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Reading Power: Female Sexuality, Bullying, and Power Relations in Young Adult  
Literature

A Dissertation Presented

by

CARA C. CRANDALL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2016

College of Education  
Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies  
Language, Literacy, and Culture

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Robert S. Feldman, Interim Dean  
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**DEDICATION**

To my beloved son

*Andrew David*

Who has taught me all I know about living bravely and fearlessly

And

To my grandmother

*Josephine Palladino Sasso*

Who knew the woman I could become long before I even imagined such possibilities

*Ti Viglio Bene*

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This dissertation and my journey in a doctoral program would never have occurred without the mentorship of three important women in my life: Dr. Dawn Skorczewski, Dr. Lisa Patel Stevenss, and Dr. Denise Ives. Dawn was the person who not only believed I belonged in a doctoral program; she believed I should enter one immediately and without hesitation. But life intervened, and several years later Leigh was the next person who pushed aside my fears about my abilities and age with a simple question, “What kind of 50s do you want to have?” When I finally arrived at the University of Massachusetts, Denise took an interest in my work and in me as an emerging scholar. My debt to her is immense because as my advisor Denise has provided me with a keen balance of challenge and support. I am incredibly fortunate that she has worked with me over these last several years. My gratitude to each of these women is immeasurable because they not only saw potential in me, but they also took the time to cultivate and encourage that potential.

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I also appreciate the time, insights, and generosity of the members of my dissertation committee including Dr. Maria José Botelho, Dr. Anne Herrington, Dr. J. Camille Cammack, and Dr. Denise Ives. Your guiding hands and encouragement have

sustained me throughout the months of writing and have helped me transform my data and analysis into this dissertation.

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When I was a little girl, I spent much of my time with my maternal grandmother Josephine Sasso, who had dreamed of having a career and never marrying. Her family, her time, and her culture forced her into roles far from her aspirations. Instead, she used her disappointments to fuel her belief about the woman I could become if only I, too, believed. I hope she is proud of all I have become, because I am so grateful to her for the model she provided of a strong woman who must find her place in the world in her own terms.



## **ABSTRACT**

### **READING POWER: FEMALE SEXUALITY, BULLYING AND POWER RELATIONS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

MAY 2016

CARA CRANDALL, B.S., MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

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Over the last thirty years, American society and schools have struggled to understand and respond to bullying and harassment by young people. In that time, scholars and policy makers have worked not only to understand this phenomenon but to also create interventions that can prevent such incidents because the consequences of bullying have been shown to be so detrimental for all involved. Adult concerns with peer aggression has led to a proliferation of young adult (YA) novels that take bullying as their narrative focus. Such novels are popular among young people as part of their personal reading practices and increasingly are being integrated into English curricula in American schools for a variety of reasons. However, not only has YA literature previously not been seen as worthy for inclusion in the classroom, but also the genre has been largely ignored by literary critics. This theoretical gap is especially true of novels about bullying. In this dissertation I report findings from an analysis of seven YA novels. I completed both a narrative analysis of these novels as well as a discourse analysis using poststructural feminism and feminist critical discourse analysis. In order to understand contemporary discourses on bullying, female sexuality, and power relations within each

novel, I employed modes of address as an analytic tool to identify and discuss the subject positions afforded readers within the text and how these subject positions reflect discourses at work in the real world. My findings include discourses on the problematic nature of adolescents, and female friendships in particular. My findings also explore discourses of sexuality and romantic partnership that follow a heteronormative script and depict both as dangerous for young women. I then outline implications for English language arts teachers, researchers, and adults in light of these findings with an emphasis on the critical approach needed to identify and disrupt hegemonic discourses around adolescence, female sexuality, and power.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*“Some people think they’re perfect. They talk to guys, talk to them behind your back, and make it that much harder when the guys are mad at you. Then it’s all just a big mess.” ~ Melanie*

When Phoebe Prince, a 15-year old high school freshman in South Hadley, Massachusetts committed suicide in January of 2010, her death was quickly attributed to bullying and harassment she had faced at school. While news reports dug into the social relationships she had maintained since her recent arrival at the town’s high school from Ireland, Prince’s death led to a vociferous debate that continues to this day about blame and responsibility. Had Phoebe been a naïve newcomer in a town of “mean adolescent women” who targeted her due to her relationships with several boys in town (Cullen, 2010)? Or were reports of Phoebe’s own actions as a bully back in Ireland examples of her complicity in the situation in South Hadley (Bazelon, 2010)? This debate crystallized around the decision by local law enforcement officials who charged six of Phoebe’s peers with a range of felonies including harassment, stalking, statutory rape, and civil rights violations. The lives of adolescents can seem unknowable by adults, but when the stakes are so high adults feel compelled to intervene. Did the teens who taunted her deserve criminal punishment? What role and thus responsibility could adults in the school and community play in such a situation? Answering these questions in Phoebe’s case reminds one of the most tragic element of her story: Phoebe cannot be saved, no matter how long and loud the debate about her death gets. But what can we learn from the choices Phoebe and the adolescent women she associated with made as they wandered their school’s hallways in pursuit of boys and friends?

In the nearly forty years since academic researchers (Olweus, 1973; Olweus 1978) first addressed issues of peer relationships and bullying, the topic has become not only a subject worthy of academic study across multiple disciplines but also one that has encouraged a national discourse on bullying in mainstream media with books such as *Odd Girl Out* and *Queen Bees and Wannabees*; in popular films like *Mean Girls*; and at the White House Conference on Bullying in 2011. This national conversation has led to an increasing focus on problematic peer relationships, leading legislators in 47 states to pass laws that require school districts to create policies for preventing and responding to bullying. In some states, these laws include consequences for school personnel who fail to report or act on that bullying (Bazelon, 2010). Such legal remedies have arrived at the same time as positive support for bullied children has come about including school-based intervention programs like the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2003), the Go Grrrls (Daley and Lecroy, 2001) or Youth Matters (Farrington and Ttofi, 2009) curricula and public awareness campaigns such as the *It Gets Better* online video project.

As the interest in the subject grew, so did the awareness for researchers and writers in the media that bullying was a complex social phenomenon. Researchers first described physically aggressive behavior exhibited by boys but later identified and addressed the different ways adolescent women enacted such cruelties (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan, 1991; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Researchers began to claim that adolescent women were far less likely to engage in physical intimidation or violence but use their friendships with others as a site for conflict and cruelty, leading to the term “relational aggression” (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan, 1991; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). At the same time, bullying became more prevalent for adolescents

as they increasingly had to navigate social relationships in classrooms and school hallways, as well as outside of school via social media. Technologies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and cell phone texting increased the ways and places people could interact and socialize. But wherever bullying takes place and whatever forms it takes, the behaviors and consequences are similar. Articles published in research journals and mainstream media have provided language on the topic that is familiar to academics, parents, educators, and kids. This language has purportedly been created to deepen our understanding of specific roles kids can inhabit: bully, victim, bully/victim, and bystander. Whether bullying is seen as a cycle (Olweus, 2003) or a continuum of behavior (Espelage and Swearer, 2003), we, adults and young people, have come to define and discuss such bullying as aberrant and destructive. The impetus to understand and intervene in peer relationships has come largely as a result of the serious consequences such behavior has had, including suicides by those who have been victimized especially in the last two decades.

The social import of this phenomenon has not been lost on authors and publishers of young adult (YA) literature, which has experienced a similar growth trajectory in the two decades that saw a rise in bullying. According to Meredith Barnes, a literary agent, “3,000 young adult novels were published in 1997. Twelve years later, that figure hit 30,000 titles” (Grady, 2011). One aspect of the genre’s growth and popularity are the multiple sub-genres that have gained prominence, including novels with bullying at the center of the narrative. In fact, “the number of English-language books tagged with the key word ‘bullying’ in 2012 was 1,891, an increase of 500 in a decade” (Kaufman, 2013). Bullying is, however, hardly new territory in YA books: Robert Cormier’s (1974) *The*



*Chocolate War* focused on the tensions between an adolescent boy and his school's power relations and is even predated by books like *The Outsiders* (1967) and *Catcher in the Rye* (1951) that also included episodes of targeting due to difference (Lopez-Robero, 2012). These earlier texts were part of a movement in the 1960s and 1970s in YA fiction toward what has come to be known as "contemporary realism" (Fitzgerald, 2004) or "YA realism," which includes a set of very specific literary conventions, namely "adolescent protagonists, narration from the adolescent's point of view, realistic contemporary settings, and subject matter formerly considered taboo" (Ross, 1985, p. 175). These books, often referred to as the "problem novel," (Trites, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2004), were written to explore the issues facing contemporary American adolescents in the latter half of the twentieth century, and were positioned as responses to the social ills faced by youth but through the lens of literature. These texts answered the call of Michael Cart, when he argued for a "...young adult fiction...written for and about adolescents and the mind-boggling problems that now plague and perplex them...a new kind of problem novel that is as real as the headlines...enriched by the best means literature can offer...a young adult fiction that takes creative (and marketing) risks to present hard-edged issues so that it may offer readers revelation and, ultimately, that elusive wisdom" (qtd. in Fitzgerald, 2004).

This idea of "revelation" and "wisdom" granted to readers through a literary experience echoes Trites' (2000) description of YA novels as historically derived from the *Bildungsroman* (coming-of-age novels that end with adulthood), but more clearly understood as *Entwicklungsroman* (novels of development that end before adulthood) because "the character grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem" (p. 14).

These novels provide then an “archetypal story” that “is a rite of passage from childhood to maturity” (Ross, 1985, p. 177), providing readers with the experience of growth and change through the eyes and experiences of the protagonist. The conventions of YA problem novels also incorporate “the friend, the first sexual partner, family members, the outcast, and the adult mentor” as part of the narrative while casting “parents ... as negative, blocking figures” (Ross, 1985, p. 177). These conventions are coupled with themes that address “identity...the importance of present experience, alienation from the adult world, and isolation” (Ross, 1985, p. 178) all in the service of a novel that picks up any number of contemporary subjects that had been previously been ignored in YA literature: teen sexuality, pregnancy, abortion, and the uses of drugs and alcohol.

Today’s titles, though, and the sheer volume published, underscore a preoccupation with peer aggression on the part of American adults, including teachers, librarians, and authors, who are often the source as these books find their way into the classrooms and hands of today’s adolescents. Publishers, too, drive this concern with peer aggression and bullying through the creation of their own anti-bullying campaigns at the same time that authors use their websites and Facebook to tap into the “perfect synergy that results: They can promote a cause that most people avidly support while promoting their own products” (Kaufman, 2013). Given this confluence between social issues, literature, and marketing, I argue this preoccupation results as much from exploitation as it does from a compulsion to intervene and help adolescents.

These “products” are increasingly used in classrooms as teachers and researchers have argued for the inclusion of YA literature alongside canonical literature that has been the staple of American English classrooms for decades (Daniels, 2006; Gibbons, Dail,

and Stallworth, 2006; YALSA, 2012). While teachers can incorporate YA novels in their classroom practices for their literary merit or their ability to engage reluctant adolescents in reading, many argue the inclusion of YA literature focused on bullying provides “bibliotherapeutic” (Larson and Hoover, 2012) possibilities in allowing teachers ways to intervene in the “invisible problem of bullying” (Bott, Garden, Jones, and Peters, 2006). Two articles in the Winter 2014 issue of the *ALAN Review* argue for the inclusion of such YA literature, and though each study addressed distinct aspects of the texts through content analysis, both articles positioned YA novels focused on bullying as worthy of classroom study not only as literary texts but also as methods of intervention to prevent or stop bullying within schools. Jones, Dennis, Torres-OvRick, and Walker (2014) looked at 10 novels related to bullying in order to analyze adult interventions in bullying situations. Their content analysis drew on literature that argued for the unique role teachers and other school staff can play in “identifying and decreasing the isolation of students at-risk with bullying,” but that also highlighted that “victims of bullying are reluctant to report such incidents to adults” (p. 67). They further urged the use of these novels because they will encourage dialogue between students and adults about the bullying situations within texts, which could then lead “teens [to] learn from adolescent literature *how* to use adults to intervene to confront the problem of bullying” (p. 67).

Similarly, Harmon and Henkin (2014) analyzed 21 YA novels selected because the protagonist had been bullied in order to understand how “such information can serve important instructional purposes” (p. 79). They argue that “teachers should not only capitalize on classroom discussions, but should also use writing opportunities to help students think more deeply about bullying,” and they further include discussions and role

playing to make text-to-world connections (p. 87). These approaches are offered in the service of “valuable instructional tools for helping teachers address these problems that occur too frequently in the lives of adolescents” because in their analysis the books “provide realistic portrayal of bullying and harassment” (p. 86). YA novels focused on bullying are also seen as offering important lessons for the preparatory work of pre-service teachers (Pytash, 2013) because of their future work with adolescents who might struggle with issues of bullying, harassment, and resulting suicide. While few would quibble with the notion of caring adults stepping in to protect students from or help students deal with experiences of bullying, harassment, or violence, our reflex to utilize YA novels focused on bullying as instructional tools for moral behavior; understanding and respecting difference; or understanding complicated issues around power and violence underscores a number of important gaps both in public debates on bullying and the research literature. These gaps, which I will address in this dissertation, include the need to submit YA literature to rigorous literary analysis; to undertake a critical examination of the ideologies of bullying, harassment, female sexuality, and power embedded in the novels as part of the narrative structure; and to problematize the representations of bullying, adolescent behavior, and female characters in particular within these novels.

As Daniels (2006) argues, many literary theorists “see the phrase YA, and they tend to dismiss the work as disconnected to the literary community” (p. 78); however, she argues that the application of literary theories to analyze texts within the YA genre is particularly apt since “the genre itself, the form itself, could contain ideological messages within the structures of its conventions” (p. 80). Lopez-Ropero (2012) also argues

“despite the proliferation of young adult titles with bullying, this subgenre has received little scholarly attention” (p. 146). This lack of attention by theorists demonstrates that while bullying novels have become popular vehicles for instruction by adults because they appear to respond to societal and educational needs, our approaches and therefore our outcomes must be considered unclear since we do not fully know if such novels are as useful as has been argued. In a similar fashion, while a preponderance of research has been undertaken in order to understand and prevent bullying among the young, our approaches and our outcomes there might also be considered unclear, if not also misguided.

As Walton (2005) argues, “despite the wealth of research, the proliferation of education policies about bullying, and the industry of related books, DVDs, and programs, bullying persists. The existence of these social artifacts attests to the longevity and tenacity of bullying as a normative practice in schools. If it were otherwise, then there would be no reason for research, policies, and products to exist in the first place” (p. 133). If well-meaning educational policies and decades of research on bullying have left us with a lack of clarity and a problem that persists, how might we move forward? If our “conceptualizations of bullying shift from the definitional...to the discursive, the contingent, the contextual, and the ideological” (Walton, 2005, p 61), how might we more fully understand bully as a socially-situated, historical practice? Our work then is to shift our focus from individual students and their bad behavior to a more nuanced understanding of such incidents and what they tell us about the complexities of human relationships and how power plays a role in these complexities.

These questions that critique current public conversations and research on adolescent relationships and bullying most certainly must also be applied to the YA novels that purport to address these issues because these novels have become part of adult response and interventions to prevent bullying. The National Council of Teachers of English encourages its members to focus their professional energies on bullying in their classrooms with its 2011 “Resolution on Confronting Bullying and Harassment.” K-12 teachers are counseled “to explore the thousands of books and digital and multi-modal sources containing the theme of bullying and harassment and to use these sources in their classrooms to discuss and confront bullying” because in “their unique roles as teachers of discourse” English teachers can “engage students in speaking and writing about bullying, including articulating their experiences and clarifying their values” (NCTE, 2011). This impetus, if taken up by English teachers, will necessitate a careful and critical exploration of the “thousands” of books that might be used in the classroom, especially if one agrees that such texts would or should serve the concomitant purposes of English literature and personal values instruction.

No matter the gender of the audience, adolescents read for all sorts of reasons, including entertainment and as part of the required school curriculum, and “literature matters because it teaches how perspective can be brought to bear on experience” (Blackford, 2004, p. 1). These connections between our real lives and the fictional worlds we visit when we read offer worlds “like our own” as well as serving an “ideational function...in the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues being addressed by the narrative” (Phelan and Rabinowitz, 2012, p. 7). As readers, we enter settings and meet characters much like us, who engage us through language and confront us with all

sorts of meanings, which we can then take up as our own because “rhetorical narrative theory considers the narrative text not just to represent but actually to constitute a transaction between an author and a reader” (Warhol, 2012, p. 10). This transaction can inform our perspectives on myriad issues a text places at the center of its plot. Given the import of the relationship between the reader and a text, adults would be wise to take a more critical approach and provide methods for more critical analysis of such texts that shape young people’s understandings of bullying and peer relations. Without this critical inquiry into narratives and the ideologies within these narratives, we run the risk, as Walton (2005) argues, of offering students “conceptualizations of bullying” that are merely “definitional” and do little to uncover “the contextual and ideological” issues that make bullying and peer relations difficult to ameliorate since our definitions create categories of behavior but do not illustrate how power operates in even our most personal relationships (p. 10).

In this dissertation, I address the research gaps by completing both a literary and discourse analysis of seven YA novels in order to undertake a critical examination of the ideologies of bullying, harassment, female sexuality, and power embedded in the novels as part of the narrative structure. Further, I problematize the representations of bullying, adolescent behavior, and female characters in particular within these novels in order to address how current research relies too heavily on these “definitional” categories, which result in an inability to effectively intervene and support adolescents as they navigate inter-personal relationships. However, I maintain a narrow emphasis on novels about adolescent females, bullying and harassment, and female sexuality as examples of “relations of power” because as Foucault (1997) articulated, “in human relationships

power is always present” (p. 292). I have selected seven contemporary YA novels that present a story of bullying coupled with representations of female sexuality. I use a feminist poststructural theoretical framework in order to complete two layers of analysis: a textual analysis of the novels as literary works coupled with a feminist critical discourse analysis in order to understand how these authors and these texts reflect, take up, and possibly resist “the contextual and the ideological” ideologies of bullying, adolescence, and female sexuality. Poststructural feminist theory is integral to my analysis because this framework will allow me to discuss how “relations of power” are the “contingent, contextual, and the ideological” issues which are at the core of what we have come to identify as bullying (Walton, 2005, p. 61) Further, I employ the analytic tool of “modes of address” to understand how authors hail readers into the subject positions occupied by the female main character and how these modes of address continue, expand, and at times resist contemporary discourses on adolescence, female sexuality, and power (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22). Modes of address become then almost a welcome to readers that they will find recognizable characters and situations in the fictional world created by the authors. An example of a mode of address is the setting of the American suburb replete with bored adolescents, distant parents, and peer activities like gossiping, parties, and dating. By situating the reader in such a setting, the author both assumes the reader is familiar with such a place and understands its intricacies. The mode of address then encourages a feeling of intimacy between reader and character as well as reader and text.

I have identified the following research questions in order to frame this project: What subject positions do these novels offer to their readers? What discourses must readers take up to read and understand these novels? How do young women in these



novels negotiate and re-negotiate power relations? How do female protagonists resist the subject positions offered them and produce counter-narratives that allow them new subject positions and with what results? How are contemporary discourses of bullying, female sexuality, and power relations utilized, reified, and resisted in the fictional worlds of the novels?

### **Dissertation Origins and Role of Researcher**

This dissertation came about after I completed an ethnographic project at the middle school where I currently work as an English language arts teacher. During that project, the data I collected through interviews and direct observations led me to see bullying and female friendships in new ways and made me question many of my own assumptions and understandings of how adults labeled and categorized adolescents, young women, and their relationships. Each chapter in this dissertation begins with the actual words from the young women who were a part of that study. I have included them to connect the fictional worlds of the novels under study with the experiences of real young women around similar issues.

The purpose of that research was to understand in a more nuanced way the lives of early adolescent women as they experience, understand, and negotiate issues around sexuality and power. These young women at a school I will call Garden Grove Middle School, a middle school in the northeastern United States, provided insights into their experiences over a six-month period as I researched the stories early adolescents tell about their lives. Data was initially collected from 42 eighth grade students who were also my students in my English language arts classes, but soon focused on the participants in a weekly group created for eighth grade adolescent women named simply

Girls' Group. This group provided a drop-in, after-school meeting each Friday for adolescent women who were in the eighth grade. Attendance at the meetings ranged from 22 to 26 adolescent women each week. Of that group, five students were asked to participate in interviews and became focal participants, including Lily, Melanie, Charlotte, MaryJo, and Alice. Each girl articulated a curiosity in my research as well as an appreciation that an adult was willing to listen to them as they talked about their lives.

