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BOOKSHELF

Darkness Too Visible

Contemporary fiction for teens is rife with explicit abuse, violence and depravity. Why is this considered a good idea?

By MEGHAN COX GURDON

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Amy Freeman, a 46-year-old mother of three, stood recently in the young-adult section of her local Barnes & Noble, in Bethesda, Md., feeling thwarted and disheartened.

She had popped into the bookstore to pick up a welcome-home gift for her 13-year-old, who had been away. Hundreds of lurid and dramatic covers stood on the racks before her, and there was, she felt, "nothing, not a thing, that I could imagine giving my daughter. It was all vampires and suicide and self-mutilation, this dark, dark stuff." She left the store empty-handed.

Journal Community >

Are dark themes in youth fiction helpful or harmful to teenagers?

- Helpful
- Harmful

How dark is contemporary fiction for teens? Darker than when you were a child, my dear: So dark that kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18.

Pathologies that went undescribed in print 40 years ago, that were still only sparingly outlined a generation ago, are now spelled out in stomach-clenching detail. Profanity that would get a song or movie branded with a parental warning is, in young-adult novels, so commonplace that most reviewers do not even remark upon it.

If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is. There are of course exceptions, but a careless young reader—or one who seeks out depravity—will find himself surrounded by images not of joy or beauty but of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds.

Now, whether you care if adolescents spend their time immersed in ugliness probably depends on your philosophical outlook. Reading about homicide doesn't turn a man into a murderer; reading about cheating on exams won't make a kid break the honor code. But the calculus that many parents make is less crude than that: It has to do with a child's happiness, moral development and tenderness of heart. Entertainment does not merely gratify taste, after all, but creates it.



Raul Allen

If you think it matters what is inside a young person's mind, surely it is of consequence what he reads. This is an old dialectic—purity vs. despoliation, virtue vs. smut—but for families with teenagers, it is also everlastingly new. Adolescence is brief; it comes to each of us only once, so whether the debate has raged for eons doesn't, on a personal level, really signify.

As it happens, 40 years ago, no one had to contend with young-adult literature because there was no such thing. There was simply literature, some of it accessible to young readers and some not. As elsewhere in American life, the 1960s changed everything. In 1967, S.E. Hinton published "The Outsiders," a raw and striking novel that dealt directly with class tensions, family dysfunction and violent, disaffected youth. It launched an industry.

Mirroring the tumultuous times, dark topics began surging on to children's bookshelves. A purported diary published anonymously in 1971, "Go Ask Alice," recounts a girl's spiral into drug addiction, rape, prostitution and a fatal overdose. A generation watched Linda Blair playing the

lead in the 1975 made-for-TV movie "Sarah T: Portrait of a Teenage Alcoholic" and went straight for Robin S. Wagner's original book. The writer Robert Cormier is generally credited with having introduced utter hopelessness to teen narratives. His 1977 novel, "I Am the Cheese," relates the delirium of a traumatized youth who witnessed his parents' murder, and it does not (to say the least) have a happy ending.

Grim though these novels are, they seem positively tame in comparison with what's on shelves now. In Andrew Smith's 2010 novel, "The Marbury Lens," for example, young Jack is drugged, abducted and nearly raped by a male captor. After escaping, he encounters a curious pair of glasses that transport him into an alternate world of almost unimaginable gore and cruelty. Moments after arriving he finds himself facing a wall of horrors, "covered with impaled heads and other dripping, black-rot body parts: hands, hearts, feet, ears, penises. Where the f— was this?" No happy ending to this one, either.

In Jackie Morse Kessler's gruesome but inventive 2011 take on a girl's struggle with self-injury, "Rage," teenage Missy's secret cutting turns nightmarish after she is the victim of a sadistic sexual prank. "She had sliced her arms to ribbons, but the badness remained, staining her insides like cancer. She had gouged her belly until it was a mess of meat and blood, but she still couldn't breathe." Missy survives, but only after a stint as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Books We can Recommend for Young Adult Readers

BOOKS FOR YOUNG MEN:

Ship Breaker by Paolo Bacigalupi (2010)

This grueling post-apocalyptic National Book Award

The argument in favor of such novels is that they validate the teen experience, giving voice to tortured adolescents who would otherwise be voiceless. If a teen has been abused, the logic follows, reading about another teen in the same straits will be comforting. If a girl cuts her flesh

winner earns its scenes of menace and the odd expletive by believably conjuring a future in which people survive by scavenging materials from the rusting hulks of oil tankers. In a pitiless semi-civilization, one single act of decency launches a young man on a terrifying journey.

Peace by Richard Bausch (2009)

For older teens, a taut World War II novel set in 1944 that evokes the conflicting moral struggles of war. When a detachment of American GIs tramping through the Italian countryside discovers an escaping German soldier and a young woman hiding in the back of a cart, the resulting bloodshed—is it murder or self-defense?—sets off profound reverberations in the men's hearts.

