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## **The Best Bullies: A Critical Analysis of Young Adult Anti-Bullying Novels**

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THE BEST BULLIES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF YOUNG  
ADULT ANTI-BULLYING NOVELS

A Thesis

By

NINA MARIE BONE

Submitted to the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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December 2014



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## ABSTRACT

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Recently, bullying has become a critical area of research across disciplines exploring effective tools for dealing with this increasing problem. Emerging from this critical research is a new sub-genre of young adult (YA) anti-bullying literature that is becoming increasingly popular. This thesis offers a critical analysis of the contemporary YA anti-bullying literature and how it corresponds to The Bullying Circle, a highly effective bully prevention program tool. This work will incorporate scholarship about the educational interpretation of YAL and the potential impact it has on adolescents. Looking at *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier and *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli with the Bullying Circle as a guide demonstrates that these books can effective classroom tools.





## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Kimberly Stilson-Christiansen who helped me rise up from being a victim, see the importance of not being a bystander, and shape me into the defender that I am today. She helped me to see the importance of education and the day I sat at her kitchen table and filled out my college application, changed my destiny forever. I will always be indebted to her for her love and support. All of my accomplishments are accredited to her sacrifice.

In addition, I'd like to thank my mother Jamie Bone, for her willingness to sacrifice her time and edit the many additions of this work. I would also like to thank my fiancé Edward Knight, for his continued patience. Finally, to my children Jacob, Josh and Marisa who respectfully gave me the quiet time that I needed to concentrate on my work.



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## INTRODUCTION

Because of the increased threat of violence in public schools and the rate of suicide among teenagers, bullying has become a critical area of research across disciplines. Teachers and researchers are currently exploring effective tools for dealing with this increasing problem trying to eliminate the violent outcomes of bullying and eradicate this issue altogether. Across the disciplines, scholars are studying broad topics about bullying, including the emotional effects bullying has on targets, possible neurological differences of people who bully, bullying in history, and the possible economical impact of bullying. Emerging from this critical research is a new sub-genre of young adult (YA) literature that carries an anti-bullying theme. It is through this venue that English Language Arts scholars can add their unique perspective to the anti-bullying conversation and use these new books as a tool for combating the bullying pandemic.

The academic debate already rages on about the many different facets of the bullying issue. As a result, organizations have set up anti-bullying weeks, school districts require their pupils to make a pledge not to bully, and entire programs have been developed dedicated to the sole purpose of creating a bully free environment. What is lacking from this discourse is a widely accepted English component that would create an open venue for students to discuss the different sides of bullying through the eyes of the characters they read about. While the pledges, programs, and campaigns help to get the seriousness of bullying across, they lack in-classroom implementation and an ability to relate to our students. This is where the YA anti-bullying literature becomes the crucial piece.

The subsequent chapters will briefly discuss what bullying is, the various forms of bullying, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP), an effective program that has been implemented worldwide. In addition, by using the criteria that makes the OBPP effective, this work will carefully analyze two YA anti-bullying novels: *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier and *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli. Each novel deals with bullying in a unique way offering teachers the ability to incorporate what the students are doing in their classrooms to the anti-bullying measures already in place.

While there are many YA anti-bullying novels available at this time, these two novels were selected for their ability to engage readers, the unique bullying situation, and their ability to capture the experiences of the bullied, the bully and the bystanders. The abundance of teen problem novels available makes it difficult to discern some of the key aspects of a true anti-bullying novel, but doing a close analysis of the text using an element of the OBPP as a gauge, their unique style solidifies them as anti-bullying novels.

In a larger social context, by continuing to measure the emerging YA anti-bullying novels along these criteria we offer a twofold purpose: 1) we offer our students a greater understanding about the effects and seriousness of bullying in a real-world context. This makes bullying an act that everyone around takes a part in. 2) Establishing strict and concrete criteria for this newly emerging genre prevents it from being overrun with typical teen problem novels or series books that have a cut and dry formula as to how their stories are presented. By using the Bullying Circle as a focal point, we can determine whether a book would be useful for classroom study.

## CHAPTER I

### STICKS AND STONES: THE BULLYING PANDEMIC

From posters along classroom walls, billboards, outreach programs, and even the rock group Shinedown's release of their song "Bully," bullying has become a topic of concern and with good reason. Increasing amounts of students are dealing with the devastating effects of being a target of a bully. But, is there a clear-cut formula as to what bullying is? What tactics do bullies employ? How dangerous are the effects of bullying? Analyzing the research available, we will answer the above questions and examine one of the main components of the most effective anti-bullying programs. By considering bullying and its effects, we will have a better understanding of how YA anti-bullying literature can become a crucial part of the solution.

#### Overview of Bullying

Bullying, as *The Anti-Bullying Handbook* defines it, is a, "conscious and willful act of aggression and/or manipulation by one or more people against another person or people" (Sullivan 9). The Oxford English Dictionary defines bullying as "[the] use of superior strength or influence to intimidate (someone), typically to force him or her to do what one wants" (Oxford Online Dictionary). Finally, the American Medical Association Journal of Ethics reported that "bullying refers to a group of aggressive behaviors to which one person is exposed repeatedly and over time by one or more others" (Srabstein 173).

Therefore, bullying is the humiliation and dehumanization of a fellow student in order to make the bully seem superior or to gain popularity among fellow students. Some could argue that in order to combat the bully problem, one must merely see the bullying and stop it; however, that is not always the case as the tactics bullies employ can often go unnoticed.

Bullying has come to take on four main forms: 1) verbal 2) physical 3) relational, and the latest trend is 4) cyber bullying. The first, and most common form of bullying is verbal. From the book, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*, Barbara Coloroso reports that verbal bullying accounts for 70% of reported bullying because it is the easiest to get away with. A bully can launch his/her attack in the presence of adults and peers without the slightest threat of detection (Coloroso 15). Verbal bullying consists of name-calling, taunting, racist slurs, cruel criticism, abusive phone calls, untruthful accusations, rumors, and gossip to name a few. Verbal bullying, when done in the presence of peers, leaves the target feeling humiliated, embarrassed, and worthless. As we will see later, those feelings can progress to problems that are far more devastating than the initial embarrassment.

Physical bullying is far easier to detect than its sly verbal counterpart. The results of this form of bullying are typically evident on the bullied students body or possessions. Physical bullying can consist of slapping, hitting, choking, poking, punching, kicking, biting, pinching, scratching, damaging property, or twisting limbs into painful positions (Coloroso 16). Physical bullying is easier to detect as it can often lead to broken bones, bruises, concussions, bites, torn clothing, and in the worst cases; permanent brain damage (Sullivan 27). While physical bullying is often the easiest to detect, it too can go unnoticed. A bully may simply shove his intended target or trip them, which may not leave any physical marks. Even a simple trip, if seen by an

adult, could be explained away as an accident especially if the target is too ashamed or too scared to speak out.

Often, when a child is too afraid of his persecutor or ashamed to tell an adult, even the physical signs of bullying can be explained away. Some children may use the excuse that they fell on the playground, thus explaining any bruises, or were hit with a ball during gym class. Ripped articles of clothing are explained as being caught on a tree or fence and even missing items can be excused as simply being lost. To help children in situations like this, ChildLine was setup in October of 1986 by The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children (NSPCC) as a counseling service for children in need. The hotline was open for approximately seven months and it reported, “ ...[we] received a total of 58,530 calls. Only 4,494 kids and 691 adults felt brave enough to open their mouths... This suggests that more than 90% of tormented children are so fearful and confused that they can't even speak anonymously over a phone line about their secret misery” (Marr and Field 140). This can be very disheartening for even the most vigilant of parents who can still be left blindsided when they come to learn of their child's abuse.

