

Off the Shelves

Books on Bullying

Ask any teacher or administrator about the everyday problems they face in schools, and the conversation will eventually lead to bullying. According to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (available at <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/faq/bullying.asp>), almost 30% of American young people (approximately 5.7 million) are believed to be involved in bullying in some fashion; this means the children could be bullies, targets, or even both. Many more students are affected by bullying, even if they are not directly involved in the act itself. The number of students affected by bullying is staggering, and the problem has not gone away in the years since these figures began to be collected. Bullying continues to be an enormous problem within our schools, and studies have indicated that the effects on victims can be far-reaching and severe. In certain instances, bullying can escalate to more extreme violence. It is our job to ensure that bullying—whether hidden or overt—ends in our hallways, and that all students have access to the same safe, secure learning environment.

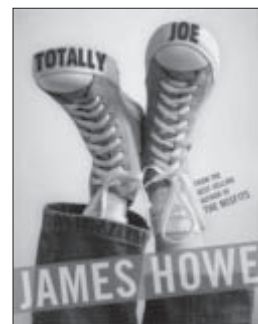
Reading adolescent literature may not appear, to some, to be the best solution to solving the crisis

of bullying. However, some books do hold a mirror up to what teens are thinking, talking about, and doing. To that extent, books that depict bullying, its effects, and possible solutions to bullying behavior can help raise greater awareness of this serious issue among students, teachers, and parents. Bullying, as some would point out, has been around for generations, and with new technologies allowing bullying to permeate cyberspace, it will continue to be an issue for children in schools and for those who work with them. The following books may start honest and fruitful discussions with your classes.

Books for Middle School and Junior High School

Any discussion of books in this area must begin, for me, with James Howe's *The Misfits* (Athe-

neum, 2001). Already taught in many schools, the book follows four outcast students who have been friends for years and have endured name-calling from others. Now that they're in seventh grade, they decide to take a stand: they run for student council as the "No Name Party." The book deals with bullying, and more broadly friendship, in a humorous and upbeat fashion. Howe also wrote a follow-up, *Totally Joe* (Ginee Seo, 2005), written as an alphabiography assignment (depicting the school year, one letter at a time) from Joe, one of the friends from *The Misfits*.



Kathe Koja's *Buddha Boy* (Farrar, 2003) explores the social cliques that dominate high school through the eyes of Justin, an "average" student who is trying to fly beneath the radar of the school's elite and powerful. Justin, however, is intrigued by the new kid at school, Michael Martin (better

known as Jinsen), who looks like a Buddhist monk and stirs the vicious nature of the school's bullies. Short and fast-paced, this book will make readers consider when to do the right thing and just how hard it can be to do that.

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An interesting alliance emerges in Caroline Pignat's *Egghead* (Red Deer, 2007): the victim, Will; his friend, Kate; and Devan, who is beginning to remove himself from the school bully's entourage. These three characters take turns narrating the book, detailing a sensitive depiction of how bullying, peer pressure, and the quest for one's identity are woven throughout their ninth-grade experience.

Alternating narrators are also used to great effect in Alex Flinn's *Fade to Black* (Harper, 2005). Alejandro Crusan, a high school junior who is HIV-positive, is attacked in his car one night by a stranger with a baseball bat. Clinton Cole, a classmate who has tormented Alejandro on previous occasions, proclaims his innocence, but there was a witness that night: Daria, who has Down syndrome, knows what she saw but is not always able to articulate her thoughts clearly to others. By shifting between Alejandro's and Daria's perspectives, Flinn encourages readers to discern the reality from rumors surrounding the events, and to think more carefully about prejudice and fear.

A stellar book that illustrates the ways in which peer pressures

can easily lead to harassment and other actions is Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* (Knopf, 2000). Stargirl is the new girl at Mica High, a girl so unique and eccentric that she initially fascinates and puzzles, and later angers other students, who can't find a label to pin on her. But for Leo, the narrator, Stargirl is a first love, and he must choose whose attention and affection is more important to him: Stargirl's or that of his peers. Spinelli has crafted a wonderfully memorable character who can show readers that it is all right to be different from the others. Readers will also want to revisit Stargirl and Leo's relationship, one year later, in *Love, Stargirl* (Knopf, 2007).