Old School by Tobias Wolff (2004)

Set in a smart New England prep school in the 1960s, this story of a young man's search for authentic identity captures the mixture of longing and ambition that causes so many adolescents to try, if only for a time, to shape themselves along other people's lines. Here, the admired models are writers—Ernest Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Robert Frost—who visit the school and for whom the young protagonist contorts himself in painful and revealing ways.

Fahrenheit 451 by Ray Bradbury (1953)

A science-fiction classic that offers surprisingly mordant commentary on contemporary American life. In a society where rampant political correctness has resulted in the outlawing of books, Guy Montag works as a "fireman" tasked with destroying intellectual contraband. His wife spends her days immersed in the virtual reality projected on screens around her. When Guy accidentally reads a line from a book, he finds himself strangely stirred—and impelled to an act of recklessness that will change his life forever. Teenagers whose families are maddeningly glued to screens may find Guy's rebellion bracingly resonant.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon (2003)

Told (with the occasional expletive) from the unreliable perspective of a high-functioning autistic teenager, this mystery recounts 15-year-old Christopher's effort to solve the killing of a neighborhood dog. When the boy himself falls under suspicion in the animal's death, his violent response propels him toward discoveries that will ultimately overturn his understanding of his own family.

True Grit by Charles Portis (1968)

The movie versions are fine, but they only approximate the drollery and tenderness of this tale of Wild West vengeance. Narrated in retrospect by a rawhide-tough woman named Mattie Ross, the novel recounts her girlhood quest to hunt down her father's killer in lawless Indian Territory, with the aid of dissolute U.S. Marshal Rooster Cogburn. The

with a razor to relieve surging feelings of self-loathing, she will find succor in reading about another girl who cuts, mops up the blood with towels and eventually learns to manage her emotional turbulence without a knife.

Yet it is also possible—indeed, likely—that books focusing on pathologies help normalize them and, in the case of self-harm, may even spread their plausibility and likelihood to young people who might otherwise never have imagined such extreme measures. Self-destructive adolescent behaviors are observably infectious and have periods of vogue. That is not to discount the real suffering that some young people endure; it is an argument for taking care.

The novel "Scars," a dreadfully clunky 2010 exercise by Cheryl Rainfield that School Library Journal inexplicably called "one heck of a good book," ran into difficulties earlier this year at the Boone County Library in Kentucky, but not because of its contents. A patron complained that the book's depiction of cutting—the cover shows a horribly scarred forearm—might trigger a sufferer's relapse. That the protagonist's father has been raping her since she was a toddler and is trying to engineer her suicide was not the issue for the team of librarians re-evaluating the book.

"Books like 'Scars,' or with questionable material, those provide teachable moments for the family," says Amanda Hopper, the library's youth-services coordinator, adding: "We like to have the adult perspective, but we do try to target the teens because that's who's reading it." The book stayed on the shelves.

Perhaps the quickest way to grasp how much more lurid teen books have become is to compare two authors: the original Judy Blume and a younger writer recently hailed by Publishers Weekly as "this generation's Judy Blume."

The real Judy Blume won millions of readers (and the disapprobation of many adults) with then-daring novels such as 1970's "Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret," which deals with female puberty, 1971's "Then Again, Maybe I Won't," which addresses puberty from a boy's perspective, and 1975's "Forever," in which teenagers lose their virginity in scenes of earnest practicality.

Objectionable the material may be for some parents, but it's not grotesque.

brilliance is all in the tone: Beneath Mattie's blunt manner lies a fierce intelligence and wagon-loads of grit. Girls will love this one, too.

BOOKS FOR YOUNG WOMEN:

What I Saw and How I Lied by Judy Blundell (2008)

The events swirling around 15-year-old Evie in this sophisticated National Book Award winner seem to her, in the blinkered way of teenagers, mainly the backdrop to her own sexual awakening. In a story involving deceitful parents, stolen Jewish treasure, a handsome ex-GI, adultery and murder, all set in louche, off-season Palm Beach, it is only when Evie must decide whether to lie—and whom to save—that it is apparent that she is no longer a child.

Ophelia by Lisa Klein (2006)

An inventive retelling of the story of Hamlet from the perspective of beautiful, bewildered Ophelia. In Shakespeare's play, we are meant to understand her as a love-struck medieval girl gone mad. Here she is an intelligent if impractical Elizabethan who, with the help of Queen Gertrude, secretly marries Prince Hamlet, fakes her own death and runs away with—well, that would be telling, wouldn't it?

Angelmonster by Veronica Bennett (2005)

This elegant novel introduces us to 16-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, future author of "Frankenstein," shortly before she meets the dashing poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. The events that ensue seem as jolting today as they were to the couple's early 19th-century contemporaries: an adulterous escape from London to Europe, the births and deaths of two children, a sojourn in Italy with the "mad, bad, and dangerous to know" Lord Byron (which included a famous night of telling ghost stories), and Percy Shelley's tragic death at sea.