The most difficult form of bullying to detect is relational. At a time in development when teens are trying to find their place in society, relational bullying can be the most devastating, especially with girls. When a student experiences relational bullying they are often ignored, isolated, or shunned. Rumors are another part of relational bullying, and often the target does not even know what the rumor is, but they still suffer from the social ostracism that accompanies relational bullying. The *Anti-Bullying Handbook* by Keith Sullivan notes that boys tend to bully with physical tactics and girls tend to use relational bullying. Sullivan says, “Indirect aggression by girls gets overlooked, probably because it is subtle and there is no outward sign of damage. It is, however, as harmful for girls as physical bullying is for boys, and more attention needs to be

paid to it” (Sullivan 21). Girls tend to be more conscious about being socially accepted, and some will go to great lengths to become what they deem as a “popular” girl. When the same girls they are trying to emulate ostracize them, they are devastated. Schools now have anti-bullying measures, but Sheri Bauman and Adrienne Del Rio say that relational bullying is being overlooked in these programs. One reason they claim this is because relational bullying is “erroneously perceived as less harmful or because it may be discounted as a normative female behavior” (Bauman and Del Rio 220). Relational bullying takes the form of, “You can’t play with us,” “You can only be my friend if...” or “Did you hear about Jane Doe? She slept with the whole football team. If you hag out with her, you will be called a slut too.” For young girls, this form of bullying is devastating. Bauman and Del Rio said that relational bullying causes the greatest amount of suffering and it can go on for long periods of time because it is the hardest to detect (Bauman and Del Rio 220). In some cases of relational bullying, the victim may be the last person to know they are the targets of a rumor

The final form of bullying is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying uses the same methods as verbal and relational bullying, but the bullying is carried out through intimidating emails, degrading text messages, and through messages and posts on social media sites. Cyber bullying is by far the hardest form of bullying to detect and is a new term to many parents and school administrators. Unless it is reported, the bully may never be caught. In one report that ran from 2003-2004 and included 1,500 students, 42% of those students reported being bullied online (Bott 149). One in four have had it happen more than once (Bott 149). While there are some YA anti-bullying books about cyber bullying like: *TMI* by Patty Blount and *The Truth about Truman School* by Dori Hillestad Butler, this thesis will not seek to cover the newly developing cyber bullying research nor the YA books that are emerging from it. While cyber bullying is a serious

issue, the purpose of this thesis will focus solely on the physical, relational, and verbal forms of bullying and the YA books that surround them.

### Effects of Bullying

The majority of today's parents grew up with the belief that stick and stones could break bones but words can never hurt you; this could not be farther from the truth. There are serious health, safety, and educational risks, and the American Medical Association (AMA) reports that these can come in the form of emotional and physical symptoms. Some resulting problems are eating disorders, self-inflicted injuries, abusing over-the counter medications, frequent absenteeism, and depression (Srabstein 173). The effects of bullying can last far beyond the adolescent years. Without proper help, a victim could suffer their entire life from the damage the bullying inflicted.

One case study reviewed the effects of bullying from nine public schools and one independent school in northern Sweden. The results from this group showed that 46% of students who reported being a target of bullying showed depressive symptoms and 22.4% showed signs of psychosomatic problems (Landstedt and Persson 396). Psychosomatic problems leave the victims physically ill with symptoms that can include headaches, anxiety, ulcers, and heavy sweating, all of which are made worse by the mental anguish the victim is under. Girls are more likely than boys to suffer from a type of psychosomatic problem known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder where the victim becomes obsessed over an assumed flaw or imperfection in their bodies. Girls tend to obsess over their weight, size of their breasts, or some other part of their body until it becomes a constant mental fixation on the perceived imperfection. The need to "fix"



their imperfection often leads to severe anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and continued mental anguish (Anxiety and Depression Association of America).

The results from the above study concluded saying, “All types of bullying increases the likelihood of depressive symptoms in both boys and girls and all types of bullying were associated with psychosomatic problems in girls” (Landstedt and Persson 396). Along with low self-esteem and depression, victims of bullying can have some of the following effects: morbid thoughts about death, no sense of a future, social isolation, inability to verbalize feelings, and irrational guilt. The irrational guilt can lead the victim to blaming themselves for their situation, even rationalizing that they deserve it. To punish themselves, victims suffering from irrational guilt may turn to drinking, drugs, sniffing, or eating disorders (Marr and Field 99). The physical and mental effects of bullying can lead to lifelong problems without the help of a professional. Rather than seeking help, some teens become so depressed they feel suicide is their only option.

### Bullycide

Words are not merely hurting young people; those very words are leading some to believe the only way out of their situation is death. Suicide, because of being bullied, has become so prevalent, that it now has its own term: Bullycide. Bullycide is when a victim of repeated bullying chooses to take his or her own life. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10-24 resulting in approximately 4600 lost lives each year. Even though there is a National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273- TALK), many victims of bullying have been so mentally beat down that their low self-esteem leads them to decide they are not even worth a phone call.

Marie Bentham is said to be Britain's youngest victim of Bullycide when, at eight years old, she hung herself in her bedroom using her jump rope. Her parents said that she was so badly bullied that she could see only death as a way to escape (Marr and Field 36). On another occasion, when one 10<sup>th</sup> grader committed Bullycide, his parents sued the school naming specifically the principal, coach, and a teacher, because they told the school about their child being bullied and the school had done nothing (Poland 92). Coloroso states, "In 1999, roughly one out of every thirteen U.S. high school students reported making a suicide attempt in the previous twelve months-a rate that has tripled over the last twenty years. In the year 2000, more than two thousand kids succeeded. There are no statistics for how many of those two thousand were actually bullycides" (Coloroso 54). The numbers are staggering to say the least.

When a child feels disconnected from the world around them and an end to their torture is not in sight, they often feel that death is the only option. Jason Wallace stated, "Statistical and anecdotal evidence reveals that many victims of bullycide suffer vicious verbal abuse but often are not physically assaulted by their tormentor. By words alone, perpetrators of bullycide kill their victims without ever laying a hand on them" (Wallace 741). There are pages upon pages of stories about children who chose to commit bullycide and this prompted Coloroso to say, "Bullying is a learned behavior. If it can be learned, it can be examined, and it can be changed" (Coloroso 24). Out of these tragedies and the need for a solution rose Dr. Dan Olweus.

#### Dr. Olweus and The OBPP

Dr. Olweus is a professor of psychology at the University of Bergen in Norway. Today, Dr. Olweus is known worldwide as the leading expert on bullying problems in schools. Dr.

Olweus was the first to develop a bullying prevention program, study teachers as bullies, and study the behavior that allows bullying to occur (American Psychologist 814). In the 1980s his research led him to develop a bullying intervention program that he tested among Norwegian schools and critically evaluated. The positive effects of his newly created anti-bully program were noticed by the Norwegian Department of Education and Research and by the Department of Children and Family Affairs. In 2000, the Norwegian government decided to offer Dr. Olweus's program to all Norwegian comprehensive schools from grades 1-10 (Limber 127). Dr. Olweus's program has received many awards throughout the years including the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Public Policy for Children by the Society for Research in Child Development in 2003. In 2011, Dr. Olweus received the award for Distinguished Contributions to the International Advancement of Psychology and the list of awards and acknowledgements for Dr. Olweus and his program continues to grow (American Psychologist 2011). With its successful implementation in Norwegian schools, the program began to spread across Europe. From then on, the program has come to be known as The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP).

The main goal of the OBPP is to achieve an overall environment throughout the school where peer relations are positive and conducive to learning. The OBPP seeks to enlist the help of all school faculty, staff, and parents to first resolve current bullying issues, and then to prevent the issue from presenting itself again. Should a bullying issue arise again, the faculty and staff would already be equipped and trained as to how to root out the problem (Limber 126). Dr. Olweus, in his article written for *Prevention and Treatment*, said that his program's goal was

(a) to reduce as much as possible, if not eliminate, existing bully/victim problems inside and outside of the school setting; (b) to prevent the development of new bully/victim problems; and (c) to achieve better peer relations at school and create conditions that allow victims and bullies, in particular, to get along and function better inside and outside of the school setting (Olweus 2003)

In order to achieve these goals, it is imperative that students, faculty, and staff are all made aware of their role in the program and the serious consequences that could result from a noncompliance attitude.