Their community, Garden Grove, is a small, suburban town comprised largely of people who identify as White/European ancestry (95%), with fewer residents identified as African American (.69%); Latino/a (1.09%), or Asian (2.9%). The town boasts a strong public school system and is recognized for its sports and music programs. Median family income was reported as \$87,742 while 1.0% of families and 2.1% of the total population fall under the federal government's poverty line (US Census, 2000). During conversations and interviews, students talked openly both about their privilege in life experiences, often in the context of appreciating how much they have, while they shared frustrations about how the community is stereotyped for its wealth when they interact with peers at social events or sports tournaments in other communities in the immediate area. Most students at GGMS have known each other since an early age, whether due to being classmates or to the numerous extracurricular activities in which they are involved. In addition, these middle school students socialize informally through networks of friends or at Saturday night dances held by the town or religious institutions in town. These demographics of white adolescents living in a suburban community are similar to those of the novels under study, and this reflects a troubling lack of diversity within YA

literature, which in turn affected the novels I was able to locate for possible inclusion in this dissertation (Larrick, 1965; Doll, 2012; Myers, 2014).

My ethnographic research explored how female early adolescents can understand, negotiate, and renegotiate a complex web of power relations among peers. For three months, I observed interactions at the school, listened to what was said, kept detailed notes, and utilized a series of interviews with focal participants as a supplement to what I saw. What became clear quite quickly in that research was a sense of surveillance, from the community, teachers, and peers, kept an eye on all they do. This sense of being watched conditioned how they dressed, how they acted in school, what they were willing to say, even if they were willing to speak at all. This sense never left them and had become so inculcated in them that the adolescent women internalized this sense that they must be on guard themselves *against* themselves for fear of being judged, gossiped about, insulted, and excluded. In the world of middle school, the hierarchies of popularity and acceptance fed directly into one's feelings of self-esteem and self-concept. This sense of being watched was especially keen when it came to the adolescent young women's sexuality. However, these age-appropriate feelings created for adolescent women the dilemma of desire. The dilemma being the reality that the very thing that was part of the developmental tasks of growing to adulthood in fact led to shame, punishment, and possible ostracism. Adolescent women were targeted because of a violation of the social mores of this group. But the outrage by peers against peers for making a personal choice hinted at deeper and more complicated reasons. Adolescent women were just as likely to be policed by peers because of the intricate power relations at work in their friendships. At the same time, adolescent women judged and punished one another around sex as

much to punish that girl as to punish and police themselves. The almost sadistic nature of the adolescent women's interactions around who had been sexually active hinted at a conflict these adolescent women experienced between their anticipated sense of how adolescent women *should* behave and how some of them *chose* to behave. As Melanie, one focal participant, described, adolescent women are labeled "bad," and that mark, like the scarlet A Hester Prynne was forced to wear, positioned the girl as someone not worthy of another person's time or respect. She crossed boundaries that were so destabilizing that she must be not merely punished, but she must be rebuked, shamed, and pushed aside. The adolescent women in this study made clear that they understand how this works.

As I pondered this research and wrote articles about my findings about gender and power (Crandall, 2012), I noticed these issues reflected and refracted all around me. It became clear to me that another element of understanding the lives of adolescent women was to further research the social constructions of gender and power through one of the most important cultural artifacts in the lives of adolescent: YA literature. As a practicing ELA teacher, it is my job to develop my students' critical and literary analysis skills, but I began to question my own critical practices when it came to the literature I used in my classroom and offered to students for independent reading. The gaps related to bullying and power that I found in research, such as the lack of literary or critical analysis of YA texts as well as reductive approaches to thinking about bullying's complexities, mirrored gaps I realized existed in my own practice and the professional approaches of my colleagues and my profession in its entirety. As a middle-aged, white woman; an educator who works with adolescents; and as a researcher, who approaches her work

from a critical stance, these gaps must be addressed. My belief in the importance of this research, which I approach both as a social scientist and a literary theorist, rests then with my own understanding of the complexities of human relationships as well as the sense of responsibility I feel for the young people who are my students.

As an English teacher, I am well aware of the relationship created between a reader and a book. This transactional nature of reading fiction is one reason feminist narrative theory is interested in the “affective and emotional impact of narrative texts” (Warhol, 2012, p. 11) and seeks to “understand...narrative’s role in the constitution of gender,” and through such understandings be “better positioned...to change the oppressive ways that gender norms work in the world” (Warhol, 2012, p. 13). This dissertation will address the role of narrative, in particular, narratives of female relationships, power, and bullying in order to analyze how such issues constitute and are constituted by discourses at work in all of our lives.

In Chapter One, I identify the research gaps as they relate to YA literature and research and public debates on bullying and adolescent women. In addition, I have outlined my role as researcher and the theoretical framework I use in order to address these gaps and provide a literary and discourse analysis of seven contemporary YA novels. In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the literature related to the key elements of this study including an overview of adolescence; theories about bullying and relational aggression; and debates about and research into female sexuality and gender. Additionally, I provide grounding information about each of the young adult novels selected as part of this study as well as the reasons for their inclusion. Finally, I outline how I theorize and define the terms power and discourse. I also explain my use of the

theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism and the use of feminist critical discourse analysis to analyze each YA text. In Chapter Three, I explore the methodologies of this study and my analysis of the interplay between language, narrative, discourse and power. I further situate this study in relation to my previous research and outline my use of the analytic tools and theoretical framework in this dissertation. An explanation of why these approaches are most applicable to this work will also be provided. In Chapters Four, I explore my findings as they relate to the elements of the narrative I have titled as the “contexts” of the plot. These include focalization; race; class; family dynamics; the prevalence of drugs and alcohol; and the setting of each novel, the American suburbs. In Chapter Five, I outline my findings in these novels as they relate to female adolescent friendships with a description of how bullying, violence, and power relations are represented in the novels. In Chapter Six, I present my findings from the novels related to female sexuality, which is represented in these novels as heterosexual as well as problematic. This chapter also explores how the narratives represent romantic relationships between female and male characters. In Chapter Seven, I share my findings as they relate to the resolutions of each narrative and how the endings reinforce ideologies of adolescence, female sexuality, and power. In each findings chapter, I include a discussion section that outlines the modes of address employed by each author to hail the reader into a particular subject position in order to read and understand the narrative. In Chapter Eight, I further discuss the modes of address utilized and how they reflect and refract discourses on adolescence, female sexuality, and power. In addition, I explore the implications of this analysis for the adults who work with and care about adolescents as well as adolescents themselves and how all of these ideologies can have a

deterministic affect on their lives. I also explore the implications for researchers who work to understand bullying by arguing that this work must reveal the “contingent, contextual, and the ideological” issues in order to comprehensively understand how power operates for and among adolescents (Walton, 2005, p. 61).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*“You know the whole thing about judging the book not for its cover but what’s inside. Well, you have to be appealing on the outside before they will get to know you on the inside.” ~ Lily*

Over the last three decades, researchers have undertaken numerous studies to understand the causes and consequences of bullying, which has increasingly been identified as a social problem of import and a particular problem of adolescence in the Western world (Olweus, 1972; 1994; 2003). Many of these studies have come to theorize bullying as a complicated and inter-related set of behaviors among young people, but the focus remains firmly on an individual or group of individuals who display aberrant behavior that necessitates an adult response (Pellegrini and Long, 2002; Espelage and Swearer, 2003). While first identified as physical violence and harassment of peers, further research identified gender-specific bullying that has come to be known as relational aggression because of the ways bullies use relationships to hurt a victim (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan, 1992). No matter the form bullying takes, theorists argue that dominance theory provides a rationale for attacking another person, especially among adolescents (Pellegrini and Long, 2002). But the success of bullying and harassing behaviors is predicated on our human need to regulate our behavior and create lasting relationships with peers (Lewis, 1995; Teroni and Deonna, 2008). For adolescent women, these issues are complicated by the ways gender and female sexuality are used as tools to influence individual behavior through bullying or harassment (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan, 1992; Underwood, 2004; Eliasson, Isaksson, and Laflamme, 2007; Ringrose, 2008; Warrington and Younger, 2010; Duncan and Owen,



2011). All of these issues have become material for authors of young adult literature who produce texts that have become part of the popular culture and literacy practices of classrooms in American middle and high schools (Trites, 2000). This inter-play between “texts and contexts” (Lazar, 2007, p. 149) is at the center of this dissertation, with a particular focus on discourses of adolescent females, sexuality, and power and the ways authors use these discourses as modes of address Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22) in order to position readers into relationship with their female main characters. In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature as it relates to these discourses as well as an overview of feminist poststructuralism and young adult literature.

### **Adolescence**

Representations of adolescence are so common across various forms of media, including news sources, films, and fiction, and in academic research that the word immediately conjures up specific images that seem familiar and common place. They have become “regimes of truth” that forefront what is believed about adolescents, their behavior, and their abilities (Foucault, 1995). Adolescents are described routinely as filled with turmoil and angst, driven by out-of-control hormones and vulnerable to peer pressures and dangers such as sexual promiscuity, sexual predators, drugs and alcohol, largely as a result of their impulsivity and lack of impulse control. These ideas are centered on theories of human development that posit adolescence as one stage on the lifespan, and one that is particularly centered on the physical body, one that is not easily controlled by self or adults (Patel Stevens et al., 2007; Lesko, 2012; Kokkola, 2013). Adolescents have passed through the stage of childhood, one most often connected with innocence and the ability of adults, be it parents or teachers, to hold sway over their

choices and behavior. The common sense approach to understanding adolescents is that the body's physical development has outpaced their cognitive abilities to regulate and moderate behavior and life choices. At the same time, the sullen adolescent pushes away parents as they attempt to individuate and peers become the focus of intimate relationships (Lesko, 2012). These beliefs about this age largely determine how adults structure schools and curricula, develop education policy, and even craft laws and legal approaches to working with adolescents. But how much of these common senses are in fact social constructions by adults and serve adult purposes?

Many of our commonly held ideas about adolescence come to us from the early part of the twentieth century when Hall (1905) postulated theories on adolescence that arose during a time of "social confusion" as well as a preoccupation with "concerns about manliness, strength, and dominance" (Lesko, 1996, p. 145). Such concerns led to an articulation of "adolescent development...as a vehicle through which to discuss the means to secure strong wills and disciplined bodies among middle-class White males" (Lesko, 1996, p. 145). The theories of adolescent development for Hall were connected to "recapitulation theory," which posited "child development and human evolution as mirrors of one another" (Lesko, 1996, p. 147). As such, the "identifiable stages of child development replicated the identifiable stages of civilization" from "savagery" to "constitutional government" (Lesko, 1996, p. 147). In this articulation of stages of development, adolescence came to be seen, according to Turner (1969), as a time of "liminality," a time period of "persons between states, in the midst of passage, outside of social positions and power" (qtd. in Lesko, 1996, p. 149) and thus are configured by their

age and specific descriptors that could be affixed to them with “a clear positionality [of the] superiority of adults” (Lesko, 1996, p. 149).

In addition to creating this in-between stage of development, Hall further associated it with the belief that “adolescents...are controlled by hormones and, therefore, dangerously out of control,” (Lesko, 1996, p. 150) which assumes “biology, or reproductive maturation, as driving many aspects of adolescence” (Lesko, 1996, p. 151). This identification with a biological imperative posits adolescence then as a normative stage of growth and development, which underscored its effectiveness as a “common sense” way of understanding adolescents. Another common sense way of thinking about adolescence comes from Coleman’s study in 1961 focused on adolescent relationships and when he argued “friends are more important to teenagers than is anything else” (Lesko, 1996, p. 153). All of these theories in wide circulation throughout the twentieth century and pervasive today undergird our beliefs that “people between the ages of 12 and 17 years are believed to naturally and inevitably possess certain characteristics and behaviors that correspond with essentially different natures than those of adults” (Lesko, 1996, p. 155). Such “naturalized states of adolescence” (Lesko, 1996, p. 155) can hardly be argued with, and since adults set the parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, they are able to cast adolescents as deviant or transgressive. Hall’s theories became a “regime of truth” so powerful that they continue to drive contemporary discourses about adolescence and are taken up by all sorts of researchers and cultural producers to be consumed without critique in mainstream society, as is evidenced by the novels in this study. These discourses become then not only what it believed about adolescents but the very definition of what it means to be an adolescent and to experience

this aspect of one's life (Lesko, 1996). Ultimately, Lesko (2012) argues that such theories of "adolescent development...[are] driven by an imperative for individual improvement [...] with a strong interest on *the future* over the present or the past," which suggests a gloomy appraisal of one's life because adolescence is positioned as a time without meaning and merely a passage through to the valued and valuable adult one can become if adolescence is gingerly handled and navigated (Lesko, 2012, p. 180).

Other theorists such as Piaget and Erickson also describe adolescence as "firmly located within a maturation process, but with the emphasis on the absence of desire maturation" such as "a lack in higher order thinking, a lack in the ability to understand one's own positioning, an absence of moderation" (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 112). Another discourse of development or maturation "centered on biological and medical paradigms..." (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 113) utilizes a "discourse of pathologization [that]works to position the young person as immature learners deficient in a hierarchized mind over body" (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 114).

Patel Stevens et al. (2007) articulate other discourses around adolescence that continue to assess how the adolescent is left without the ability or space to speak or think about his or her experience but have their selves and experiences largely described, controlled, and mediated by adults. They articulate a "critical perspective on adolescence" that can "draw particular attention to the role of power in the human experience and this viewpoint assumes an imbalance of power in all situations and contexts" (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 115). Their critique of this approach rests on the concern that while this perspective emphasizes an examination of power imbalances and methods of resistance such work is typically in schools led by an adult, so that adults "castigate young people

for their inability to independently identify and then reject the dominant discourses of mass media texts” (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 116). Further, they identify “the unruly youth” discourse, which associates adolescents who fail to make progress as “at-risk...or not achieving to their true potential” and which locates “danger and risk within the young person” (Patel Stevens et al., 2007, p. 118). Taken together, their articulation of discourse around youth suggest an adult preoccupation with categorizing and constraining adolescents thus constructing, defining, and pathologizing all at the same time with nary a thought for how adolescents experience their lives.

One of adults’ preoccupations with adolescence is the theory that the brain is not fully developed and lacks key components necessary for higher order thinking skills and the ability to control one’s behavior. However, Epstein (2007) argues that not only are such theories wrong but they are based on inappropriate and reductive readings of brain scans and other research into the supposed “teen brain”: “it is dangerous to presume that snapshots of activity in certain regions of the brain necessarily provide useful information about the causes of thought, feeling and behavior” (Epstein, 2007, p. 57). Rather, he argues, “the teen brain we read about in the headlines—the immature brain that supposedly causes teen problems—is nothing less than a myth” (Epstein, 2007, p. 58). Epstein bases his argument on evidence that brain growth and development takes place throughout life and continues well into adulthood. He also believes rather than a biological or developmental reason for brain responses other factors such as the environment and other contexts determine what the brain can do and when. He argues instead that adolescents are quite capable and in some brain research best adults in many areas. Instead, he believes the turmoil adults associate with adolescence with an “artificial

extension of childhood past puberty” (Epstein, 2007, p. 59) during which time adults “infantilized our young” by “isolating them from adults” and by overly constraining their lives since he notes that adolescents are encumbered by “10 times as many restrictions as mainstream adults” (Epstein, 2007, p. 59). Graham (2004) makes a similar argument in his book *The End of Adolescence* where he notes that the word teenager came into parlance in 1941 in the magazine *Popular Science* and may have “leaked into language from the world of advertising” in order to “define those in the teen years as having special consumer needs” (Graham, 2004, p. 26). This interplay between discourse, language, consumerism, and modern culture appears again and again in an analysis of the historical origins of adolescence and human development theory. These discourses have become powerful means by which adults position and constrain young people, and as will be seen in the further sections of this chapter these discourses provide the foundation for contemporary discourses around bullying and relational aggression; female adolescents and their sexuality; and the continuing construction of adolescent as Other who must be constrained and controlled through power relations all set in motion, mediated by, and pathologized by adults.

### **Bullying**

While researchers often debate how to define and best measure bullying, most agree that bullying’s most salient features include a power differential between peers as well as purposeful, repetitive aggressive behavior that is meant to cause pain (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel, 2010). Bullying was first defined by Olweus in 1972 as a kind of “mobbing,” by which an individual or group harasses and bothers another person. His later work (1994) further outlined such harassment to include repeated verbal

and physical behaviors that occur over time in a relationship with a clear imbalance of power (Espelage and Swearer, 2003). Olweus continues to work in the field, and through his efforts created the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP). His work (2003) still addresses bullying as the systemic interaction among groups of peers who take on specific roles in relation to each other and the bullying. In his "bullying circle" Olweus identifies roles for the perpetrator and victim, but describes these roles with nuances that reflect the intricacy of social relationships. He further assigns roles for allies of both the bully and the victim. In his view, a bully will identify either a "passive victim," or a "bully-victim," who exhibits behavior that already provokes a negative reaction from much of a peer group, and expose that person to harassment. The bully has as his allies "henchmen/followers" who will participate in the bullying but will also be encouraged by "supporters" and "passive supporters," who do not participate in the bullying but like it and do nothing to stop it. On the other hand, the victim may be helped by "defenders," who act in response to bullying or may be supported by "possible defenders," who want to help but will not. At the same time, Olweus argues there will always be "disengaged onlookers," who know what is happening but have no reaction or interest. In his view, bullying then is a systemic function of the social relationships within a peer group or classroom. As his cycle demonstrates, such behavior is never a secret and happens as part of the social relations of the group.

Another version of a systemic understanding of bullying is the continuum approach (Espelage and Swearer, 2003), which encompasses Olweus's original definitions of bullying, but argues for a "continuum" approach (p. 365). In this way, "more subtle and less regular" kinds of teasing can be accounted for as part of harassing

behavior (p. 365). These various researchers have described bullying in terms of systemic social behavior, and this research and the interventions that have been designed as a result have made an impact. According to the most recent data reported by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center on Education Statistics (2015), bullying has decreased to its "lowest levels since 2005" when this agency first began to collect data (qtd. in Layton, 2015). However, "1 out of every five students in U.S. middle schools and high schools reported being bullied in 2013," and this behavior continue to trouble a "larger percentage of girls" than other groups (Layton, 2015). It is important to note that such statistics only shed light onto reports of bullying and harassment, so a true sense of bullying rates can be hard to ascertain since many young people do not report such incidents. I will argue that the struggles researchers and educators have had in categorizing bullying as well as proposing more successful interventions underscore the inherent flaw in how we understand this issue since these behaviors and processes are much more complex and are far more about power relations among people and far less about adolescents as aberrant Other.

### **Relational Aggression**

If Olweus laid the foundation for inquiry into bullying, Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan (1992) are credited with first describing and studying aggressive behavior that was fundamentally different based on gender and age. Using three cohorts of boys and girls at ages 8, 11, and 15, they found that aggressive behavior was associated with gender. Boys were more likely to use physical or direct aggression while girls used indirect or verbal aggression. Additionally, such verbal aggression for girls did not begin in earnest until the age of 8.



Following their lead, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) argued that if aggression was centered on trying to harm others, that girls would be most likely to perpetrate such behaviors in regards to friendships and social relationships. Their research supported this theory and identified such behaviors, which have been labeled “relational aggression,” as more typical of girls than boys largely because girls are adept at making friends and operating in the social realms (Underwood, 2004). Bullying then becomes a specific category of behavior associated with not only a particular developmental stage but also as gender-specific. By doing this, researchers locate bullying as conditioned by girls’ inherent reluctance to use physical violence, and their purported skill at inter-personal relations. However, other theorists (Ringrose, 2008) identify “complex power relationships [that] shape girls’ relationships and their conflicts (p. 512), and these conflicts are often predicated on gender and sexuality as the instigating factor. As she argues, much of what has come to be labeled as bullying among young women results from the “heterosexual matrix...through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized” (p. 511). When girls are in conflict, such fights escalate due to “heterosexualized competition” (p. 519) based on what girls see as incursions on their territory as it relates to social status and relationships with boys. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that while some researchers see adolescent females as bullies who operate through a fixed gender, other theorists see bullying and harassment as part of the same phenomena and resulting from rigid boundaries of what gender actually is.

### **Dominance Theory**

Whatever its causes, Pellegrini and Long (2002) argue that bullying and relational aggression are tools used to achieve a more important end: dominant status in the social

group. From this standpoint, bullying and relational aggression are understandable, and perhaps foregone conclusions in social relationships, when one takes into account this idea of dominance theory, which postulates that people will use whatever they have at their disposal including positive and negative social interactions to gain what they truly desire, which is dominance in the respective peer group. With this theory, Pellegrini and Long (2002) account for the reasons for increased bullying at specific ages and school settings: as peer groups shift and change, dominance must be asserted over and over again, no matter the cost. In their research and that conducted by Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan (1992) early adolescence is a particularly fraught time. At this age, children face a number of physiological, psychological, and social challenges, and often leave an elementary school for a new school setting in a middle or junior high school. At the very same time that friendships take on more significance as early adolescents start to initiate independence from parents, they are at a new school where they must negotiate social status.

