

Who's Holding the Mirror?

Missing Representations of Dating Violence in Young Adult Literature

Approximately one in five females in high school have been or are involved in an abusive dating relationship (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Boyfriends who attack, beat, and stab their girlfriends are too often featured in the news. If this is such a common problem for teenage girls, why do we find so little exploration of it in young adult literature (YAL), a literature that is known for not shying away from reality? That was the question that I asked myself after reading Sarah Dessen's courageous 2000 YA novel, *Dreamland*, and searching for articles on dating violence in YAL with very few results. Cole (2004) echoes my thoughts when she asserts that, "While child abuse is an ample theme in young adult literature, dating violence has been explored minimally" (p. 62). Literature mirrors life, but in the case of dating violence in YAL, there are too few people holding up that mirror. Exploring *Dreamland* via Chodorow's research on how identity is shaped sheds some well-needed light on why girls enter and remain in abusive relationships.

In "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," Chodorow (2007) explores how early childhood interactions, especially with families and mothers, shape men and women differently. In general, children's personalities are affected greatly by the people around them, and females especially are more likely to find definition in their relationships. Young girls spend more time with their mothers than young males do. Chodorow points out the potential problem in this identification, noting that mothers tend to hinder the development of individual personalities in their

daughters in order to live out their own dreams vicariously.

Examples from different cultures around the world show how girls and women tend to be more communal, or social, than boys and men are. When children reach the age of five in rural Modjokuto, Indonesia, girls are expected to work with their mothers and the other women on household chores, while boys are encouraged to play on their own with the other male children (Chodorow, 2007). Boys, therefore, are generally better at developing individual personalities and not relying on other people to define who they are. Because of this ability to individuate, boys see a difference between their *valued* independence and the *disparaged* dependence of girls. Consequently, they desire to separate themselves from anything that would make them less individuated or that could be considered "feminine" (Chodorow, 2007).

In this article, I consider the fact that girls tend to individuate poorly and thus are more prone to identity development via female familial and social influences. I also explore the characteristics of abusers, victims, and violent dating relationships, and how friends and family contribute to the shaping of a girl into a victim. I examine how those traits and trends are unflinchingly represented in *Dreamland*. I chose to examine *Dreamland* rather than another YA novel, like *Fault Line* by Janet Tashjian or *Things Change* by Patrick Jones, because *Dreamland* articulates clearly how Caitlin's identity becomes entangled with that of her abuser.

Media's Role: Distorting Identity and Reporting Often Terrible Results

As a young woman raised by two loving parents who both encouraged me to stand up for myself and be my own person, it was difficult for me to imagine staying in a relationship with someone who hurt me physically, mentally, or both. I needed a book like *Dreamland* to be able to empathize with victims of dating violence. When I finished reading, I wondered why so many girls experience abusive relationships, and why they stay in them and allow the abuse to continue, as Caitlin does in *Dreamland*. Examining popular magazines, websites, and TV shows provided some insight into this issue. In April of 2011, the homepage of *Seventeen* magazine's website demonstrated how pop culture renders it imperative for young girls to have a boyfriend. The two most popular articles on the site were "20 Things You Shouldn't Say to Him" and the "30-Day Guide to Making Him Yours." The website offers 12 different quiz categories that girls can take online, six of which relate to boyfriends, boys in general, and romantic relationships. This website had the same quiz options available in October of 2011. *Seventeen* magazine is marketed to girls ages 12 to 19 (Seventeen).

Television also portrays the message that having a boyfriend is a necessity for a young girl. On Disney Channel shows like *Hannah Montana* and *Sonny with a Chance*, it's difficult to find a female character who isn't spending much of her time "crushing" on a boy and trying to win his affection. These characters are the role models that our culture feeds young girls. Girls emulate these boy-crazy characters who give the message that life is about getting and keeping a boyfriend, even for young girls. Brookes and Kelly (2009) confirm that our "'consumer-media culture' . . . has established itself as one of the most powerful influences over identity formation for children and young people" (p. 599).

