Teachers Offering Healthy Escape Options for Teenagers in Pain

In the early 1990s, I read, annotated, and categorized hundreds of young adult (YA) realistic fiction novels for *Adolescents at Risk: A Guide to Fiction and Nonfiction for Young Adults, Parents, and Professionals*, which was finally published in 1993.

At first I resisted the publisher's request to provide statistics and where-to-call-for-help sections, but my research brought me to this bottom line: twenty-five percent of today's teenagers have inordinate emotional baggage beyond the normal angst of adolescence. According to the National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence (http://www.nccafv.org/child.htm), child abuse and neglect have increased to epidemic proportions in the United States with more than 2.5 million reports of child abuse made annually. To respond to this national problem, I paired literacy experts with therapists and had counselors provide therapy to young adult protagonists in books. The final book in this six-text series, *Using Literature to Help Troubled Teenagers Cope with Abuse Issues*, was published in the fall of 2004. My hope is that teachers and helping professionals can gain insight into the lives of at-risk youth, and those adolescents in pain can have access to free counseling. There are at risk students in your classes who might be described as 12 going on 40, and these are the kids who are often choosing unhealthy ways to escape their pain.

The National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion distributes the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (NYRBS) every two years during the spring semester, and acquires data representative of ninth- through twelfth-grade students in public and private schools throughout the United States; data are currently available from 1991–2003. These data provide information related to the health risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth. (Note: parenthetical remarks are data taken from the NYRBS.) Because adolescents are often black-and-white thinkers, I am very clear when I speak to them about the unhealthy choices they are making, and I promise them that their lives will get *worse* before they get *better* if they choose any one of these quick-fix escapes for their emotional pain.

Unhealthy Escapes for People in Pain

- Alcohol & Drugs (Accidents are the #1 cause of death for teenagers.)
- Rampant Sex (Of the 47% who engage in sexual activity, 83% do not use birth control, leading to problems associated with teenage pregnancy, poverty, and HIV.)
- Gangs & Violence (Violence causes more deaths of American teens than communicable diseases.)
- Eating Disorders (As many as 13.3% will go without eating for more than a day to intentionally lose weight, and 6% will vomit or take laxatives to lose weight.)
- Suicide (Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for 10–14 and 15–24 year olds.)

While our students are trapped in adolescence with no ability to decide who they live with or where they live, there are better escapes for them

until they are old enough to deal with their life's circumstances. Talking with an adult about life's problems is an option that teachers and school counselors encourage. But when students resist conversation, what other options might we show them? Following are the healthy escapes we can offer adolescents in pain (Kaywell, *Letters of Hope*, in progress):

Healthy Escapes for Teenagers in Pain

- Arts and Crafts (Not required in schools.)
- Music and Dance (Not required in schools.)
- A Belief in a Higher Power (Not allowed in schools.)
- Athletics (You don't pass, you don't play.)
- Doing for Others, Including Animal Care (Service learning is sporadic in schools.)
- Reading and Writing (Now at risk because of high-stakes testing.)

As English language arts teachers, we may not have much control over school offerings and policy, but we do have the ability to encourage our students to write in journals and influence their reading selections. Encourage students to talk about their concerns without insisting that they do so, and listen in a genuinely warm and nonjudgmental way. As is required by law, refer serious cases such as abuse or injurious situations to the appropriate school administrator. It is important to remember that we are English teachers, not guidance counselors. Providing a list of names and phone numbers to contact for individual or family counseling can be helpful.

Teachers and authors are often the unsung heroes of children on the brink of self-destruction. By offering books to children to help them momentarily escape the pain of growing up, teachers offer teenagers a constructive way to survive the crisis, find hope, and know that they are not alone. What follows is a brief list of annotated YA novels that illustrate teenagers living in painful circumstances making healthy choices for themselves.

