice as likely to be depressed, and are four times as likely to commit suicide (Rothenberg 1997). In the United States, girls under fifteen are five times more likely to give birth than female teens in other industrialized nations (Brumberg 1997). In the 1997 Commonwealth Fund Survey of 3,532 high school girls and boys, reported by Johnson, Roberts and Worell, over 20% of the girls said they had been physically or sexually abused (9). 23% of the girls had experienced depressive symptoms in the two weeks prior to the

survey (9). Statistics gathered in 2002 reveal that one to four percent of girls exhibit clinical anorexia nervosa or bulimia, and a far greater number experience disordered eating habits such as binge eating, extremely restrictive dieting, fasting, laxative abuse, or vomiting (“Statistics: How many”). This picture is very disturbing, and as teachers at the high school and college level, we are interested in using literature to discuss what societal forces are at work that might be creating this grim picture for at least some of our adolescent girls.

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One way of understanding what has happened to the society surrounding adolescent girls in the last half of the twentieth century is to compare Beverly Cleary's book, *Fifteen*, to Laurie Anderson's novel, *Speak*. The two stories, both centered on the experiences of high school girls, were written 43 years apart, *Fifteen* in 1956 and *Speak* in 1999. They reveal dramatic changes in the social fabric of America from the middle fifties to the end of the century, particularly in the ways that adolescent girls come of age.

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There are so many parallels in the books that it appears that Anderson could have written *Speak* as a dark companion reader to *Fifteen*.

In *Fifteen*, the central character is Jane Purdy. We find out that this is her name in the first sentence. This early candor sets the tenor of the book: everything is transparent, and there are very few secrets. We know all about Jane's thoughts and wishes because the author clearly reveals them to us. The third sentence informs the reader of Jane's preoccupation

throughout the book: "Today I'm going to meet a boy" (1). Indeed, Jane does meet a boy. The boy, Stan, is handsome, pleasant, appealing, and slightly older than Jane. Like Jane, he comes from a white, middle class family. The book traces their burgeoning romance, which goes smoothly, barring a few hitches. First, Stan does not ask Jane to the first school dance, because he has already invited an old girlfriend from his former school. Unfortunately, he does not tell Jane this until after the dance, but finally he explains and all is forgiven. Second, Stan has an unexpected appendectomy, which puts him out of the picture for a while, but which ultimately allows Jane to declare her feelings for him and actually makes the relationship stronger. The book ends with Jane and Stan "going steady," which has been Jane's goal all along. Like Jane and Stan, the other characters in the book are also white, middle class and pleasant. Jane's mother and father (her father's occupation is unspecified, but

her mother is a stay-home mom) are devoted to Jane and are very protective of her. Jane's mother insists that Jane wear clothes that are somewhat childish, and Jane's father teases her about her boyfriend. They provide some of the gentle humor that is found throughout the book. Jane's best friend, Julie, is totally supportive of Jane and very much like her. They run a baby-sitting service together. The only moderately unpleasant character is a girl named Marcy, who is in Jane and Julie's class and is popular, self-absorbed and arrogant. The book does have a theme of sorts: Jane realizes that when she tries to act like Marcy, she makes both her friends and herself miserable. When she acts like herself—agreeable and friendly—she is happy. Jane sums up this concept as she thinks to herself, "She would remember she was Jane Purdy and no one else. Maybe she was doing the wrong thing, but that was the way she was" (176).

The contrast between *Fifteen* and *Speak* could not be starker. Both books open with girls who are getting ready to go back to school. However, while Jane is looking forward to it, *Speak*'s central character, Melinda, is dreading it. We do not even know Melinda's name until the twenty-fourth page of the novel. We only know that something is very wrong in Melinda's life, since her good friends from the previous school year will not speak to her. We find out on page 27 that Melinda "called the cops" during a summer party. Gradually we learn that Melinda harbors a secret, about which she cannot speak, that is making her withdrawn and depressed. Melinda was raped at the summer party, but has been unable to tell anyone about it. Unlike Jane Purdy, luckily endowed with a supporting cast of characters, Melinda is alone. Her parents, both of whom work, seem to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge the depth of Melinda's despair. Her best friend Rachel has turned on her after the cop-calling incident, and the rest of her middle school friends are simply ignoring her. Melinda does meet a new "friend," Heather, but Heather ultimately betrays Melinda in her attempts to become part of a clique.