Television shows portray girls with boyfriends as popular with and respected by the other girls. It's not surprising then that girls in America feel that it's important to have a boyfriend, regardless of how those boyfriends may treat them. Girls live under the assumption that as long as they are dating, they will have the respect of their peers, respect that is necessary for girls to feel like they possess an iden-

tity. Chodorow (2007) states, "In any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does" (p. 368). This explains why girls tend to look at others to define themselves. They are influenced by their friends who are influenced by the media; it's a cycle that continues to affect the way that girls view themselves.

Because the story in *Dreamland* seems so vivid and realistic, I began to research the topics in the novel and found interviews with and stories about real victims of dating violence. The number of stories paralleling Caitlin's story in *Dreamland* is shocking. Even nonfiction stories that are more recent than *Dreamland* share some of the same characteristics. These parallels show that there are trends when it

comes to violent relationships. Many of the young women reported that their boyfriends were "so sweet" to them in the relationship's beginning, but then, "suddenly," the abuse began.

One example of a real-life story that parallels *Dreamland* is that of Sarah Van Zanten (Burleigh, 2007). She met a "nice" boy in high school; however, after they dated for awhile, he became violent. When asked why she didn't just leave her boyfriend when he started hitting her, she replied, "I felt ashamed of sticking with him . . . I think it has to do with being in one of the first relationships of your life. You don't really know where to draw the line." Other girls at school also influenced Sarah's actions and decisions. When her boyfriend beat her unconscious at a party, someone called the police, who arrested him. This arrest led to his being kicked out of school. A friend of Sarah's reported that "Even the other girls were saying to her, 'How could you do this to him? He's so cute'" (Burleigh, 2007). The other girls ignored the fact that she had been physically assaulted, seeing instead that she was no longer associated with her "cute" ex-boyfriend.

This reading of the novel examines how Caitlin's story in *Dreamland* parallels Sarah's and so many others' stories of dating violence. Like Sarah's, Cait-

Girls live under the assumption that as long as they are dating, they will have the respect of their peers.

lin's fictional story demonstrates that girls struggle to develop their identities sans the approval of their media-influenced female peers and that they are fighting an up-hill battle.

Getting In

Another aspect of the development of identity in young women, aside from gaining approval of friends, is the relationship between the young women and their parents. Caitlin's need for more status and attention in *Dreamland* begins

when her parents ignore her while they search for her runaway sister, Cass. Caitlin's birthday is far from everyone's mind "as [the] kitchen became mission control, full of ringing phones, loud voices, and panic" (Dessen, 2000, p.

13). Caitlin has become like a statue sitting in the kitchen as everyone rushes around her, not acknowledging her presence or the fact that she is worried about her sister, too. The absence of familial support in Caitlin's life leaves her longing for something to fill that void.

Caitlin then reveals that she never had the attention of her parents like her sister did; she was always the quiet one in the background while her sister played sports, earned good grades, and had a steady boyfriend. The first-person narrative gives readers insight into Caitlin's thought process, and how she feels about being "inferior" to her sister and friends. It was difficult to have a sister who was "always blazing the trail ahead"; she left Caitlin no choice other than to "pale in comparison" (Dessen, p. 15). Like many adolescent girls, Caitlin feels like she is alone in her life, even when she's surrounded by people. With her parents being distracted by her sister's running away, Caitlin searches for a way to garner some of their attention, a way to feel noticed by them and by her friends at school so that she feels more connected with the people in her life.

Her best friend at school convinces her to try out for cheerleading, something that Caitlin agrees to mostly because it's something that her sister has never done. She makes the squad and is awarded a spar-

kly uniform and a new sense of popularity. Her first attempt at gaining attention works to an extent: "My making cheerleader changed my mother's life. . . . She had finally found something to concentrate on that was familiar and busy in the strange silence of Cass being gone" (Dessen, p. 41). But even with that attention from her mother, something is still missing for Caitlin; she hasn't distinguished herself from her sister or achieved the completeness that she's looking for. She laments that, "The only reason I'd even tried out was to do something different from Cass. But here, in the end, I was following her again" (Dessen, p. 35).

