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Abuse and Harassment: Finding Solace in Contemporary Realistic Fiction

Harassment comes in all forms from people who feel the need to scare or belittle others. Those who tragically become victim to the malevolent nature of abuse often shut themselves down and exclude themselves from society. There is real emotional and physical dangers that come from experiencing abuse and harassment. Teenagers face enough personal and social obstacles as they make the transition into adulthood as it is. For many teens, this transition is a difficult stage in life because of new challenges that they must learn how to overcome for the first time. The difficult aspects of life's hardships can often be stressful and overwhelming. Young adults already feel like they are out of place, misfits in a world unaccepting of their thoughts, choices, and existence, which can leave them feeling awkward or alone. When physical, verbal, relation, sexual, and prejudicial, abuse takes hold of one's life, it can be hard to focus on the positives; self-harm then becomes a way to de-stress and overcome the interior battle that is occurring. Books of contemporary young adult realistic fiction relate to many teenagers by offering comfort, advice, and encouragement to carry out a content lifestyle.

Contemporary realistic fiction consists of literary works that contain plots that are believable to the audience, and take place in modern time. These storylines consist of issues that mirror contemporary young adult lifestyles, which have relatable conflicts with realistic characters. The contemporary realistic fiction genre explores many real-life relatable abusive circumstances, which can deliver a sense of comfort to its young adult audience through

impactful novels and other styles of literary works. Though I have specified my topic themes covering harassment and abuse, young adults might also find relatable issues including falling in love, loss and grief, alcoholism, racial or religious controversies, etc. These topics are ongoing issues that occur frequently in everyday life. Learning how to deal with these circumstances is an important part of growing older; the choices people make help to develop their character.

This genre has been deemed successful in terms of granting solace and comfort to its young adult audience seeking advice. Many of the events seen in this genre conjure thoughts that allow for self-reflection. The plot endings can help guide the young adult reader to make choices that can better their own lives, because they may be going through similar controversies.

According to *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, "We are writing about young adult fiction with real-world settings in historical periods not far removed from our own. The books feature young protagonists solving problems without the help of magic." (Ch.4) There are multiple topics covered in novels written in the realistic fashion that deal with physical, cultural, and sexual discrepancies that can teach readers how to deal with moral and ethical positions. Reading about the conflicts of fictional characters in a realistic style of writing allows the reader to face their own inner demons, as well as teach readers to make their own moral and ethical judgments.

The realistic fictional genre can provide solace for people in abusive situations because although no one story is exactly the same, those plots mirror situations enough to offer healing. The impact made through reading literary works of contemporary realistic fiction involving harassment and abuse is very important to adolescent readers who are developing their sense of self that is often torn down after experiencing such violence. Great works of fiction will address hopes and fears of contemporary teenagers, as well as provide realistic options to escape

challenging situations. Most importantly, these great novels serve to propose new ways to think about life, offering new reasoning, rather than forcing opinions and ideas on young readers.

Annotated Bibliography

*Note: All Summaries have been taken from Goodreads.com

Novels

1. Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. New York: Puffin, 2001. Print.

Melinda Sordino busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops. Now her old friends won't talk to her, and people she doesn't even know hate her from a distance. The safest place to be is alone, inside her own head. But even that's not safe. Because there's something she's trying not to think about, something about the night of the party that, if she let it in, would blow her carefully constructed disguise to smithereens. And then she would have to speak the truth. This extraordinary first novel has captured the imaginations of teenagers and adults across the country.

Reference: Personal read. Class assigned novel.

Commentary: This novel deals with harassment specific to sexual assault and bullying. It offers readers a place to find solace. As I read through this novel, I watched the main protagonist and rape victim, Melinda Sardino, go through her own silenced process of healing. She refuses to tell anyone about the rape and expresses hardships as she transitions into high school. She grows and develops as a young adult and eventually comes to the realization that speaking about it can help her heal. Melinda has weaknesses that she overcomes as the story comes to a close. This story can help others learn how to accept their pasts and grow from the strength it takes to talk about their troubles openly.

2. Clayton, Colleen. *What Happens Next: A Novel*. New York: Poppy, 2012. Print.

How can you talk about something you can't remember? Before the ski trip, sixteen-year-old Cassidy "Sid" Murphy was a cheerleader (at the bottom of the pyramid, but still...), a straight-A student, and a member of a solid trio of best friends. When she ends up on a ski lift next to handsome local college boy, Dax Windsor, she's thrilled; but Dax takes everything from Sid—including a lock of her perfect red curls—and she can't remember any of it. Back home and unable to relate to her old friends, Sid drops her college prep classes and takes up residence in the A/V room with only Corey "The Living Stoner" Livingston for company. But as she gets to know Corey (slacker, baker, total dreamboat), Sid finds someone who truly makes her happy. Now, if she can just shake the nightmares and those few extra pounds, everything will be perfect... or so she thinks. Witty and poignant, Colleen Clayton's stunning debut is a story about moving on after the unthinkable happens.