The central boy in Melinda's life is the boy who raped her. Never calling the perpetrator by name, Melinda refers to him only as "IT." This depersonalization is an attempt to objectify her traumatic experience. Melinda's nerdy biology lab partner, David, is a possible male counter to "IT." He expresses an interest

in being Melinda's friend, but Melinda has difficulty connecting to anyone because of her rape. The theme of the book centers on Melinda's loss of identity due to the trauma she has endured. In the novel, she slowly loses the ability to speak as she sinks deeper and deeper into despair. She is saved from complete annihilation by several things, including an art teacher who challenges her to express her feelings through art and a message she writes on a bathroom wall that warns other girls of "IT." These actions give Melinda the courage to tell her former best friend Rachel about her experience, and although at first Rachel does not believe her, Melinda becomes empowered by the event. At the end of the novel, "IT" attempts to rape Melinda again. This time, however, she has the ability to scream and to fight back. Though dark, *Speak* offers frequent, biting moments of sarcastic humor through Melinda's descriptions of her teachers and the cliques that exist at her high school.

These two books show the challenges that girls have faced for centuries. The role of the female has traditionally been to subvert her own wishes and desires in order to assume the role of nurturer and caretaker. The expectation of the adolescent girl is that she will adhere to the commandments of society, winning a male who will fulfill the role of decision-maker and provider. That is evidently Jane Purdy's main goal in *Fifteen*—one at which she succeeds. This role was well-established in America in 1956. Despite the sacrifice that was required, there were systems in place that supported the adolescent girl in her tasks. For one thing, mothers were expected to remain at home to provide guidance, support and unconditional love for their daughters. Fathers—at least those of the middle class—remained married to their wives and contributed to the financial security of a household that sheltered young women from financial worries. It was expected that young men would respect young ladies and protect their innocence. Girls were placed at the center of a neighborhood or town in which the inhabitants knew them and contributed to their senses of security and protection. This is the experience of Jane Purdy, and of many (though certainly not all) girls in America in the 1950's. Of course, this security was purchased at a very high cost: girls were discouraged from seeking their own careers and personal fulfillment.

However, by 1996, for many of the girls in America, these protective systems were gone. In modern homes, mothers are usually working, and their children are not the sole focus of their lives. This does not have to be devastating, but in many cases it is. Melinda's mother is too stressed out and distracted by work to deal with Melinda's increasing problems. Although Melinda does have two parents (or two half-parents?) many girls in America do not have a father in the home for a large part of their lives, since more than half of all marriages end in divorce. This means that America's girls have experienced a loss of financial and emotional security. Like Jane, Melinda wants to meet a boy, so she goes to a party where she meets what she thinks is an attractive, charming suitor. She reflects ". . . I thought for just a minute there that I had a boyfriend, I would start high school with a boyfriend, older and stronger and ready to watch out for me" (135). But he ends up violating her. This is not surprising: Mary Pipher quotes a study from the 1980's that showed that more than half of the teens questioned (both males and females) believed that forced sex was justified if the girl had "led the guy on" (p206). There is very little sense of community in modern cities and towns; the rise of urban sprawl and mammoth suburbs has created neighborhoods of strangers who do not even speak to one another.