There are four key principles that the OBPP establishes for parents and school employees: 1) show warmth and positive interest in their students; 2) set firm limits to unacceptable behavior; 3) use consistent nonphysical, non-hostile negative consequences when rules are broken; and 4) function as authorities and positive role models (Limber 126). By implementing these four principles, the OBPP seeks to avoid some of the legal consequences that a bully may face. Legal issues are a concern because states and providences of the United States have chosen to codify bullying as a criminal offense. Forty-two states now enforce laws and policies that criminalize bullying (including Alaska and Hawaii), Eight (ND, MN, KS, AZ, TX, TN, IL, IN) have only laws making bullying a criminal offense, and one state (MT), only a policy for those who bully. According to the research by Susan Limber, appearing in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, she states that in 1999 there were no state laws that addressed bullying, in three short years there were 14, and when this article appeared in 2010 there were 41 (Limber 124). Today, every state in the U.S.A has a law or policy about bullying and stretching farther beyond that, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands all have laws and policies criminalizing bullying. The consequences of bullying are real. For the victims it can be deadly and for the perpetrator, it could be costly and lead to jail time. The OBPP and other prevention programs that followed Dr. Olweus's lead have been an enormous help.

## The Bullying Circle

There are several helpful tools taken from the OBPP that are now used worldwide to help students understand where their responsibilities begin. One activity involves handing the students a map of the school and having them mark where they have seen bullying takes place. Another activity has students make their own posters that define bullying, the types, and what each form of bullying includes. There are plays, puppet shows, role-playing activities, and post play worksheets. Above all the rest, one of the most publicized tools is *The Bullying Circle* (See appendix 1).

*The Bullying Circle* includes all the people involved when there is bullying going on. In the middle of the circle we have the “targets” and a large “T” represents their place. The targets are those students who are being bullied. Starting from the top left in the “A” position are the bully/bullies. Moving counterclockwise around the circle, in the “B” position, we come to the henchmen. Henchmen do not plan or start the bullying, but they take an active role in it. In the next position, are those who cheer on the bully because they seek social acceptance or some kind of material gain from it; these are known as active supporters. Passive supporters stand back and enjoy the show but are not openly supportive of it. The onlookers take the place at the bottom of the circle and reason that what is going on is none of their business and they turn away. At this point, we are now on the right side of the circle where we find the potential witnesses. A potential witness knows that the bullying is wrong and that they should do something to help, but they do not. Everyone in the lower portion of the circle make up the bystander group.

Finally, at the top, right-hand side of the circle, is the much needed resister, defender, and witness. Those who make up this group, actively resist, speak out against, and stand up to the

bully. The bullying circle, or some form of it, can be found on posters, in classrooms, and in the back of school handbooks across the U.S. Unfortunately, this is not enough. Coloroso says, “It is one thing to have a policy; it is wholly another to make sure the policy is not just placards on the school wall or an inspirational piece of writing at the beginning of the student handbook (Coloroso 178). This is where YA anti-bullying literature allows students to see their school settings in a different light. As stated above, students are currently living in a bullying culture and by reading the YA novels that mirror that environment, along with using *The Bullying Circle* to go along with it, it puts the situation into context and allows for deeper reasoning, understanding, and empathy.

#### Readers of Young Adult Literature

Research is being widely published on the benefits of reading this new genre of YA anti-bullying literature and the results are positive. When Paul Hankins’s chose to have his high school class read *Scars* by Cheryl Rainfield, he had no idea the affect it would have. *Scars* deals with sexual abuse and self-mutilation and when one shy and quiet girl, a victim of abuse herself, read it she said that it changed her life (Collier 6). After reading this testimony and others like it, Collier reports,

Stories like these show how young adult (YA) literature can reach deep for adolescents, showing them they are not alone with their problems-that others have been there, and survived. YA books can also teach empathy by exploring others’ concerns and can help youths sort out feelings about life’s big questions: death, love, and what it all means. YA lit is also an invaluable resource in today’s English classrooms, engaging students with relevant topics, relatable characters, and accessible language (Collier 6).

C.J. Bott, a leading expert and researcher on YA anti-bullying literature, says that it is books like *Scars* that help students find themselves (Collier 11). By having situations and scenarios that are similar to what is going on, students have a vested interest in the content of the books. When

using YA books in accordance with anti-bullying programs, such as the OBPP, students do not merely see A, B, and C on the bullying circle, but they see the roles come to life and have an enhanced understanding of the actions that role describes.

Carol Hillsberg and Helene Spak researched the effects of YA anti-bullying literature on six, seventh, and eighth graders, with the premise that if students are able to identify with the situations encountered in literature, their emotional growth can be affected (Hillsberg and Spak 25). They asserted that if the literature were relevant to the readers, they would have higher levels of comprehension. With the increased understanding, changes in behavior will follow. They continue to argue that a bully could identify with the fictional victim, and this could create empathy and the possibility for change. Many of the students expressed positive outcomes and felt that the stories helped them (Hillsberg and Spak 26). The ability to affect change through literature is a wonderful concept but not just any story could bring about the desired change needed for both the bully and the victim.

Hillsberg and Spak used the following criteria when choosing the books for their study: a memorable protagonist, engaging plots, and thematic material. They concluded their study saying that students can take a story's deeper meaning and turn it into something personal. They feel that the YA novels they chose for their study solidified that (Hillsberg and Spak 25-28). Hillsberg and Spak are not the only ones who acknowledge that reading YA novels to address bullying is an effective method.

Dr. Pytash, Dr. Morgan, and Dr. Batchelor are all professors of Literacy Education from Kent State University of Ohio. They realized that, on average, 3.2 million students are bullied each year and because of this, schools were implementing anti-bullying programs. This prompted

them to conduct a three-year longitudinal study and they found that 80% of middle school students believed their teachers were unaware of bullying. Their answer to this problem is found in literature. “Literature offers one way to bring bullying to preservice teachers’ awareness. Reading provides imaginative rehearsals for the real world” (Pytash, Morgan, and Batchelor 15). Their study further states that students are in desperate need of the rehearsals that books offer. In conclusion of their study, the professors reported that through the readings and the subsequent conversations, teachers gain a deeper awareness about the bullying climate in their schools and, this allows them the opportunity to break down the walls between teachers and students (Pytash, Morgan, and Batchelor 19). The greatest benefit that came from this study was the ability to see how YA literature contributed to the understanding of the students and the teachers.

Using YA literature as a means of generating faculty understanding is just as important as impacting the students. C.J. Bott noted, “The biggest obstacle to anti-bullying programs is adult attitudes. Some of your staff members will probably be bullies” (Broz 34). Dr. Olweus was among the first to research the issue of teachers as bullies and while administrators are trying to eradicate the issues of bullying from their students, they have the added task of trying to do the same thing with their faculty. Relating his story in *The ALAN Review*, Dr. William Broz describes a situation that occurred while he was teaching in a new school. The incident involved a football player who was verbally bullying a fellow classmate and when he was sent to the vice-principal’s for his detention, the issue should have been resolved.

At the end of the school day, it was not the student who ended up in the principal’s office, but Mr. Broz. Broz relates that the principal and the football coach wanted him to retract the football player’s detention saying that whatever the situation was, it must have been a misunderstanding (Broz 36). Perhaps it is for this reason that students do not feel comfortable



telling the adults at school about bullying issues (Jones, Dennis, Torres-OvRick, and Walker 67). Since both students and teachers can be bullies, a space needs to be created where open dialogue can take place. YA anti-bullying novels create that space. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recently passed a resolution on confronting bullying where they state, “We believe that the books we have read provide a realistic portrayal of bullying and harassment and, hence, can serve as valuable instructional tools for helping teachers address these problems” (Harmon and Henkin 86). Other articles and studies have all culminated with the same results; YA anti-bullying literature is a valuable and necessary tool to address bullying.

