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### Bullying in Contemporary Realistic Fiction

All too often, stories appear in the news that another young person has died because of being bullied. Young adults are extremely fragile and impressionable, easily influenced by everything they see and hear, and it does not take much for them to believe that something has ruined their lives past the point of repair. Bullying awareness has increased because of how many lives this issue has claimed in recent years, but there is still much to be exposed in order to stop bullying at its source. The books I have explored fall into the genre contemporary realistic fiction, with an emphasis on the effects and consequences of bullying in young adults. Books about bullying can inspire a plethora of virtues in young adults, such as hope, truth, bravery, friendship, perseverance, and self-worth. Likewise, books about bullying can teach morality, acceptance, tolerance, coping mechanisms, and many more important lessons for young adults to absorb in order to perpetuate better attitudes and a more peaceful future.

My centerpiece book, *Endgame* by Nancy Garden, is important because the theme deals with bullying, an injustice to which young adults across the globe can relate. Bullying is also a very personal topic for me because I experienced it growing up, having been teased about my skin, teeth, stature, and ethnicity. During difficult times, I found solace in the books I read about characters dealing with similar situations. I could relate to the characters, their problems, and their worlds more easily than I could relate to anything about a magical world, in which it would be easy for me to pick up a wand and wave my problems away; instead, the books grounded in contemporary realistic fiction inspired me to continue facing each day when I felt weak and

scared. Not only was I able to draw on my favorite characters' strengths and stories to find it in myself to face my own bullies, but reading books about the different kinds of bullying expanded my narrow viewpoint of what constituted bullying; it helped me understand that bullying does not always manifest itself in the same ways or even from the people we would expect.

In addition, one of the most important things that books about bullying have shown me is that our bullies are human, though it is hard to believe. It is important for young adults to understand that oftentimes, bullying stems from a person's insecurities, a lack of self-worth, or a need to feel superior to someone because they feel inferior to someone else. Even though this in no way makes up for it, if we understand that our enemies are flawed too instead of simply evil for evil's sake, we may have a greater change at forgiveness down the road—and forgiveness is ultimately better for the victims' peace of mind because it allows them to move on instead of dwelling on revenge, which solves never solves anything quite like we want it to. Also, learning to identify bullying is the first step in putting a stop to it, even if it means swallowing our pride and asking for help, taking ourselves out of a situation that has become the only one we know, and examining our own behavior to see if we need to modify our attitudes about people who are different from us. Furthermore, if a young adult is partaking in bullying someone, perhaps that bully can see the effects it has on that person and cease his or her malicious behavior before it becomes too late. In this way, books about bullying have the power to teach us something about what it means to be human; in this way, books about bullying can potentially save lives.

## Annotated Bibliography: Bullying in Contemporary Realistic Fiction

### ***Speak*** by Laurie Halse Anderson

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999. Print.

Melinda Sordino is a reclusive freshman in high school, and she has started the year with no friends—they have all dropped her because she called the police while at a popular end-of-the-year party a few months prior. What the student body does not know about Melinda is that she was calling for help because she was raped by a popular senior at the party. Her struggle about how to cope and accept what happened to her is detailed throughout *Speak*, and eventually, Melinda finds her inner strength to join the world around her again.

Melinda's journey is particularly inspirational because she learns that harboring inside what has happened to her is not healthy. Though she does not speak much, events in the novel lead Melinda to find her voice, which has been lost for so long. None of her friends gave her the benefit of the doubt to find out what was wrong with her, but Melinda realizes that she needs and values friendships because they give her the courage she needs to finally speak about her rape. Many times in the novel, Melinda is confronted with her rapist, who taunts her and in the end, attacks her again. This novel portrays the importance of friendships and strength in numbers if someone is being bullied, and it stresses that people can help victims of bullying if those victims speak up about their problems. A beautiful auxiliary element to the novel is how Melinda grows to hone her art to cope with her loss, and it could be an example for young victims of bullying of how they might channel their negativity in a healthy, productive way.

### ***13 Reasons Why*** by Jay Asher

Asher, Jay. *13 Reasons Why*. N.p.: RazorBill, 2007. Print.