Z for Zachariah by Robert C. O'Brien (1973)

A post-apocalyptic novel for adolescents that is all the more frightening for its restraint. It has been a year since all-out nuclear war has left Ann Burden apparently the only girl in the radioactive remains of the United States; thanks to a quirk of geography, her family's farm (but not her family) survived the cataclysm. When she sees a column of distant smoke, Ann realizes that she is not alone, and soon she is nursing back to health a man who turns out not to be the person to play Adam to her Eve.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith (1943)

This vivid novel of early 20th-century Brooklyn is proof that mature material can be rendered with such subtle humanity that a younger teen can read it with as much enjoyment as a person many years older. I got my copy in a used bookstore when I was 11 and was so entranced by the story of book-loving Francie Nolan and her impoverished Irish-Catholic family—her beautiful mother, her handsome drunken father and

By contrast, the latest novel by "this generation's Judy Blume," otherwise known as Lauren Myracle, takes place in a small Southern town in the aftermath of an assault on a gay teenager. The boy has been savagely beaten and left tied up with a gas pump nozzle shoved down his throat, and he may not live. The protagonist of "Shine," a 16-year-old girl and once a close friend of the victim, is herself yet to recover from a sexual assault in eighth grade; assorted locals, meanwhile, reveal themselves to be in the grip of homophobia, booze and crystal meth. Determined in the face of police indifference to investigate the attack on her friend, the girl relives her own assault (thus taking readers through it, too) and acquaints us with the concept of "bag fags," heterosexuals who engage in gay sex for drugs. The author makes free with language that can't be reprinted in a newspaper.

In the book business, none of this is controversial, and, to be fair, Ms. Myracle's work is not unusually profane. Foul language is widely regarded among librarians, reviewers and booksellers as perfectly OK, provided that it emerges organically from the characters and the setting rather than being tacked on for sensation. In Ms. Myracle's case, with her depiction of redneck bigots with meth-addled sensibilities, the language is probably apt.

But whether it's language that parents want their children reading is another question. Alas, literary culture is not sympathetic to adults who object either to the words or storylines in young-adult books. In a letter excerpted by the industry magazine, the Horn Book, several years ago, an editor bemoaned the need, in order to get the book into schools, to strip expletives from Chris Lynch's 2005 novel, "Inexcusable," which revolves around a thuggish jock and the rape he commits. "I don't, as a rule, like to do this on young adult books," the editor grumbled, "I don't want to compromise on how kids really talk. I don't want to acknowledge those f—ing gatekeepers."

By f—ing gatekeepers (the letter-writing editor spelled it out), she meant those who think it's appropriate to guide what young people read. In the book trade, this is known as "banning." In the parenting trade, however, we call this "judgment" or "taste." It is a dereliction of duty not to make distinctions in every other aspect of a young person's life between more and less desirable options. Yet let a

various other misbehaving or censorious relatives—that I read it over and over throughout adolescence. Only years later did I grasp everything that happened between the adult characters. Isn't that what being a young reader, or indeed a teenager, is all about?

gatekeeper object to a book and the industry pulls up its petticoats and shrieks "censorship!"

It is of course understood to be an act of literary heroism to stand against any constraints, no matter the age of one's

readers; Ms. Myracle's editor told Publishers Weekly that the author "has been on the front lines in the fight for freedom of expression."

Every year the American Library Association delights in releasing a list of the most frequently challenged books. A number of young-adult books made the Top 10 in 2010, including Suzanne Collins's hyper-violent, best-selling "Hunger Games" trilogy and Sherman Alexie's prize-winning novel, "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian." "It almost makes me happy to hear books still have that kind of power," Mr. Alexie was quoted saying; "There's nothing in my book that even compares to what kids can find on the Internet."

Oh, well, that's all right then. Except that it isn't. It is no comment on Mr. Alexie's work to say that one depravity does not justify another. If young people are encountering ghastly things on the Internet, that's a failure of the adults around them, not an excuse for more envelope-pushing.

Veteran children's bookseller Jewell Stoddard traces part of the problem to aesthetic coarseness in some younger publishers, editors and writers who, she says, "are used to videogames and TV and really violent movies and they love that stuff. So they think that every 12-year-old is going to love that stuff and not be affected by it. And I don't think that's possible."

In an effort to keep the most grueling material out of the hands of younger readers, Ms. Stoddard and her colleagues at Politics & Prose, an independent Washington, D.C., bookstore, created a special "PG-15" nook for older teens. With some unease, she admits that creating a separate section may inadvertently lure the attention of younger children keen to seem older than they are.

At the same time, she notes that many teenagers do not read young-adult books at all. Near the end of the school year, when she and a colleague entertained students from a nearby private school, only three of the visiting 18 juniors said that they read YA books.

So it may be that the book industry's ever-more-appalling offerings for adolescent readers spring from a desperate desire to keep books relevant for the young. Still, everyone does not share the same objectives. The book business exists to sell books; parents exist to rear children, and oughtn't be daunted by cries of censorship. No family is obliged to acquiesce when publishers use the vehicle of fundamental free-expression principles to try to bulldoze coarseness or misery into their children's lives.

—Mrs. Gurdon writes regularly about children's books for the Journal.

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