### Shame

These processes of dominance and aggression are predicated on an aspect of social relations that makes us human and helps in one's development as a responsible social being: shame. All of us experience shame, an emotion that has been described as "self-conscious" because it allows us to understand who we are (Lewis, 1995; Teroni and Deonna, 2008). Shame allows an individual to understand herself especially in relation to the beliefs and standards one holds as important. Shame, then, mediates our self in relation to others and helps a person consider who one is and how one is seen not only by one's self but also by others. Thus, feelings of shame and humiliation have a profound

affect on one's self-definition and feelings of worth. If shame provides an important mechanism for developing an awareness of one's self in relation to others, it also provides a mechanism to control behavior. Relational aggression manipulates one's social relations by the uses of gossip and ostracism, so a girl will feel like she does not belong. By defining a girl as unworthy or distasteful in some way, she is shamed out of social relations and into outsider status. Girls, socialized to be adept at crafting and maintaining friendships and other social relationships, are adept at this aspect of relational aggression. However, shame also becomes an important tool for punishment and discipline in order not only to teach people how to become socially responsible because it can be operationalized as part of relationships between people to articulate norms and social mores. Thus, this interplay between people causes them to be categorized as within social boundaries or aberrant.

### **Peer Relationships**

Middle school girls are poised to face a number of conflicting developmental tasks, including how to emerge from childhood and begin to find a place in the world as an independent adult. In doing so, personal relationships take on key importance at this age as one way to understand and determine not just who one is friends with, but who one is as a person (Underwood, 2004). If we think of identity as a "kind of person" who "acts and interacts in a given context," then we will understand identity both as a performance and one that is socially mediated (Gee, 2000, p. 99). In one's social relationships then status, or one's position within and even across social groups in a given context, becomes a key feature of not only who one is, but how one experiences and understands one's worth. For girls, their status is often determined by how popular they are with boys

(Eliasson, Isaksson, and Laflamme, 2007; Duncan and Owen, 2011). This popularity in turn allows one to be accepted, or not, by both genders through “complex and elaborate processes, constantly under review, policed, and renegotiated by students both in school contexts and beyond” (Warrington and Younger, 2010, p. 154). These processes stratify personal choices into socially accepted or rejected behavior, which then construct how girls are positioned and how they feel about themselves. The ability to determine who is in and who is out in a peer group creates an intense feeling of one’s power through two mechanisms: first, a girl has the power to create peer groups that others want to join, and second a girl has the power to sanction any girl who has broken important social codes in that group (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, 2007; Duncan and Owens, 2011). Being able to judge or label another girl becomes then far less about that girl and far more about one’s desire to feel dominant as Pellegrini and Long (2002) have argued. But one must be able to position one’s self as the arbiter of what is acceptable and what is not. Thus, girls must be positioned in some hierarchal way that creates a sense of what is acceptable: standards that can allow for judgment to take place, standards that allow those who judge the fuel for their power (Nation, 2008; Duncan and Owens, 2011).

Most often girls are judged related to physical appearance and their sexuality, which becomes a way to “other” girls even among girls who know each other and are friends (Eliasson, Isaksson, and Laflamme, 2007; Ringrose and Renold 2010). This process of being seen and judged continues to create for girls a sense that “everyone was watching each other, of being on display and constantly judged, but being unable to conform to what was expected” (Warrington and Yonger, 2010, p. 158). This watchfulness functions in conjunction with what has come to be described in the

literature as well as the mainstream media as “meanness” (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, 2007; Ringrose, 2007), but is more clearly understood as relational aggression. While this aggression can take a variety of forms, it is most often displayed through verbal abuse, the spreading of rumors, and ongoing fights or conflicts between girls. Such verbal abuse functions in a number of ways: One’s own power is defined and the sexual behavior and sexuality of another is regulated.

Words can be used to set boundaries for acceptable behavior in the arenas of sexuality and gender (Eliasson, Isaksson, Laflamme, 2007). One of the most powerful words, and perhaps one of the most commonly used to legislate the behavior of girls because of the intersection between relational aggression and adolescent sexual development is the word slut (or whore), which “even if actual use of the word is not so common, the risk of being called a ‘whore’ is present and sufficiently manifest for girls to adopt strategies to avoid it” (Eliasson, Isaksson, and Laflamme, 2007, p. 589). But how this label is used, against whom, and when remains seemingly arbitrary and perhaps far less about the sexual choices of a girl and far more about those who seek power and popularity (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, 2007).

Girls then use what they have at their disposal – words and the ability to control how others think about a person – in order to gain power, which is often elusive to early adolescents, but in particular to girls. Girls then are able to tap into and manipulate peer networks in order to hurt not only the other person’s feelings but also to place them outside of such groups of friends, leading to feelings of unworthiness and social isolation (Warrington and Younger, 2010). For those who have been attacked, bullied, or gossiped about, few are willing or able to stand up for one’s self because of their young age and

because standing up against a group of people can be daunting and intimidating especially when done in public for an age group where social acceptance is so vital and also because the sense of shame is so acute (Ringrose and Renold, 2010).

### **Female Sexuality**

In many ways, sexual development and exploration remains such a fraught experience for adolescent females because of the conflicting message they receive from adults, both within schools and within the larger American society. On the one hand, adults are uncomfortable thinking about sexuality and adolescents because of their own discomfort with sex, their discomfort toward young people making sexual choices and becoming sexually active, and the adults own repression of their awareness of adolescents as sexual beings (Tolman, 1994). Because of this ongoing discomfort, girls and their bodies are put “under surveillance and silenced in schools” by adults (Tolman, 1994). At the same time, young women pick up and operationalize such repressions, but in the service of power relations. At the same time, contemporary society has commodified sexuality, especially that of the young, to sell any number of products or create films and television shows. These messages then place one’s sexuality at the core of how to achieve social status among peers and with boys at the same time that sexuality is constructed as a behavior that can lead to punishment and exclusion.

Girls then face an ongoing conflict between their own sexual desire, which is age appropriate and part of being human and encouraged by media, at the same time that their success in relationships and their social worlds pressures them to deny and repress any aspect of that desire (Tolman, 1994). But this repression flies in the face of the key role sexual agency plays in human development (Tolman, 2006). Tolman’s conception of

“sexual agency” is similar to the definition articulated by Chambers, Tincknell, and Van Loon (2004) as one’s “entitlement to sexuality” and one’s “owning and controlling of sexual power and agency” (p. 72). Thus, making decisions about and engaging in sex are often seen as a normative way to explore one’s decision-making and sexuality.

But this encouraged sexuality is not necessarily liberating for girls since it positions them as objects locked inside the male gaze as well as conscripted into an assumed, compulsory heterosexuality (Tolman, 2006). As they are encouraged to be sexual and respond not only to a boy’s advances but to also allow their bodies to be judged by other people as pleasing and acceptable or not, girls are also taught through hegemonic ideals of what it means to be a woman to police not only their bodies but also their own feelings (Tolman, 2006). They must learn to be pleasing but never to initiate a search for their own pleasure, to be pleasing but to not enjoy experiences that bring pleasure to them. Their choices to act on their sexual pleasure, to live as fully sexual beings, can and do provide the opening that allows other girls and boys to label them as slut or whore punishing them for giving in to feelings that are now labeled as bad (Rahimi, 2009).

Female sexuality remains a contested arena for how to empower girls, largely because the debate over what it means to be empowered remains undefinable because women still struggle to achieve equal status in society. Debates on how to define empowerment have outlined its categorization as either subjective and internal or objective and internal (Peterson 2010) at the same time that it has been defined as “mastery or control” (Bay-Cheng, Lewis, Stewart, and Malley, 2006, p. 74). But the ability to define empowerment raises its own paradox because to claim one is empowered

or powerful means to identify someone else as disempowered or weak (Bay-Cheng, Lewis, Stewart, and Malley, 2006, p. 74). As Peterson (2010) argues, being able to make choices about one's sexuality including acting on one's desire is a key way to feel empowered, allowing access not only to what one wants but to feelings of self-confidence in making life choices and living with the consequences. In this view, sexuality is less about empowerment and far more about "sexual self-efficacy," and one that is on a continuum of needs related to accessing sex education, resisting normative sexual definitions, and decision-making around sex (Peterson, 2010). However, the line between empowerment and objectification is hard to affix. Having girls initiate sexual intimacy with a partner may seem liberatory, but given the complex ways American culture embodies sex, and the varying ways adolescent boys are also positioned around sex, may in fact not empower girls but trap them in what looks like empowerment but is really still sexuality for the pleasure of others (Lamb, 2010). This view articulates a "self-sexualization," which reifies a commodified female sexuality, which reflects a dilemma not only for adolescents but for women as well (Peterson, 2010).

Choices between who is acceptable or not reinforce rigid ideas about female sexuality and gender in ways that produce a sense of internal conflict and confusion for girls. On the one hand, girls must balance "doing heterosexuality with not being too forward" because they must enact what it means to be heterosexual to engage with expectations for their sexuality at the same time that they must not act on that sexuality (Read, Francis, and Skelton, 2011, p. 178). This sense of conflict between expectations and desire creates then a dilemma that girls often resolve by projecting their own sexual feelings, their sense of internal shame at their desires, onto other girls who can then be



excluded and shamed for their perceived “bad” behavior (Read, Francis, and Skelton, 2011). Thus, girls are punishing themselves nearly as much as they seem to be punishing the other girl.

The work of female development around both sexuality and gender identity positions women between socially constructed ideals of womanhood and femininity and the actual lives they lead, but such constructions are impossible for women and girls to achieve creating a “post feminist masquerade” where by women must balance their working lives with dominant standards for physical beauty (Read, Francis, and Skelton, 2011, p. 173). For girls, learning how this functions begins early, often in middle school, when girls are pushed to excel at academics and sports while still being physically pleasing to boys and socially acceptable to all of their peers.

### **Gender**

Butler’s theories on gender (1988; 2004) are particularly illustrative of the ways gender is produced in order to make both it and heterosexuality appear as givens. As she explains, gender is something one does, and one does or performs gender so that it fits with the “sanctions and proscriptions” of others (Butler, 1988, p. 525.) She extends this theory to explain that gender’s performative quality means that, like many performances, it depends on an audience. Thus, one’s performance of gender will be evaluated by others as either conforming to or contesting expectations of what it means to be male or female (p. 527). Drawing upon the work of Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, Butler (1988) explores the ways the body in fact is not merely a gender, but is in fact an embodiment of cultural expectations of what it means to be gendered, to be female (p. 519). This sense of instability around gender becomes so threatening that rigid conformity to what it means

to be female and feminine must not only be enacted but any infraction to these expectations must be met with fierce and resounding disapproval (Duncan and Owens, 2011). Additionally, questions about gender, femininity, and sexuality coalesce into powerful tools for domination in peer groups and provide ammunition for the girl who seeks dominance in a peer group, but will do so in what seem like socially acceptable ways for a girl (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Crick, Casas, and Nelson, 2002; Pellegrini and Long, 2002).

Such disapproval becomes part of the relational interactions between peers, an aggression that for girls has often been ignored and continues to be misunderstood (Ringrose and Renold, 2010). If as Besag (2006) argues girls are bullies and their fights are not insignificant arguments that can be easily placated and ignored, then one must consider the damaging and long-lasting effects of such bullying and cruelty (Crick, Casas, and Nelson, 2002; Gruber and Fineran, 2007; Crick, Ostrov, and Nick, 2006). Such meanness is often hard to notice by adults since it has been described as both “relational” and “indirect” in that girls specifically want to harm others, their self-confidence or friendships, but will do so only when they can avoid direct confrontations with their target (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspect, and Kaukianinan, 1991; Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz, 2007). Ringrose (2007) argues that by focusing on girls’ behaviors and labeling them in ways that appear definitive provide adults the ability to understand and respond to these behaviors. However, these attempts at categorization merely pathologize girls and objectify them as problems, not the complex human beings their behavior actually suggests.

## Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature, a phenomenon of the twentieth century that rose to prominence following World War II, owes its existence in large measure to the concurrent construction of the developmental period of life we now know as adolescence (Trites 2000; Lesko 2001). According to Trites, the American Library Association defines such literature as follows: “‘Books Written Specifically for Adolescents’, ‘Books Written For General Trade Market Which Have Adolescent Heroes or Heroines,’ and ‘General Books of Interest to Young adults’” (p. 7). Bullying, relational aggression, and negotiating power relations as described previously in the literature review have become fodder for the young adult Literature genre largely because of the “very determined way that YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual rather than focusing on Self and self-discovery as children’s literature does” (Trites, 2000, p. 20). Numerous authors in the genre have always taken up this interest in social relations and the individual, for example Robert Cormier’s (1974) *The Chocolate War*, which is considered by many the first novel about bullying as we have come to understand it (Lopes-Roper, 2012). Now, however, authors have turned their attention to the ways girls seek to understand themselves and negotiate their friendships and romantic relationships in the context of bullying. As Trites argues, the exploration of relationships in YA literature not only demonstrates “the fluid ways that the individual negotiates with his or her society” but also “the ways adolescents’ power is simultaneously acknowledge and denied, engaged and disengaged” (p. 6). This fluidity underscores “power [as] a force that operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature; teenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books” (p. 7).

Power relations are thus an important feature of YA novels since the genre's inception, but today's titles increasingly reflect an engagement with young women, female sexuality, and power, issues that have become increasingly part of conversations in the real world among parents, educators, researchers, and girls themselves.

YA novels are then artifacts "of popular culture" and as such allow for an analysis of "both the rhetorical strategies of the text and the audience to whom these strategies are directed" (Ross, 1985, p. 189). One of the key strategies of any author who wants people to read his or her novel is the relationship that develops between a reader and the narrator, who in most YA realistic novels is also the protagonist. A level of intimacy develops between such a narrator and the reader, a relationship that is vital "in YA realism, [because] the narrative method is a means of drawing the reader into the story and controlling the distance between the reader and the story told" (Ross, 1985, p. 182). If this relationship is the primary draw for a reader into the fictional world of the novel, it also provides another vital function in the purpose of such novels: "the relationship between the narrator and the implied reader often proves to be the crucible in which ideology is smelted...because the source of narrative authority in a text can reflect much about the text's ideology" (Trites, 2000, p. 73). These ideologies have one source: adult authors who embody "competing influences of capital and parental/authoritative concern that motivate and inform the production of young adult literature" and cannot help but locate such influences in their work (Pattee, 2004, p. 245).

While YA literature takes as its subjects and thematic focus adolescents, their social worlds, and experiences the guiding hand of these novels is always that of an adult. Adults conceive and write the novels; adults act as gatekeepers as agents and editors in

publishing houses; and adults determine what books fill shelves in bookstores, libraries, and classrooms (Trites, 2001; Kokkola, 2013). YA literature then cannot help but act “as ideological vehicles, [serving] the interests of adults who wish to maintain or encourage a positive image of society that can be [embodied] in the next generation of young people” (Pattee, 2004, p. 245). These cultural artifacts that transmit cues for behavior and act as socializing agents because they take up and reify hegemonic discourses of what it means to be an adolescent and what it means to be an adult (Trites, 2000; Pattee, 2004; Kokkola, 2009).

Nowhere is this socializing function more apparent and more fraught for adolescents than when it comes to sexuality. As previously addressed, YA realistic fiction takes as its central theme the crisis that allows for a “transition from innocence to experience” (Ross, 1985, p. 184), and these crises often involve sexuality (Trites, 2000; Kokkola, 2009; Younger, 2009; Tribunella, 2010; Lewis and Durand, 2014). But Trites (2000) cautions “parents and teachers and librarians and literary critics [to] take serious looks at the ideological intent of validating teenagers’ self assurance about human sexuality” because these “novels...have at best a conflicting ideology and at worst a repressive ideology that reflects and perpetuates Western culture’s confused sexual mores” (p. 95). If adolescent readers delve into texts that have such conflicting messages and mores embedded in narrative structure, point of view, and other genre conventions, most readers would not think to adopt a critical approach to reading novels that seem to replicate the real world because these texts are reify conflicting messages and mores that the reader will find familiar.

### **Power, Discourse, and Feminist Poststructuralism**

A significant component of this dissertation is the analysis of power both as narrative element in the novels under study and as an ideology at work in the real world, which necessitates an understanding of how power will be theorized and analyzed in this study. In defining power, one must look to Foucault (1981) who articulates power as “force relations [that] form a chain or system...the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect...embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies” (qtd. in Weedon, p. 110). These strategies to which Foucault refers and the ways that they are embodied in what Foucault calls “relations of power” (qtd. in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 490) are centered on the ways people negotiate power in their relationships.

Power is not something done to people by outside forces, but rather power is produced as we relate to one another. As such, these “relations of power” are operationalized in how behavior and bodies are controlled: “Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). This gaze causes a feeling of “permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” because “the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; ...the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault, 1995, p. 201). Power then becomes not an instrument of repression from without, but is an internalized state of being by which people understand they must conform or they will be punished by some mechanism of society. Power then is not something that rests within

an individual but circulates among people and through society in complicated ways. Power remains something we all participate in and are all affected by. While such definitions of power focus on the interplay between people and resulting internal conflicts, this is not to say that power does not have real, material effects in the world. As seen in each of these novels and the real life examples of bullying and harassment that have led to depression, anxiety, and suicide, power relations have serious and lasting consequences in people's lives.

Such a complicated interplay between people, power, and sanction will be identified and analyzed in each of the novels especially as it relates to how the female main characters understand their subject positions as victim, victimizer, and agentive self. Foucault's theories on power are reinforced by his theories on discourse and its relation to power. Discourse for Foucault and in this dissertation focuses on its abilities to "[transmit] and [produce] power; ...[reinforce] it but also undermine and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, 1982, p. 101).

In order to fully explicate how power works in particular for female subjects, both in fictional and real worlds, and how it can be thwarted, poststructuralism provides a "useful, productive framework for understanding the mechanisms of power in our society and the possibilities of change" (p. 10). This change becomes possible because poststructuralism is a "theory of relation between language, subjectivity, social organization, and power" (Weedon, 1997, p. 12) and takes as a fundamental principle that "subjectivity is neither unified nor fixed and is in fact [constructed] ...in ways that are socially specific" through language (p. 21). The work of this dissertation is to locate in each of the novels under study the ways language and ideology construct subjective

positions both for fictional female main characters as well as the readers hailed into those subject positions through the modes of address utilized by each author (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22). For these novels and this dissertation, feminist poststructuralism provides a keen analytic lens because this theory sees the subject as being “precarious, contradictory, and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32) rather than humanism’s theory of the fixed, unitary self (St. Pierre, 2000). This approach is particularly resonant given the corpus of the novels being analyzed because “poststructuralist feminism requires attention to historical specificity in the production for women, of subject positions and modes of femininity and their place in the overall network of social power relations” (Weedon, p. 131). In order to complete this analysis of narratives and discourses in each novel, feminist critical discourse analysis will be utilized as a theoretical framework.

### **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

Feminist critical discourse analysis (feminist CDA) according to Lazar (2007) “[aims] is to show...the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle ways in which taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, and negotiated” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). This approach provides a mechanism to analyze each novel in this study in terms of the modes of address as functions both of the narrative and larger social discourses around adolescents, women, sexuality, and power. If, as feminist CDA argues, “discourse” can be seen “as a site of struggle,” it may provide acute insights into the ways conflicts show themselves in the novels; conflict that demonstrate both normalizing discourses about how adolescents females behave, or that may reveal the ways “hegemonic power relations...[produce] and



[sustain]” ideologies about adolescent women, sexuality, and power (Lazar, 2007, p. 144). Thus, the “gendered nature of social actions” throughout these novels becomes useful in understanding their employment within the narrative both as “interpretive category and social actions” as the way power operates in society and between people (Lazar, 2007, p. 144). Feminist CDA allows this dissertation to forefront the “mobilizing [of] theory to create social awareness” (Lazar, 2007, p. 145), which is part of the focus of this project. The inclusion of possible social change in this dissertation project becomes important because the origins of this work are actual adolescent females whose experiences initiated my research into discourses around female sexuality and power. If, as Weedon (1997) argues, poststructural feminism provides “an understanding of how discourses of biological sexual difference are mobilized...[as] the first stage in intervening in order to initiate change,” this dissertation provides an important way to articulate such discourses at work in fictional narratives and in the lives of real adolescent women (p. 131).

