

Taking a Closer Look:

Ellen Hopkins and Her Novels

Ellen Hopkins once told me that she tries to always write the truth in her books because “my readers will call me on it if I don’t.” Because of this, she tries hard to write the entire picture—no matter how ugly, deceiving, or raw it is—so her readers will know that she is being as honest as she can be. This truth telling is what has endeared her to her readers. The honesty, while an affront to many people, is the core of her seven (soon to be nine) books that deal with teen prostitution, drugs, abuse, homosexuality, religious fundamentalism, suicide, cutting, and many other issues. As a result, she receives hundreds of thousands of letters and emails from her readers, most of which she will answer, making an effort to impart whatever advice her readers are asking for.

While Hopkins started out as a nonfiction writer of high-interest books for juvenile readers, her fiction work is what drew the acclaim of critics and her readers. At first, teachers and school librarians were slow to recommend these books, but once teens began to pick them up, read, and then talk about them, teachers and librarians could not ignore her popularity with young adult audiences. As a result, her books are more often off the shelves than on, since they are checked out regularly, and now her readers include parents, librarians, and teachers, along with drug and school counselors, juvenile court officials, and rehab treatment specialists. Many of her books

are interrelated; for example, the recently published *Fallout* (2010) and the soon-to-be-released *Perfect* (according to Hopkins’s website) both continue a story line developed in earlier works. Through these books, we see the end of one character’s journey and the continuation of another character’s life.

Fallout (2010) is a continuation of Hopkins’s *Crank* (2004), her first foray into fiction. A lofty 544 pages, she wrote *Crank* in free verse, something she originally thought might be “off putting to people.” In the end, though, she has found that most people like the verse, which, she believes, also makes her books more accessible to reluctant and nonreaders. In addition, she thinks that the verse format allows her regular readers some “breathing room,” since the books involve very tough subject matters.

Her books are also very personal to her. In her author’s note to *Crank*, she writes, “While this work is fiction, it is loosely based on a very true story—my daughter’s. The monster did touch her life and the lives of her family. My family” (front pages). In the book, she tells the story of Kristina, her 15-year-old narrator, as she becomes addicted to crank (crystal meth). A straight-A student, the free verse propels the reader through Kristina’s first introduction to the “monster” when visiting her biological, but addicted father after a court-ordered required visit. As her alter ego, Bree, Kristina meets Adam, a deceptively hunky guy

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An Interview with Ellen Hopkins

Ellen Hopkins spends a lot of her time writing for young adults, but she also spends a lot of time just answering their emails and letters. For Hopkins, this comes with her job as a writer for young adults. But as you might guess, she also ends up learning a great deal about what is going on in a teen's world. Since she started writing, she has received hundreds of thousands of letters from teens in all types of life situations. Not only are her books in great demand in school libraries, but they are also used by school counselors, drug courts, residential treatment centers, and juvenile halls because they deal with the tougher issues of abuse, self-mutilation, drugs, alcohol, suicide, and teen prostitution. But Hopkins's impact often goes beyond the page and directly into the lives of the teens who read her books. I talked to her recently about her books, about her audience, and the impact of her books on her audience.

TAR: Do you think that teens today are faced with tougher choices?

EH: I don't know if they have tougher choices. When I was a teenager, we didn't talk as freely about choices or issues like drugs, alcohol, abuse, or psychological problems that we faced in our lives. But now, because we have given teens permission to talk and open up, I think that they are encouraged to do that more. We are also more aware of the issues.

TAR: Since we are more open about issues today, do you find it easier to write about them?

EH: I absolutely find it easier to write about these issues. There was certainly a reticence to talk and write about them before. When I was a teenager, we really didn't have young adult literature, so we looked to adult books to try to explain what we were feeling and what was happening in our lives. But adults are affected by issues differently than teens, so I think that it is really helpful to have authors who are writing YA novels now that speak to kids, especially those kids who are going through major challenges. As parents, we often want to put the blinders on and don't believe that

these things are happening to our kids. This happened with my daughter, the daughter that my book *Crank* is based upon. We didn't go looking for problems until we couldn't *not* look at them. With today's YA literature, kids can see that they are not the only ones going through these issues, so they are more likely to talk about the ones they are confronting. I think it is so important that they feel free to be open. It's when they don't feel free to be open that any problems they might be experiencing are compounded.