Reference: Wrappedupinbooks.org

Commentary: Though I have never read it personally, the comments on Goodreads.com seem to suggest that this novel might strike a nerve. The main protagonist is assaulted and has no memory of it. She was drugged and raped and keeps it all to herself; she detaches herself from her friends and family. This book might help those young adults learn that it is fine to experience

fear, but it is also better to tell someone about that fear. The reaction to the harassment in this novel is a leading example of how emotional attitude can suffer when our physical bodies are in distress.

3. Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York: Greenwillow, 2001. Print.

A group of misfits in the form of a high school swim team struggles to find their places in a school that ignores their existence. The team, comprised of a multi-racial team captain, a fat kid, a one-legged angry kid, a genius, an unnoticed kid and a bodybuilding kid, eventually open up to one another, and their bond establishes a new place where they can find acceptance. The novel covers a large range of topics, such as multiculturalism, child abuse, various forms of discrimination from racism to ableism, and bullying.

Reference: Personal read for class

Commentary: This book illustrates multiple realistic scenes of sexual and racial harassment. The main protagonist, TJ, is a racially mixed high school teenager who stands up for others whenever he feels people are discriminating against them. In the novel a friend of his girlfriend is physically harmed, a racist man continues to break his restraining order and threatens his ex and her kids, an athletic boy from school harasses another boy for being a non-athlete who wears his dead brother's letterman jacket. All of these scenes in the novel are forms of harassment. It is a far too common problem that exists in our communities. Christ Crutcher gives offers a great read for those suffering from harassment on a daily basis. He tackles the subject head-on and offers advice through TJ how to go about standing up against harassment, or simply how to deal with its malevolent nature in daily life scenarios.

4. Dessen, Sarah. *Dreamland*. New York, NY: Speak, 2004. Print.

Ever since she started going out with Rogerson Biscoe, Caitlin seems to have fallen into a semiconscious dreamland where nothing is quite real. Rogerson is different from anyone Caitlin has ever known. He's magnetic. He's compelling. He's dangerous. Being with him makes Caitlin forget about everything else--her missing sister, her withdrawn mother, her lackluster life. But what happens when being with Rogerson becomes a larger problem than being without him?

Reference: Goodreads.com

Commentary: This novel is another example of how people who hide their pain can cause physical and mental harm to themselves. This dark and contemporary realistic novel provides a very real outlook on abuse and the effects that take place unto its victims. The plot illustrates a young teen who falls for a desirable boy, but learns that he is not at all what she thought he was.

5. Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead, 2003. Print.

Amir is the son of a wealthy Kabul merchant, a member of the ruling caste of Pashtuns. Hassan, his servant and constant companion, is a Hazara, a despised and impoverished caste. Their uncommon bond is torn by Amir's choice to abandon his friend amidst the increasing ethnic, religious, and political tensions of the dying years of the Afghan monarchy, wrenching them far

apart. But so strong is the bond between the two boys that Amir journeys back to a distant world, to try to right past wrongs against the only true friend he ever had. The unforgettable, heartbreaking story of the unlikely friendship between a wealthy boy and the son of his father's servant, *The Kite Runner* is a beautifully crafted novel set in a country that is in the process of being destroyed. It is about the power of reading, the price of betrayal, and the possibility of redemption; and an exploration of the power of fathers over sons—their love, their sacrifices, their lies.

Reference: Personal read.

Commentary: This book is a prime example that harassment can take place anywhere around the world. The book is beautifully crafted with a graphic and believable voice that is hard to separate yourself from. While the overall novel challenges the issue of discrimination in Afghanistan, harassment appears in the form of bullying which ultimately ends in rape.

6. Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: Pocket, 1999. Print.

And while he's not the biggest geek in the school, he is by no means popular. Shy, introspective, intelligent beyond his years yet socially awkward, he is a wallflower, caught between trying to live his life and trying to run from it. Charlie is attempting to navigate his way through uncharted territory: the world of first dates and mix tapes, family dramas and new friends; the world of sex, drugs, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, when all one requires is that perfect song on that perfect drive to feel infinite. But he can't stay on the sideline forever. Standing on the fringes of life offers a unique perspective. But there comes a time to see what it looks like from the dance floor.