In order to meet such a charge, this dissertation analyzes seven young adult novels that employ as part of the narratives issues of female sexuality, peer relations among adolescent girls, bullying, and power. This research addresses power relations within each novel as well as the reasons for and consequences of the bullying and marginalizing of each female protagonist due to her sexuality, female body, sexual choices, or sexual situations. In addition, as a way to further understand the consequences of bullying, this dissertation examines how the female characters negotiate and re-negotiate power relations, especially the protagonists’ uses of counter-narratives to respond to and disrupt the bullying situation. Finally, the analysis explores how these texts and these authors actually shape and contribute to contemporary discourses of bullying, female sexuality,

and possibilities for disruption for actual adolescent girls. An analysis of each text demonstrates how the authors use bullying as a metonym for “relations of power” between female characters and discourses around female sexuality, so that bullying becomes a stand in for the issue actually being represented.

This dissertation further analyzes using feminist critical discourse analysis the modes of address, as described in the Introduction and will be explained in further detail in the Methodology Chapter, used by the authors to hail readers into relationship with their female main characters, and by doing so illustrates the discourses and ideologies around adolescent females, sexuality, and power that are familiar to readers because they are so prevalent. This dissertation responds to Stephens’s (1992) call that researchers must “bring together into one methodology the elements of narrative theory, critical linguistics, and a concern with ideology and subjectivity” in order to “examine fiction written for children” (p. 5). While other theorists (Stephens, 1992; Talbot, 1995; Boardman, 1994; Talbot, 2010) have done so, this dissertation is unique in its use of feminist critical discourse analysis, the breadth of the texts under study as well as the analysis of texts and discourses, and the centrality of power in this analysis. Through the analysis of the modes of address at work in each novel, this dissertation is also unique in that its work integrates literary analysis with an emancipatory project for the understanding of how readers might take up, use, and resist such texts in the same way they might take up, use, and resists discourses on their subjectivity as adolescents and young women.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

*"If one person makes a mistake, they're bad, they're not a good friend. They should not be friends with them. They're bad to be with." ~ Melanie*

#### Theoretical Framework

I use a feminist poststructural theoretical approach in order to undertake a narrative and discourse analysis of seven YA novels to investigate how these novels take up, construct, and counter discourses of female sexuality and power relations. This approach is particularly apt given young adult literature's representations of the individual and the society in which she lives. Poststructural feminism will allow for an explication of the female protagonists as "socially constructed in discursive practice" but "also [as] a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and is able to choose from the options available" (Weedon, 1997, p. 121). This aspect of reflection is especially integral to each of the novels previously discussed as reflection and change are fundamental parts of any novel, and are used by these authors to offer new understandings and meanings for each protagonist of her situation. This quality of reflection within fiction is in line with "poststructuralism's double move in the construction of subjectivity: a subject that exhibits agency as it constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices and a subject that, at the same time, is subjected, forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). In these novels, these discourses and practices revolve largely around sexuality because as Foucault has argued "sexuality as a historical construct ... is the site of 'an especially dense transfer point for relations of power'" (qtd.

in Weedon, 1997, p. 120). Thus, feminist poststructuralists argue sexuality, and in particular female sexuality, becomes not only a site of power relations but posits female sexuality and the female body under the control of others and never fully belonging to a young woman alone. While such conflicts ensnare these female protagonists in alienation from family, friends, and themselves, poststructuralism offers another perspective on these conflicts as a recognition not only of how we are constrained but also how we might resist: “We are not born free; we are born into relations of power from which we cannot escape. Sawicki (1991) takes this to the personal level and explains ‘freedom does not basically lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified’ (p. 27)” (qtd. in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 492). Such resistances become possible through the very discursive practices that constrain us because “...language which enables us to think, speak, and give meaning to the world around us” (Weedon, 1997, p. 31) is also the path for us to give meaning to the world within us, a sense of who we can be. Each of the novels in this study enact this complicated interplay between subject position, social practices, and power within the lives of young women in the fictive world and as literary texts in the real world.

Because this research seeks to analyze these texts *and* their contexts, feminist critical discourse analysis (feminist CDA) will be used to analyze these novels. While other researchers have employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) in studies of critical literacy and YA fiction with adolescent readers (Bean and Moni, 2003; Glenn, 2008), this dissertation uses feminist Critical discourse analysis as articulated by Lazar (2007) in order to analyze the texts as discursive products and as social practices. As Lazar (2007)

explains, feminist CDA “aims to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining gendered social arrangements” (p. 141) and takes as its main project the “demystifying [of] the interrelationships of gender, power, and ideology in discourse...applicable to texts *and* talk” (p. 144). Lazar’s (2007) articulation of the central work of feminist CDA frames the task I have set for myself in this dissertation, because this project also seeks to “examine how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter-) resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices” (p. 149).

This approach can be brought to bear on the analysis of these novels because this dissertation “[brings] the analysis of gender closer to practice, by looking at the linguistic and discursive construction of specific texts and contexts” (Lehtonen, 2007, p. 3). This double-focus highlights the need to complete both a literary and discourse analysis of these seven novels because narrative structure and ideology are woven together in cultural products like fictive texts. This project thus employs a “methodology of narrative analysis” (Lehtonen, 2007, p. 7), by which I will analyze each novel for “gender in the text from narrative and discursive points of view” (Lehtonen, 2007, p. 8), but I also “examine the novels in their socio-historical context,” an approach which is necessitated by the ways YA novels, particularly YA realism, are texts created in response to particular social practices and historical moments (Lehtonen, 2007, p. 9). Feminist CDA provides for the “study of texts and talk equally,” in order to “demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power, and ideology” (Lazar, 2007, p. 144), which the focus of my project.

In order to employ a feminist critical discourse analysis within a narrative literary analysis, a conceptual tool focused on the relationship between reader, text, and discourses will be borrowed from film and media studies: modes of address (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22). This analytic tool, similar to Booth's (1961) concept of the "implied reader," allows for an exploration of the discourses inherent in each text and how authors use discourses that are familiar to readers as a way to invite readers into a close relationship with the characters. This relationship and the willingness of a reader to identify so deeply with characters and their experiences are predicated on the employment of "subject positions – ways of being an individual – and the values inherent in them" (Weedon, 1997, p. 3). These discourses presuppose much about who a potential reader is while also offering these "subject positions," such as adolescent or girl or bully, that the reader might take up during the reading experience because written texts, like films, are created for "intended and imagined audiences," with the expectation that "the viewer must enter into a particular relationship with the film's story and image system" in order to take up and understand the creative work, be it a written or visual text (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 23). Thus, texts "[hail] a viewer into a position from which to read" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 25) through the use of familiar images and ideas that reflect the reader's experiences and ideologies they recognize from the real world. Through an analytic tool like modes of address, I will investigate two key questions regarding the interplay between readers, texts, and discourses: "Who does this [book] think you are, or want you to be" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 29). By doing so, this study will identify what one "must be able to adopt—if only imaginatively and temporarily" in order to read and understand the seven novels under study, and by doing so identify overtly "the social, political, and economic interests

that are the conditions for the knowledge they construct” when readers enter the fictional realm of these particular novels (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 25). This analysis then extends to what these text-based subject positions suggest about the subject positions afforded young women in their actual lives in the real world and the reasons such discourses are used in works of fiction.

In addition to completing a feminist critical discourse analysis of these texts, I will not lose sight of their primary purpose as examples of young adult literature. In order to fully understand both the “texts and contexts” (Lazar, 2007, p. 149), also undertake a limited literary analysis of each novel. In doing so, I analyze how each author uses narrative elements, including characters, plot, and setting, in order to understand the novel as a literary work as well as how the author has created a meaningful experience for readers. This focus on “text and context” will allow me to analyze how authors use genre conventions as well as ideologies to construct meaning for readers.

This dissertation is very much an emancipatory project and as such knowingly takes up modes of address specifically because it is “not a neutral concept in film analysis,” but provides a tool to explore, as this dissertation does with YA novels, “how filmmaking and film viewing get caught up in larger social dynamics and power relations” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 28), especially as this inter-relationship figures for young female readers. The issues I focus on in this dissertation, the questions posed, and texts analyzed have one central “aim...to show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted and gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). In order to achieve that goal, I

will this discuss not only these discourses but also how we all – teachers, adults, young people – can learn to read critically and respond in our thoughts, writing, actions, and lives to such discourses and by doing so choose to accept, resist, or recast them and our world.

My focus on fiction is a recognition of fiction's power because narrative remains "the form in which we receive reality...[because] stories are how the world is presented to us," which allows readers to see "reality [which] comes to us in the shape of stories" (Talbot, 1995, p. 5). Fiction's import provides readers with more than just a way to "receive reality" but also "fictional narratives can be seen as imaginary resolutions to real contradictions" (Talbot, 1995, p. 6). Thus, novels and the act of reading allow readers an experience that entertains but also educates about much more than literary techniques and tropes; novels teach us about the world we live in and the ways human beings inhabit that world, and so an understanding of the interactions between reader, text, author, and ideology center this dissertation project.

But what do I mean by text, and how do I take up the idea of discourse? In this dissertation, text is defined as an "observable product of interaction: a cultural object," and in the case of this dissertation, all of the texts are YA novels, cultural objects written about and marketed to adolescents by adults (Talbot, 1995, p. 24). At the same time that I analyze these novels as works of literature, I also analyze them as examples of discourse, or embodying a "process of interaction: [as] cultural activity" (Talbot, 1995, p. 24). For Talbot and from my perspective, the permeability of the two provides the impetus for this project's analysis of these novels both intra- and inter-textually. Thus, this dissertation examines the novels to make apparent the ways "fiction texts are part of a kind of



discourse, which like all discourse, takes place under specific conditions of production and consumption and both enables and constrains the people involved in it” (Talbot, 1995, p. 24). A discourse is more clearly understood, as defined by Hollway, as “systems of statements that cohere around common meanings and values...[a] product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual’s set of ideas” (qtd. in Gavey, 1997, p. 53). An important distinction must be made here between what Gee (2015) has termed the “big D Discourses” as they relate to “our ever multiple identities,” and the “little d discourses” of language in use because I will explore both discourse as ideology and discourse as language practice in this dissertation (p. 5). However, I use the term discourse following Holloway’s definition and Gee’s (2015) description of discourse as “ways of behaving [and] interacting” (p. 4) because I am most interested in how, as he goes on to argue “each Discourse incorporates taken-for-granted and tacit ‘theories’ about what counts as a ‘normal’ person and the ‘right’ ways to think, feel, behave” (p. 4). This dissertation will identify and investigate the discourses inherent in each novel as part of the narrative structure of the text as well as a reflection of the “powers and practices” that led to its “production and consumption” and the ramifications of this text as literary work and embodiment of social practices and ideologies as they relate to power, young women, and female sexuality.

## **Methods**

### **Text Selection**

Because one of the purposes of this dissertation is to better understand adolescent girls and their lives, I began my text selection of young adult novels by talking with my students. As a practicing 7<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts teacher, I have many

opportunities to talk with students about books, in addition to other forms of media. In several conversations, I asked my students about the books they were reading, their assessment of those books, and how they make their own text selections for personal reading. I spoke with both male and female students; however, it became clear quite quickly that my male students do not pick novels to read with female main characters for personal reading, except in the case of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series, which are both popular and have been made into equally popular films. These conversations provided me with insights into how young people select books to read including both fiction and non-fiction; which books are most popular at present; and the sorts of topics students are interested in reading about. Based on this information, I began to question privately how context figures into choices about reading material: Are adolescents currently so interested in dystopian fiction, or is dystopian fiction heavily marketed to teens through a variety of media? What books are being published and marketed, and thus do the gatekeepers of the publishing world, including agents and editors, have a large role in determining what is being read? Are boys less likely to read about female characters because of the content of such books, or do cultural expectations around gender, sexuality, and power preclude young men from reading about female main characters? When young women select books, why do they select books about female characters? Are their choices simply about wanting to read about character like them, or are other cultural forces in play? More important, what are and what do young people do with the discourses at work in the texts they read? This complicated interplay between text, message, reader, and contexts is at the heart of this dissertation and the implications I will discuss for young people and the adults who work with them – teachers, parents,

authors, and other adult gatekeepers in American society who influence what young people read, how they read, and for what purposes.

Once I had the insights of my students in mind, I needed to narrow my search to only those works of fiction that included bullying as part of the plot. In order to do that, I reviewed a Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) online list of such novels. With this list in hand, I then selected 12 titles. Once I had identified 12 possible texts, I did research on each novel by reading a synopsis of the book and reader responses via Amazon.com and Goodreads.com. In addition, I visited my local Barnes and Noble store to see how the texts were positioned on shelves and displays for sale. I also informally interviewed an in-store salesperson about each title on my list and his thoughts from a marketing perspective on those I had selected and adolescent consumers' interest in each title. Additionally, I researched each author via their websites; read reviews of each book on personal blogs and news sources like *The New York Times*; and if any book had other media produced in support of the book or to market either the book or another form of the book (blogs, websites, books being produced as films) I also reviewed these sources.

I became particularly interested in these novels because many of them employed multiliterate and multimodal practices as part of the narrative arc and character development. I wanted to consider how and why the authors employed these communicative practices (speaking to a public audience; writing a journal; creating a multi-media project; and using various media including email, texts, and cassette tapes) as ways to further the narrative but also to produce certain effects within the novels related to agency and power relations between female main characters and other

characters in the contexts of bullying and harassment. My interest in the inclusion of these communicative forms connects with my work as an English teacher in addition to my identity as a writer. For the purposes of this dissertation, I include an analysis of these communicative projects within the text as they relate to issues of agency, power, and the idea of counter-narratives.

After gathering this information and reflecting on my prior research interests, I selected the seven novels described below. Their inclusion resulted because their plots were focused on bullying, harassment, female sexuality, and power relations between female adolescents.

### **Novels in the Study**

The novels selected for this study were published between 2002 and 2014, and thus provide insights into the kinds of books adolescent readers will find on bookstore or library shelves. These books, as has been argued previously, constitute a corpus of YA problem novels focused on bullying (Trites, 2000). However, I argue in this dissertation that the problem of bullying represented in these novels portray the impetus for this troubling social phenomenon as a problem of adolescence and female sexuality.

In *Story of A Girl* (Zarr, 2007), Deanna Lambert, a high school sophomore, struggles to live with the consequences of a sexual relationship she has shared with Tommy, a friend of her older brother, when she was still in middle school. Her involvement with this young man takes place prior to the novel's start; however, the plot is focused on the aftermath of her father finding her in a car engaged in a sex act with this boy. This novel, which was National Book Award Finalist in 2007, explores Deanna's resulting alienation from her father, who cannot forgive her sexual choices, and her peers

at school. Deanna takes up journal writing, following a teacher's insistence that such writing allows one a space to express one's self. Deanna's writing is a through line in the novel that reflects her attempts to deal with her changed position in her family, among her peers, and from herself, and eventually provides her with a reflective space to counter how she has been positioned by others, her own sense of shame, and her attempts at new understandings of her situation. This novel has also received recognition by the American Library Association (ALA) as a Best Book for Young adults (2007), and was optioned to be made into a film by the actress Kyra Sedgwick. While at this time the film has not been made, the potential impact of the film version of the novel was one reason for its inclusion. Most important, however, was this novel's focus on female adolescent sexuality, which becomes problematic both within the female main characters' social world and her family, which is a unique feature of the book for this study.

Writing is also used as a way to counter gossip and bullying in the novel *Sticks and Stones* (Goobie, 2002). In this novel, written as part of the Orca Recording book series published for reluctant readers, the female protagonist Jujube is the target of rumors and innuendo after a male peer brags about being sexually intimate with Jujube in a car during a school dance. These rumors also lead to alienation for Jujube until Carlos, a peer marginalized due to language and race, befriends her and opens her eyes to the plight of other female students at her school who have also been victimized. In order to resolve this situation, Jujube also takes up writing, but her writing is collaborative in nature and purposefully created for a public audience as she, Carlos, and the other victimized girls band together to counter how peers have labeled them as sluts at their school. Jujube and Carlos work together to create a piece of performance art as a project

in their English class while the other girls cover the school walls with posters echoing the themes of the project. This novel, although 13 years old, was important to include because of its subject matter directed at its target audience: reluctant readers.

The import of sharing one's version of events provides the narrative structure in the novel *13 Reasons Why* (Asher, 2011), but Hannah, the female protagonist in this novel, has committed suicide before the novel begins. However, she has found a way to tell her story through cassette recordings she has left behind strategically created for the people she holds responsible for her decision to end her life. In this novel, Clay, a male friend of the dead girl, foregrounds the sense of responsibility and shame she hoped her recordings would create as he listens to each cassette focused on another intended recipient of the recordings while also unveiling how each person's actions led to her death. In this novel, technology has made it possible for the dead female protagonist to speak from the grave and by doing so right the wrongs perpetrated against her. This novel, which was a *New York Times* bestseller, was honored by YALSA in 2008 in two categories (Audio Book for Young adults and Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers) and selected by the International Reading Association as a Young adult Choice book among other recognitions. Additionally, the author has used the book as a way to engage adolescents in conversations about bullying and suicide through his website and other social media as well as his 50 States Against Bullying Author Tour. This year-long event, which was ostensibly to engage middle and high school students in discussions about bullying prevention, also provided the author with a marketing platform for this and future books because it combined the traditional author book tour with an important social issue. This element of cultural impact led to the book's inclusion as did the

relationship between fiction and social issues, which are clearly taken up both in the world of the novel but also by the author in his real life and work.

Conflicts between girls who had been friends inform the narratives in the books *Some Girls Are* (Summers, 2009) and *Just Listen* (Dessen, 2008). In these novels, female protagonists suffer rape or attempted rape but rather than seen as victims by their peers, these episodes lead to their re-victimization by friends, in particular other female characters. The main characters face bullying and social ostracism as punishment because each incident of sexual violence in these novels positions these young women not as victims but as betrayers of their friends and peers' social codes. Each book takes very different approaches as the main characters respond to their treatment at the hands of former friends, and by doing so offer differing perspectives on how a young woman might respond to bullying by bullying or transforming herself and those around her in positive ways. In *Some Girls Are*, Regina, who had formerly been a reluctant bully as a part of the Fearsome Fivesome social clique, becomes so enraged by the level of harassment and physical violence targeted at her by her former friends that she uses the same modes to defend herself. For Annabel in *Just Listen* family issues leave her reluctant to even tell anyone about her rape. This disinclination paired with her own prior history as a reluctant bully prevent her from fighting back when she is humiliated or ostracized by former friends. In both novels, the female main characters find ways to resolve these situations. *Some Girls Are* was selected largely because of the level of physical violence used by the female characters. Such behavior, which is disturbing for a reader but also veers toward the hyperbolic, provided an important aspect that is often dismissed when researchers discuss girls and bullying: physical violence. Most studies

claim that girls use, as discussed in Chapter Two, relational aggression rather than actual physical assaults. This novel provides a counter to such claims. Additionally, this novel also has been well received by ALA and YALSA earning in 2011 and 2012 recognition as a Popular Paperback, Amazing Audio Book, Top 10 Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers, and Best Fiction for Young adults. *Just Listen*, also selected by the ALA as a Best Fiction book, was included here primarily because of the author Sarah Dessen. Dessen has published 12 books of YA fiction, centering on a female main character who faces some sort of trauma or serious event that leads her to question herself and her prior life.

*Before I Fall* (Oliver, 2010) takes up similar themes of bullying between girls and power relations, which are explored in the aftermath of a car accident. In this novel, the female main character Samantha is in a car crash at the beginning of the novel, but does not die immediately. Instead, she relives the last day of her life over and over until she has redeemed herself for the poor choices she has made previously. These choices largely revolve around her treatment of peers at her school, including in large measure Juliet for whom she has no real animus but targets her along with her circle of friends, who are popular girls at their high school. As Samantha reviews her life, she realizes that she will only find peace through her salvation of Juliet. This novel was included in this study because of this aspect of life and death, which picks up religious and fantasy themes as it explores bullying. This novel, another *New York Times* bestseller, has also received recognition by ALA/YALSA as a Best Fiction for Young adults selection as well as YALSA as a Teens' Top 10 choice in addition to numerous other commendations from booksellers and media outlets. In addition, the author Lauren Oliver has written a number



of books, including the popular YA dystopian *Delirium* series. *Before I Fall* also has been optioned to be made into a movie.