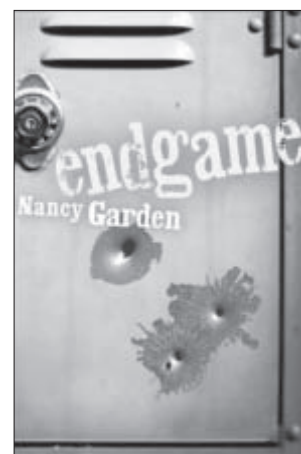
Books for High School

One of the best books I've read in some time, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Razorbill, 2007) can show readers the effects that seemingly innocuous behaviors can have on others. Clay Jenkins receives a box of audiotapes from Hannah Baker, a classmate who had committed suicide two weeks earlier. The tapes reveal how different people treated Hannah over the years and how she came to believe that she had to end her life.

Bullying, and the horrific effects it can have, is presented from varying perspectives in *Quad* by Carrie Gordon Watson (Razorbill, 2007). After shots begin to ring out in the halls of Muir High, six students barricade themselves inside the school store and try to figure out who the shooter could be. The six students all come from different social cliques within the school, so their interpretations of events and people are colored in different ways.

As the book progresses, the group comes closer to identifying the shooter, and readers see how cruelty can have long-lasting effects.

Nancy Garden's *Endgame* (Harcourt, 2006) takes readers inside the mind of a student who, after



prolonged and humiliating bullying, turns to violence. As Gray's story unfolds as he talks to his lawyer following the shooting, readers will be astounded by how blind some authority figures—at school and at home—can be to signs of bullying and warning signals of progressively worse behavior.

The pursuit of popularity lies at the heart of J. M. Steele's *The Market* (Hyperion, 2008). When Kate discovers that all of the girls in her senior class have been ranked on



the Milbank Social Stock Market (MSSM), she is determined to increase her “junk bond” value of 71. Markets fluctuate, and the social market is no different; as she changes her looks and mannerisms, Kate realizes the relative value of popularity and friendship.

Bullying behaviors can also appear in seemingly friendly relationships. Jo Knowles explores complex secrecies and contradictions between girls in *Lessons from a Dead Girl* (Candlewick, 2007). Laine and Leah have been friends since the fifth grade, but they drifted apart as they went through high school. Secrets that had been held between them start to emerge after Leah dies in a car crash. As Laine revisits their relationship after Leah’s death, she comes to realize that their childhood “games” have had powerful affects on her. This is an excellent book about the power friends can have over one another, and Knowles does a skillful job of showing how both Leah and Laine are damaged and tragic.

Prejudice against the undead is the focus of *Generation Dead* by Daniel Waters (Hyperion, 2008). Across the country, some teenagers who died are coming back, although they are not technically alive and are slower to speak and move than they were in life. These “differently biotic” teens, as they come to be known, go to school alongside the living, and this can cause serious disruptions to the social order at school. At Oakvale High, Phoebe and her friends interact with the differently biotic daily, and she falls for Tommy, who is a leader among the dead students. Their relationship causes disruption among Phoebe’s friends

and becomes more complicated when a living boy falls for Phoebe. This is a smart and funny book about how differences manifest themselves at school and in the community at large.

Cyberbullying

As mentioned earlier, there is a dangerous and growing trend of bullying behavior via new media, such as email or texting, MySpace and Facebook pages, and pictures posted on the Internet. Young adult authors have noticed this as well, and the following books can help bring these issues to light for you and your students.