Hannah Baker was in high school when she committed suicide, but nobody knew why she did it until Clay Jensen discovered the tapes she had recorded listing thirteen reasons why she killed herself and including the names of thirteen people she felt contributed to her decision. The novel deals with the depression that can stem from the spreading of seemingly harmless rumors. It also details how helpless Hannah felt by people spreading the rumors about her reputation; they had a deeper effect on Hannah than anyone realized until after she had already ended her life

([http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1217100.Thirteen\\_Reasons\\_Why](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1217100.Thirteen_Reasons_Why)).

This novel details what it is like to be depressed in high school; Hannah cannot see past her situation to a better future, which ultimately influences her decision to kill herself because she thinks her life is irreparably ruined. Hannah's inability to view life on a larger scale reflects a common frame of mind that teens have, often letting their emotions get the best of them and not thinking rationally. This is important because it displays how sensitive young adults can be, even about things that do not seem to bother them superficially. The rumors that plague Hannah about being promiscuous steal her sense of safety and violate her privacy, and thus the rumors

are a form of bullying. The horrible act that happens to her is a direct result of the several rumors spread about her throughout the novel. This displays a different kind of bullying than the physical kind, and it also demonstrates that emotional bullying can be far more damaging and harder to detect, but equally as serious an issue, as it can lead to suicide. This novel is also important because of how the teenagers respond to Hannah's anonymous confession about considering suicide—their lack of empathy for her implicates them in her death as well, and it shows that the signs of suicide should always be taken seriously, no matter the circumstances.

***The Hate List*** by Jennifer Brown

Brown, Jennifer. *The Hate List*. N.p.: Little, Brown for Young Readers, 2010. Print.

*The Hate List* follows Valerie, whose boyfriend Nick went on a shooting spree at their high school using a list they had compiled together to pick out his targets. Valerie returns to her senior year of high school after being implicated in the shooting because she helped compile the list, although she never intended for Nick to use it like he did. Now, she must face and deal with her classmates and her friends, who all know about her part in the shooting and who mostly still blame her for the devastation that occurred (<http://laurenreadsya.tumblr.com/post/22309621300/review-hate-list-by-jennifer-brown>).

*The Hate List* takes place after the initial shooting, so the book is not about the shooting so much as it is about the aftereffects of it. The focus is on a character who does not commit the crime but is indirectly affected by it and must deal with the consequences of what she has done in the absence of her boyfriend, so this novel is unique because it forces readers to consider the perspectives of people who are affected by the shooting, thereby considering the psychological damage that bullying can cause in not just one person but in everyone around that person as well. It also poses the question of what constitutes bullying—is it really only the person who physically does something, or could bullying be caused by a participant who is not as active but still partly at fault? The novel attempts to answer this question, while being effective because it portrays how much of an effect a bully can have on a network of people; therefore, it is important because it forces people to rethink how they might initially feel and what they might do to someone they may dislike.

***Leverage*** by Joshua C. Cohen

Cohen, Joshua C. *Leverage*. N.p.: Dutton Juvenile, 2011. Print.

This novel takes place at Oregrove High School, where football is the end-all be-all sport, and winning—by any cost—means everything. The main characters in *Leverage*, Danny and Kurtis, are as opposite as can be, but one day both boys witness a steroid-driven prank gone wrong that changes their lives, forms the basis of their unlikely friendship, and forces them to reevaluate what they both will stand for in terms of complacency and survival in high school. The book deals with bullies, drug use, and standing up for what is right, even if it means standing alone.

([http://www.amazon.com/Leverage-Joshua-C-Cohen/product-reviews/0142420867/ref=dp\\_top\\_cm\\_cr\\_acr\\_txt?showViewpoints=1](http://www.amazon.com/Leverage-Joshua-C-Cohen/product-reviews/0142420867/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?showViewpoints=1)).

Because this book has a heavy emphasis on the politics of athleticism in high school, it is the perfect example to display how important it is to have personal standards and not simply follow the crowd or the stereotypical “cool jocks.” It also displays to what length high school athletes will go to win and how dangerous that drive can be when winning is the only thing that matters to people. The reactions that take place regarding the bullying in the book are particularly important to showcase what happens when a person does not step in to stop something horrible from happening. The friendship that forms between Danny and Kurtis also displays that having a solid friendship can be courage enough to do the right thing.