The final novel included in this study was actually published during my text selection process, but was immediately included due to its focus on bullying and power relations, but even more so due to the female main character and the novel's appropriation of the bullying and suicide of Phoebe Prince in Massachusetts. In the novel *Tease* (Marciel, 2014), the main character Sara faces legal consequences for the bullying and harassment she and her best friend perpetrate against Emma, the fictional stand-in for Prince. While several of the novels in this study address these issues from the perspective of a girl who admits to bullying peers, this novel portrays behavior that results in legal as well as ethical and social consequences. While all of the novels center on the real world issue of bullying, this novel follows closely the real life suicide of Phoebe Prince and the legal ramifications for those accused of bullying her.

Each of these novels provides instances of young woman using communicative practices, including speaking and writing, in order to counter what has been said about or done to them and by doing so purportedly provide themselves and other characters with the possibility of forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. Such reimagining and re-negotiating of power relations and thus one's understanding of agency and power have multiple consequences, but can offer insights into how power "operates within the subject and upon the subject in adolescent literature" (Trites, 2000, p. 7). Thus, given the content of these seven novels, they form the corpus for analysis in this research project.

## Textual Coding and Analysis

After identifying the novels for analysis, I read each text once because I wanted to find out what each novel was about and was open to the kind of reading experience I might have. This process worked in some ways because my first responses to the books were aesthetic: I liked certain books more; I found certain books disturbing; I rejoiced at some parts, and found some romantic elements memorable. However, I found reading the novels one after the other to be a somewhat depressing experience in the ways female friendships and women are positioned in these novels. I recognized and thought about my personal reactions and remained cognizant of them while I undertook the analytical work of this dissertation. While my personal reactions are not included in the dissertation I remained aware of them as I completed my analysis to separate how I felt from what I was analyzing and thinking about in the novels as much as possible. However, as with any qualitative research project, my identity as woman, feminist, teacher, and writer cannot be completely isolated from my work as researcher, so it must be acknowledged.

While my background includes training in literary analysis as an English teacher and a Master's in Fine Arts in Creative Writing, my most current educational experience has been as a doctoral student focused on qualitative research. My coursework led to the ethnographic project described in Chapter 1, so that my approach to the analysis of these novels includes the tools of an ethnographer. As I came to a second reading of the novels, I used the following questions articulated by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) to consider how to begin my analysis of each text as well as discourses across the texts: "What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish? How, exactly, do they do this? How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? What

assumptions are they making? What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes” (p. 146). Thus, I reread the novels looking to create and use initial codes based on this second reading of the novels with my prior research into the issues of bullying and girls as related in Chapters 1 and 2 in mind. These initial codes, which included bullying, sex or sexuality, friendships, and boys, then became a wider set of categories and initial codes: contexts (including school, family, extracurricular); roles (typically identified as bully, victim, bystander); bullying tactics (including relational aggression, shaming, social isolation, and physical violence); power and power relations; and responses/options for action. This open coding allowed me to target my second reading of the novels but not so much that I ignored issues because I was coding “any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest no matter how varied or disparate” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 143). At the same time, my second reading of the novels and my identification of these codes came as a result of the theoretical framework I had selected, feminist critical discourse analysis, because I was clear that an analysis of these novels must include a focus on the texts as works of literature *and* cultural products. In my second reading, I began to identify “textual representations of gendered social practices” (Lazar, 2007, p. 149), and the ways these “representations” played a role in the narrative structure. Thus, in my second reading a literary and discourse analysis solidified the codes I used.

By using these codes, I was able to analyze the ways these texts take up discourses on bullying, power, and female peer relationships and utilize them as features of a narrative. But this reading then provided me with “topics that [I] identified as of particular interest...to provide the major topics and themes” for my research, which

meant I would now come up with “focused codes” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 143) based on what I now understood to be at work in each novel and across the novels. This process made visible “new themes and topics and new relationships between them” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 161), which then led me to create a final set of codes that became: Main Character; Point of View; Setting; Race; Class; Resolutions; Predatory Boy/friend; The Other Boy; Mean but Powerful Best Friend; Not True Friendship; Weaker Girl/Victim; Main Character Not True Bully; Absent/Disengaged Parents; Ambivalent Attitude Toward Sex/Sexuality; Sexual Attitudes and Experiences; Bullying and Harassment; Death; and finally, Violence. While this list of codes is quite long, because my project includes an intra- and intertextual analysis of the bullying situation as described in these novels and the ways these novels are both literary texts and emblematic of cultural discourse, I kept a wide approach to what I chose to analyze.

With these focused codes I set out to complete my third reading of each novel. At this stage, I completed the process of “sorting and retrieving ...[and] physically grouping segments of the data on a theme in order to more easily explore their meanings” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995, p. 159). In order to do this, I created a two-column chart for each code and then assigned that code a specific color. On the chart, I took notes and copied quotations from each novel, including page number referents, in order to collect data from each novel. At the same time, I used colored sticky notes to mark the location in each novel where specific data was found. Once all of the novels had been coded and the data collected on the charts, which I completed by hand, I cut each category up, so that I could glue them onto heavy cardstock for durability and, more

important, to look across the novels at the data. I then had a stack of seven cards complete with data from each novel for that specific code or topic.

As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) explain, I needed to write “integrating memos which elaborate ideas and begin to link or tie codes and bits of data together” in order to complete “. . . a more sustained examination of a theme or issue by linking together a variety of discrete observations” (p. 162), and by doing so undertake “a process of creating what is there by constantly thinking about the import of previously recorded events and meanings” (p. 168). Thus, my analytical writing began with these memos, which allowed me to articulate for myself the connections and meanings I saw in the data, and by doing so began to theorize using feminist critical discourse analysis not only what I saw and what it meant, but how my data and observations engaged with other research on adolescents, power, sexuality, and young women. In writing these analytic memos, I began to “understand the complex workings of power and ideology” in each of these novels and began to identify in my analysis “how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or (counter) resisted” (Lazar, 2007, p. 149). This step in my analysis provided me with an important vantage point in identifying the modes of address utilized by each author as well as the relationship of these modes to ideologies at work in the real world.

These memos became the seed for each of my Findings chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) as well as each sub-section. In this way, I was able to couple my data with my analysis and locate both within larger academic and public discourses, which are detailed and explored in Chapters 1, 2, and 8. At this point, I realized that I needed to consider how these topics could be organized together into potential chapters. While all of these

topics are included as part of my findings in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, I had to decide how to construct those chapters. I resolved this challenge when I realized my coding had illustrated the modes of address within each novel. Given my theoretical framework, I decided to create findings chapters that broke out the modes of address into distinct units for analysis, and then use my analysis in each of those chapters and in Chapter 8 to weave these distinct, though related aspects of each novel, together in the conclusion and implications of my dissertation.

Once I had begun the process of writing the dissertation, I needed to develop a method for ongoing reading, note taking, and reflection in order to manage this recursive process of writing since my work necessitated a continual process of writing, revising, and rethinking in the context of my data and research. I created two notebooks divided and color coded as the data collection had been in order to keep notes organized as I was writing and to collect further research into theoretical and academic discourses on issues I was writing about, which allowed me a metacognitive space to hold my thinking as I was writing. These notebooks sat beside my computer and allowed me to brainstorm and sketch out ideas before and while refining them in the dissertation document.

At the same time, I began writing in another notebook, which was used as a research journal. I wrote in this notebook each day as I came to the task of dissertation writing, so that journal writing became my ritual to start each day's work. I detailed my plan for the day, noted my start time, wrote out a plan for the day's work, captured my frustrations, and included a section titled "Things I'm Thinking About," which allowed me to hold any ideas I had related to the dissertation, previous work, and ideas for future writing. As I am sure is common for others at work on a dissertation, these notebooks

kept my work focused but also provided me with a record of the intellectual and personal process I experienced in the moment.

### **Research Questions**

Using the approaches detailed in the previous sections of this chapter, this dissertation will address the following research questions:

- What subject positions do these novels offer to their readers? What discourses must readers take up to read and understand these novels?
- How do young women in these novels negotiate and renegotiate power relations? How do female protagonists resist the subject positions offered them and produce counter-narratives that allow them new subject positions and with what results?
- How are contemporary discourses of bullying, female sexuality, and power relations utilized, reified, and resisted in the fictional worlds of the novels?

With these questions in mind, I turn now to the findings and analysis of these seven YA novels, the female main characters, and the situations in which they find themselves as young women. In Chapter 4, I discuss the fictional worlds inhabited by the female main characters and how these worlds reflect discourses in the real world relating to race, class, family dynamics, and the American suburbs. In Chapter 5, I explore the representations of female friendships as well as examples of bullying, harassment, and power relations between female characters. In Chapter 6, I examine representations of romantic relationships and female sexuality portrayed in each novel. In Chapter 7, I tie these narrative elements together and explore the resolution of each novel because this element of fiction highlights an author's thematic intent.

## CHAPTER 4

### READING THE WORLD: CONSTRUCTING CONTEXTS

*“Everyone knows everyone’s business.” ~ Melanie*

When novelists set to the task of writing, their immediate thoughts turn to who will inhabit their fictional worlds and what events will take place. Character and plot are the driving forces in narrative, but of equal importance is where and when the story will unfold. This space where the story occurs is at once the creation of the author’s mind and at the same time is evocative of the real world in which readers live. Readers are thus invited to visit these imaginary spaces and can navigate this unfamiliar territory because a novel’s setting echoes and takes up common features of the actual world, and by doing so offers readers a way to think about both the fictional and real world. This bifurcated stance provides readers with a way of seeing into the novel and a way of seeing back out into their own lives. In the novels selected for this study, readers are invited into these fictional worlds by the main characters through the tales they tell, who they are, and the time and place in which they live. Thus, the novels locate their main characters in social and cultural contexts, much in the same way the lived experiences of readers are situated in social and cultural contexts. The intersection of plot, character, and setting ground the “actual reader” not only in the experience of reading the book but also in the subject position she must inhabit as the author’s “implied reader” in order to take up and understand the novel’s various events as well as discourses in the text related to these contexts (Talbot p. 29). In order to more fully understand the novels under study, we must first look at the subject positions these authors have created for their readers to take up as they are grounded in the fictional worlds of each novel.



## Main Character

The main characters of the novels used in this study are all first-person narrators, an authorial choice that will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but which immediately creates in readers a sense of intimacy not only with the narrator but also in what she experiences and where she is in the world of the novel. For the sake of this study, these main characters fall within the bully/victim nexus as each has been or is involved with a situation of bullying and/or harassment.

In *Before I Fall*, Samantha Kingston, a white, upper middle class, high school student in the middle of her senior year, enjoys her status as part of a popular girl clique. Prior to the start of the novel, she has acted as a bully towards several students, but in particular participated in the harassment of Juliet, another girl at her school who is seen as an easy target by Samantha's group of friends. When the novel begins, Sam, as she is also known in the novel, is not thinking about Juliet but another girl she bullied when she was in the fourth grade. This flashback to a childhood memory is provoked during the novel's first scene, a car accident in which Sam will die. However, this novel takes on an element of the fantasy genre when Sam must repeat this last day of her life over and over in order for her to reflect on those she has hurt and how she might change what she has done in the past. Prior to the car accident, as readers discover as the novel progresses, she has not reflected much on her actions toward those peers she deems as less than. Her status in the "social worlds" of her school and her ability to be mean to others without consequences are givens for her (Finders, 1997). However, a sub-plot to the bullying story includes Samantha's relationship with her boyfriend Rob, with whom she considers having sexual intercourse for the first time, as well as her growing romantic feelings for

another boy, Kent. These romantic dilemmas will become part of the larger narrative and will be addressed in Chapter 6.

Similarly, Regina Afton in *Some Girls Are* is a white, middle/upper middle class, high school senior. She belongs a group of friends whose nickname, “the Fearsome Fivesome”, hints both at their unity and their bullying and cruelty toward others at their school. But the animosity they direct toward others is later leveled at Regina when Donnie, the boyfriend of her best friend Annie and the leader of the Fivesome, sexually assaults her. Regina later confides in Kara, another member of their social circle, about what happened. However, Kara, who harbors jealousy and anger toward Regina for her own past misdeeds, betrays her secret and tells Anna. Rather than believe Regina when she explains she was assaulted, Anna coldshoulders Regina, forcing their group to do the same, and eventually they connive to have the rest of the student body ostracize Regina.

This model of bully turned victim is also recounted in the novel *Tease*. Sara Wharton, a junior in high school, faces serious legal issues following the suicide of Emma, a peer at her school. This fictional retelling of the Phoebe Prince case in Massachusetts begins after the suicide and uses flashbacks to tell what led to Emma’s death while in the present time of the novel Sara tries to make sense of what occurred as she denies and then begins to reflect on her responsibility in these events. Sara, a white, middle class young woman, confronts the judgment of the community both in the courtroom but also in the halls of her high school where she becomes *persona non grata* when her role in Emma’s death comes to light.

Once again, the tables are turned for a character at the top of the social strata of her high school in *Just Listen*. Annabel, white and upper middle class, works as a model

as well as attending her local high school during her senior year. She enjoyed the benefits of popularity as a member of a small circle of girls who rule the school's social scene, a group led by her best friend Sophie. Her friendships and position are imperiled when Will, Sophie's boyfriend, rapes Annabel. Although Sophie walks into the room where the assault is taking place, she refuses to believe Annabel, leading to her ostracism within their social circle and within the school community at large.

In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah Baker, a white middle class high school student, is one half of this novel's two-voiced narrative. Her story and her actual voice come through cassette tapes she mails to unsuspecting people in her social circle at school before she commits suicide. Her death provides the catalyst for much of the novel's dramatic tension: Why has she killed herself, and what role did those who received a cassette play? Answering those questions becomes possible in the narrative structure of the novel because Hannah shares narrator duties with Clay, a friend of hers from school. Clay and Hannah had also worked together at an after-school job, but their close proximity at school and work still did not allow them to act on the romantic feelings they secretly harbored for one another. Clay's receipt of the tapes puzzles him because he believes he has always been a good friend to Hannah, and he remained well aware of his hidden feelings for her. As Clay seeks these answers, Hannah's story of bullying behavior and exclusion raises questions about complicity and the consequences of cruelty.

Jujube in the novel *Sticks and Stones* is a fifteen-year-old high school student. Her actual name is Trudy, and her nickname reflects that she has one blue and one green eye. She lives with her single mother, and they were recently joined in their home by another single mother and daughter. Jujube's mother has taken in her friend and her child Sophie

in response to serious family issues including domestic violence and alcoholism. Sophie's father, who had been beating her, was incarcerated and her mother had to seek treatment for a drinking problem. At a school dance, Jujube makes a decision to visit the car of Brent, the boy who had asked her to the dance. When Brent shares his version of their time in the car with other peers after the dance, Jujube is quickly labeled a slut and faces harassment and ostracism at her school.

The consequences of being alone with a boy in a car also face Deanna Lambert in *Story of A Girl*. Though in this novel, Deanna has actually engaged in sexual intercourse and faces the consequences when her father discovers them *in flagrante delicto*. Deanna, who in the present time of the novel is fifteen, was only thirteen years old when her dad finds them. She is also white, and her sophomore year in high school has just finished when the novel begins. Although being found in a car having sex by one's father might seem to be a private and family matter, the entire school has been well aware of what happened then. Deanna continues to deal with his discovery three years prior, as it has affected her position at school as well as within her family. Deanna is bullied/harassed at school and ostracized by her father

### **Point of View/Focalization**

Authors make purposeful decisions about the story they will tell and who will tell that story and by doing so provides readers with a sense of reality even in a fictional story because "reality comes to us in the shape of stories" (Talbot, 1995). One aspect of authorial choice related to the choice of narrator is the way this decisions creates the relationship between text, narrative, and reader and by doing so allows readers to understand both the text and the discourses the text utilizes (Talbot, 1995). This

relationship becomes more intimate when an author uses first-person narration (FPN), or internal focalization, as is the case in all of the novels under study (Gennette, 1972). The world of the novel is seen through the eyes of the narrator providing readers with insights onto the plot, characters, and character development, but more important positions readers to take up certain discourses and ideologies embedded within the social and cultural contexts of the novels since they reflect the contexts of the readers' lives.

Authors act as “reproducers of discourse” already at work in the world and with which readers will be familiar and this authorial move is wise given the desire to have readers understand, like, and buy one's novels (Gavey, 1997, p. 53). But this move also continues to circulate discourses because “literary texts provide important examples of various discourses in circulation at a given time in a given culture” (Gavey, 1997, p. 55). These discourses then reify the real world inside the fictive world and by doing so ask readers to employ these ideologies as part of their meaning making about the novel. At the same time, given the close relationship constructed with the reader as a result of internal focalization readers bond with the narrator because she speaks in and through the text as narrator but also friend (Talbot, 1995).

Readers thus experience the world through the events of the plot as the narrator experiences them and tries to make sense of them as well. Her experiences as well as her emotional responses, reflections, epiphanies, and development create a relationship with the reader not just as observers but also as confidantes. Through this approach to narration, the protagonists share grounding information about plot, themes, and characterization, so that readers can sense the protagonist as a well-rounded, or dynamic, character, but also think through and feel with the FPN as one might do with a friend.

Internal focalization becomes a “powerful means for manipulating readers into subject positions” (Talbot, 1995, p. 31) and will largely be successful when the author uses internal focalization because it “tends to push the reader into subject positions identical to those of the narrator” (Talbot, 1995, p. 30). In the case of these seven novels, the subject positions afforded readers include white, heterosexual, middle to upper middle class adolescent women who live in American suburbs. Each FPN faces bullying largely as a result of sex and sexuality, so they occupy the role of a victim, though in several of the novels the narrator who is now bullied has also been a bully, which complicates her likability for readers and thus the willingness of the reader to take up similar subject positions unless the reader, too, has acted as a bully (Talbot, 1995). At the same time, in each novel another subject position afforded to the narrator and thus readers is that of a young woman in love with another character she is surprised to have feelings for in a romantic sense. Each of these subject positions as well as the process by which readers are addressed by authors to take up these positions (Talbot, 1995; Ellsworth, 1997) and for what ends will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **Setting**

These disparate novels take as their setting very similar geographic and social spaces: American suburbs. The suburbs as sites of alienation amidst economic promise have become a trope used often in films and novels, especially as such feelings relate to adolescents. Little wonder since the rise of the suburb in America in the years following World War II coincides with the solidification of the adolescent as a recognized developmental age for young people as part of the life span (Lesko, 2012). Others have argued that the rise of the middle class that allowed for the development of the suburbs

was the same impetus for the phenomena of the adolescent. But in line with the trope of adolescence, as discussed earlier, whatever material comforts exist for those raised in the suburbs, feelings of ennui and disappointment afflict residents, increasingly adolescents through the late twentieth century (Currie, 2004). Such attitudes make their way into the novels in this study.

In *Before I Fall*, the story takes place in Ridgeview, a suburban town in Connecticut, that the main character, Samantha, sees as having conformity as its purpose: “being like the people around you is the whole point” (Oliver, 2010, p. 11). She also tells readers her hometown is a place where “we’ve got malls and basement parties” (Oliver, 2010, p. 37), connecting her home with consumerism as well as the two stereotypical haunts of the American teen: the mall and a party. At the same time, she shares that the national media has described her high school as having the highest rate of teen suicides in the country, again connecting this novel’s setting with a plague of teen life in contemporary America and also foreshadowing elements of the story (Oliver, 2010, p. 45).

For Annabel in *Just Listen*, her house more so than the town she lives in provides a symbolic connection between place and thematic elements of this novel. As she has often done in her other novels, author Sarah Dessen locates this story in the fictional town of Lakeview, North Carolina. In this book, Annabel and her family live in a development named the Arbors, a nickname that echoes the symbolic use of plants in the novel that parallel the growth and renewal that will take place for Annabel and her sister Whitney, who suffers from an eating disorder in one of the book’s subplots. But her house provides the strongest symbolic connection to the novel’s themes. Annabel lives in what

“everyone called... ‘the glass house’” (Dessen, 2008, p. 48), designed by her father who is an architect. This house, which looks so beautiful as cars drive by, allows passersby to see directly into the family’s living space, but as Annabel explains, even glass houses can hide secrets. While onlookers think the entire house is made of glass, that’s an illusion. Instead, “only the front” is glass, and the “rest was tucked away behind, out of sight. So while it seemed like you were seeing everything, you really weren’t. Just bits and pieces that looked like a whole” (Dessen, 2008, p. 48-49). This idea of what is known and what is below the surface symbolizes both her family dynamics and the secret she carries about her rape while going about her life as if nothing has happened.

The idea that others can see into one’s most personal moments appears in *Some Girls Are*, which is set in a Hallowell, a suburban town, an “in-between town, stuck between a city and another city” (Summers, 2009, p. 13) where “everyone here knows everyone else” (Summers, 2009, p. 13). While Regina and her friends attend Hallowell High, they are well aware that in every small town people are connected in myriad ways, but such intimacies do not protect Regina nor do they encourage others to come to her aid when she is attacked.