In Jane Purdy's day, teenage girls were expected to be pretty, sweet, and loveable. The role of "Kitten" on "Father Knows Best" (the title is exemplary of the era) typified the eager, pleasant young woman society required. What is the young woman of today supposed to be? Because of the pervasive influences of television and MTV, fashion magazines and movies, today's teen is expected to fulfill all of the following roles: sex kitten, waif, seductress, and fashion model, but also athlete, scholar and homemaker. It is too

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much for many girls, who withdraw into depression, drug abuse, and even suicide as they give up on trying to achieve the behaviors expected of them with little support and no safety nets.

It is important to note that *Fifteen* was certainly not an accurate portrayal of the majority of girls in the 1950's; nor, certainly, is *Speak* a portrait of every girl in the late 1990's. Both books are the authors' constructions of the reality experienced by themselves or their daughters as teenagers. But read together, these books reveal real changes in the world that now envelops adolescent girls.

Because we feel that these two books are so illustrative of what has happened to the world of American girls, we decided to use them as initial books in two courses: at the college level, they were used in a graduate course for teachers; at the high school level, they were the first books read in the school year by a group of tenth grade honors students.

The graduate class "Young Adult Literature" was part of the curriculum in a master's degree program in teaching language arts. The class consisted of 11 students, all female, who were teachers. This included elementary and secondary teachers. In the college class, after an introduction to the class and young adult fiction, the assignment made for week two was to read both *Fifteen* and *Speak*. In addition, the students were assigned readings from *Reviving Ophelia*, by Mary Pipher. Because the class members were teachers and graduate students, this reading was not onerous. Students were asked to respond to the books with a journal entry. In the next class, the three-hour class discussion revolved around issues raised in the journals and initiated by the instructor.

In the high school setting, the pace of reading the books was much slower. Paul's curriculum includes "LitTalk Day," a once-a-week occurrence during which students discuss the adolescent literature that they are reading independently. Paul introduces a novel to his tenth grade students in week one. This year, the novel selected was *Speak*. Students were instructed to read the first quarter of the novel at home (it breaks easily into fourths since it is organized around the nine-week grading periods used in most high schools.) Students had a week to read that portion of the novel.

When students enter class on "LitTalk Day," they first take a quiz on the novel they are reading. This is to ensure that students have read their assigned

chapter. The quiz asks for basic knowledge of the characters and events in the novel. After the students take the quiz, Paul collects their papers and briefly goes over the answers. Paul then asks the students to respond in writing to several prompts that require them to think about the novel. For instance, after the first quarter of the book students responded to these questions:

1. What is Melinda's home life like? What kind of support does she get from her parents? Do you think her home life is believable? How important is parent support for success?
2. What is Melinda's peer group like? Does she fit in? Why or why not? Have you ever experienced anything like Melinda does in this high school or other schools?

Students write quietly for about 10 minutes on these two topics. Then they are asked to move their desks into a seminar circle and bring their writing with them. Students must follow the following rules in the seminar circle:

- They are to use a "talking ball" to control the discussion. This small, lightweight ball is held by the person talking. When (s)he is finished talking, another student indicates that (s)he wants to talk, and the ball is thrown to the new speaker.
- Everyone listens respectfully to the person talking.
- The teacher is a listener, recording who talks and briefly noting interesting points.
- Students who contribute two or more comments receive 100 points for a quiz equivalent. Students who contribute one comment get an 88; students who listen respectfully but do not contribute get a 79 (C-).
- Students may discuss their responses to the questions that they have answered, or they may discuss other things in the text that they have read.

During a typical lesson, the action flows in this way: Paul sits on the outside of the circle as students begin to discuss Melinda's home life. The talk is interesting and lively. Many students participate, and the ball moves back and forth among the 30 pupils. Paul stops the discussion after about ten minutes to summarize some of the interesting points that have been made and to suggest that the students move on to the topic of Melinda's school life. The discussion resumes. At the end of another 10 minutes, about half of the students have contributed something to the

discussion. Paul now asks the students to pass the ball around the circle. Students who do not wish to speak can simply pass the ball along; however, this gives everyone one last chance to contribute to the discussion. This strategy results in almost every student contributing a comment. Paul summarizes the main points of the discussion and asks the students to read the next “nine weeks” section of the book by the following week.