### ***Whale Talk*** by Chris Crutcher

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf, 2001. Print.

T.J. Jones is a bright, unique teenager with extraordinary athletic ability and no desire to participate in Cutter High School’s athletics because of the cruel and racist jocks that plague the teams. When one day he witnesses one of his own bullies, Mike Barbour, bullying mentally handicapped Chris Coughlin for wearing his deceased brother’s letterman jacket, T.J. declares a war on the athleticism that rules Cutter High School and puts together a swim team of misfits in retaliation. Along the way, T.J.’s team bonds and forms the unlikelyst of friendships, and T.J. learns their individual stories and much more about dealing with life in other ways besides revenge.

This book is about so much more than sports teams; T.J. Jones is a hero because he stands up to not only his bullies, but he also defends other, more defenseless people like Chris Coughlin and five-year-old Heidi, who is a victim of child abuse due to her mixed race. This book is inspirational because it displays that there is strength in numbers as well, and the boys that constitute the swim team learn to accept one another and defend one another when faced with a common enemy. T.J. Jones also learns from his father that violence and intimidation is not the way to solve problems because oftentimes, one’s enemies are damaged people who only mirror the attitudes and behaviors they have seen all their lives; likewise, people in abusive relationships are not necessarily weak people—they may just be responding to the only way of life they know. In this way, this book acts as a model for people to consider how to deal with bullies and difficult situations in their lives from different perspectives.

### ***Endgame*** by Nancy Garden

Garden, Nancy. *Endgame*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2006. Print.

Gray Wilton was a meek freshman in high school who was were mercilessly bullied for years until he snapped and went on a shooting spree, killing four people. Now, he sits in a jail cell, answering questions that his lawyer asks him in order to get his side of the story for when Gray has to appear in court for sentencing. Gray had been a sweet young

man who loved his dog, his older brother, and playing with his bow and arrow, but for some reason, bullies kept singling him out and making his life miserable, and he never understood why. Gray was harassed about his friends, his appearance, his school performance, and even not measuring up to his older brother; feeling helpless and dead inside, Gray notified his teachers and his parents of what was happening to him, but because no one ever helped him, he ultimately took matters of revenge into his own hands.

This book, as chilling as it is, is extremely important for people to read so they can understand the extent that some people will go to when they are pushed to their breaking points. It displays how much of an effect that bullying can have on someone's sanity, and it shows how cruel some bullies can be for no detectable reason at all. It also teaches readers to be aware of victims of bullying and to listen to them and take them seriously when they ask for help. In addition, it offers a heartbreaking inside look at what goes on inside a person's head when they make a decision to end their problems with guns and violence. In this way, *Endgame* helps readers understand what can push a person to this point and make them empathize with victims of bullying who decide that they have no choice but to put an end to their suffering in this tragic way.

### ***Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick**

Philbrick, Rodman. *Freak the Mighty*. New York: Scholastic, 1993. Print.

In *Freak the Mighty*, Max and Kevin, affectionately known as "Freak," are complete opposites—Max is enormous and mentally substandard according to society, and Freak is tiny, brilliant, and physically disabled. Both boys are outcasts in school, but they form an unlikely friendship, which allows them to go on inspirational adventures together, standing up to bullies along the way. However, Max's dad, Killer Kane, who was imprisoned for killing Max's mom, kidnaps Max one night and Freak must save him. Max ultimately learns the truth about the top-secret operation that Freak has been talking about all along, and Freak ultimately teaches some unforgettable lessons to Max about life.

In one of my all-time favorite books, the themes of bullying juxtaposed with overcoming one's fears is almost tangible. Max has trouble standing up to his main bully because he is his father, so it is all the more difficult to ignore this type of bully, and his father is also a convicted murderer, so it is no wonder why Max fears him. However, this book teaches us the importance of doing just that—standing up to people who do not allow us to have voices and who instead smother us with their own agendas. Ostensibly, *Freak the Mighty* exemplifies that sometimes, having a true friend helps a person recognize their own inner strength, and then they can overcome obstacles and begin achieving things they never thought possible. In addition, Freak's attitude about his disability is inspirational, and perhaps teens who are being bullied for far less can draw on his courage in the face of their own personal adversity.