Reference: Goodreads.com

Commentary: This novel might be a good read representing the genre of contemporary realistic fiction with the protagonist's struggle for social acceptance. It also seems to be about discovering the person he is and who he wants to be, which is what any teen can relate to. There seems to be a real search for identity in this novel, while confronting real matters on drugs, sex, and other common teen affairs. Sexual harassment seems to be the most rampant in this novel. The harassment is seen when the main character faces his past issues of molestation. Another example is when a guy abuses a female character. One of the character's is not only abused by his father when he is caught kissing another male, but faces bullying from his peers in the form of name calling. This novel would be a great source for young adults dealing with any form of sexual harassment. This novel is also offered as a film.

7. Frank, E. R. *Dime*. N.p.: Simon & Schuster Children's, 2015. Print.

The realities of teen prostitution are revealed in this eye-opening, heartbreaking story from the author of *America*, which Booklist called "a piercing, unforgettable novel" and Kirkus Reviews deemed 'a work of sublime humanity.' As a teen girl in Newark, New Jersey, lost in the foster care system, Dime just wants someone to care about her, to love her. A family. And that is exactly what she gets—a daddy and two "wifeys." So what if she has to go out and earn some coins to keep her place? It seems a fair enough exchange for love. Dime never meant to become a prostitute. It happened so gradually, she pretty much didn't realize it was happening until it was

too late. But when a new 'wifey' joins the family and Dime finds out that Daddy doesn't love her the way she thought he did, will Dime have the strength to leave? And will Daddy let her?

Reference: Gift from in-class Book Pass. Personal read.

Commentary: This novel describes a girl's struggle with the lack of family stability and finding acceptance with people who introduce her to sex, drugs, and violence at an extremely young age. The events that take place in this novel are hard to accept as truth but the reality is that Dime is in a situation that many young girls fall victim to: Prostitution. The story follows Dime's struggle with morality, identity, and acceptance, as the main subject in a fast developing prostitution raid. In the novel, Dime finds solace in reading, and sneaking books from the library into her room to read whenever she can make time for it. She uses books as a way to escape her own terrible circumstances. Allowing oneself to become lost in a great work of literature is a perfect way to uncover advice for one's own life. If a young adult had a friend or family member, or facing prostitution issues themselves, this novel can act as a guide to getting out of their terrible situation. Because I have read this novel personally, I can recommend it to those facing matters on sexual harassment, sexual assault, violence, harassment, prostitution, and pornography that they wish to escape from.

8. Hinton, S. E. *The Outsiders*. New York: Viking, 1967. Print.

According to Ponyboy, there are two kinds of people in the world: greasers and socs. A soc (short for 'social') has money, can get away with just about anything, and has an attitude longer than a limousine. A greaser, on the other hand, always lives on the outside and needs to watch his back. Ponyboy is a greaser, and he's always been proud of it, even willing to rumble against a gang of socs for the sake of his fellow greasers--until one terrible night when his friend Johnny kills a soc. The murder gets under Ponyboy's skin, causing his bifurcated world to crumble and teaching him that pain feels the same whether a soc or a greaser.

Reference: Goodreads.com

Commentary: This novel seems to deal with realistic situations like social acceptance, bullying, and how one's choice of friends can change one's life. More relatable themes are society and class, love, loyalty, violence, isolation, appearances, education, and choices (Litcharts.com). Though I have never read this novel, I recommend it due to the topics, themes and plot that seem to be realistic and relatable for the young adult audience. This novel have also been made into a film.

9. Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Viking, 2002. Print.

Set in South Carolina in 1964, *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the story of Lily Owens, whose life has been shaped around the blurred memory of the afternoon her mother was killed. When Lily's fierce-hearted black 'stand-in mother,' Rosaleen, insults three of the deepest racists in town, Lily decides to spring them both free. They escape to Tiburon, South Carolina--a town that holds the secret to her mother's past. Taken in by an eccentric trio of black beekeeping sisters, Lily is introduced to their mesmerizing world of bees and honey, and the Black Madonna. This is a remarkable novel about divine female power, a story women will share and pass on to their daughters for years to come.

Reference: Kristen Christensen's Book Talk presentation.

Commentary: This novel deals with a very real issue in America, which is racism. It also involves the death of a mother, which can be helpful to those who have lost a parent or parental figure. Identity is also a theme in the novel. The young protagonist finds a new family in a place that she never would have expected. This novel brings together people in a time period of cultural division. Though, this book takes place around 1964, racism and cultural division is still very real to this day, and the more books that are taught on it, the better people can become at gradually diminishing discrimination and segregation. This novel has also been made into a film.