TAR: Do you think that kids read your books to find answers to their problems or affirm that their life is okay?

EH: I think that a lot of them are reading my books for answers. Some of the "normal" kids like to read my books so they can vicariously experience what it is like to do those things without really doing them. There are other kids who are looking for ways out, and I try in my books to show them a way out, a different choice.

TAR: Do you think that, on the whole, we are too overprotective of kids in our society?

EH: I think that all parents want to save their children from pain and hurt, but they need to share information to do that. They are not protecting kids by keeping knowledge from them or pretending that rape and drug addiction do not happen. Kids see it happening every day—if not in their lives, then in the lives of their friends' or people they know. I understand wanting to make childhood as easy as you can, but closing your eyes to these issues will not make them go away. You empower your child when you give them information on which to base choices. When parents don't want their kids to read my books, I think that they mostly want to protect their kids from reading about the kind of lives that my characters have.

TAR: Do parents ever read your books and, if so, what do they tell you about their experience?

EH: I have had parents who read my books write to me to ask if I think that they are too much for their

teens. Other parents will thank me for the books. Some have thanked me for opening lines of communication. Only a narrow group of people challenge my books, but I think that they should read my books and talk about them with their children.

TAR: How do you feel about influencing the lives of your readers?

EH: It is sometimes overwhelming. I will get letters and be sitting at my desk when my husband comes into my office and asks, “Why are you crying?” It hurts when a young person shares their own deep hurt. I really, truly think that what I do is to give permission to open up the conversation. I want my readers to feel like they can talk to me. It is one of the reasons that I am here doing this. I think that my daughter is part of it. If I can positively impact a life, it means a lot. But if I can positively impact thousands of lives, that, to me, is a gift. I feel like I have been given a gift to use. It started with my daughter, but it goes deeper than that. I feel like there is a responsibility in having that gift, so I take it very seriously.

TAR: Are you ever shaken by the intensity of the scenes that you write?

EH: Yes, sometimes after writing a scene, I have to get up and come back to it. Sometimes, I go outside and process it.

TAR: Does this intensity propel you to keep writing?

EH: I just finished a book in which the end was so important to me, I could not stop writing. I never write more than 25 pages a day, but for that book, I wrote 25 pages a day for a week because I just couldn't stop writing. It was so important to me to get the book done and get it right. I love when that happens, too . . . when the story is pouring through me and out of me. This is much better than when I am stressing over every scene. But with this book, the writing just came to me. I absolutely go to another place. I don't become the character, I channel them. They are just writing through me.

TAR: You have said before that you must be honest

with your readers or they will call you on it. Why is honesty in your writing so important to you?

EH: One example that I can give of readers expecting my honesty is from *Identical*, where I wrote about the abuse between the father and daughter. In that scene, I kept the door open while he abused her. Several of my readers told me later that, if I had shut the door in that particular scene, people reading the book could have assumed that nothing happened behind the closed door. I tried to show the honesty of both sides in that book, the father's and the daughter's, because I felt that it was important to write him as honestly as I wrote her. In *Crank*, when Kristina first does drugs, she enjoys it. It is fun. So I feel that if I don't write honestly about it, I am just another person saying, “Don't do it.” I have to show that it is fun until it's not fun anymore. Because that's the truth.

TAR: You have said that *Identical* was inspired by three of your friends. Have you had stories from teens who have risen above the abuse in their lives?

EH: I have heard from quite a few. I love those stories. They are amazing because they show just how resilient people are and how much they want to get life right. *Identical* was inspired by friends who had been through abuse, and to see them today as these successful women is just what I want kids to understand. They need to know that a) it wasn't their fault, and b) you can have a good life, if you decide that is what you really want. I tell kids who write to me that they can choose to create a different future for themselves, that they have the power to make a different choice and reclaim control over their lives.

TAR: What about your friends? How did they feel about *Identical* when it was released?

EH: They all three thanked me. They wanted the story out there, but couldn't write it themselves. One of them wrote me a two-page letter and told me how much it meant to her that the book showed they could still love their father beyond the abuse. The truth is, victims of abuse often do love their abuser;

just because abuse occurs doesn't mean the love isn't still there.