Arts and Crafts as Healthy Escapes

***Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (198 pp.)** Melinda Sordino begins her freshman year of high school as an outcast, an almost invisible student without a voice. "Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (p. 9). None of her friends want to hear why she called the police during that summer party; no one even asks. The novel, spoken through Melinda herself and alive with characters we all recognize from our own high school experiences, realistically portrays her struggle to recapture her voice, her strength, to speak up and tell the world what happened. Her journey to express her pain, to tell her truth, metaphorically weaves itself into Mr. Freeman's assigned art project to turn an object (for Melinda, a tree) into a piece of art. "This is where you can find your soul, if you dare. Where you can touch that part of you that you've never dared look at before" (p. 10). Through Melinda, Anderson shows the courage of a young adolescent girl conquering the Beast in her life. Her growth, her tree, breathes hope. (Winner of the 2001 Heartland Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, a 2000 Printz Honor book, an ALA Top Ten Best Books for 2000, a 1999 National Book Award Finalist, Edgar Allen Poe Award Finalist, Winner of the Golden Kite Award, an ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, an ALA Quick Pick, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year, a *Booklist* Top Ten First Novel of 1999, a *BCCB* Blue Ribbon Book, a *SLJ* Best Book of the Year, & a *Horn Book* Fan Fare Title) [Sexual Abuse]

***The Island* by Gary Paulsen (208 pp.)** Perhaps it is because his parents fight a lot, or perhaps it is because 14-year-old Wil Neuton has been uprooted from his city life and friends, or perhaps it is because of a bully at school, but Wil is becoming a recluse, and it's making many people a bit nervous about him. An uninhabited island in the middle of Sucker Lake in northern Wisconsin becomes his sanctuary, his spiritual home. The island provides Wil with a place to meditate—a

place to write essays and paint pictures about what he sees, feels, remembers, and thinks about. (An ALA Best Book) [Relocation and a Bully]

Music and Dance as Healthy Escapes

***The Big Nothing* by Adrian Fogelin (224 pp.)** Thirteen-year-old Justin Riggs not only feels like the title suggests, but he chooses to slip into "the big nothing" when life gets too overwhelming—which is now. His older brother Duane is fighting the war in Iraq, his father might be having an affair and has left, his mother is depressed and is barely functioning, and his best friend is spending all of his free time with a girl. With no one to turn to, he strikes up a friendship with a neighbor and classmate Jemmie Lewis. It's Jemmie's grandmother, however, who encourages Justin to sit at an old upright piano, and he discovers that making music is preferable to nothingness. [Abandonment and Depressed Mother]

***Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse (227 pp.)** Written in free verse, Hesse sets this fiction story in the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma during the 1930s. Billie Jo and her family are barely surviving, but her and her mother's piano playing bring some joy to the otherwise dry and empty household existence. Life gets way worse, however, when Billy Jo's mother has an accident at the stove, and Billy Jo accidentally throws a pail of kerosene on her mother. Billy Jo's hands get burned, but her mother dies in the fire. In time, Billie Jo eventually plays the piano to help her get through her mother's tragic death. (A 1998 Newbery Award winner) [Death of a Parent]

***Hate You* by Graham McNamee (119 pp.)** The day eight-year-old Alice's father grabs her by the throat—the result of her effort to protect her mother from her father's rage—is the day Alice's mother banishes him from the house and their lives forever. Unfortunately, Alice's mother is too inept herself to see how physically and emotionally hurt Alice has become. Alice's turtleneck sweater hides the bruises, but the emotional bruises continue to grow for the next eight years of her life. Alice is a gifted musician and is able to release her anger when her boyfriend helps her see the beauty in her gravelly voice. Her friend, Rachel, helps Alice realize that others have their own real burdens, including her mother. [Emotional & Physical Abuse]

***Dancing on the Edge* by Han Nolan (244 pp.)** Miracle, as her name implies, is a miracle child in that she survived her birth in spite of her mother's tragic death while pregnant with Miracle. Grandmother Gigi, a woman who believes in spells and incantations, is raising Miracle, even as her novelist father lives reclusively in the basement. After he disappears ("melts away into thin air," as Gigi says), Miracle and Gigi go to live with Gigi's ex-husband, Grandaddy Opal, where Miracle has her own meltdown. Although Grandaddy Opal is gruff, he offers Miracle some stability in her life by providing her with a bicycle and dancing lessons. Although dancing is a positive outlet for Miracle, it is not enough to prevent her from seeking her father by setting herself on fire. (A 1997 National Book Award Nominee) [Abandonment and Mental Illness]