Caitlin is still lacking something that will boost her popularity even more, something that will make the other girls jealous of *her* for once. She isn't feeling like she is truly a part of the female community at school, even after becoming a cheerleader, since "it was decided early on that [she] would be at the top of the pyramid This also led to [her] being hated with a passion by Eliza Drake" (Dessen, p. 41). Instead of being accepted as a cheerleader, she's now a target to some of the other girls. Her attempts at positively individuating herself from her sister are failing as well; consequently, she turns to a negative method of gaining attention: Rogerson Biscoe.

More than just a boyfriend, Rogerson is a boyfriend with an element of danger. He dresses in grungy clothes and has dreadlocks in his hair. This element of danger—of looking like a "drug dealer" and having "that wild look," as Caitlin's friends say—gives the reader a sense of foreboding when Rogerson is introduced, a sense that real girls usually don't have when entering into a relationship that turns violent (hence the abuse seems sudden when, in fact, warning signs were present) (Dessen, p. 52). Caitlin ignores that foreboding because her friends say that "he's hot" and "sexy," labels clearly demonstrating approval (Dessen, p. 52). In Rogerson, she finds a negative way to get attention, both from her disapproving parents and from her friends, who are also physically attracted to him. Rogerson changes Caitlin's definition of "boyfriend," and the interest that the other girls take in him show Caitlin that being with a guy like Rogerson will boost her popularity even more than being with another guy because he's different—he is mysterious.

Rogerson demonstrates that mystery and begins to make Caitlin feel that she needs him, ignoring her completely after he drives her home from a party.

The absence of familial support in Caitlin's life leaves her longing for something to fill that void.

Caitlin spends her time thinking about him and wishing to see him or hear from him, but he seems to have disappeared. That tactic is the first step that Rogerson takes in getting Caitlin “addicted” to being with him. The separation only makes her want to be with him more, which is exactly what he wants; Caitlin is being conditioned to latch onto Rogerson once he comes back into her life, which helps to explain some of her behavior later in the relationship after he begins to hit her. She’s afraid to end the relationship because she’s afraid that she’ll end up back where she started: the quiet, unpopular girl in the background. Once Caitlin sees Rogerson again, she feigns anger, trying to hide the fact that she’s been longing to see him. He quickly distracts her by touching and kissing her. The physical way that he gets her to submit to him forebodes his communication style. He doesn’t try to explain why he didn’t call; he just takes Caitlin in his arms and kisses her. For Rogerson, being physical is how he gets what he wants. In this instance, the touching is gentle, but later he’ll use this physicality in a negative way when he gets angry.

Rogerson’s touching and need to be physically connected to Caitlin is strongly demonstrated on their first real date. Between pages 78 and 81, Dessen mentions Rogerson driving with his hand on Caitlin’s leg, grabbing her and kissing her, and taking her hand to lead her up to his house. Rogerson “leaned over and kissed me, hard, his hand reaching behind my neck and holding me there, his mouth smoky and sweet” (Dessen, p. 79). This language shows the dominance that Rogerson is exerting over Caitlin with his hard, rough kissing and his firm grip, forcing the kiss to last longer. His desire for physical dominance indicates his abusive tendencies.

Going Down

After that first date, Caitlin and Rogerson are officially together, which has just the effect on Caitlin’s friends that she wanted. Some of the other cheerleaders are talking about Rogerson when they see him outside. Rina, Caitlin’s best friend, is especially excited for her; even though “she might have wanted [she and Caitlin] to both date football players, she [loves] the idea of [Caitlin] with Rogerson. It was just forbidden and wild enough” to be appealing (Dessen, p. 89). Caitlin and Rogerson are now the main topic of conversation after

cheerleading practice, which means that Caitlin has finally reached the status level that she coveted.