In *13 Reasons Why*, place figures prominently both as a backdrop for the plot, but also as a driver of the novel’s action and narrative structure. Hannah and Clay live in Crestmont, a suburban town bordering on a city that includes one high school, a hospital, and a park. In addition to sending Clay a set of thirteen cassette tapes, Hannah includes a map of important places that will help him understand why she has committed suicide. As the novel unfolds, Clay visits each location that Hannah identified on her map as integral to realize what led to her death. He listens as she narrates through the earphones



of his Walkman how each place and what happened to her there left her no other option other than death.

While the majority of the novels in this study take place in fictional locations, Pacifica, California, the setting for *Story of a Girl*, is an actual town in Northern California (Zarr, 2007, p. 26-27). This coastal town, which is a suburb of San Francisco, includes a Safeway grocery store and Terra Nova High School, which both figure in the novel. As with the fictional counterparts, Deanne describes Pacifica in the morose terms ascribed to angst-filled teens: boredom and nothing of worth in the town. But this novel also offers a critique of class, which will be discussed below, that is shared in part through the narrator's perspective of her hometown, a viewpoint not seen in the other novels.

While *Tease* takes place in a suburban, middle/upper-middle class town in America and *Sticks and Stones* takes as its setting a small town in Canada, neither book uses setting in an explicit manner as the other novels do. In these two books, setting is, in fact, a backdrop, information for readers to locate themselves in the story but not used as devices for plot or character development, and thus setting in these books appears not to be used a commentary on place and its role in the lives of adolescents. However, even in this novel, setting speaks to absence: the two suburban towns in these novels are not racially diverse, and offer readers a largely white and middle class world.

### Class

While academics continue to debate if America offers the world an example of a classless society, the material consequences of one's access to economic resources cannot be denied (Kingston, 2000; Lareau and Conley, 2008). Some lack, while others have

plenty, and these differences have profound implications for one's sense of identity both as an individual and within the larger society, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The novels in this study include many markers of class both as descriptive features of characters and setting, but also as motivating factors for the choices that characters make, the conditions under which they make those choices, and their eventual fates.

In *Before I Fall*, Samantha's family reflects an upper middle class lifestyle with cars, cash, and credit cards readily available. Students at her high school vie for spots in the school parking lot, and when Samantha wants to purchase clothes, she steals her mother's American Express card, hinting at both financial stability and the alienation from parents, which will be discussed in more detail below. At one point, Samantha describes a minor character, Anna, as being working class, and this distinction marginalizes Anna and provides one reason that she is easy prey for bullying behavior.

The town where Annabel lives in *Just Listen* gives a similar slice of American life. Residents are middle to upper-middle class, and no problems related to money are included. Annabel's father works as an architect, and her mom does not work outside of the home. In fact, this novel includes no working mothers in the plot. However, Annabel does work at a career that she feels a great deal of ambivalence about. She is a model, a career she shared with her older sister that was the result of their mother's interest in the field. Annabel continues to balance modeling and school throughout the novel largely because she sees its role in helping to lift her mother's lingering depression. Annabel has her own car as does Owen, indicating a common marker of American identity and American teen identity in particular: the automobile as marker of financial stability as well as a status symbol and path to independence.

Class distinctions are more apparent in *Some Girls Are* when Regina, whose family is comfortably middle class, compares what money makes possible for her friend Anna and how money limits Regina. While the novel does not explore her family's finances in great detail she alludes to her parents' experiences as workers: "My parents work. They work and work and work. Except there's no work in Hallowell, so they go to the city, even though they're too old for the house and the commute..." (Summers, 2009, p. 61). What is unclear in such details about the parents' job is if these are choices they are making about living in the suburbs while furthering careers as many do in real life, or if they are forced into these professional choices due to economic need. She explains that not only does Anna drive a Mercedes, but also wealth allows her a consumer consumption that Regina doesn't have: "I can't afford to replace the labels I'm wearing" (Summers, 2009, p. 5). This reflection suggests that while the friends can afford higher-end clothing ("the labels"), only Anna can afford to buy them more often. Such differences merely show lifestyle options until Regina's assault affects the relationship between the two friends. Then, class becomes another marker for conflict between female characters and an aspect of the power imbalances that lead to bullying.

This framework occurs as well in *Tease*. Sara appears to be middle class, but her family's finances and living situation are stressed following her parents' divorce. Her father lives in another state, and her mother works full time, leaving Sara often in charge of her younger brothers, a role she finds burdensome at points in the novel. Sara owns a car, an "old" Honda Accord (Maciel, 2014, p. 47). Her best friend who is also implicated in Emma's comes from a wealthier family: she drives a Mercedes and shops at stores that Sara explains she cannot afford (Maciel, 2014, p. 47). Once the friends are parted

due to the legal proceedings, the variances in money become more telling for Sara.

Similarly, Emma comes from a family with money and drives an Audi.

While Crestwood, California, the setting for *13 Reasons Why*, appears to offer a comfortable middle class lifestyle, economic challenges plague Hannah's family. In her taped-retelling of her decision to take her own life, she mentions the financial pressure her parents face when their store begins to languish. Hannah claims their focus on saving their business led to a distance between parents and child, one she did not believe she could bridge (Asher, 2007, p. 169).

But limited financial resources do not always paint a portrait of an unhappy home in this study. In *Sticks and Stones*, Jujube is parented by a single mother who works as a meatpacker during the evening shift at Gainers, a local meat processing plant (Goobie, 2002, p. 32). Her mother is an active and engaged parent, so much so that she meets with her daughter's principal when she becomes aware that Jujube has been bullied. This decision, too, makes her unique in the parents in this study. She alone intervenes to end her child's suffering and expects the school personnel to act as well. No aspect of Jujube's life suffers in the book due to financial issues and class does not appear to set her apart from her peers. At the same time, Jujube's mother acts as a role model for her friend whose daughter has suffered domestic violence at the hands of her father by taking them in and encouraging her to end the relationship with the abuser.

Social class and the financial pressures families face are taken up in *Story of a Girl* where seemingly employment for every major character is problematic. Deanna is looking for a summer job, which she hopes will allow her to save money to move out of her family's home and into a new living situation with her brother. However, this older

brother Darren, who currently lives in their parents' basement with his girlfriend Stacy and their new baby, works at the local Safeway grocery store as does Stacy. Their mom works long hours at Mervyn's, a department store, and her job leads her to warn Deanna, "Don't ever work retail" (Zarr, 2007, p. 44). Much of the financial pressures faced by the family, and the challenges they face as a cohesive family unit, appear to be connected to her father's loss of employment. Her dad works now as a warehouse manager for an auto supply store, but had been employed for 19 years at National Paper, "his first and only job until the day they laid him off" (Zarr, 2007, p. 45). A sense of decay and depression comes throughout the novel, but is particularly resonant in Deanna's description of her family home. Rather than enter the house as soon as she arrives there, she "stood outside the front door for my usual count of ten before walking inside" and as she counts she reminds herself "don't notice how the garage door doesn't hang straight...forget about the broken flowerpot that's been in a heap on the lawn since last summer...it's okay, everyone leaves their Christmas lights up all year...the front porch is a fine place for a collection of soggy cardboard boxes...oh, forget about it, just turn the knob and go in already" (Zarr, 2007, p. 11). The lack of upkeep on their house, the father's anger and distance from his children, and the underemployment of characters hint at the ways people are affected by their times and the pressures of financial instability.

This sense of things falling into ruin translates from the domestic sphere into the larger community when Deanna talks with Michael, the owner of Picasso's a local pizza shop, about working for him. He admits that while he will hire her, "...business is a little slow these days. Since 9/11 and Enron and Iraq and all the other bullshit – excuse me – this country has been through, it turns out pizza doesn't hold the esteemed position in the

family budget it once did” (Zarr, 2007, p. 31). But frustrations due to economics are not equally shared in Pacifica as Deanna reports on a class debate on *The Lord of the Flies* being read in her English class. When Caitlin, a classmate, argues that the boys on the island should have realized their survival depended on working as a community, Deanna provides a critique of Caitlin’s inability to understand that sharing the wealth, be it high school popularity or financial resources, doesn't happen, but that her social position allows her to believe such things are possible: “Caitlin Spinelli might have a different perspective, being rich in all the things that would have put her in the surviving tribe” (Zarr, 2007, p. 4). While Deanna and Michael, and to a lesser extent Hannah in *13 Reasons Why*, clearly understand the interplay between private lives and public forces like the economy and politics, ultimately their choices and fates are not resolved, as will be discussed in Chapter 7 and 8, on any stage but the personal. Class may determine rank and power, but according to these novels, its emphasis is minimal in determining people’s lives and fates.

### Race

When race or racial identity appears in these novels it shows up only as a descriptor, like the color of one’s hair or one’s skin. This information is added in as a factoid that bears no relevance to the plot; that character’s identity or development; or his or her relationship to the main character. The version of the world reflected in these novels is a white world, with no conscious thought about race so that the America these characters inhabit is a white one possible through a privilege that goes unnamed and unacknowledged. Three of the novels, including *Story of a Girl*, *Before I Fall*, and *13 Reasons Why*, forefront white characters and make no references to race. In *Story of a*

*Girl*, Deanna's best friend Jason is biracial in that his parents are Japanese and white. But the challenges of being biracial are never explored. Since Jason is Deanna's unrequited love as well as a friend he occupies an elevated status in the story. In *Just Listen*, Annabel's best friend, Clarke, is Chinese by birth but was adopted by the Reynolds, a white family when she was an infant. The ramifications of cross-cultural adoption for Clarke are left out of this story, despite her role as a close friend that Annabel has, loses, and regains by the novel's end. Jason and Clarke matter to the protagonist because they are emotionally intimate in many ways, yet the complexities of race and culture for those characters are left out of the stories; they exist merely as objects for the main characters' love and friendship but in ways that can read as less than mutual. Cultural appropriation does rear its head, though only briefly, when a wealthy peer of Deanna's drives past her in a mall parking lot: "Caitlin Spinelli pulled into the mall parking lot and drove by us in her new Jetta, with the window down. 'Must be nice,' I said, watching her head bob to a rap song cranked to ten on her stereo. 'She does know that she's white, right?'" As discussed earlier, Deanna sees Caitlin as someone whose affluence and popularity provides her with all sorts of privileges.

In *Tease*, race is used as descriptive markers but lacks complexity in the development of either the character or the plot. In fact, these descriptions become problematic when Sara describes the African-American, male legal intern who is working on her case. She tells readers: "He's black, with short hair, and the smoothest skin ever. It's very dark, and it looks nice against his shirt, which is a bright lilac color. It reminds me of one of the nail polishes I used to always pick for pedicures..." (Maciel, 2014, p. 3). The intern, who goes unnamed, is referred to as "Hot intern" (Maciel, 2014, p. 3),

transforming him from an object of color (his skin, his shirt, nail polish) to a sexualized object for a teen's desire during a meeting with the lawyer who is defending her against serious legal charges following Emma's suicide. Later in the novel, another character whose purpose is to help Sara is described in a racialized way but without any depth. Her therapist Theresa, whose race is unclear, is described as having "glossy black hair and this ridiculously smooth light-brown skin" (Maciel, 2014, p. 32) and this description, which echoes that of the intern, is followed by another connection to a colorful outfit: "...she wears weird, colorful scarves all the time...She's always very pretty and colorful..." (Maciel, 2014, p. 32).

Race and the consequences of living in a white-majority world are taken up with more specificity for a character in *Sticks and Stones*. Carlos, one of Jujube's friends who becomes her love interest, is Latino and a Spanish speaker in the all-white small town where they live in Canada. When he defends her during a time of bullying, she wonders what the impetus is for his concern. In addition to their romantic feelings for one another, which remain concealed for some time in the novel and will be discussed in Chapter Five, Carlos explains to Jujube: "I got a lot of hassle when my family first came to Canada. It was because I couldn't speak English. I flunked grade three. Kids made fun of me, called me names. Most of the first English words I learned were the names they called me. I remember thinking English words were not friendly. So I guess I know what it can be like" (Goobie, 2002, p. 70). His admission affords the reader with insights into the experiences of this character, one who is marginalized as a child due to linguistic differences. This aspect of his character provides readers with an example of a character who is an entity in his own right, with experiences that affect how he behaves as a



character in the novel and towards the main character. But in the novels read for this study, this level of character development around race or ethnicity is unique.

### **Parents and Family**

Cultural messages in literature, films, and other forms of mass media abound with the alienation adolescents feel toward their parents and families. In what is often considered the first YA novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield makes clear his exasperation with parents (and other adults) who fail to understand him and his life. This belief in the suspect nature of the parent-child dyad during adolescence appears to be developmentally appropriate when one considers the need for children to separate from the family of origin in order to navigate successfully the transition from child to adult, a transition that resonates with the American ethos of independence and self-sufficiency. At the same time, in YA literature, parents need to be off the stage, so to speak, in order to allow for the protagonist's movement toward adulthood and to allow for plot points to occur without adult intervention. Each of the novels in this study takes up this motif.

For Annabel, in *Just Listen*, the relationships between the family members echoes the discordant description of her home, a glass building that people can see into without knowing the truth of what goes on there (Dessen, 2008, p. 63). Annabel describes dinners where the family joins at the table and “pretend[s] everything was fine” (Dessen, 2008, p. 113). But in this family, members have learned that if one faces problems or difficulties, one should “...keep it out – out of earshot, out of the house –even if this meant, really, just keeping it in” (Dessen, 2008, p. 33). This need for silence comes about in response to the mother's depression, which begins shortly after her own mother's death. As she lapses further and further into a clinical depression, Annabel explains that “my mother's

condition quickly grew to dictate our lives” (Dessen, 2008, p. 32). If this cocoon of silence was created and left undisturbed to protect the mother, this silence comes to imperil the life of one daughter, Whitney, who secretly battles an eating disorder; causes Kirsten, another daughter, to leave home in order to set boundaries for her life and find her voice; and leaves Annabel adrift, unable to confide in anyone about her sexual assault and ostracism at school. When Annabel is asked later by Owen, a boy who becomes her friend and love interest (which will be discussed in Chapter 7), how her parents know when she needs help, her response is “they can’t, I thought, but I didn’t say this. Couldn’t say this. ‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I guess you’d have to ask them.’” (Dessen, 2008, p. 198); thus, this familial collusion around silence and secrets affects her friendships and relationships in her life outside of the home as well as profoundly shapes how she sees herself and her responses to life’s challenges.

For Deanna in *Story of a Girl*, her relationship with her father in particular has been irrevocably impacted after he catches her at thirteen having sex with an older boy in his car. Her father’s shock turns to rage as he gets into a fight with the boy, but worse isolates Deanna: “My dad hasn’t looked me in the eye or talked to me, really talked to me, since” (Zarr, 2007, p. 2). In fact, not only has her father not spoken to her, but when he does he is angry or suspects her of doing wrong. Worse, when his male co-workers are talking about Deanna being found in the car, her father does not defend her, but complains about his embarrassment. Deanna finds this betrayal the worst. However, her detachment from him doesn’t come easily for Deanna, because, although her father’s responses to this event have disappointed her, his rejection of her is not something she wants. Instead, she knows what she needs from her father even if it will not be given:

“That’s what I figured out that day while he yelled at me. That as much as I’d let him down, he’d let me down, too, and he was the one who should know better. He was the dad. He was *my* dad. That’s when I had to make myself stop loving him. I had to stop remembering the way he used to be, the way we used to be, because if I kept thinking about the old dad every time I looked at him, it would never stop hurting” (Zarr, 2007, p. 105). Her sense of a shared past and emotional intimacy come out in Deanna’s journal where she writes about memories of her father’s kindness and the closeness of their relationship: “*We are each other’s* (Zarr, 2007, p. 41). Parental disappointment disrupts her brother Darren’s relationship with their father as well. In his case, their father is disappointed in Darren for having a child while so young as well as previous court troubles for “getting busted for pot when he was sixteen” (Zarr, 2007, p. 42). Later in the book, Deanna confronts her father, and while he admits he does not hate her, he does not unequivocally declare his love and support for her. Still, she sees this conversation as an important recognition of her feelings about the status of their relationship. It offers her some sense of control in their relationship. However, in a scene shortly thereafter, Deanna sits up late watching television with her mother. Their intimacy, both emotional and physical, provides the parental comfort Deanna craves: “...I felt Mom’s eyes on me. ‘Come here, sweetheart. Snuggle up.’ She held her arms out, smiling. I was embarrassed: I hadn’t cuddled with my mom since I was a kid, way before Tommy. [...] She stroked my hair...Then I closed my eyes, concentrating on the warmth of her fingers on my scalp, the worn chenille of her old robe under my cheek” (Zarr, 2007, p. 174). This dual movement of standing up to a parent while being accepted and loved by another gives

Deanna not only a sense of peace but also a renewed “faith in [her] family,” which for her means to “[believe] in something when it made more sense not to” (Zarr, 2007, p. 174).

But this positive approach to understanding the complexities of family dynamics occurs less frequently in the other novels. In *Some Girls Are*, Regina claims “my parents are useless” (Summers, 2009, p. 43) and they “work and work and work” which she maintains is “okay with me because otherwise, we might have to talk” (Summers, 2009, p. 61). But at another point in the novel, once Regina has been assaulted and is being harassed by peers, she wonders about her mother because “for a second I think I do need her” (Summers, 2009, p. 64). The need for parental intervention appears again later in the story when her mother is called to her school to meet with the principal once Regina gets in trouble for also bullying those who have been taunting her. But Regina’s mother remains unaware of the truth of the situation and, in fact, greets and responds warmly to Regina’s former friends completely unsuspecting that these girls have targeted her daughter. Despite this meeting between parent and school administrator, Regina tells them nothing, so that they are unable to intervene in a way that will truly help her. Instead, she leaves the office where they’ve been meeting and rejoins “the real world” of peers and bullying (Summers, 2009, p. 124). If Regina feels let down by her mother, she later admits “I feel guilty looking at her. She just wants to be a good mother, and it’s weird and sad to me how we’re all in some small ways trying to be good” (Summers, 2009, p. 111).

Parental failures and the sense that not only do parents not know or understand what actually goes on in their children’s lives abound in these novels, but are also tied to the economic factors described earlier. In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah admits “*My parents*

*love me, I know they do*” but she also admits that “*things haven’t been easy recently, Not for about a year,*” which Clay then explains is the result of a “huge shopping center [that] went up” and would affect “downtown stores” like the one Hannah’s parents owned (Asher, 2007, p. 169). As she confirms, “*when that happened, my parents became distant. There was suddenly a lot for them to think about. [...] When I cut my hair, my mom didn’t even notice*” (Asher, 2007, p. 169). While Hannah’s tapes make clear that many factors, and people, led her to suicide this distance with her parents makes such issues all that much harder to bear. When her mother fails to notice her haircut, Hannah connects this with other examples in the novel where people have failed to see her, see her pain, and offer help.

In *Tease*, Sara believes her life has been negatively affected by her parents’ divorce and her mother’s need to work full-time. Her mother, portrayed through Sara’s eyes as an overburdened, working single mom is “never around after school,” leading Sara to claim “I got promoted to co-parent” (Maciel, 2014, p. 19). While Sara resents her new responsibilities, she admits that she and her mother have never been that close: “We were never one of those, like, crime-fighting mother-daughter teams on TV who tell each other everything about their days. And now we don’t see each other much at all. Even when we’re in the same room” (Maciel, 2014, p. 39). Later, though, her mother seeks Sara out and talks to her directly about Emma’s death as well as Sara’s decision to admit blame and speak in court about her role in what happened. During their conversation, she takes Sara by surprise by what she says and its honesty: “But I don’t remember her ever saying what she says next. ‘I’m on your side. I’m your mom. I’ll always be on your side. The idea of you ever wanting to kil—of ever doing something like what Emma did...I

just don't know how I'd be able to go on.' [...] I feel numb, but she's looking at me so intently, I nod" (Maciel, 2014, p. 235).

Still, Sara's resentment toward both of her parents continues throughout the book until she accuses them of letting them down: "You don't know *anything*. You're never here. Neither of you! You act like you know what happened, you act like you know who I am or what I did. But you *don't!*" (Maciel, 2014, p. 274). As the book comes to a close, Sara's father remains distant from this daughter and quite blaming in response to his daughter's legal troubles. However, her mother's role in the family appears to have changed: "Mom's actually making good in her promise to spend more family time..." which leads Sara to notice "*She smiles more now, I think*" (Maciel, 2014, p. 317) in one of the final scenes of the book where she, her mother, and brothers gather together in a scene of domestic harmony, cooking and sharing a family dinner.