A Belief in a Higher Power as a Healthy Escape

***Song of the Magdalene* by Donna Jo Napoli (240 pp.)** Set in Israel around 5 to 25 A.D., this is the fictional story of Mary Magdalene as a teenager named Miriam. Life was good for Miriam until the age of ten when her seizures started. In ancient Israel, it was believed that a person who had a physical affliction was unclean, and Miriam herself believes she is possessed by demons. Miriam gives up dancing in an attempt to pacify the Creator, but her fits continue. If anyone finds out, she will be an outcast like Abraham, the caretaker's paraplegic son. Because of their joint isolation and deep views on religion and the world, Miriam eventually falls in love with Abraham. After Abraham's death, she is raped by a villager and miscarries Abraham's child. She eventually finds peace and compassion when she meets up with

Jesus and comes to understand the power of a healing song. (A 1997 YALSA Best Book for Young Adults) [Physical Disability]

***Words by Heart* by Ouida Sebestyen (176 pp.)** Set in 1910, Lena Sills and her family are the only black people living in the small town of Bethel Springs. Ironically, Lena learns about racism after winning a scripture-reciting contest. At every turn, it seems that Lena confronts fear and hatred, especially when a 16-year-old boy shoots her father for being a perceived threat to his drunken father's job. Lena's father and her belief in scripture help her to live the words instead of reciting them by heart. (A 1982 National Book Award winner) [Racial Prejudice]

Athletics as a Healthy Escape

***Stotan!* by Chris Crutcher (192 pp.)** Four young men—Nortie, Lion, Jeff, and Walker—are on the varsity swim team and are preparing for a week of hell, Stotan Week, during Christmas break of their senior year. Their swim coach has a week of intense training in store for them, but all four boys survive an intense emotional workout as well. They learn that Nortie's mother has endured countless beatings, and so has Nortie while trying to defend her. When his father ends up putting Nortie in the hospital, the guys go to his house to pick up his stuff so that he can stay with Lion. Lion tries to help Nortie's mother get away from the situation, but she returns to the abuse she has grown accustomed to. As the novel closes, the abuse is still going on, but Nortie has managed to find a way out through swimming, his coach, and his band of friends. (An ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults, a School Library Journal Best of the Best in YA Literature, an ALA Best Books for Young Adults) [Physical Abuse]

***Over the Wall* by John Ritter (312 pp.)** It's been about ten years since Tyler's father accidentally ran over and killed his baby sister, but Tyler's father still hasn't gotten over it, and Tyler is angry—real angry—that life for his father seems to have frozen in that moment so long ago. Thirteen-year-old Tyler serves as the book's narrator and shares what happens when he leaves his distraught family to live with relatives in New York City where he gets to play baseball. The title suggests three types of walls: the wall that Tyler has built around himself, the wall he wants to smash a baseball over, and the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. that reminds American society of a dark time in history. Although Tyler has talent and passion enough to make the all-star team, his anger undermines his attempts to succeed. Thanks to some guidance he receives from his baseball coach and Vietnam veteran, Tyler learns to reconnect with his guilt-ridden father. (Winner of the Parents' Guide to Children's Media Award by Shenendoah University) [Depression and Anger]

Doing for Others, Including Animal Care, as Healthy Escapes

***Keesha's House* by Helen Frost (128 pp.)** Even though the house doesn't really belong to Keesha, she has a habit of inviting other troubled teenagers to come live with her there. Initially, it belonged to a woman who took in her 12-year-old nephew Joe because he needed someone stable in his life. Now Joe's an adult who helps out kids in similar situations, like Keesha, whose mother has died and whose father is a mean drunk. She wants to stay in school but needs support to help her stay. Through poetry, readers learn the stories about several teenagers in trouble: Stephie's pregnant and scared to tell her parents; Harris told his parents he's gay and he's been thrown out; Carmen's parents have abandoned her; and Dontay's in foster care because both of his parents are in jail. These adolescents courageously try to hold their lives together by encouraging each other. (A 2004 Michael L. Printz Honor Book) [Pregnancy, Homosexuality, Neglect, Alcoholism]