However, once obtained, the attention from her friends ceases to be such a powerful motivator. Her desire to be with Rogerson quickly surmounts her need for status and acceptance by her family and friends. Soon she has “stopped riding home with the team and squad, leaving instead in the BMW with him,” and Rogerson encourages this separation when he tells Caitlin things like, ““They’re a bunch of idiots. I don’t know why you’d want to hang out with them anyway”” (Dessen, p. 93). With Rogerson’s encouragement, Caitlin begins to spend less and less time with her friends, and more and more time with him. She also continues to question her parents’ love for her. She wonders why they aren’t more concerned with what she’s doing with Rogerson since they have yet to meet him:

Maybe it was because they knew what his father did, who his brother was, had seen his mother’s face on For Sale signs staked into a million lawns, and this made him safer, somehow. The other option—that somehow, losing me would be less of a loss [than Cass], never as hard as the one already suffered—was something I pushed out of my head each time it rose up, nagging. (Dessen, p. 103)

Even after attaining the boyfriend who brings her extra attention from her parents, Caitlin still doesn’t have the assurance that they love her as much as they love her sister. She even admits that she uses Rogerson to try to fill a missing part of herself, that she, “took his wildness from him and tried to fold it into myself, filling up the empty spaces all those second-place finishes had left behind” (Dessen, p. 110). She confesses that she tried to fill herself with him, but not that she succeeded.

Caitlin’s attempts to fill in her life with Rogerson, coupled with the thoughts that her parents still don’t love her as much as her sister, shows that having a boyfriend is not the only thing that gives a girl her identity, and that a dating relationship shouldn’t overtake the life of an adolescent girl. If it is a negative

She’s afraid to end the relationship because she’s afraid that she’ll end up back where she started: the quiet, unpopular girl in the background.

relationship, the girl is in danger of developing a negative identity because “feminine identification is based . . . on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life” (Chodorow, 2007, p. 374). Since Caitlin spends so much time with Rogerson, he is the person with whom she most identifies.

Caitlin shows just how much being with Rogerson was taking over her life. “I . . . was struggling to keep my grades up, since I was suddenly spending so many weeknights (when my parents assumed I was doing cheerleading squad activities) with him” (Des-

sen, p. 110). Caitlin has also begun to use drugs with Rogerson in order to maintain her status among Rogerson’s friends. Rogerson is beginning to totally monopolize Caitlin’s time, and she’s started lying to her parents, a trend that will continue to escalate

throughout the rest of the story as she is forced to cover up the bruises from Rogerson’s beatings.

Concerning Caitlin’s old friends, she explains that she doesn’t see them anymore because Rogerson doesn’t like them (Dessen, p. 115). The attention that Caitlin wanted from her parents and friends is now useless to her; she’s lost the desire for both community and individuation. Girls need to individuate, however, while maintaining a sense of community; the two must work together because it takes a healthy sense of community to fully individuate. Sadly, Caitlin’s community has failed her, and consequently, she has no self. She has Rogerson, and their relationship is beginning to overtake her life. Her identity is entwined with his—she can’t identify herself apart from him. He treats her like someone special, at least in the beginning of their relationship. It’s now his attention that she wants, not that of her family and friends.

Things begin to take a turn for the worse in Caitlin and Rogerson’s relationship one day after Caitlin chooses to stop and help Rina instead of going home to wait for Rogerson to pick her up for a date. Once they finally meet up, much later than they had originally planned, Rogerson is complaining to Caitlin about her choosing to be with Rina instead of him, a complaint to which she replies:

“Oh, come on,” I said, reaching over playfully to knock him on the knee. “Don’t be such a big baby.”

When he hit me, I didn’t see it coming. It was just a quick blur, a flash out of the corner of my eye, and then the side of my face just exploded, burning, as his hand slammed against me.