One earlier example of cyberbullying in YA literature is Doug Wilhelm’s *The Revealers* (Farrar, 2003). Russell, Elliot, and Catalina are three friends who all share tales of physical and mental abuse from other students. When they share their stories, they realize there is power inherent in their small community. They decide to broaden their scope and use their school’s intranet system to distribute their experiences and give

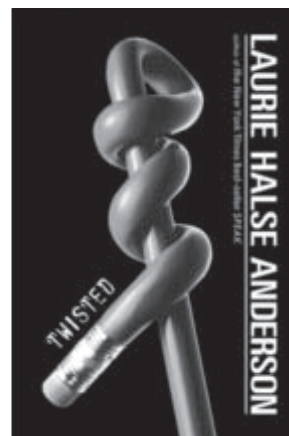
Books such as these, and others that are yet to be written, can show students the often complicated truths that lie behind bullying stereotypes and help students see themselves in the roles that usually exist in a bullying relationship (such as bully, victim, and witness).

other students the chance to share theirs. The atmosphere in the school begins to change for the better, and while the plot does fol-

low some predictable paths, this is still a good lesson for students about the nature of stereotypes and what can happen when students get involved to combat bullying.

In *Something to Blog About* (Amulet, 2008), Shana Norris begins with a strong mother-daughter relationship between Libby and her mother, which then becomes more complicated when Libby’s mom begins to date the father of Angel, a girl who has tormented Libby since grade school. When Angel sneaks onto Libby’s computer and posts her private blog to their tenth-grade class, Libby’s world is completely upended.

Laurie Halse Anderson illustrates the rapid nature of cyberbullying in *Twisted* (Viking, 2007).




Her narrator, Tyler, has transformed himself into a muscle-bound senior after a summer of physical labor, which served as his punishment for a prank. When his new look catches the eye of popular Bethany, it enrages Chip, Bethany’s brother, which leads to conflicts between the two boys at school. When photos of Bethany at a party—drunk and passed out in a compromising position—are posted online, the blame falls on

Tyler. Anderson presents a compelling male narrator and poses tough questions about the nature and benefits of popularity.

Books such as these, and others that are yet to be written, can show students the often complicated truths that lie behind bullying stereotypes and help students see themselves in the roles that usually exist in a bullying relationship (such as bully, victim, and witness). As teachers, it is up to us to constantly stay aware of students and

work to prevent bullying behavior before it becomes apparent, or before it is too late. For much more information than I could provide in this column, I strongly recommend the excellent work of CJ Bott. Her book, *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (Scarecrow, 2004) is an outstanding resource for fiction and nonfiction titles that deal with bullying and for further information about bullying prevention. Her second book, *More Bullies in More Books*, will be

released by Scarecrow in 2009. Bott also maintains the website <http://bulliesinbooks.com>, which contains book recommendations and other resources that can assist teachers and students with beginning and sustaining productive conversations about this vitally important topic. Preventative measures begin in our individual classrooms, and I encourage you to read these books and resources and to consider how you can use them to help your students. 

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The Burning House

Students are writing again. I can hear the sounds of words, and phrases, and sentences being drawn out upon the surfaces of paper. They are discovering the similarity of color shared by the lamp on my desk, the gently swaying flame of the candle, and the chalk rendered flames of fire engulfing the image of the house on the gallery wall—the color is yellow, ranging from near white to the soft yellow of a rose, from muted amber to the boundary line of orange. They are thinking of Anne Bradstreet and her burning house, a tale that has survived nearly four hundred years. Some of them are recalling their own fires; they have a lot to say. They are writing in the light of these three vessels and the light that has pushed its way through the blinds covering the two windows of this room. We hear others talk, in other rooms, but we are silent. Our voices fall onto the page with a quiet ease, like wading into the water of a lake late in a summer evening when the air is cool and the water is warm. We will go as deep as we can in the light of these lanterns.

— Kevin Marshall Chopson
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Kevin Marshall Chopson received his MFA from Murray State University in May of 2008. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *The Chaffin Journal*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Cellar Roots*, *The Broad River Review*, *New Madrid*, and *Poem*. He teaches at Davidson Academy, a small private school in Nashville, Tennessee.