TAR: In your books, is it important to you to balance adult influences and presence, to show that not all adults are "damaged" people?

EH: Yes, it is important to me to show that not all parents are bad or have serious problems. In my recently finished book, *Perfect*, the kids feel pressured by their parents in some ways, but I also tried to show the parents' own problems and the influence those problems have on their lives and parenting. I think, too, that it's healthy for kids to have mentors others than their parents. When I talk to kids, they often tell me that they can talk to a teacher or their school librarian. School librarians are people that kids feel safe with, and I think that's so interesting. I am always fascinated by the relationships that school librarians form with their kids.

TAR: You have been called a "controversial writer." Does that label bother you in any way?

EH: I have always been a *rabble rouser* so, no, it doesn't bother me. I know that my books are not for everyone, but I think that my books need to be on the shelf for some kids, not for every kid. So facing censorship challenges head-on is hugely important to me. I think that all authors need to do this. You can't back away. You cannot write with censorship in mind. You cannot write books with challenges, reviews, or awards in mind. You have to write books where the story speaks to you. You

don't write for anyone but your readers.

TAR: Your new book *Fallout* came out in September 2010. It continues the story of Kristina and her family, doesn't it?

EH: It does. For *Fallout*, I wrote the future, although it is only a possible future of how I see things now. I did that because I wanted to write a book about Kristina's kids and their lives and the impact of her choices on their lives. I had hundreds of requests for another book about Kristina, so I felt like it was something that I wanted to give my readers.

TAR: What are your future writing plans?

EH: I plan to move into adult novels and verse because my publisher's imprint is interested in having me write in that market. I also see that my readership is getting older, going to college and/or sharing these novels with their parents. I feel like people are starting to like the verse format, though for some time, there were not any adult novels in verse. The first one, I think, will be about an adult midlife crisis and will deal with the idea that people face middle age so differently.

I will also continue to write young adult novels. I love my YA audience and love doing school visits. I love being out among teens. They are, to me, the future. They look forward to life, and there is something so vibrant and alive about them. I love that audience and feel like my books are important to them. They tell me, "Never stop writing!"

who introduces her to her first whiff of crank, and Bree gets her first experience with the drug she likens to a wild roller coaster ride. From that point on, Bree/Kristina is a disciple of crank. She becomes addicted, is raped, then returns to her home in Reno, where she has her first child, Hunter. For Kristina, "Life was good before I met/ the monster./ After life was great. At least/ for a little while." (*Crank*, 2004, p. 1).

Hopkins's second book, *Glass* (2007), continues Kristina's story and her addiction becomes a permanent, ongoing fight, which makes her a bona fide addict, whether she wants to be or not. Ever since

her first toke of crystal meth, her life has spiraled downward—she is controlled by her addiction, loses custody of her son, and she and her addicted boyfriend become dealers who burglarize her parents' home. When she looks in the mirror, she can't believe that the person she sees is herself—"no one to see the vacant-/eyed girl, staring/ in the mirror. Staring at a stranger/ who doesn't care/ if she dies. Maybe/ wants to die. Who would care/ if I died?" (*Glass*, 2007, p. 639). When she and her boyfriend are arrested, she ends up behind bars back home again in Nevada, where she asks herself if she would ever be worthy of

forgiveness and love, but she says with hope and an admission of her unflinching optimism that “by/ the time I get out of here,/ the monster will be nothing/ more than a distant memory./ An unforgettable nightmare.” (*Glass*, 2007, p. 679).

In Hopkins’s upcoming book, *Fallout* (2010), the story of Kristina is continued, but through the point of views of her three children. Hopkins felt compelled to write the continuation of Kristina’s story for her readers, many of whom had asked for closure on the two books, but she couldn’t bring herself to write another book from Kristina’s point of view.

“I didn’t want to keep writing the same book,” said Hopkins. “So I was talking with a friend of mine who said, maybe it is not her [Kristina’s] story anymore, but it is Hunter’s story.” For Hopkins, this was the resolution she was looking for: “I wanted to write about her kids and their lives; and I wanted to write about their lives and give voice to them about dealing with their parents’ addictions and how their lives were built through their parents’ addictions.” As a result, Hopkins believes that *Fallout* is the best of the three books and believes that she finished the series that was inspired by her daughter.