The noise it made was a *crack*, like a gunshot. And it wasn’t like in the movies, where the person just stands there and takes it. I reeled back, hitting my head against the seat. (Dessen, p. 143)

That first hit comes as a shock to Caitlin, as Rogerson’s quick temper overpowers her. Once his initial angry outburst is over, however, Rogerson returns to his normal, affectionate self. They just continue their evening as if “nothing had happened, nothing at all” (Dessen, p. 145). He’s back to treating Caitlin the way that he always did. Rogerson blinds Caitlin to the implications of his behavior because he is her *boyfriend*; sustaining this relationship is her top priority.

At the end of the night, Rogerson takes Caitlin home just as if they’d had a normal night out. Caitlin explains her thought process and why she doesn’t leave him after he hits her:

I could have just gotten out of the car and walked up to my house, leaving him behind forever. Things would have been very different if I had done that. But the fact was that I loved Rogerson. It wasn’t just that I loved him, even: it was that I loved what *I* was when I was with him. Not a little sister, the pretty girl’s sidekick, the second runner-up. All I’d ever wanted was to make my own path, far from Cass. And even after what had happened, I wasn’t ready to give that up just yet. (Dessen, p. 146)

Caitlin believes that she has finally found her identity, not in herself, but as Rogerson’s girlfriend. She so firmly believes that she is nothing without her boyfriend that she can’t bring herself to leave him, even when their relationship turns violent. Chodorow (2007) explains that, “processes of separation and individuation are made more difficult for girls” (Chodorow, p. 372). The problems that girls have with individualizing themselves apart from others have made escaping violent relationships more difficult. A girl has to come to understand that she is worth more as herself than she is as someone’s girlfriend.

The bruises on Caitlin’s face are easily explained to her parents and friends; she makes up a story about being bumped into at a party. She has a harder time, however, hiding the evidence of the violence from herself. She talks about how hard it is to forget the

A girl has to come to understand that she is worth more as herself than she is as someone’s girlfriend.

look that was on Rogerson's face as he struck her, but then "he'd kiss me harder and I'd go under again" (Dessen, p. 150). "Going under" is a phrase that is often associated with anesthesia or drowning, demonstrating how Caitlin feels drugged and helpless when she's with Rogerson, which makes sense because sometimes she really is drugged when they're together. He uses her physical attraction to him to distract her from the truth, always using touch as his main form of communication in both positive and negative situations.

Rogerson's second attack on Caitlin occurs for a different reason than the first. Rogerson sees her talking with her male photography teacher and automatically assumes that she's having an affair with that teacher. Caitlin wanted the jealousy of her friends when she started dating Rogerson, but Rogerson's jealousy is a different beast. This beating differs from the first in another way as well. Rogerson doesn't try to act like it never happened; instead, he tells Caitlin that it's her fault, that she brought this one on herself (Dessen, p. 156). At this point, because Caitlin identifies herself through Rogerson, she just submits to the beating and accepts his explanation.

Caitlin's willingness to make excuses for Rogerson goes along with Walker's (1977) report that women in abusive relationships often go "to elaborate lengths to justify why their men batter them, often accepting blame for the incident" (p. 54). Caitlin comes up with another lie to explain her swollen, bruised face to her parents when she goes back into the house after Rogerson kisses her again. Rogerson "kissed me hard and urgently, his hand curling around the back of my neck, the way he knew I liked it. As if somehow, that way, he could give back what he'd taken from me. And I let him" (Dessen, p. 158). Rogerson's behavior has begun to settle into a pattern at this point: get angry about something small or imagined, hit Caitlin, and then kiss her in order to make up.