The remaining chapters will critically analyze two popular and highly effective YA anti-bullying novels. Each has a memorable protagonist, an engaging plot, and thematic material. Each book looks at bullying from varying viewpoints and includes the bully, the bullied, and all those who act as bystanders when someone is being bullied. These books demonstrate concrete examples of the bullying circle and show that no one, except the victim, is innocent. These two books have been used in classrooms but by applying them to the anti-bullying programs in place, they become even more valuable. We have the research that shows that the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is effective. We have the research that shows the effectiveness of reading YA literature in the classroom. Reading a YA anti-bullying novel, ties that research together accomplishing a twofold purpose.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CHOCOLATE WAR: THE GRANDFATHER OF ANTI-BULLYING LITERATURE

Dell Laurel-Leaf first published *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier in 1974. At this time, Cormier did not consider himself to be a YA author nor did he sit down to write a YA book, but after his agent Marilyn Marlow read the first few chapters of *The Chocolate War*, she was convinced Cormier had written a YA novel (Campbell 26). When recalling this moment, Cormier said he was worried he would have to go back and clean up the language, Marlow told him not to touch a thing (Campbell 28). *The Chocolate War* was an instant success.

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974 *The Chocolate War* received one of its first reviews published by Kirkus Reviews. Kirkus said that *The Chocolate War* was a compelling novel and mature readers, “will respect the uncompromising ending that dares disturb the upbeat universe of juvenile books” (Kirkus Reviews). The “New York Times” said it was “masterfully structured and rich in theme” (Weesner 15). In 1975, The “School Library Journal” rated it as 1974’s best book (School Library Journal). Finally, in 1975, the “New York Times” again placed *The Chocolate War* as a noteworthy book saying that it is, “a beautifully structured parable for teenagers about the cruelty and ruthlessness of bullies” (New York Times 13). Neither Cormier nor Marlow had any idea that while Cormier was writing his first YA novel, and he was writing one of the first YA anti-bullying novels. And by far the most well crafted. It is true that other novels did come before *The Chocolate War* that carried an anti-bullying theme, like *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton and *The Pigman* by

Paul Zindel, but *The Chocolate War*'s unique style and varying viewpoints solidify it as a strong anti-bullying novel that is relatable and is able to transcend generations.

“THEY MURDERED HIM” (Cormier 1). This is the first line of the YA novel, *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier first published by Dell Laurel-Leaf in 1974. In this story, Jerry Renault has just moved to this New England town after watching his mother lose her fight with cancer. This is where we find Jerry when he begins his freshman year at Trinity High School. Trinity is an all boys' Catholic school that is currently being run by the Assistant Headmaster, Brother Leon.

*The Chocolate War* takes place at an all boys' Catholic School in Massachusetts. Our primary characters are Jerry, Archie, and Brother Leon. In an attempt to assert himself as a prime candidate for an official Headmaster position, Brother Leon has ordered twenty thousand boxes of chocolates to be sold for the school's annual fall fundraiser. Leon has ordered twice the amount of chocolates as before and wants them sold at double their usual price. If his plan fails, Leon will lose any consideration for a headmaster position and possibly his job. It has been rumored that Leon overstepped his bounds and has used funds to purchase the chocolates that he was not supposed to use. This could lead to financial ruin for Trinity. Leon needs to sell those chocolates.

The next component to this story is The Vigils. The Vigils is a gang-like group of boys at Trinity run by the ruthless Archie Costello. The boys of Trinity are far more afraid of Archie and The Vigils than any of the brothers who teach there. The reason the boys are scared is because of Archie's “assignments.” To keep the boys in line and show the power of the Vigils, Archie selects boys at random to complete what he calls, an assignment. The assignment is likened to a

dare and Archie creates them to expose a weakness or cause great embarrassment to the boy chosen. Despite any embarrassment or trouble the assignment might cause, the boys always comply for fear of the repercussions that would follow anyone who disobeyed Archie. What this means is that the boys would rather face detention, expulsion, or humiliation in order to avoid making Archie and his gang angry.

While the brothers at Trinity would deny any such claims of gang-like activity at their school, they are all aware of its existence and the power Archie holds. When talking about The Vigils Archie says, “The school allowed it to function by ignoring it completely, pretending it wasn’t there” (Cormier 27). When Brother Leon is in desperate need for the boys of Trinity to sell the chocolates, he turns to the one person who can make it happen, Archie.

Archie is elated by having Leon acknowledge his power and is happy to help the brothers coerce the boys of Trinity to sell the chocolates. Just so the brothers know who is in charge, Archie selects a new freshman named Jerry Renault for a special assignment. At roll call, when the brothers ask for the total amount each boy sold the night before, Jerry is to refuse to sell any chocolates for ten school days. Once the ten school days are over, Jerry is to sell the chocolates like the rest of the boys. Brother Leon is livid with Archie’s display of power, but he is unable to stop it.

On day eleven, the boys assemble for roll call once more and an air of relief was in the air, as most of the boys knew that Jerry’s assignment was over and he was now going to accept his quota of chocolates and begin to sell them. “Three,” Parmentier called out. “Right,” Brother Leon answered, making the check against the name. Looking up, he called “Renault.” The pause. The damn pause. “No!” “No. I’m not going to sell the chocolates.” Goober, one of Archie’s

henchmen, knew that Jerry was in trouble. When Jerry said that eleventh no, Goober described the situations saying, “Cities fell. Earth opened. Planets tilted. Stars plummeted. And the awful silence” (Cormier 118). Jerry’s defiance of The Vigils and Archie makes the story move rapidly from this point forward until we reach the climax where we find Jerry barely conscious, beaten, on the football field and the last few lines read, “The ambulance’s siren began to howl in the night...Archie and Obie sat there awhile not saying anything and then made their way out of the place in the darkness” (Cormier 263). Is Jerry dead? The reader does not know, and it is here where Cormier ends his novel. The reader is left in shock and disbelief. Most students have not read a novel that ends with the bad guys looking like the winners. This is one of the many reasons why *The Chocolate War* is an exceptional anti-bullying novel.

*The Chocolate War* is an all-encompassing anti-bullying novel. Each chapter is told from a third person omniscient characters viewpoint, but our narrator looks into the lives of the bullied, the bully, the henchmen, and the bystanders. The action moves quickly keeping young readers engaged and captivated. *The Chocolate War* has a character that represents each place on the bullying circle and the actions that cause them to be in those positions. In the center of this story, as in the OBPP Bullying Circle, we have Jerry. Jerry is targeted because he is not only a freshman, but he is new to the area. Jerry has no friends, nor allies. Furthermore, he is quiet, and shy and even though he is trying out for the football team, he is by no means an outstanding player.

Keith Sullivan, author of *The Anti-Bullying Handbook*, noted that there are typically three types of victims: 1) passive 2) provocative and 3) bully/victims. The passive has lacking self-esteem and they are usually weak and unpopular. Provocative victims are active and cause tension with the children around them thus causing their classmates to turn on them, making

them a target. Finally, a bully/victim is an aggressive target that cannot take on his bully, so in turn, he bullies someone weaker than he is (Sullivan 26). It does not take long to see what kind of victim Jerry is; Jerry is meek and passive.

Sullivan notes that children who come from families that are dealing with stress or other major life events can become withdrawn leaving themselves open to become a target (Sullivan 26). Jerry is a new student, in a new place, his mother has passed away, and he is living in an apartment with his father who hardly talks and works long and late hours. Jerry has a world full of stress and since his sadness causes him to withdraw, he is an easy target for Archie. While many students will not have situations exactly as Jerry, they will understand the stressor that life can bring. Jerry's situation allows ample opportunity for class discussions and for teaching students how to be proactive when dealing with new students or being sympathetic to what other classmates may be dealing with.