Reconnecting with parents and siblings occurs as well in *Before I Fall*, but with more poignancy in that novel because Sam comes to appreciate her family as the result of a car accident, that ultimately takes her life. Still, she transitions from a teen who takes her family for granted and pushes them away, to a person enjoys time with her younger sister and sharing meals with her family. Sam admits that she has pushed her family away and trained them to let her be: "Where you headed? *Just want to be alone*. Can I come in? *Just leave me alone. Stay out of my room. Don't talk to me when I'm on the phone. Don't talk to me when I'm listening to music. Alone, alone, alone*" (Oliver, 2010, p. 275). Yet, Sam does not see them blameless in her death: "*What I really wanted to say was, Where were you four days ago? Where were you when my car was spinning off the edge of a road in the middle of the night? What weren't you thinking of me?*" (Oliver, 2010, p.

186). She recounts the distance between them as something of their making as well: “I hate both of my parents right now: for sitting quietly in our house, while out in the darkness my heart was beating away all of the seconds of my life, ticking them off one by one until my time was up; for letting the thread between us stretch so far and so thin that the moment it was severed for good they didn’t even feel it” (Oliver, 2010, p. 186). Still, she admits: “I did my part too. I did it on a hundred different days and in a thousand different ways” (Oliver, 2010, p. 186). As the novel draws to a close and Sam realizes her time on Earth will end, she enjoys times with her family, including when she takes her sister Izzy to a lookout spot that has always been special to Sam. In the final scene with her family, they are gathered around the breakfast table as her father makes breakfast. Before Sam leaves she looks back at that and catches a quick kiss between her parents: “It’s a nice thing to see. I’m glad I was looking” (Oliver, 2010, p. 418).

Only one of the novels, *Sticks and Stones*, includes an active and engaged parent and thus a close relationship with the protagonist. Jujube’s mother appears early in the book and in this instance makes her presence known: “...Mom put him through Twenty Questions at the door. She’s pretty military with my boyfriends” (Goobie, 2002, p. 4). Jujube later describes her mother’s involvement in her life: “Every now and then she’d give me one of her long thinking looks. What this usually means is a talk about condoms and the meaning of life. This is part of being an only child” (Goobie, 2002, p. 32). This sense of involved parenting style continues when Jujube considers how her mother will respond if she became aware of Jujube’s troubles at school: “I knew if I told her about Brent, she’d flip out and go after the entire school” (Goobie, 2002, p. 33). Jujube’s prediction is not far off the mark because when her mother does become aware of what

has been happening, she immediately acts. First, she makes Jujube repeat the word slut, which she has been called at school, over and over again, finally counseling her, “When you can say a word, you own it. Which means that that word can’t do anything to you anymore. It’s just a word, Jujube—not your name. Not you” (Goobie, 2002, p. 52). Not content with only providing her daughter with guidance, she also meets with the school principal to complain about graffiti in the bathroom about Jujube, who describes the interaction: “Mom laid into that principal like the meatpacker she was. She cut and diced him into small pieces, then packed and wrapped him up. When she was done, he’d practically promised to move his office into the nearest guys’ bathroom. He looked as though he’d suspend some kids for life” (Goobie, 2002, p. 54). Still, despite the mother’s warning that the graffiti “better be” removed, it is not (Goobie, 2002, p. 54), and Jujube, like the girls in the other novels in this study, ends up having to solve this situation for herself.

Relationships between children and parents in all of the novels reflect a duality of intentions: these young female characters crave parental love, attention, and involvement, and admit they need it. At the same time, they push parents away, in response to a desire to figure life out on their own while also believing that parents are impotent in the social worlds, “the real world” as Regina named it, that they inhabit far from the love and protection of family and home.

### **Drugs/Alcohol**

In the “real world” that these fictional teen-agers inhabit, drugs and alcohol are used in ways that assume such usage as givens for teens with little reflection on the role substance abuse plays in sexual relations, sexual assault, or other character motivations.



As Sam explains in *Before I Fall*, “you learn to work, and you learn to drink” (Oliver, 2010, p. 37), and drinking is so common at her school that “two years ago, the NYT ranked us among the top ten booziest public schools in CT” (Oliver, 2010, p. 37). Regina in *Some Girls Are* offers some thoughts on her own drinking: “At Josh’s parties, I was usually the first to start drinking and the last stop, and it wasn’t because I enjoyed the taste. It was because I hated the people I was around” (Summers, 2009, p. 55). Josh, one of her friends, not only hosts drinking parties; he also supplies friends with a variety of substances including pot and Adderall, which the teens snort. Regina even “strong arms Josh’s clients” when he’s drunk, so they pay him for his wares (Summers, 2009, p. 3). Drinking, smoking pot, and drinking at parties occur in each novel under study except for *Sticks and Stones*.

In *Story of a Girl*, not only does Deanna begin a sexual relationship with Tommy, who is seventeen, when she’s thirteen, he also introduces her to marijuana. They get together often to smoke and have sex before this relationship comes to its abrupt end when her father catches them in Tommy’s Buick. Hannah, in *13 Reasons Why*, claims that “drinking and sex” are the “most accurate response for most of our student body” about their favorite things to do on the weekend (Asher, 2007, p. 121). Similarly in *Tease*, the first time Sara and her boyfriend Dylan are together Dylan is drunk and then kisses her, which foreshadows the use of alcohol at a party where they end up having sexual intercourse for the first time. While Sara has spent a good deal of time wondering about the decision to have intercourse, when it finally happens they are both drunk. She has been drinking beer for hours before and during the party, and her friend Brielle offers her vodka, or “liquid balls” as she describes it, to build up Sara’s courage for her first sexual

experience (Maciel, 2014, p. 53). Drugs and alcohol are omnipresent in the teen's social worlds in each book, and appear to play a role in many of the events in character's lives, including rape and sexual assault. Yet, no adults intervene and no discussion of substance abuse or its consequences ever takes place. Teen usage of such substances, which given their ages are illegal for them to use, remain unexplored and characters reflect on such usage in passing ways.

## **Discussion**

### **Mode of Address: Focalization**

As Talbot (1995) argues, who tells the story is as important as what the story is about because a reader identifies most strongly with the "focalized character," which will "draw the reader into complicity" with not only what this narrator/character has to say but also who she is as a character. This "complicity" then becomes the "powerful means for manipulating readers into subject positions," which provide readers with the ability to see as has been previously discussed into the novel and back out into their real lives (Talbot, 1995, p. 31). In the novels under study in this dissertation, this process becomes heightened because each of the novels uses an internal focalization, which elicits a close relationship between reader and main character because the reader sees the story through her eyes (Genette, 1972; Talbot, 1995; Trites 2000). In the case of all seven novels, the female main character narrates the story of which she is a part, so all of the events are mediated from the perspective of this character who is herself never neutral in the tale she tells. Thus, the internal focalization limits readers' understandings of other characters and the various contexts for the events of the plot. However, at the same time, this perspective positions the reader in an intimate relationship with the main character who confides all

her thoughts, fears, and motivations as well as her reasoning for what she does and her understandings of what happens to her. The reader becomes a confidante who knows things about the main character/narrator that no other character can know. This sense of intimacy and close proximity to the main character creates a sense of friendship as well as more readily allows the reader to identify with the main character. If focalization helps to answer the questions of who sees and who speaks, then the answer becomes for readers a girl just like me. By seeing the world through the eyes of this narrator, readers are provided with the narrator's insights onto discourses and ideologies that readers will readily understand and take up from the real world and by doing so are positioned as readers to sympathize with the female main character at the same time that the reader can imagine or may even have lived some of the experiences laid out in the fictional worlds of the novel (Talbot, 1995). Readers practice, as it were, their own reactions, thoughts, and experiences with the themes and discourses embedded in novels, which allow for a sort of dress rehearsal of life with much lower stakes than in the real world girls negotiate on any given day.

This process of identification with the main character is of great import for young adult literature as Trites (2000) has argued because by their very nature one of their goals is to contribute to the development of a socially acceptable adult, one whose identity is constructed through the teen years when "adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures" (p. 7). This emphasis in the literature for adolescents reflects discourses on Western adolescence so prevalent in a society that sees this part of life as a necessary but problematic step on a developmental trajectory (Hall, 1905; Lesko, 1996 and 2012; Patel Stevens et al, 2007) with a "movement or lack of it toward the desire

characteristics” of an adult” (Lesko, 2012, p. 180). This process of identification then does not end then with the conclusion of the novel, but provides the female reader with insights and even instructions into how to conduct herself in her own life as she negotiates “the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions” (p. 3) of which she is a part.

Trites (2000) makes an important distinction in her argument about the genre of young adult literature, which applies to these ideas of growth and development inherent in the genre. She posits such novels as “*Entwicklungsroman*” and notes that they differ from the “*Bildungsroman*,” which are novels that include the maturation of an adolescent into adulthood. *Entwicklungsroman* instead are “novels of development” concerned with how “the characters grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem” and by doing so demonstrates “her or his ability to engage institutional power” (Trites, 2000, p. 14, p. 16). Thus, she argues, “the YA novel teaches adolescents how to exist within the (capitalistically bound) institutions that necessarily define teenagers’ existence” (p. 19). The work of this dissertation is to deconstruct the lessons being taught to the adolescent female reader, especially as they relate to the institutions of sexuality, power, gender, and peer relations, because such analysis will reveal the subject positions available as one becomes an adult who can “exist within” such institutions in the real world.

By analyzing the discourses and ideologies at work in these seven novels, a very distinct image of the socially acceptable teen who will develop into a socially acceptable adult becomes clear. The modes of address employed in these novels provide then ““natural ways’ of looking at and making sense of experience” (Ellsworth, p. 25) and this sense of what is “natural” positions readers to see who the main character is, who she

becomes, and how such possibilities might operate in her own life. Through the analysis of the modes of address at work in these novels, the subject positions afforded young women in contemporary American society will be addressed and their implications for young women today.

By using first person narration, a sense of intimacy is created between readers and the main characters. This identification allows readers to see themselves in this main character and identify with her, her foibles, and her plight more readily. As such, readers are assumed to be and willing to take up subject positions of white, middle class, suburban, heterosexual girls because, except for the two-voiced narration of *13 Reasons Why*, those descriptions fit the main characters and reflect ideologies of the majority culture in America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Mode of Address: The Neoliberal Subject and Class**

If Trites's (2000) ideas on the uses of YA literature to fashion an adult out of the teen who reads such fiction are accurate, part of this fashioning necessitates a subject who can perform a number of aspects of identity. These performative subject positions run the gamut from a sexualized to racialized and classed self. In this section, I will address the ways the novels reflect class identity and the subject position offered to female main character and thus readers as members of a particular class. If as Skeggs (2005) argues we "construct a class identity based not only on wealth but on lifestyle choices" (qtd. in Lehtonen, 2012, p. 244), then each female main character participates in a number of "lifestyle choices" that indicate her status as middle class at the same time that the novels hint at, without ever critiquing, the unstable concepts of class and the

consequences for people, real and fictional, when they make these choices. As McRobbie (2009) has argued and as the female main characters make clear, part of the work of a classed subject is to “make right choices,” choices which by their very nature hint at the constraints at work on all of us (qtd. in Lehtonen, p. 246). At the same time, these choices make clear a “bourgeois normative life trajectory” (p. 247) that reflects a maturity from an “impulsive teenager into a responsible and respectable adult who aims for stability and safety” (p. 245), and this movement of development from impulsivity to respectability echoes Trites’s analysis of the uses of YA fiction. For the female main characters in the novels under study, their class identities are predicated on the wealth and social standing of their parents as well as their lifestyle choices that position them as participants in a consumer culture. In addition, these characters offer reflections onto how economic situations have affected their lives and family situations, determine peer relationships, and determine their social activities.

In *Sticks and Stones*, Jujube lives with a single mother who works nights at a meatpacking plant. This nod to working class status is joined with one of the few parents in the seven novels in this study who is actively engaged in her child’s life. When Jujube is bullied and harassed at school, her mother meets with the school principal to advocate for her daughter and goes to great lengths to provide her with emotional sustenance to deal with being targeted. At the same time, this mother welcomes into her home another single mother and her daughter who have both been victimized by domestic violence. This maternal example of strength becomes a working-class hero of sorts who defends those she loves with the means she has, and though her efforts are not always victorious, she provides one example of parental intervention against misogynistic social and

cultural forces. Jujube is never targeted due to class and any class distinctions between her and her peers are unexplored in this novel. Interestingly, this novel is one of a series published for reluctant readers, so I question the pairing of such readers with a celebration, such as it is, of the working class.

But such positive outlooks on class are more rare in the other novels under study. In fact, economic anxiety is part of the sub-text in three of the novels. In *Tease*, Sara describes her alienation from her mother as the result of promises her mother makes to spend more family time with her daughter and two sons. But as a newly-divorced working mom, such promises are hard to keep, resulting in her using Sara as a co-parent, which further distances the daughter from her mother. In a similar fashion in *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah feels a comparable alienation from her parents whose store faces an economic downturn due to competition from a nearby mall. As Hannah finds herself more and more depressed and socially isolated, she claims that she cannot reach out even to her parents due to their preoccupation with saving their livelihood. While Deanna in *Story of a Girl* never considers suicide, her outlook on life, peers, and her family is equally bleak. For her, like with Sara and Hannah, economic hard times and a change in financial status have stressed her family to its breaking point. Though her problematic relationship with her father is catalyzed when he finds her having sex in a car with an older boy, this family faces an incremental dissolution following her father's unemployment when he loses a job he's held for his entire adult life, a job Deanna describes as "his first and only job" (Zarr, 2007, p. 45).

But even more common in these novels are the ways middle to upper middle class teens are portrayed as troubled even amidst the material comforts they enjoy. In *Tease*,

*Just Listen, 13 Reasons Why, Some Girls Are, and Before I Fall*, characters have comfortable homes; cars of their own to drive; visit malls to shop; dress well; and are able to access aspects of consumer culture from credit cards to alcohol for parties. At the same time, both female main characters and several of the female characters who are friends with the female main character and act as bullies are described as facing serious problems including alcohol abuse, date rape, eating disorders, and peer violence. Whatever material comforts middle class status has provided to them, a sense of ennui haunts these characters and are used to suggest motivations for the bullying and harassment that occurs between the female characters, though that relationship is never made overt. How these female relationships are constructed in these novels will be addressed further in this chapter.

What then are readers to make of these mixed messages about class, problematic lives, and the ways class both confounds these characters and their live choices but also provides them with social status and financial support for the families in these novels? How do these novels illustrate that class identity is constructed from a series of choices, but such choices are both constrained by social forces and constrain the individual? Equally important to raise is the question of how the problems that come as a result of class identity are left in these novels largely for individuals to solve, so that the discourse of each novel rests on the rugged individualism so familiar in American culture.

These novels, published between 2002 and 2014, arrive within the sphere of influence neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007) has had on economic and social institutions for nearly three decades. Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2007), is “characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade” and while privatization is favored



over government intervention in social services, “the state...[will] guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of the market” (p. 2). Neoliberalism’s effects show themselves in these novels in a number of ways, the least of which being the economic challenges faced by the families in some of the novels. More important are the subject positions available to these female main characters and the sorts of constrained choices they are able to make in their fictional lives. This neoliberal subject appears to be guaranteed rights of “freedom of expression and choice” (Harvey, 2007, p. 64), but such a focus on individual rights and the primacy of individual freedoms come at a great cost. Ultimately, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her actions and well-being” (Harvey, 2007, p. 65) which in theory sounds fair enough until one considers that success or failure, inclusive of one’s financial well-being, is decoupled from outside forces like the market, employment opportunities, or a social safety net and predicated only on one’s correct choices and “personal failings” (Harvey, 2007, p. 65). As with the novels, the female main characters can outline how unemployment, divorce, the expectations of consumer culture, or the high costs of a middle class lifestyle affect themselves and their families. However, in none of these novels does the female main character critique these contexts of her life situation. Instead, her problems are the result of her own choices and decisions and as the responsible party she must determine the course of action that will resolve her problems and vindicate previous poor choices she has made. Within each novel then, the only subject position related to class becomes one who is constrained by such forces but one who is agentive to make decisions that count. While on the face of it, such a subject position suggest agency and empowerment, the neoliberal subject cannot truly impact these economic forces that led to economic

instability or family disruption. As in life, those forces are not resolved at the novels' conclusions, so that the choices left open to the female main characters are focused on self-improvement and fashioning a more "respectable adult who aims for stability and safety," which provide readers with the message that we lead lives decontextualized from the forces that surround us and are ultimately responsible for who and what we become (Lehtonen, 2012, p. 245).

### **Mode of Address: The Neoliberal Subject and Race**

If readers are hailed to understand class as both real and inconsequential in these novels, race becomes even more of a non-issue in the fictional worlds of these seven novels. This neoliberal subject lives in a largely white world, and these novels' predilection for whiteness suggest not only that the authors presuppose their readers to be white but that they also imbue them with a white privilege that understands race need not be considered. When race is introduced in any of the novels, it is used more as a descriptive device than a way to fully develop a character, and while one might argue that such flat character development results from poor writing, readers will not necessarily consider that analysis. Instead, the mode of address in these novels suggests that the implied readers (Talbot, 1995) are in fact white adolescents, and as such race does not figure into their worldview. Or at least these novels will suggest that worldview to them.

Only *Sticks and Stones* utilizes race in a more compelling way to understand a character, but racial identity is left unclear so that Carlos is described as a linguistic minority who moves to English-speaking Canada when in elementary school. While he explains to Jujube he was taunted because he spoke only Spanish and also failed a grade in school, his ethnic identity is left unstated as if where he comes from and the particulars

of that identity are unimportant save for his outsider status (which will be discussed later in this chapter) and how it is employed to the benefit of the white, female main character. was included in a compelling way only once when Carlos in *Sticks and Stones* the racism he faced as a cultural and linguistic minority in Canada.

Other than that, race remains silenced or used as it is in *Tease*, *Story of a Girl*, and *Just Listen* merely as a descriptive for minor characters who end up playing pivotal roles in the lives of the female main characters. However, how race functions for these characters is never explored, and how race functions in society and in personal relationships is muted in all of the novels. In *Just Listen*, Annabel's best friend, Clarke, from whom she becomes estranged was born in China but adopted as an infant by an American couple. While her physical descriptions ("darkest, shiniest hair I've ever seen" and "eyes so brown they were almost black") fulfill what we associate with Asian features, her personality is no less stereotypical as she is described as "serious" and "measured and thoughtful" in contrast to Annabel, who is blonde, blue-eyed, and more outgoing (Dessen, 2008, p. 6). In a comparable way, Jason, Deanna's best friend in *Story of a Girl*, has a Japanese mother and a white, deceased father, leading to his description of black hair, long eyelashes, and blue eyes (Zarr, 2008). In both cases, how race might play a role in these characters, how they are perceived by others, and the connection between race and their outsider status in the novels is never explored. In *Tease*, race ends up utilized to see two characters, one a minor character and another integral to the plot, but again these descriptions fall into stereotypes without clearly articulating what these racial markers might mean for those characters or the fictional world of the novel. Sara describes a legal intern as "hot" and whose "very dark [skin]...looks nice against his shirt,

which was a bright lilac color” (Maciel, 2014, p. 3). While we are told this character is black, Teresa, the therapist who works with Sara throughout the novel, has an unclear racial or ethnic identity save for her “ridiculously smooth light brown skin” and the “pretty and colorful” way she dressed (Maciel, 2014, p. 33).

The “color blind” approach that these novels utilize displays white privilege in the uses of racial and ethnic markers in such a way that readers will understand their meanings but will not expect race to be deconstructed in any meaningful way, thus highlighting the use of race as a mode of address for the white reader. The world is overwhelming and by default white and race need not be explored by the main character because it’s her story after all to tell. How race figures into the lives of other characters she cares about is not something she needs to trouble herself with. This discourse of silence around race is hardly surprising given the amount of silence around race in much of American society, which is a fundamental aspect of white privilege.