It's after this second attack that Caitlin shows her first signs of wanting her situation to change, of maybe wanting to get out of this abusive relationship. She writes a letter to her sister in her dream journal that reads:

My boyfriend, Rogerson, hit me tonight. It wasn't the first time. I know you can't believe I'd let this happen: I can't either. But it's more confusing than you'd think. I love him. That sounds so weak and pitiful, but lately, it's been

enough for me to forgive anything. But after tonight, I'm not so sure. (Dessen, p. 161)

Caitlin is admitting to herself that her relationship is negative and reaching out for help, but not to anyone who could actually do something about her abuse. Her runaway sister will never see this letter as it sits, tucked away, in the journal in her room. Caitlin wants help, but she still feels that she won't be worth anything if she isn't with Rogerson anymore. The influence of her "friends" is still too strong in her mind, telling her that she can only *be someone* if being that someone involves *being someone else's girlfriend*.

Because of these beatings, Caitlin has to wear clothes that cover her arms and legs. Rogerson has taken to hitting her only where she can easily cover the bruises with her clothes (Dessen, p. 164). His awareness of the fact that she has to cover the marks or he'll be found out shows that he is aware of what he's doing to her and wants the abuse to stay hidden so that it can continue. He likes being in control of Caitlin. His beatings continue to escalate until "it got to be that sex was the only time [Caitlin] could count on being safe. And it never lasted long enough" (Dessen, p. 166). The more Rogerson hits Caitlin, the more she longs for time when he'll leave her alone, but she realizes that during intercourse is the only time when she's guaranteed safety, so she's willing to have sex frequently.

More insight as to why Caitlin feels like she can't ask for help comes as she's talking to Rina, who is beginning to suspect that something is wrong. Rina questions Caitlin, who lies and says that everything's fine. The lies come easier to her now since she's had practice throughout her entire relationship with Rogerson, but she still wishes that things were different. She says:

I look at her . . . and for a split second I wanted to let it all spill out. About the importance of time, and the helpless feeling I got every time I saw that black BMW, not knowing what waited on the other side of the tinted windows . . .

He uses her physical attraction to him to distract her from the truth, always using touch as his main form of communication in both positive and negative situations.

But I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell anyone. As long as I didn't say it aloud, it wasn't real. (Dessen, p. 171)

By not talking about her problems, Caitlin is able to pretend that they aren't happening. At this point in the story, she is lacking "communion," or "being at one with other organisms" (Chodorow, 2007, p. 377). She feels alone and doesn't know how to reach out to those around her. Confessing to others would give her more community, but it would also grant validity to

She's hoping that someone will eventually notice that something's off, that something's wrong in her life.

her situation. She resists telling Rina or anyone else because she knows just how bad the situation is, and she doesn't want people questioning her as to why she hasn't gotten out of the relationship sooner.

Caitlin's feelings are best shown in the book

through her few letters to her sister Cass via her dream journal. Caitlin isn't afraid to write her true feelings in these letters because she knows that she's never going to send them. Her second letter to Cass comes after her conversation with Rina. Caitlin is trying to sort out her feelings as she writes:

Something's happening to me. It's like I'm shrinking smaller and smaller and I can't stop it. There's just so much wrong that I can't imagine the shame in admitting even the tiniest part of it. When you left it was like there was this huge gap to fill, but instead of spreading wide enough to do it, I just fell right in, and I'm still falling. (Dessen, p. 176)

Cass running away was a big motivation for Caitlin to try and make a name for herself, to finally get a boyfriend and get some of the attention that had been previously placed on Cass. This plan may have worked had Rogerson not been an abuser, or if she had a stronger female community around her, a community that taught her that she didn't need a boyfriend to shape her identity. Caitlin is realizing this, and that realization prompts her to write these letters to her sister as an unheard cry for help.

Getting Out

Caitlin is waiting and wishing that her mom will notice and step in to take care of her. She wants help, but she's too hurt and embarrassed to ask for it.

When her mom is in her room one day, Caitlin thinks, "Maybe this was it. Maybe she *could* save me . . . but she didn't seem to see me, even as I pleaded that she would" (Dessen, p. 193). Caitlin's baggy, long clothes are more than just a way to cover up her bruises and other marks from Rogerson's beatings; they're also a cry for help. She's hoping that someone will eventually notice that something's off, that something's wrong in her life. In this way, Dessen invites her audience to share in the responsibility for healthy young girls. She shows us the power of observation, or noticing.