Archie is not the only bully in *The Chocolate War* even though he is the leader of The Vigils. Brother Leon is a bully who uses his power and authority to strike fear into the students and faculty at Trinity. *The Chocolate War* is one of the few books for young readers that look at a teacher in the role of a bully. Dr. Olweus believed that a teacher could be a bully as well and therefore contribute to the problem. Dr. Olweus recognized that teachers could still misuse their authority, use put-downs, and be an overall negative role model for the other students (Sullivan 25). This concept, a teacher as a bully, may be a new idea for a majority of students who have been taught that teachers are infallible and thus their actions cannot be called into question.

With the students in fear of Archie and the faculty in fear of Brother Leon, some critics feel that this leaves *The Chocolate War* too bleak for young readers, as there is an absence of a moral agency. A “moral agent” as described by James Rachels is

Someone who is concerned impartially with the interests of everyone affected by what he or she does; who carefully sifts facts and examines their implications; who accepts principles of conduct only after scrutinizing them to make sure they are sound; who is willing to listen to reason even when it means that his or her earlier convictions may have to be revised; and who, finally is willing to act on the results of this deliberation (Tarr 97).

Throughout the book we see Jerry being pummeled on the football field, but no matter how many times he is knocked down, he continues to get back up. In response to this, Anita Tarr in her article for *Children’s Literature* refers to Jerry being a hero as a joke. We expect Jerry to be beaten but always to get back up and Tarr notes, “The actual end of the novel shows Jerry being beaten but not getting back up. He stays down, defeated. He [Cormier] creates and then deflates the expectation that Jerry will rise one last time in his lonely defiance. Jerry is not victorious” (Tarr 99). The action leading up to Jerry’s final defeat will hold young readers and the final unorthodox ending will leave them speechless.

Tarr is correct when she asserts that there is no moral agency in *The Chocolate War*, but this purpose is twofold. Throughout the book disengaged onlookers and potential witnesses surround Jerry, but these students chose to stay in those roles and not become a resister/defender/witness. Students can see a possible grim outcome if bystanders remain passive. William Burroughs, in his book *Exterminator*, says, “There are no innocent bystanders...what were they doing there in the first place” (*Exterminator* 47)? Readers of *The Chocolate War* are shocked at the outcome of Jerry because we are raised with the belief that the protagonists of our books are supposed to live happily ever after. In essence, Cormier is saying to the bystanders,

and to an extension the reader, you did this to Jerry. While there may have not been a moral agent present among the teachers or parents, none of the students chose to become a moral agent either. While there may have only one student that physically beat Jerry into his unknown condition, by their lack of action, the entire school body beat him.

Having a lack of a moral agent reflects the feelings of some students who feel alone in their plight regardless if a supportive adult is present. In Jerry's world he was truly alone. Cormier inadvertently poses the question, what can we do for students that feel the same? The outcomes of this desperate feeling of being alone are tragic and deadly. In the sequel to *The Chocolate War*, *Beyond The Chocolate War*, It becomes clear that Jerry has survived. David Caroni becomes tired of being a henchman of Archie and he is frustrated that there is not an assertive adult role to turn to for help. His feelings of hopelessness become internalized where he fantasies about a school shooting and bombing. Caroni attempts to stab the principal, fails, and then commits suicide (Cormier 270).

*Beyond The Chocolate War* focuses more on the role of the bystanders and henchmen and focuses on how the success of bullying relies on the active and passive supporters and the bystanders who remain silent (Lopez-Ropero 47). The greatest acknowledgment of the crucial role bystander's play is shockingly from Brother Leon. In front of the school assembly after Caroni's death, he acknowledges that he is guilty of not noticing how trouble Caroni was then he says,

But you, also, are guilty. All of you. If I am guilty of ignorance, you are guilty of neglect. Of blindness. David Caroni was one of you, a student like you, an adolescent like you. He sat beside you in classes. He walked the corridors with you. He ate beside you in the cafeteria. He talked to you. And you did not listen. You did not see. You did not respond. The troubled person always sends out



signals. But you did not acknowledge those signals. And for this you should be ashamed. You should hang your heads in shame (Cormier 272).

Even though it is Leon condemning his student body, Cormier's diction is so poignant that readers are drawn in and left feeling ashamed for their own participation in Caroni's demise.

David Kidd and Emanuele Castano note that literature has been deployed in programs to promote social welfare, empathy among doctors, and life skills among prisoners (Castano and Kidd 380).

To that extension, *The Chocolate War* is a prime example for creating the same reader empathy in a bullying environment. Students can now make the concrete correlation between the bullying circle and other anti-bullying programs in place because they have seen all the roles played out through Cormier's novels. A, B, and C no longer mark the bullying circle, but it becomes, Jerry, Archie, and Goober. Like Coloroso said was needed, the anti-bullying policy is no longer a poster on the wall or a placard in the back of a student handbook, (Coloroso 178) *The Chocolate War* has made it real.

While Cormier may not have intended it, he has one underlying theme to his book. Every time Jerry opens his locker we see it almost as a subliminal message, Goober contemplates it, and Jerry thinks about it throughout the novel. Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? T.S. Eliot originally writes the quote in his poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Cormier has it on a poster hanging inside of Jerry's locker. Cormier not only asks the question of Jerry and the boys of Trinity, he asks it of his readers as well. Do you dare to disturb your universe? Do you go along with the crowd, or do you stand up and be different? Carter and Harris note that the poster is mentioned repeatedly when anyone-Jerry, his father, his classmates, his teachers-either challenges or bows to the demands of the bullies around them. "Cormier is clearly not writing about this existential question solely within the context of an isolated secondary school, but as it is applicable to the larger world" (Carter and Harris 284). Jerry says that he liked the poster

because it had moved him mysteriously (Cormier 129). I assert it is for this reason he decides to refuse to sell the chocolates in defiance of Archie and The Vigils. He knows it is the right thing to do although he may not understand why. The poster moved him mysteriously, asking him, asking us as readers, do we dare to disturb the universe? While Jerry was not able to leap up and shout “Freedom!” in a BraveHeart fashion, his simple meek “No. No, I am not going to sell the chocolates,” was the best he could do.

Tarr attests that there is no reason why Jerry refuses to sell the chocolates, thus he is not a hero saying that he is clueless as to how his actions will affect others and he does not listen to the warnings of others (Tarr 97). Tarr is not alone in her reasoning. Parry Nodelman says, “The refusal to sell the chocolates only seemed like a heroic action because of the circumstances that led up to it...In fact, Jerry’s heroic action, his way of disturbing the universe, is a negative decision not to act rather than a positive decision to do something” (Nodelman 30). However this is not the case. If we look back at the text, Jerry, and specifically chapter eighteen (a total of five pages long) we can see that Jerry has a specific reason for not selling the chocolates and it is correct to portray him as a hero.

Jerry is lying in bed, tossing and turning; unable to sleep because of the torture he is under. As readers we are watching Jerry and hearing his internal dialogue as he tells himself, why did you do it?” He answers, “I don’t know”. Jerry thinks, “Was it because of what Brother Leon does to people, like Bailey, the way he tortures them, tries to make fools of them in front of everybody” (Cormier 120)? His internal dialogue continues and we learn that all he wanted was for his assignment to be over with. Jerry wanted to return to his normal life. He wanted Brother Leon to stop glaring at him with hate in his eyes. Then his mind recalls a run-in he had with a man at the bus stop that told him, “You’re missing a lot of things in the world” (Cormier 123).