After the students completed *Speak*, using four Fridays, they did the same thing with *Fifteen*. The book was divided into three parts, and students spent three weeks discussing the book. At the end of the three weeks, students were asked to write a paper comparing and contrasting the two novels they had read.

Student Reactions

The students’ writings, both in-class responses and the final paper were collected. Additionally, transcripts of the class discussions were reviewed. Themes that emerged from the analysis included:

Friendships are critical to the lives of teenagers.

Students commented over and over again about how difficult things were for Melinda, since she had basically no friends. This seemed horrible to the students. They noted how helpful Julie, Jane’s friend, was to her; Julie is “open and forgiving” while Melinda’s friends “take almost a year to forgive her.” Interestingly, some of them seemed to blame Melinda for her lack of friends: one boy commented, “Melinda is so closed off that nobody can get close to her”; one student talked about how “dreary” Melinda was another girl called her “dark and scary.” Most students did not seem to appreciate her sense of humor, or the strength that she exhibited in overcoming the effects of the rape.

Rape and scary things happen, but they can be prevented with care.

This theme developed during the class discussion of the rape incident in *Speak*. Both boys and girls talked about how Melinda should not have been drinking at the party. They said that she could have avoided the rape if she had stayed home or not had anything to drink. This was one of the few times that the teacher intervened in the discussion, talking about

the idea of “blaming the victim.” The students were quite defensive about this, and assured the teacher that they understood that rape was never justified. However, both the teacher and the observer felt that both boys and girls had a disturbing feeling that the behavior of raping was somewhat to be expected. In his final paper, one boy commented that Andy probably “learned this behavior from people around . . . I’m not saying that it’s right, but he kind of couldn’t help it.” Another boy also blamed the times: “I think if Andy had been around in the fifties then he wouldn’t have done what he did.” Girls seemed resigned to the fact that “there are people like Andy who stalk freshmen to try and have sex with them . . .” Many students talked about the fact that girls have to “protect themselves.” Only one talked about the fact that Andy’s behavior was criminal.

Today people tend to ignore teenager’s behaviors.

One girl commented, “Melinda’s parents and peers didn’t expect much from her; they wanted her to act “normal,” but when she didn’t they didn’t really address the problem.” One boy wrote, “. . . our “rules” today have evolved into a much more lenient [to] somewhat careless form. We are supposed to, nowadays, act responsibly, but our generation is full of rebellion and rowdiness. Parents today won’t crack down as much because of our society. We aren’t as safe as we think.” Another wrote, “Teenagers are supposed to be good but that doesn’t often happen. Peer pressure is a big factor in teens today. Teens get involved in drugs, gangs, unprotected sex, and many other things that they shouldn’t be doing.”

Parents need to talk to their kids, no matter what.

Students were very passionate about the need for parents to be involved in their lives. Most students felt that their own parents were supportive of them. One student wrote, “Parents are supposed to put their children first, talk to them, support them, and raise

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them to be respectful adults.” Another wrote, “A teen might tell their parents that they butt into their business too much, but we would rather have that than you not care.” Students were appalled at the fact that Melinda had cuts on her wrist and her mother “had no time for this.”

Girls are resentful of the way some boys treat them.

One girl wrote, “There are few guys like Stan . . . Not many would meet the parents or respect a girl’s space.” Another commented, “Back in the 1950’s, guys were raised to be respectful and treat females like porcelain dolls that could break at any moment. Nowadays, a lot of guys have that ‘I wanna get with anything that has legs, breast, and a nice butt’ attitude . . .”