***Hero* by S. L. Rottman (134 pp.)** Sean Parker is the epitome of resiliency. Readers are initially introduced to an angry, troubled teen hardened by years of abuse and neglect from his alcoholic

mother and his estranged father. Unloved by the adults who should love him the most, Sean lashes out when his mother steals his own money from a secret hiding place (something essential to the neglected child's survival); angry outbursts at school compound his problems. The reader is not surprised when Sean ends up in the juvenile justice system. Thankfully, the arrest transforms beautifully into the most compassionate relationship this teen has ever known. When Sean is placed in the partial custody of Mr. Hassler, an old man who takes in juveniles to work on his horse farm, Sean is furnished with his first real lessons in unconditional love. The author draws a clever parallel between a foal Sean helps to deliver and the boy, both needing to be removed from their mothers for their own safety. The novel's climax is a surprise, giving readers a winning description of a hero. (Winner of the 1998 Oklahoma Book Award) [Emotional Abuse & Neglect]

Reading and Writing as Healthy Escapes

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time: A Novel* by Mark Haddon (240 pp.)** Christopher Boone, an autistic 15-year-old boy with an affinity for the logic of Sherlock Holmes, is falsely accused of murdering his neighbor's poodle and spends a night in jail. Christopher decides to solve the crime, and Siobohan, a social worker at his school, encourages him to write a book about his investigations. While looking for clues, Christopher confronts a crisis within his own family and writes from the point of view of a person who cannot feel emotions. (An ALA Top Ten Best Books for 2004) [Divorce]

***3 NBs of Julian Drew* by James M. Deem (153 pp.)** Fifteen-year-old Julian Drew keeps a journal that recounts the emotional and physical abuse he receives at home at the hands of 543 (she, "stepmother" or step-not-her) and 43 (he, his biological father). Julian writes to his deceased mother using a strange form of code to protect the information he writes. His obsessive counting of the bricks that make up his locked "GB" (garage bedroom) and the shame of using a "P can" mark the quiet desolation that this severely neglected child suffers. When a teacher disbelieves the severity of his problem, and despite what could be paralyzing feelings of wanting to "KI77" (kill), Julian runs away to his childhood town in an attempt to travel back in time to see his mother; the memory of her love is Julian's primary source of strength. Alone and free from the tyrannical abuse of his demented stepmother, Julian is finally able to face his past in order to survive the present. At first difficult to follow because of the chaotic code of the severely abused, the reader comes to appreciate the raw intensity that code lends to the action of the novel. At once frustrating and terrible, the "NBs" (notebooks) provide a link into the mind of a child struggling to survive emotional abuse and neglect. The ending leaves room for a variety of conclusions with only the understanding that Julian is going to begin the healing process. [Emotional & Physical Abuse]

***The Watcher* by James Howe (174 pp.)** One summer, a lone girl sits and watches families on vacation. From her perch, the top of the steps that lead to the beach on Fire Island, everyone else plays while she records her observations in a notebook. She never walks onto the beach; instead, she is just a shell of a person who feels invisible. She becomes particularly enamored watching Evan and his family playing on the beach and is envious of this seemingly perfect family. She sneaks into their beach house and takes a family portrait. She carefully cuts a photograph of herself and places it inside of the frame of the stolen family picture. When her parents discover the tampered photograph, the origins of her feelings are revealed and Margaret emerges. (An ALA Best Book) [Emotional & Physical Abuse]

***So Much to Tell You* by John Marsden (119 pp.)** Because of unacknowledged and conflicting feelings of anger, guilt, love, and hate, 14-year-old Marina hasn't talked or interacted with others since an abusive incident that put her father in prison. She communicates by writing in a journal at the

boarding school she attends after a stay at a psychiatric hospital. As she writes, Marina and the reader develop an understanding about the event that changed both Marina's life as well as her appearance forever. In spite of her resolve to not feel, Marina starts wanting to get to know Cathy, the girl whom she trusts the most. Finally, Marina stops hiding in corners and, in spite of trying to be invisible, she occasionally smiles and writes notes to others in a conversational way. Marina's journey toward health, however, is not without obstacles. With feelings comes a period of regression and another stint in the hospital. Adolescents who have suffered abuse will relate to the way Marina deals with the ordeal in her life, and might see their own coping strategies in a more objective light. (Australia's 1988 Book of the Year Award, the 1990 Christopher Award) [Physical Abuse]

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