However, Rina is the one, not Caitlin's mom, who finally notices that Caitlin has become distant. She tries cajoling Caitlin into acting like her old self, suggesting a trip to the lake. The problem for Caitlin comes when she can't get in touch with Rogerson via phone; she knows that he'll be angry if he comes to pick her up and she's not home. Rogerson's lack of trust in Caitlin has left her with an inability to relax if she doesn't have his permission to go, and she shows this by carrying her phone around all day at the lake, making Rina angry that she won't just enjoy the day (Dessen, p. 209). That trip to the lake makes Rogerson angry in a way that he's never been before. This time the beating takes place in plain sight in Caitlin's front yard, even though he knows that her parents are having a party right in her backyard. Caitlin says:

I lifted my head and he was standing over me, breathing hard. I knew I should get up before someone saw us but somehow I couldn't move. . . . It was the first time he'd done it out in the open, not inside the car or a room, and the vastness of everything, fresh air and space, made me pull myself tighter, smaller. (Dessen, p. 215)

By staying there on the grass and not getting up when Rogerson tells her to, Caitlin bravely stands up for herself. The noise of the beating brings her parents, who have called the police. Caitlin may have chosen to stay in the yard, may have chosen to let her secret out, but she is still plagued with the mindset that Rogerson is her everything. She still believes that "he had been all I'd had, all this time. And when the police led him away, I pulled out of the hands of all these loved ones, sobbing, screaming, everything hurting, to try and make him stay" (Dessen, p. 218). Caitlin is "unable to grow out of . . . self/other distinctions" (Chodorow, 2007, p. 379). Even after months of beatings, and after crying out for help in her head and on paper, Caitlin can't just accept the help of the people

she loves because she thinks that by losing Rogerson, she's losing herself.

Without professional help, Caitlin isn't able to break free from the mindset that she is worthless without her boyfriend. She goes to a rehab facility and takes time to heal. This example is good for adolescents who could be in a situation like Caitlin's, but who are too hurt, both physically and mentally, to accept professional help. Sometimes the effects of such a negative search for identity are so strong that they can't be changed without help from someone who is trained in this type of recovery. Young girls are trained to seek male relationships; it's time we instead train them to individuate in healthy ways.

Caitlin's recovery from this type of thinking isn't instant; it's a long process that has its good days and its bad days. She talks about her time in the rehab facility and how hard it is to change her thinking:

Other days I thought about Rogerson. . . . it should have been easy to finally lift that heaviest of weights and place it squarely where it belonged, on Rogerson. But this, even on the good days, was hard. After all that had happened, how could I miss him? But I did. I did. (Dessen, p. 233)

Caitlin undergoes sessions with a therapist while she's at rehab to try to break her way of thinking about herself as not worth anything without her boyfriend. The therapist tells Caitlin that she shouldn't try to forget her relationship with Rogerson, but that she should learn from it instead (Dessen, p. 242).

Dreamland finishes with Caitlin leaving rehab and going home, knowing that she'll have to continue her therapy sessions to continue her recovery. The realistic way that Dessen portrays Caitlin's recovery is positive in that it can show girls that big problems can't always be fixed instantly, while at the same time, it ends things on an optimistic note, with hope for Caitlin's future. She's home from rehab, her family is working with her to continue her recovery, and her sister is coming back into her life. This ending shows girls that there is hope for them, even if they are caught in a negative relationship like Caitlin.

These selections of *Dreamland* demonstrate the way that culture has influenced real girls and their literary counterparts when it comes to relationships and dating violence. The book ends well for Caitlin, something that, sadly, can't be said about some girls involved in violent relationships. This article mentions earlier how literature mimics culture and society,

but society can learn from literature as well. Dessen's descriptions of Caitlin's realistic thought processes throughout the book and the fact that she gets the help she needs to leave Rogerson can be helpful to girls who are in situations that are similar to hers, girls who want the status that comes with having a boyfriend, regardless of how their boyfriends act or how they treat their girlfriends.