He may not be ready for what he is doing, but he is doing it because he knows, even if it's only subconsciously, that he must do what is right. Carter and Harris add to this by saying that Cormier is not leaving his readers hopeless, but he warns them that they cannot plead innocence, ignorance, or prior commitments when there is a threat of tyranny. Carter and Harris's article ends by saying, "By arguing that Cormier does not imply that resistance is easy, but he insists it is mandatory" (Carter and Harris 285). By accepting the chocolates and going back into his normal routine, he is missing the world that the man at the bus stop was talking about. He mentions how his father is sleeping through life and he doesn't like it. It is for this reason that Jerry refuses to sell the chocolates.

Jerry does not like what Archie and Brother Leon do, he does not want to sleep his life away like his father and not be a part of the world around him. All of which he does if he conforms to the will of Archie and Brother Leon. Everyday he opens his locker and he is asked, "Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?" Tarr and Nodelman are correct when they state that Jerry does not have an assertive and direct opposition to the bullying, but his internal moral compass knows the correct course of action to take and leads him onward.

Chapter eighteen can be considered the dullest chapter of the book, as the only thing going on is the internal struggle of a teenage boy. Yet, it holds the most crucial information. Well before any student decides to act or react, they are often tormented by the pros and cons of their thoughts and actions. Jerry, like many other teens, lacked the resources or knowledge to fully understand his situation and the implications of it. All Jerry could comprehend was that he did not like his situation and he could not understand the force that was driving him to continue to be defiant. Chapter eighteen is often overlooked as an expository piece and is overshadowed by then ending when Jerry chooses to forget about Trinity, Archie, and Brother Leon and instead he

thinks of his crush, slides his hand into his pants, and we are left with the implication that Jerry is masturbating. For this, critics ignore the essential portion of the chapter and cite *The Chocolate War* as being misogynistic and inappropriate. Judy Blume, renowned young adult author, said in an interview discussing banned books, “Masturbation seems to be the activity that sets off would-be banners the most” (Aronson 11). Cormier perfectly and candidly portrays the life of a normal teenage boy where he [Cormier] is neither misogynistic nor lewd.

Cormier’s overall thesis of *The Chocolate War* is asking his readers, “Do You Dare Disturb the Universe?” He realistically portrays the lives of normal everyday teenage boys and although the year is 1975, you could read *The Chocolate War* one hundred years from now, and the story would still be relevant and relatable to the teenage population, with the exception to one small reference to Harpo Marx. He candidly shows the reader bullying from all its angles and the grim outcomes that can occur when evil is allowed to prevail. Cormier’s unhappy ending where Jerry lays alone and nearly dead leaves the reader with such a shock, that the reaction to jump in and help becomes real, vivid, and unforgettable.

In 1974, Cormier was the first to talk about the deadly consequences of bullying, the first to point to teachers as bullies, the first to discuss school shootings, and the first book to have a bullycide, even before the term was invented. *The Chocolate War* is far more relevant today than it has ever been. If there is one book that comes close to the feelings and actions of our students today, it is *The Chocolate War*: the grandfather of YA anti-bullying novels.

## CHAPTER III

### STARGIRL AND CONFORMITY

Compared to *The Chocolate War*, *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli does not initially seem to be a book about bullying at all. The equation does not seem to add up since our supposed target and victim is a popular cheerleader who is loved by all. Or at least, it appears all her fellow students love her. What makes *Stargirl* a sound choice for a YA anti-bullying novel is that it contains all the pieces needed to use it in conjunction with the bullying circle and in addition to that, the bullying is relational, the hardest form of bullying to detect. This YA novel is fun to read, contains scenes that make readers laugh, and more often than not, the moments of relational bullying can often be overlooked. This in itself is the perfect example of relational bullying. Students are often so caught up in a harmless prank, joke, or rumor, that they do not even notice they are becoming an active supporter of the bully. The final plot surprise comes when the reader realizes the he is being told the story by the bully himself. Leo, Stargirl's boyfriend, turns out to be the true bully.

*Stargirl* is about a young tenth grade girl named Stargirl. She is a new student at Mica High in Arizona and has a personality all her own. Oddly, it is not Stargirl who is telling us her story, but Leo, a Mica High eleventh-grader who later becomes Stargirl's boyfriend. Leo himself was once a new student to Mica High and yet he shows no compassion for the new "new girl" in school who marches to the beat of her own drum, well ukulele.

Stargirl stands in stark contrast to the students at Mica High. As Leo describes it, “we all wore the same clothes, talked the same way, ate the same food, listened to the same music...If we happened to somehow distinguish ourselves, we quickly snapped back into place, like rubber bands” (Spinelli 10). When reviewing this novel, Kelly Emminger notes that this description of Mica High seems very odd, almost unbelievable. Emminger is correct when she points out that the setting is in a modern U.S. high school, in the heavily Latino southwest (Emminger 170). To say that all the students looked the same, talked the same, and listened to the same music could hardly be reasonable, let alone be a mirror of reality. However, the formation of cliques and having social groups is relatable and does resonate with young readers.

Stargirl is not concerned with trends, brand names, or wearing makeup. In contrast, she comes to school wearing odd clothing like a 1920s flapper or dresses that are so long they drag on the floor and have Leo wondering if she is wearing her grandmother’s wedding dress. She decorates, disassembles, and redecorates her desk with flowers and a tablecloth for each of her six classes. To further add to her oddities, she sits alone at lunch and plays the ukulele. When someone is having a birthday, she walks around the cafeteria serenading the birthday boy or girl. At first, the students don’t know what to think of her. She seems almost foreign to them and they steer clear of her.

Slowly, but surely, the students warm up to Stargirl and embrace all her oddities even emulating them in their own dress and actions. They invite her to be on the cheerleading squad and she accepts and is accepted by her peers and the other existing social groups. Soon, everyone is playing ukuleles at lunch, leaving celebratory notes for each other, and making little homes out of their desks. Then, as almost as quick as it happened, the students turn on Stargirl and by extension Leo, making them both social outcasts. After resisting, Stargirl tries to conform, even

using her given name Susan, but to no avail. She returns to her true self, and Leo chooses to be accepted by his peers than to continue his relationship with Stargirl. She attends the final school dance as her usual, unusual self and for that evening, the students embrace her once again. After that night, she is never seen again. Stargirl left being exactly who she wanted to be without regrets. Her classmates, who are now grown, reminisce about her. They now understand that brand name clothing, wearing makeup, and going along with the crowd is not important. Because they were trying so hard to conform, they missed out on some wonderful opportunities for fun and friendship.

Spinelli asks his readers if they choose to conform. The underlying theme of this novel is conformity; how people conform, why they conform, and who's right is it to ask us to change ourselves if we do not fit the designated status quo. Emminger notes that teens can relate to this novel because they can relate to the issues such as conformity, first love, school, the power of love, loneliness, cliques, and the power groups hold over individuals (Emminger 171). Spinelli asks his readers, young girls in particular, to look at their relationships and take inventory about the demands a significant other is placing on you. If he or she is asking you to become someone you are not, demanding change in order to stay with you, then those relationships are not healthy and need to be abandoned.

We assume the main bully in this novel is Hillari Kimble, a popular cheerleader with the most popular boy in school as her boyfriend. This scenario is something all too familiar in a majority of teenage hierarchies. Hillari begins victimizing Stargirl on the second day of school even though she never says a word to her. Hillari begins telling her clique and by extension, the rest of the school, that Stargirl is not real, "She's a actress." Hillari devises a rumor that Stargirl is an actress that has been placed in the school to drum up school spirit. As true with a majority

of relational bullying we read that, “Hillary Kimble’s theory spread throughout the school and was widely accepted” (Spinelli 7). Relational bullying has its active and passive supporters as well. All the students who spread the rumor are active supporters. All those who chose to believe it, instead of asking Stargirl, are passive supporters. As for Stargirl, and many who are victims of relational bullying, she was not even aware that there were rumors spreading about her causing her alienation. Hillary’s rumors continue to spread and develop even saying that she sniff fumes. All of this surrounded her and she had no idea causing Leo to say, “She had no friends, yet she was the friendliest person in school” (Spinelli 15).