***Good Girls*** by Laura Ruby

Ruby, Laura. *Good Girls*. N.p.: HarperCollins, 2008. Print.

Audrey is a senior in high school who has a compromising photograph taken of her and her boyfriend one night at a party. The events that follow force Audrey to rebuild her ruined reputation—she goes from social butterfly to ostracized “slut,” and the entire school comments about her private life as if it were any of their business. She makes new friends, who slowly but surely help her realize that a young woman is much more than her reputation in high school (<http://www.amazon.com/Good-Girls-Laura-Ruby/dp/B002YNS0LC>).

*Good Girls* is an important novel for young women in particular to read because it captures how the American culture looks down on them for being sexually active. The bullying that Audrey endures teaches her the life-changing lesson that being sexually active does not simply make someone a bad person. In addition, she learns who her true friends are after the event that ruined her life, which young adults should witness because they should know that any person who does not defend you when their character is called into question does not deserve a place in their lives. This novel has the capacity to empower young women about their sexuality as well as provide them with the perspective that being sexually active while young, despite societal standards, should not determine a person’s worth and is really not anyone else’s business.

***Pretty Little Liars*** by Sara Shepard

Shepard, Sara. *Pretty Little Liars*. New York: HarperTeen, 2006. Print. *Pretty Little Liars*.

This 13-and-counting book series follows Aria Montgomery, Emily Fields, Hanna Marin, and Spencer Hastings, four high school friends who have lost their fifth best friend, the mean-girl type Alison DiLaurentis, who was mysteriously murdered. The girls are being bullied by someone anonymous who calls themselves “A.” “A” goes to great lengths to spy on and stalk the girls and manipulates them at every turn, and the anonymous bully knows such impossibly intimate details of their lives that the girls become so paranoid that they begin to wonder if their friend Alison really is dead after all, or if this is another one of the cruel pranks she was so famous for when she was alive. As it turns out, Alison had quite a few dirty secrets of her own.

I have read about half of the books in this series so far, and it has even inspired a popular television show of the same name. The idea of an anonymous bully is even more terrifying because the girls can trust no one at all, as they do not even have a face to associate with their fears. This series is also important because it exposes the “mean-girl” stereotype that runs rampant in society today; this stereotypical bully is the kind that masquerades as a friend but actually hurts more than helps people for personal gain. Also, this anonymous bully operates behind technology, sending threatening text messages and e-mails to scare the girls into submission, which displays how easily technology can be a tool for bullies to more easily manipulate their victims. The characters in the books are also highly exploited for their secrets, which “A” uses to control them and ruin their lives, thus displaying further emotional bullying

and how that is arguably more damaging than physical bullying. It is also important to note that this bully is particularly effective because the girls in the novels give the bully so much power by succumbing to every demand and wanting to keep all their secrets instead of notifying others who may be able to help them about what is going on in their lives.

***Give a Boy a Gun*** by Todd Strasser

Strasser, Todd. *Give a Boy a Gun*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2002. Print.

Brendan and Gary attend Middletown High School, and they have been relentlessly bullied by jocks their whole lives for not being cool, smart, or popular. They are labeled as outcasts, and they are tormented daily until they reach their breaking points. They then decide that revenge is exactly what they want, so they steal guns from their neighbor and barge into the school dance one dreadful evening, holding their classmates hostage to exact vengeance ([http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/350507.Give\\_a\\_Boy\\_a\\_Gun](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/350507.Give_a_Boy_a_Gun)).

*Give a Boy a Gun* is written in letter format and is punctuated with facts about school shootings and gun statistics throughout the novel. This makes it a powerful and realistic medium through which readers are forced to consider how the decision that the two main characters made to go on a shooting rampage is not so far-fetched, given recent tragedies regarding bullying and school shootings nationally. This novel also brings gun control to the forefront of the issue, as it is an inherent factor in school shootings that stem from unregulated or poorly regulated no-tolerance bullying policies in schools. Also, the way that Brendan and Gary are ostracized simply for being different and not fitting any typical high school stereotype is important to note because more young adults than not cannot be pigeonholed like that. Thus, this shows that young adults need to be more accepting of different kinds of people and learn to tolerate and be kind to not just their own preferred circle of friends because terrible things happen otherwise.