Recently, Hopkins also completed yet another book, *Perfect*, which will come out in the fall 2011. Though she doesn’t consider it a sequel book, *Perfect* is intended to be a companion book to Hopkins’s third book, *Impulse*. Even though the issues are still very tough, *Impulse* is perhaps one of Hopkins’s most optimistic books. In it, three teenage residents of Aspen Springs treatment facility meet and form a bond of friendship, despite the issues that have brought them to the treatment facility. Vanessa, a daughter of a manic depressive, is also manic depressive and deals with her illness through cutting. Connor is the son of wealthy parents who expect nothing but perfection from him, but who cannot show love and affection. Connor’s twin, Cara, remains at home. After being locked up in juvenile detention for killing his mother’s child-molesting boyfriend, Anthony believes that he is gay. All three are in the treatment facility because they attempted suicide.

As their treatment progresses, these three open up to their counselors to show the pain, and they move through levels of treatments. In *Impulse* (2007), Hopkins shows the gritty realities of a treatment facility and its “loonie bin” patients. As the treatment

of the three advances to the point where they can now participate in an “Outward Bound” wilderness experience, their struggles in the wilderness parallel their struggles to build relationships between the three friends, their counselors, and other patients. Perhaps the most poignant character is Connor, whose struggle to find love and affection overwhelms him.

As he proceeds through the wilderness challenges, he receives a dour letter from his mother; seeing only the futility of his life, he wonders if he will ever be able to love anyone. He folds the letter into a paper airplane and says:

Into a perfect paper/ airplane, take a walk under/ a sequined night sky, try to/ silence the chatter in my brain./ The sound of cheerful voices/ drifts towards me from camp./ Their letters are tucked into/ pockets and sleeping bags, gifts./ Rewards for accomplishments/ and, with any luck at all, change./ But nothing has changed for me./ I’ll go home to the same grand/ house in the same manicured/ neighborhood/ . . . I’ll go home to expectations/ no way I can live up to, no/ longer want to. But I’ve never/ had a say about my future./ I close my eyes, and all/ I can see is my mother’s/ face. Sculpted. Beautiful./ Angry. So often angry./ And I am so much like her./ A grenade of my own anger/ explodes inside my head./ I am damaged. Decayed./ A gust of wind roughs up/ my hair. The paper airplane/ sits heavy in my hand. I cock/ back my arm, release, let it fly/ straight to hell.” (*Impulse*, 2007, p. 635).

This passage perhaps lays the best groundwork for Hopkins’s upcoming book, *Perfect*, which takes place at the same time with Connor’s twin, Cara. In this book, Hopkins wanted to define what perfection was and to demonstrate how kids will come to understand that they have this power without really realizing what it means to use it. “One of my *Perfect* characters is so set on a baseball scholarship that he uses steroids, even though he knows what it will do to him,” said Hopkins. “I have another character that uses her good looks to get guys to buy her booze, and then the wrong guy buys it and rapes her.” Hopkins hopes to show that her characters in *Perfect* have “these unrealistic goals,” but go to great lengths to achieve them, despite understanding the power and how using it the wrong way can get them into trouble.

In *Fallout* (2010), the story of Kristina is continued, but through the point of views of her three children.

With this book, as with all of her books, Hopkins's greatest hope is that kids will make their choices wisely. "I have readers who say, 'You give me comfort.' Or some come right down to it and say, 'Your books saved my life. I saw where I was headed and saw what was happening to your characters and I chose not to do it.'" In these letters and expressions of appreciation, Hopkins finds all the affirmation she needs to know that she is writing as honestly as she can for an audience who expects no less.

Rebecca Hill is a freelance writer who writes on education, literacy, and reading issues. She has been published in the American Library Association's magazine, Book Links, Middle Ground (the magazine for the National

Middle School Association), YALSA Journal, School Library Monthly, School Family Media, B Magazine, and VOYA—Voice of Youth Advocates. She also writes the VOYAGES column on science fiction for VOYA magazine. She has a Masters in Library and Information Sciences from Indiana University-Purdue University.

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