Teachers’ Reactions

Surprisingly, the teachers responded to the books in quite similar ways, although their age range was so varied. For most of them the 1950’s represented a time

significantly before they had come of age, although because of television they had similar beliefs that there was a time when things were like the setting of *Fifteen*. Discussion and journal entries revolved around the following points:

The world has changed for teenaged girls in many ways, although crucial elements remain the same.

The teachers felt that both Jane and Melinda were consumed by trying to “fit in” and find a place to belong in their teen

society. They, like all adolescents, were seeking identity. In both instances a male was central to this search; however, Jane’s ultimate goal was to merge her identity with a boy, whereas Melinda’s triumph was to free herself from victimization by a boy. In

both books, the teenagers are separated into “clans”—the popular kids and the unpopular ones. One teacher pointed out that in both books the “enemy” character is a cheerleader.

A major difference between the 1950’s and the 1990’s is the lack of a community that knows and supports its young people.

In *Fifteen*, the owner of the ice cream parlor knows Jane and asks about her. Jane’s parents check out Stan to make sure that he is acceptable. The small suburban setting offers a protective barrier against many threats. On the other hand, Melinda is isolated not only at school but in her community—she wanders through a mall, on a bus, in a hospital—and is neither recognized nor claimed. One teacher described Jane’s experiences as “walking a social tightrope with a safety net provided by two loving parents and an actively-involved community.”

The relationship between parents and child has fundamentally shifted.

In both books, there are two parents available to a single child. In *Fifteen*, the mother is totally focussed on home and children, although the father is absent due to work. In *Speak*, both parents are focussed on work and on themselves. As one teacher expressed: “Jane’s biggest worries involve appearing “too little-girlish” and disapproving of her mother’s tendency to forego stockings in the privacy of their home.” Melinda’s parents, instead of prying in their daughter’s life, appear not to want to know about her problems. When Melinda tries to cut her wrists, her mother says, “I don’t have time for this.” This was shocking to the teachers, and they spent significant time discussing the impact of working mothers. One journal response noted, “Jane navigated her way through adolescence with relative ease, taking for granted the support provided by her nuclear family. Imagine the impact a similar support system might have on the thousands of Melindas in our society.”

Both books describe white, middle class families.

Therefore, the inferences that can be drawn from these books are severely restricted. Class discussion revolved around the different experiences that Blacks and Hispanics had during the 1950s, before civil rights legislation.

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Summary

It is fascinating to contrast the different ways in which the intertextual reading of the books varied between teachers and students. Teachers, certainly because of their age and interest in changes in society, focused more on the macro-level inferences of the books, the relationship of the society to the behavior of the girls and boys in it. They sought illumination from the texts that would help them understand the world of the students that they were teaching. Not surprisingly, the students, lacking the experiences of living through different generations, were more focused on the micro-themes related to their own world. Although they observed the 1950's through *Fifteen*, they could not truly access it to understand changing contexts for teenage behavior. They often alluded to it, but only as comparison for what they were experiencing themselves.

Reading the books together was definitely helpful for both groups. The teachers were able to engage in the society/behavior analysis (aided by additional readings), while the students could look at questions that are important to them: how should girls be treated by boys? What is the role of "clans" in negotiating high school? How can parents help through the teenage years? These kind of discussions are vital in helping students negotiate the complicated world of high school, and in helping teachers understand what their students face on a daily basis.

The experience certainly argues for teaching books, particularly young adult literature, together to provide different contexts or lenses into similar issues. Consider the texts *Go Ask Alice* and Burgess' *Smack*: both speak of drug addiction, but the differences in culture, time period, and approach are markedly different. *Julie of the Wolves*, contrasted with *A Girl Named Disaster*, both describe a young girl's survival in hostile environments after running away from dreadful circumstances, but the protagonists in the stories have fascinating similarities and differences that make for rich discussion. All of these books deal with young girls, so they extend the examination of gender issues and what is expected and experienced by girls in various environments. Classes that allow students to do this kind of reading have the potential to help girls (and boys) understand and deal more

effectively with the social challenges that surround them.

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