10. Luedeke, Lisa. *Smashed*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry, 2012. Print.

Stay out of trouble for one more year, and Katie Martin can leave her small town loneliness behind forever. She is a field hockey star on the fast track to a college scholarship, but her relationship with alcohol has always been a little questionable. Then trouble finds her. Alec is the most popular guy in school, and also the biggest bully—with his sights set firmly on Katie. When Alec turns on the charm, Katie thinks she must have been wrong about him. Except that she wasn't. On a rain-soaked, alcohol-drenched night, one impulsive decision leaves Katie indebted to Alec in the worst possible way. This debut novel is a fast-paced and compelling story of addiction, heartbreak, and redemption.

Reference: Borrowed book from in-class Book Pass. Personal read.

Commentary: This novel is another perfect representation of contemporary realistic fiction in that it includes teenage topics like sexual harassment, college acceptance, alcoholism, family issues, and learning how to confide in one's friends. The main protagonist is the captain of her hockey high school team who is harassed by a football player. She lacks family stability and finds it difficult to talk to her friends about the sexual harassment that is occurring with this jock. This plot is relatable to many young female high school students who may not know where to turn when their safety is threatened.

11. Rawl, Paige, and Ali Benjamin. *Positive: Surviving My Bullies, Finding Hope, and Living to Change the World: A Memoir*. Print.

Paige Rawl has been HIV positive since birth...but growing up, she never felt like her illness defined her. It never prevented her from entering beauty pageants or playing soccer or making the honor role. On an unremarkable day in middle school, while attempting to console a friend, Paige disclosed her HIV-positive status—and within hours the bullying began. She was called "PAIDS," first in whispers, then out in the open. Her soccer coach joked that she was an asset because opposing team members would be too afraid to touch her. Her guidance counselor told her to stop all the "drama," and her principal said she couldn't protect her. One night, desperate for escape, Paige swallowed fifteen sleeping pills—one for each year of her life to date. That could have been the end of her story. Instead, it was only the beginning.

Reference: In-class Book Talk by Bekki Zarco

Commentary: The author of this novel writes about her personal encounters of harassment when she is bullied for having a health disease that she cannot control. Many people are born with

diseases and symptoms that are beyond their control. This novel offers something for everyone. Even for those who don't suffer directly from HIV, her story reminds its readers that human kindness is something that everyone should express.

Contemporary Realistic Poetry

1. A young girl compares herself to what society has deemed as "perfect"

"Barbie Doll" by Marge Piercy

This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.
Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:
You have a great big nose and fat legs.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.
She went to and fro apologizing.
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.

She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.
Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt.
So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.

In the casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,
a turned-up putty nose,
dressed in a pink and white nightie.
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.

2. A young teenage boy stands up for his Indian heritage against the teasing he encounters from his "friends".

"Dothead" by Amit Majmudar

Well yes, I said, my mother wears a dot.

I know they said “third eye” in class, but it’s not an *eye* eye, not like that. It’s not some freak third eye that opens on your forehead like on some Chernobyl baby. What it means is, what it’s *showing* is, there’s this unseen eye, on the inside. And she’s marking it. It’s how the X that says where treasure’s at is not the treasure, but as good as treasure.— All right. What I said wasn’t half so measured. In fact, I didn’t say a thing. Their laughter had made my mouth go dry. Lunch was after World History; that week was India—myths, caste system, suttee, all the Greatest Hits. The white kids I was sitting with were friends, at least as I defined a friend back then. So wait, said Nick, does *your* mom wear a dot? I nodded, and I caught a smirk on Todd— She wear it to the shower? And to bed?— while Jesse sucked his chocolate milk and Brad was getting ready for another stab. I said, Hand me that ketchup packet there. And Nick said, What? I snatched it, twitched the tear, and squeezed a dollop on my thumb and worked circles till the red planet entered the house of war and on my forehead for the world to see my third eye burned those schoolboys in their seats, their flesh in little puddles underneath, pale pools where Nataraja cooled his feet.

3. A woman poetically illustrates harassment and discusses her experience on a crowded city bus when a man stands uncomfortably close behind her.

Spoken Word Poetry by Olivia Cole.

“Wednesday”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Gucl2H-Pkk>

4. Four women speak out on the common topic of rape violence.

“Rape Poem To End All Rape Poems” by Rutgers University Slam Team, featuring Poets: Justice Hehir, Lindsey Michelle Williams, Kate Thomas, and Lillie Hannon.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Wu7Ax78hXo>