This novel is loaded with bystanders and as the novel continues, students begin to speak to Stargirl and form their own opinions about her. They realize the rumors are untrue and Stargirl is a wonderful person with a kind and caring heart. Instead of shopping, Stargirl spends her time performing random acts of kindness that results in the student body doing the same throughout the halls of Mica High. Hillary is furious and that’s when we find her with Stargirl’s pet rat, holding it by its tail over the stairwell railing. All the students that gathered to watch the scene, but only one student called for Hillary to stop and no one ran to get an authority figure for help. While this is the first instance of physical bullying, the focus is on the bystanders. Those who laughed, were active supporters, those who were indifferent were onlookers, and so on. No one in that crowd was innocent.

Hillary is what Coloroso characterizes as a social bully and social bullies tend to be mostly female. A social bully uses rumors, gossip, and shunning isolating her targets or excluding them from activities. Coloroso paints these bullies as jealous of their targets qualities, as having a poor sense of self, and she will hide her insecurities in over exaggerated confidence and charm. Social bullies are often popular, like Hillary, but no one truly want to confide in them



for fear of becoming a target (Coloroso 18). Speaking on the subject of the differences between male and female bullying, Sullivan reports that boys are more likely to be physically bullies than girls, and girls are more likely to experience being the target of rumors and being left out of social activities (Sullivan 20). Hillari becomes a physical bully on a couple of occasions, but her primary method of torture is relational and the overall theme of the book is relational bullying.

Leo then goes on to give us a long description about the frogs in the Sonoran Desert. He mentions that they lie dormant waiting for the rain and sleeping within the earth. Leo is in the same situation. He can conform and sleep life away, like the rest of the student body, or he can be different and learn to love someone different. Leo does not step out of the neatly constructed box, but the rest of the student body goes wild with change and individuality so much so that individuality becomes conformity. It became ok, because it was now the status quo. For Stargirl, nothing has changed; she has always been herself. Editor for English Journal, Pauline Schmidt notes that, “the concepts of acceptance, popularity, and individuality (according to her peers) are lost on this kind soul. Stargirl is a remarkable example of being true to oneself no matter what peers may say or do” (Schmidt 113). It is this exact message that Spinelli conveys throughout this entire novel, and Stargirl is the very embodiment of what being true to oneself looks like.

The bullying by Hillari is left unchecked and continues to escalate. If we would like to discuss a lack of a moral agent or agents, then this novel has some explaining to do. In *The Chocolate War*, there were adults present but they were either contributing to the problem as Brother Leon was, or they too were victims and could offer no moral compass to the boys at Trinity. At Mica High, there seems to be no adults at all leaving some adult readers thinking, “where are the parents?” Adults are merely alluded to in this novel like shadows on the wall. We see a lunch lady once or twice, a referee, or bus driver, but the majority of the time the students

of Mica High seem to be running around in an adult less world. There is an old widower ironically named Archie, with whom the boys and Stargirl confide in, and while the beginning of the story seems to point to him as a possible moral agent, he is there to do nothing more than impart fortune cookie wisdom on the characters and leave them to settle their own issues. This is hardly the action of a true moral agent given the escalating severity of the bullying.

On two separate occasions the bullying crosses the relation line and becomes physical. The first time is when the basketball team is on an away meet and they tell Stargirl to go into the gym and retrieve something left behind. Once she is gone, the students tell the driver that everyone is on board and they depart. Stargirl is driven the two hours home by the opposing teams custodian (Spinelli 54). The second instance is again at a basketball game and as Stargirl is cheering, someone throws a tomato and hits her in the face (Spinelli 72). In a gym full of parents, students, and other adults, no one goes to Stargirl's rescue. In *The Chocolate War*, we saw how a teacher could be a bully. In *Stargirl*, we see how teachers and parents can become bystanders. No one went to help Stargirl and that makes the parents guilty of bullying as well. What makes this unique and why Stargirl is such a strong anti-bullying novel is that despite all of this, Stargirl remains positive, she remains true to herself, and she does not let others take away her joy; at least, not yet.

Next we find Stargirl in love with Leo and what's more, Leo is in love with Stargirl. The next few chapters resonate with young love that a majority of students can or desire to relate to. Readers follow Stargirl and Leo as they literally skip through fields holding hands and sit under sunsets. All the components of a happily ever after are falling into place for Stargirl and she could not be happier. Until Leo notices that no one is talking to them. In fact, when they walk

down the hall, the student body deliberately moves out of the way and turns their backs. The relational bullying has come to a head and now both Stargirl and Leo are being shunned.

Leo confronts his best friend Kevin and Kevin says, “I was wondering when you’d notice. Kinda hoping you wouldn’t” (Spinelli 96). This shows one of the ugly truths about relational bullying, as most victims do not even know they are targeted. Hillari revels in her assumed triumph and gloats at the couple by smirking at them when they pass by. Stargirl? Stargirl could care less. As always, she is happy and confident in herself as a person and does not need the validation from others and not only that, but she is in love and in her mind, everything is fine. Leo? Leo is mortified. At first, he tries hiding from her, but she finds him and confronts him asking if he is going to stop talking to her also. This is when we realize that the true bully in *Stargirl* is Leo.

The next portion of the book has to be the most disheartening section of them all. Stargirl asks Leo if they are going to break up. Leo tells her that something has to change. This means that in order for them to be together, she has to do something. Looking back at our examples of relational bullying, this is a prime example. Leo then he begins to yell at her and tell her she doesn’t understand (implying stupidity) and that if she does not change she will end up a hermit (implying that if she does not change, he will leave her). This is an absolutely perfect situation for young girls and if they are only able to read one thing in a school year, it should be this section. Her boyfriend, someone who says he loves her, is demanding certain changes from her in order to stay together. Leo is giving her an ultimatum. This is the time to talk with young girls about healthy relationships and that if a partner asks you to change, then they do not love you and the relationship is not healthy. This is a great segue into opening a discussion with young

girls about when it is appropriate to say no when it comes to sexual relations and explain that a partner would never ask you to do something that you are not comfortable with.

The true bully in Stargirl is finally realized at this point. Stargirl thinks she is in love, she thinks Leo loves her. Leo says that they continued the conversation for days and he, “explained the ways of people to her” Stargirl asks why and Leo can offer no viable reason other than that is the way things are. Leo is not doing anything for her safety or benefit, as a bully, he is only concerned about what he gets out of the situation. Coloroso would classify Leo as a fully armored bully. A fully armored bully “Shows little emotion and has a strong determination to carry out his bullying. He looks for an opportunity to bully when no one will see him or stop him. He is vicious and vindictive toward his target but charming and deceptive in front of others” (Coloroso 19). Leo spends the next few days being that cunning and vindictive bully, showing Stargirl, who he now calls by her birth name Susan, how he wants her to act, and dress, and who he wants her to become.

Leo is proud as a peacock. When Susan enters the cafeteria she is now wearing name brand jeans, makeup, earrings, and looks just like Hillari. Leo is on cloud nine. Before this moment, Leo would only see Stargirl after school away from the general public because he was embarrassed to be with her. Now, as Susan, since she has done all that he asked he is finally happy to be seen with her in public and he is finally happy to be with her. As the days go by, Leo’s world is great. His victim is doing all that he wants. In contrast, Susan is slipping into depression. The only time we ever see her cry is when she has yet to gain her popularity back for Leo and rather than console her, Leo tells her to continue doing what she is doing and give it time. Her happiness is no concern of his. Leo is the only one who manages to break Stargirl down, this makes him a far worse bully than Hillari ever was.