I didn't know how prevalent dating violence is in our society until I read this book and conducted my research. I didn't know about the negative cycle of violence involved in these kinds of relationships, but now I do. I salute Sarah

Dessen for writing about a topic that is too often ignored in YA literature. The disparity between real-life dating violence and most literature's portrayal of it must be remedied. If literature mirrors life, why are there so few stories on dating violence? This problem needs more exposure and more people working to change our culture; girls deserve to know that their worth is not determined by who they date, or by how long those relationships last. We need more authors like Dessen who are willing to take on the tough subjects, thereby helping to open the eyes and minds of young readers so that they are better prepared to handle these issues. We need more authors who are willing to hold up the mirror and more readers who are willing to look in it.

In December of 2011, Kristen Harris graduated from Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, with a BA in English. She plans to concentrate on adolescent literature in her graduate studies beginning in fall of 2012. Her goal is to become an English professor. She thanks Alisa DeBorde and David Smith for their input on this article.

References

- Brookes, F., & Kelly, P. (2009). "Dolly" girls: Tweenies as artifacts of consumption. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 12, 599–613.
- Burleigh, N. (2007, September 10). A high school student's nightmare: Dating violence. *People*, 68(11), 98–104. Retrieved from <http://www.people.com/people/archive/issue/0,,7566070910,00.html>.
- Chodorow, N. (2007). Family structure and feminine personality. In S. M. Gilbert & S. Gubar (Eds.), *Feminist literary theory and*

Young girls are trained to seek male relationships; it's time we instead train them to individuate in healthy ways.

criticism: A Norton reader (pp. 368–387). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Cole, P. B. (2004). For boys only: Young adult literature about girls and dating. *The ALAN Review*, 31(3): 60–62. Retrieved from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN>.

Dessen, S. (2000). *Dreamland*. New York, NY: Speak.

Jones, P. (2004). *Things change*. New York, NY: Walker & Company.

Seventeen. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.seventeen.com>.

Silverman, J. G., Raj, A., Mucci, L. A., & Hathaway, J. E. (2001). Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286, 572–579.

Tashjian, J. (2003). *Fault line*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Walker, L. E. (1977). Who are the battered women? *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 2(1), 52–57.

Other Books to Consider

- *Inexcusable* by Chris Lynch—*Inexcusable* is the story of Keir, a high school student/athlete who thinks he is a good guy; he gets good grades, is polite, has lots of friends. That changes when his friend, GiGi, accuses him of raping her.

Lynch, C. (2007). *Inexcusable*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

- *Things Change* by Patrick Jones—*Things Change* is about sixteen-year-old Johanna who has her first boyfriend. Paul is affectionate with Johanna at first, but then he hits her. This story of dating violence

includes letters from Paul to his father which help to explain why Paul is abusive.

Jones, P. (2006). *Things change*. New York, NY: Walker Books for Young Readers.

- *Fault Line* by Janet Tashjian—Tashjian uses the viewpoints of both the abuser and the abused to add a different dimension as she tells about the relationship of Becky and Kip.

Tashjian, J. (2003). *Fault line*. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson—In *Speak*, Anderson focuses on the aftermath of a rape and how it affects Melinda, both on the inside and the outside.

Anderson, L. H. (1999). *Speak*. New York, NY: Speak.

- *Tornado Warning: A Memoir of Teen Dating Violence and its Effect on a Woman's Life* by Elin Stebbins Waldal—This memoir is the true story of how the author's abusive relationship and how she got out. She also discusses the healing process that she has experienced over the years.

Waldal, E. S. (2011). *Tornado warning: A memoir of teen dating violence and its effect on a woman's life*. Carlsbad, CA: Sound Beach Publishing.