When Susan finally returns to her senses and becomes Stargirl again, Leo is embarrassed. Stargirl is once again happy and content with whom she is and does not need the validation of others to be happy. She breaks up with Leo and he says, “in that moment I hated her” (Spinelli 162). I argue that he hated her all along. Had he truly loved Stargirl, he would not have required her to change nor would he be embarrassed of her. Stargirl leaves with no word or warning and is never heard from again. At the end of the novel, we see Leo has grown old and has never married. He pines over her, wishing he could see her again, but he is not looking for Susan, he is looking for Stargirl. We are left with the sense and implications that wherever Stargirl is, she is better off and has a life that trumps everyone she ever knew.

*Stargirl* is a great anti-bullying novel because it takes on the aspects of one of the most difficult forms of bullying to detect, relational. This novel offers readers the opportunities to see relational bullying in action and how easy it can be to be swept up in the crowd and become a supporter. However the novel is not grim or overbearingly sad; it is upbeat and full of humor and wit. Furthermore, it is a great teaching tool to use for teens about healthy relationships with boys and how you must always stay true to yourself. The cliques and presence of a stereotypical high school hierarchy make it relatable to young readers. Along with *The Chocolate War*, *Stargirl* will be a great anti-bullying book for many years to come. Both books are considered to be a YA favorite among teachers and they are frequently taught in school. Using them in conjunction with the Bully Circle and to open discussions about bullying continues to shed light on their value.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this work was to look at YA anti-bullying novels critically and discuss why and how the text works. We looked at how the chosen novels could mesh with Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) and specifically, The Bullying Circle as some form of this diagram is used around the world.

In a larger social context, having a strong anti-bullying novel that shows the different roles and how they play out, offers teachers a larger pool of discussion topics and they are no longer confined to discussing bullying from the victims perspective alone. Teachers can use these books and ignore the bully and the bullied altogether and create assignments and discussion based solely on the roles and actions of the bystanders, passive supporters, and/or indecisive witnesses. When someone is being bullied, the only innocent person is the victim. Those who stand by and do nothing contribute to the damage that is inflicted both physically and mentally.

By continuing to measure the emerging YA anti-bullying novels along these criteria we offer a twofold purpose. First, we offer our students a greater understanding about the effects and seriousness of bullying in a real-world context. Bullying is no longer an issue between the bully and the bullied, but is an act that everyone around takes a part in. If students do not understand the implications of being a bystander, these books, and those judged along the same lines, show how these roles are defined and the consequence they may suffer as well.

*The Chocolate War* is a prime example of a well structured YA anti-bullying novel. The action is fast paced as each chapter captures the viewpoint of the bully, the bullied, and the

bystanders. *The Chocolate War* unexpected ending alone has already established it as a book to remember and the implications of the ending offer great discussion topics and opportunities for writing assignments. Finally, *The Chocolate War* can be used in correlation with any Bullying Prevention Program offering the opportunity to make the program not only something they have, but something they do.

*Stargirl* works well with the Bullying Circle and has the added benefit of looking at relational bullying. What makes this YA novel unique and solidifies it as an anti-bullying novel is that it deals with relational bullying, the hardest form of bullying to detect. Like *The Chocolate War*, this novel show the plight of the bully, the bullied, and the bystanders and makes students think about conformity and staying true to themselves. This YA novel can be used in conjunction with any anti-bullying program and can double for any girl empowerment clubs or groups. The issues the novel raises about healthy relationships are ones that even girls as young as 6<sup>th</sup> grade can read, comprehend, and enjoy. This book offers strong points about self-confidence and even gives great examples of what true friends look like.

There are numerous books that deal with bullying from varying aspect and with different outcomes. Nevertheless, it was Cormier and Spinelli that I found to be the strongest for their style, diction, and overall content. Using Cormier and Spinelli in conjunction with the Bullying Circle helps to clearly define each role that students play and reinforce the idea that if you are not a part of the solution, then you are a part of the problem.

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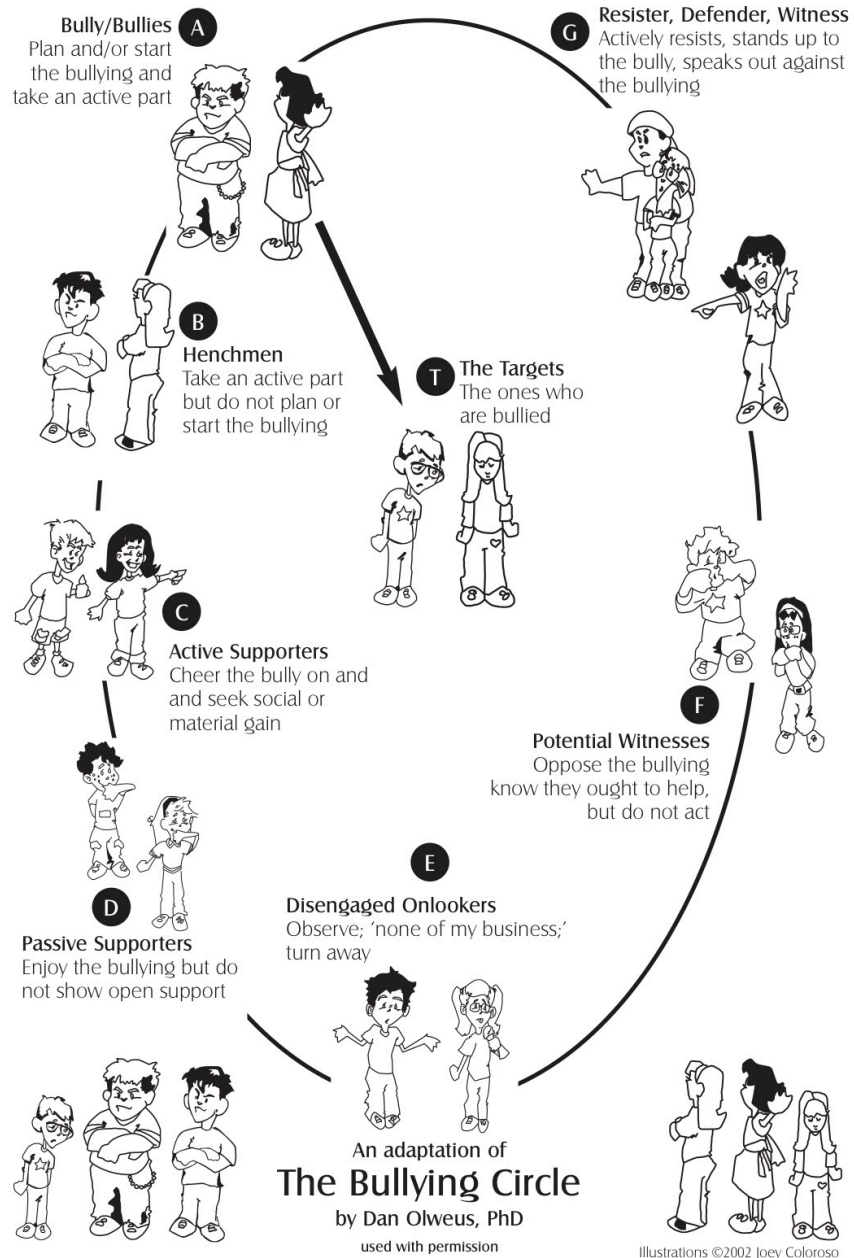
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## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### OLWEUS BULLYING CIRCLE



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nina Marie Bone attended the University of Texas-Pan American where she received her Bachelor of Arts in English and a Minor in Mexican American Studies, in May of 2013. In December 2014 she was awarded her M.A. in English with a concentration in literature and cultural studies from the University of Texas-Pan American. Nina is currently an English Faculty member at the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal College in Mount Pleasant Michigan. Nina's creative works have been published in the 2011, 2012, and 2013 editions of *Along The River: Voices from the Rio Grande Valley* and she continues to write critically about Young Adult Anti-Bullying Novels. She has presented earlier forms of this research at conferences across the United States and hopes to write her own YA anti-bullying novel. Nina Marie Bone 420 South Lansing Street, Mount Pleasant Michigan 48858