### **Mode of Address: The Suburbanite**

Braided with their portrayals of race and class in America, the authors set the novels analyzed here in North American suburbs in the United States in Canada. This setting is not neutral but weaves in aspects of race, class, and consumerism discussed earlier in this chapter. Post-war suburbs provided Americans with a center for “affluence and strength” (Lesko, 2012, p. 125), and as such emphasized racial and class segregation as suburbs were created as part of “the new consumer society [that] was fundamentally redirecting the American character from productivity to social conformity” (p. 125). This expectation of conformity may have had its price, but the suburbs offered a way of life centered on space and leisure activities made possible through the separation of the

domestic and work spheres; moving to the suburbs then assured not only the accumulation of financial wealth and middle class (or higher) status as well as the cultural capital focused on American consumerism (Bourdieu, 1986). But what price was paid for such accumulations for families and individuals who may have gained much in material possessions but are confronted with clear limits on what is acceptable behavior and lifestyle choices? By 1999, *The New York Times* addressed the worries about the suburbs and their impact on adolescent in an article entitled, “How Suburban Design is Failing Teen-Agers,” and its publication came less than a month following the school violence at Columbine High School, an event cited by many bullying theorists as focal in our understandings of the nature of adolescent violence but one that has been widely misunderstood and far less about bullying and teens and far more about mental health issues in America. In the midst of such debates, this article forefronts adult concerns that the “safe havens from the sociological ills of the cities” have become infested with their own “environmental diseases” like “isolation and dissociation from the reality of contact with other people” (1999). Such critiques in the wake of mass murder committed by and against adolescents in the school setting provoke every anxiety American society might conjure on both how and where we live.

In each of the novels, readers are assumed to be familiar with and residents of these suburbs. While each novel clearly employs descriptions of life in the suburbs, this information also assumes an insider’s knowledge and a mode of address to readers that the suburbs and the experience of living in the suburbs will be familiar. In *Before I Fall*, Sam describes a life focused on “malls and basement parties” (p. 37) as well as her hometown’s infamy in the news media for its numerous teen suicides. This connection

between death and the suburbs comes up again in *13 Reasons Why* when Hannah not only describes how unhappy she has been living in her town, but also uses a map to propel Clay on his journey to understand the reasons why she has killed herself. Thus, place matters and becomes the literal markers for Hannah's death since not only people she interacted with are indicted for her suicide but also the places *where* they interacted. Such unhappiness is similar to the sense of ennui Deanna describes in *Story of A Girl*, which is focused on an actual place Pacifica, California, which is a suburb of the far more cosmopolitan and historically diverse San Francisco. Her claims that Pacifica is boring and nothing happens there could have been uttered by any of the characters in these novels but is also an archetype of suburban life pervasive in multiple forms of American pop culture from movies to songs and television.

But teen boredom is only one aspect of the challenges of the suburbs as portrayed in these novels. As Regina in *Some Girls Are* explains, "everyone knows everyone else" (Summers, 2009, p. 13), which can offer a comforting sense of belonging but can also leave one aware that little room for error or mistakes is available because everyone not only knows you but is also aware of your foibles and judges them and you. This aspect of suburban life was reported by several of the girls I observed and interviewed as part of the ethnographic project I completed and discussed earlier. This aspect of suburban life also echoes Foucault's idea of "disciplinary power," whereby one realizes one is under surveillance and begins to internalize this sense of being watched (qtd. in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 419). As St. Pierre (2000) explains, "Disciplinary power works invisibly because of the visibility of the prisoner. The inmate is constantly being seen, examined, and subjected – he is the trapped object of the guard's gaze (p. 491). Those girls, challenged by the issues

of peer criticism, sexual harassment, and bullying similar those what has been found in the novels, articulated a common fear of making choices in life because one of the hardest consequences to deal with was peer criticism and ostracism. Joined with this knowledge that everyone knew them and thus knew what they were up to at all times, they articulated a sense that in their town people, both adults and young people, lived a sort of dual lifestyle similar to one described by Annabel in *Just Listen*. She lives in a literal glass house, designed by her father who is an architect, that “seemed like you were seeing everything, but you really weren’t” (Dessen, 2008, p. 48). This illusion made possible by how the house was built and landscaped suggests that how one constructs one’s life it is possible to appear one way to outsiders but actually be living a completely different and hidden life. Such a dichotomy suggests common tropes of the suburbs, which these authors assume readers can understand and take up: the suburbs may offer a comfortable lifestyle but how that life is lived is problematic and unsatisfying.

Such attitudes about where the novels take place also connect with how the adolescents in these novels choose to pass their time. Once again, they take up behaviors that these authors assume readers will be familiar with both as participants and because they have become rites of passage with adolescence: the use of drugs and alcohol. Of these seven novels, six of them include the uses of drugs and alcohol by the adolescent characters as part of the culture of their “social worlds,” mostly centered on the parties alluded to by Samantha (Finders, 1997). Once again, the authors have employed a lifestyle choice that is often associated with adolescents especially as it relates to adult and societal concerns about adolescent behavior. At the same time, as will be discussed in the following subsection on female sexuality, using alcohol fuels many of the choices

made by female characters around their sexuality and bullying. These novels then invite readers to visit places that the authors assume readers will already be familiar with: suburban towns where teens party out of adult control as a way to relieve their sense of boredom and alienation, but such choices invariably lead to more sadness and even tragedy.

### **Mode of Address: Going Solo**

The sense of alienation ascribed to adolescents living in the suburbs extends to their relationships with parents and families, and once again this attitude is employed by authors as a way of addressing readers because of its relationship to the developmental theory of human development. If as many theorists like Hall, Piaget, and Erickson have argued that children move from youth to adulthood on a normalized course of stages that build one upon another, the key step in adolescence is the ability to separate from one's family of origin in order to become an independent adult. But such a huge deportation from one's most important relationships between parent and child and even between siblings cannot be understood without acknowledging the loss and grief that must accompany such individuation. However, in American culture with our value for individualism, such movement from home into the world is accepted as normal and important for one's development as will be discussed in the next section. In order to accomplish this stage of development then, adolescents must be willing to transfer primacy of relationships from parents to peers, and this narrative is accepted in American society as the dominant force in an adolescent's life. Such alienation from parents is taken up in each of these novels except for one, *Sticks and Stones*.



In *Sticks and Stones*, Jujube remains close to her mother, who is portrayed as a sort of feminist and working class hero as has been discussed previously. Her mother's role as single parent and breadwinner for her family of two is coupled with her welcoming a friend and her daughter who have been victimized by domestic violence. At the same time, Jujube eventually confides in her mother about her own harassment and bullying, which makes this novel unique among the seven under study. Once she has been informed of Jujube's mistreatment by her peers, her mother confronts the school administration, and while Jujube ends up solving this problem at school she retains complete faith in her mother's ability to deal with this administrator and her willingness to take on the school power structure to defend her daughter. I remain convinced that these elements of this novel are dependent on the assumed readers for this text since it has been published as part of a series of reluctant readers, students who are often challenged by economics, race, and language as well as learning. Thus, this author constructs a parent-child dyad that assumes a positive attitude toward the working class and single mothers.

On the other hand, the remaining six novels contain parent-child relationships that are troubled, and these authors have constructed these relationships because our cultural assumptions about the parents and young people, especially in wealthier communities, during adolescence is that this time of life is fraught. According to these novels, adults are unaware of and perhaps uninterested in the social worlds of adolescents as Regina in *Some Girls Are* explains when she tells readers she has to negotiate on her own the "real world" of peers and bullying (Summers, 2009, p. 124). Further, she believes "her parents are useless," which is a common belief that articulated by all of the main characters in

these six novels (Summers, 2009, p. 124). At the same time, this alienation has an ambivalent quality about it in that these young women understand, as Regina articulates, “we’re all trying in some small ways trying to be good” and so parents can be seen with a certain amount of sympathy (Summers, 2009, p. 124), and at times in each novel these main characters admit, as Regina does, “for a second I do need her” (Summers, 2009, p. 64). But this ambivalence is less a position of resistance to a cultural narrative of alienation from parents but more an actual part of the narrative: adolescents are moving away from their parents but they recognize they still need and want guidance, intervention, and love from their parents.

Still, feelings of alienation also appear as a result of an adolescent’s newfound position as outsider within the family. As each of the main characters spends more and more time with her peers, she can see her family of origin in different ways thus allowing the ability to analyze and even critique the family of origin in ways never possible before. Loyalties have shifted from family to peers and thus, the main character can judge the family of origin from a safe distance while feeling supported by peers. Annabel in *Just Listen* embodies this possibility due to her sense of isolation when she tells no one about her rape as well as her burgeoning relationship with Owen. Thus, as she explains, she has learned in her family to act as if “everything is fine” despite her mother’s clinical depression and her sister’s struggles with an eating disorder. These lessons for how to comport one’s self include how to “just [keep] it in” and in her case keeping it in includes her rape as well as ostracism and bullying at school. Throughout the novel, her ability to resolve these issues depends on her ability to stop colluding with her family of origin and find new strategies for responding to life’s challenges. Outsider status becomes possible

for an adolescent not only through peer relationships but also through romantic relationships and the choice to become sexually active.

For Deanna in *Story of A Girl*, her decision to have sex with an older boy leads to her ostracism from her father, which creates a fracture within their relationship as well as the family as a whole. When Deanna engages in sex with a friend of her older brother, she has complicated and conflicting reasons for her choice, which were outlined in Chapter Five. Adults, particularly parents, may meet the decision for any adolescent to be sexually active with all sorts of reactions. In this novel, Deanna's father reacts with such anger, resentment, and rejection of her that suggests his realization that Deanna is indeed a separate person with her own desires and dreams for her life. She is an agentic *person*, and not merely *his* daughter. Ultimately, Deanna repairs this relationship through a combination of confronting her father for his treatment of her and an acceptance of his limitations as a parent. While in these novels Annabel and Deanna are able to repair relationships with their parents, such a happy ending does not occur for Hannah in *13 Reasons Why* or Samantha in *Just Listen*.

In these novels, resolution such as it is comes with death of these main characters. While Hannah leaves behind a legacy of cassette tapes to indict all those she believes responsible for her death, she does not directly accuse her parents; they are not among the 13. However, she describes the distance she feels from them as a profound loss and perhaps the final aspect of her lonely life she cannot tolerate. While she explains a mature understanding that this distance was the result of her parents' attempts to save their business, she reports feeling unmoored when her mother fails to notice her new haircut (Asher, 2007, p. 169). Perhaps her parents did not contribute to her death, but Hannah

suggests that they did not save her either. On the other hand, for Samantha, it is her death that leads her to appreciate her parents and resolve her feelings of estrangement from them and her younger sister. Samantha's death leads to this rapprochement with her family, but this change offers a tragic resolution that can never be enjoyed in the real time of the novel since Sam only appreciates her family once she understands she will lose them forever due to her death. In both cases of these novels, the didactic feature of these relationships will be further discussed in the conclusion section of this chapter.

When resolution of parent-child relationship does become possible such change is predicated on the ability of both parents and main characters to see one another and their interactions in new ways. This re-visioning of their relationship suggests for readers that as much as alienation might be the norm, getting along with one another improves the emotional health of families and the main character. For Sara in *Tease*, she reconsiders her anger and resentment toward her working, newly divorced mother once her mother admits to her, "I'm on your side," which offers Sara a salve for the sense of isolation she articulates since the novel's start (Maciel, 2014, p. 235). At the end of this novel, Sara feels closer to her mother who has offered words of comfort but has also kept a promise to Sara that she would make more time for family despite her work responsibilities which also comforts Sara who had once complained, "You don't know *anything*. You're never here" (Maciel, 2014, p. 274).

In all of these novels, the authors include as part of the narrative structure the commonly accepted aspect of adolescent development that conflict with parents will occur and must occur as part of the progress from child to adult. Readers will understand and take up this alienation and ambivalence as a way to understand the main characters'

motivations but also to sympathize with these characters at the same time that they can use the novels to understand their own relationships with parents. At the center of these narratives of parents and children remains the discourse of adolescence prevalent in American society and a foundational aspect of all Young adult fiction, if not *the* very cultural discourse that allowed the genre's creation and ongoing popularity.

All people want to make sense of life and experiences, which can often feel unpredictable. Readers come to texts seeking many things, and one of them is clarity. Fiction, in particular, offers a safe space, separate from one's own life but reflective of the worlds readers inhabit as well. Narrative and storytelling resonate with readers because it puts structure and meaning onto what can otherwise feel like a chaotic universe. When readers enter the fictional worlds created by authors, many aspects of a novel can and must be familiar. Once a reader is grounded in that space, readers can identify with and want to know more about the characters whom they come to care about and identify with as they read. In the next chapter, I address the female characters and their relationships with female friends.

## CHAPTER 5

### READING POWER: READING FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

*“Girls usually like to find out about the rumors or whatever’s going around before and they’ll tell as many people as they can to make it more appealing.” ~ Melanie*

A central conceit in American culture regarding adolescence positions this period as one of independence and autonomy as teens move both literally and figuratively from the family home into the social worlds of school, peers, and romantic relationships (Unruh, 1980). Such ideas come from a variety of sources – in the claims of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from Hall (1905) regarding adolescence to developmental psychologists like Piaget and Erikson to today’s researchers in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and sociology. Their claims run concurrent with and often use as their evidence economic and social mores as well as changes to family structures across the twentieth century, which have been outlined in the literature review and will be taken up further in the Implications and Conclusion chapter. Developmental categories like childhood and adolescence take on meaning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the post-World War II era with the abandonment of child labor and a rising middle class that could turn its attention to young people with new insights. This re-visioning of lifespan development also occurs with a rise in the social sciences, including psychology, psychiatry, social work, and education, that gain traction in the study of and articulation of specific developmental milestones as key steps on a path toward a coherent and stable concept of a self whose purpose is to achieve a psychologically sound and socially-normed adulthood (Lesko, 1996). The work of adolescence, these theorists argue, is to act as a time-bridge of sorts whereby children can emerge into the world, build relationships with people outside the family circle, and engage in meaningful work while still buttressed by parents and the family of origin. In

this chapter, same-sex friendships between female characters will be discussed and the ways these relationships are portrayed as emotionally healthy and/or quite problematic. In addition, this chapter will focus as these novels do on the myriad ways these problematic relationships lead to or encourage bullying, harassment, violence, and in some cases, death.

### **Friendships: True Friendships**

The concept of friend appears easy to understand, but enacting friendship is quite personal and derives from our very human desire to be connected with others in order to have a variety of needs met. However, a number of theorists agree that one element in particular is key to understanding friendship and its importance for adolescence: intimacy (Berndt, 2002; Collins and Laursen, 2004). Intimacy, which rests on the idea of self-disclosure, allows one to share one's feelings, ideas, and experiences and know they are valued because there is another person in whom one can confide without being judged (Berndt, 1992)). This supposed lack of judgment distinguishes peer friendships from relationships with parents because at their core, these different relationships have different goals, and thus allow for differing levels of acceptance, trust, and self-disclosure (Giardino, 2003). Intimacy arises when one can be honest about inner thoughts, desire, fears, and actions with the knowledge that acceptance and unconditional love will result. But friendships are not without their conflicts, and are often sites of intense feelings of rivalry (Berndt, 2004; Giardino, 2003).

In the case of the seven novels in this study, all of the books include relationships between same-sex people who define themselves as friends. In fact, each novel is rife with self-disclosures, but what friends do with such information and how intimacies

converge with other issues like power and sexuality propel the dramatic tension in each novel but also provide insights into the ways adolescent relationships are framed for young people, but by adults who are the books' authors. In the case of these novels, even what appear to be relationships with positive friendship quality (Hartup, 1996), questions of loyalty, rivalry, and jealousy figure in these very personal entanglements. In addition, in the case of several of the novels, opposite-sex friendships are included, but these act as precursors to romantic relationships, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6. For all of these friendships, the impact of social contexts is never far from the plot and the characters' understanding of what it means to be and have a friend.

While the seven novels contain examples of same-sex friendships, few of the novels under study include relationships that are positive in friendship quality (Hartup, 1996). In fact, as will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 8, relationships among female characters are problematic in multiple ways, even when the friendships appear to be emotionally healthy and satisfying. Only one of the friendships described in these novels are free of betrayal and disappointment. While theorists who study adolescent relationships will argue that no friendship is fully positive, it is telling that *only one* example of positive female friendship could be found in seven novels, a fact that will be explored further here and in Chapter 8.

Deanna has few friends, but feels close to two people whom she sees as her best friends. Jason has been her friend since childhood, and displays qualities that matter to her: he's "loyal" and "gets it," so his ability to both understand and stand by Deanna matter to her (Zarr, 2007, p. 8). On the other hand, Lee, who is newly moved to Pacifica, offers Deanna an intimate same-sex friendship on which to depend. Deanna explains that



she is drawn to Lee as a friend because “she was different from most of the other girls,” which includes the ways girls typically “were always talking smack about their supposed best friends,” hinting both at Deanna’s treatment among her peers and need for loyalty (Zarr, 2007, p. 9). Once they become friends, Lee confides in Deanna about her father’s alcoholism, which leads Deanna to confess about her relationship with her own father and what happened with Tommy when she was 13. However, this friendship becomes complicated when Jason (for whom Deanna has romantic feelings) begins a relationship with Lee. While, on the one hand, Deanna respects their budding romance, she is plagued by feelings of jealousy and self-doubt about her own worthiness. Deanna’s complicated feelings about her friends, their relationship, and herself lead her to betray Lee in two ways. First, Lee goes to her to ask advice about having sex with Jason. During this scene, Deanna admits to herself that she wants to “help her decide. I’d be a friend,” but that impetus is at war with her own feelings for Jason and her sense of shame and remorse at having had sex with Tommy (Zarr, 2007, p. 79). She feels jealous that Lee is “getting to think about losing her virginity with a nice guy like Jason,” (Zarr, 2007, p. 79) and in fact sees this choice, one she was denied, as “wasn’t fair” (Zarr, 2007, p. 78). Deanna’s response to Lee that she should not “waste her time” on either Jason or herself (Zarr, 2007, p. 79) leaves Lee in tears as Deanna walks away from her even as she knows she should have done more for her friend: “I couldn’t be that person, somehow, no matter how much I wanted to. She was inside me; I could see her and picture her, hear her. But who was I to *be* her?” (Zarr, 2007, p. 78).

Her second betrayal occurs when Lee and her family have gone on a camping trip, leaving Jason and Deanna to hang out as friends. They end up kissing, an act initiated by

Deanna but very much mutual on both their parts. Later, when Lee has returned from the trip, Jason confesses to her, and before Deanna can say anything, Lee forgives her: “‘It’s okay,’ she said, quietly. ‘It’s okay’” (Zarr, 2007, p. 178). This aspect of forgiveness, which is a thread running through this novel as well as the others and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, suggests that friends will do wrong, but that the relationship can continue. However, this female friendship is complicated because it offers an example as much about intimacy as it does about duplicity.

Disloyalty among friends also appears in the relationship between Annabel and her friend Clarke Reynolds. The two girls have been friends for over ten years, meeting first when they were six years old. However, when they are in sixth grade, Sophie, a new girl moves to town and her arrival will presage the end of their friendship. While the three will spend time together, it becomes clear to Annabel that friendship with both girls will not be possible. Annabel describes her attempts at understanding and negotiating the “politics of girls” (Dessen, 2008, p. 26) throughout the novel, and the problems that occur between Annabel and Clarke are largely the result of her desire to be liked by Sophie and accepted into her social world, a world much more focused on appearance, popularity, and boys. This conflict comes to a head when the three begin an evening together at Clarke’s house for pizza and a movie, but Sophie presents the option of going to hang out and drink with some boys they know, including a boy that Annabel has feelings for.

When Clarke refuses to go along both because her parents have told her not to go out and because she doesn’t want to, Annabel has a choice between “..Clarke, my best friend...everything we’d always done and known” versus “..this whole other world, uncharted and open, at least for a little while, this one night” (Dessen, 2008, p. 72). But

Annabel also admits she looks back on that choice differently in the present time of the novel: "...it was this moment with Sophie, my fear of what would happen if I stood up to her, that stopped me" (Dessen, 2008, p. 74). Her regret at that choice leads her to also understand: "Looking back, maybe if I had approached Clarke again, we could have worked things out. But I didn't. It was like the passing time and my guilt and shame opened up a chasm, wider and wider" (Dessen, 2008, p. 75). This chasm, interestingly, will be bridged not when Annabel is ostracized by Sophie and alone at school day after day, but when Annabel's relationship with Owen, which will be discussed in Chapter 6, brings her and Clarke back into the same social circle through their boyfriends. In fact, Clarke admits that she was "mad. [...] But then you never came around, you never called. You were just gone" and that her feelings of anger and betrayal have been changed because of her feelings for Rolly and the time Annabel has been spending with Owen (Dessen, 2008, p. 319). This rapprochement, which follows years of hurt feelings, becomes possible through the young men both of these friends love. At the novel's conclusion, their friendship continues (as do their relationships with each young man), but as Annabel describes the intimacy of earlier times has been changed irrevocably: "It wasn't like it had been, but then neither of us would have wanted that anyway. As it was, we were just happy to be hanging out. Everything else, we took day by day" (Dessen, 2008, p. 367).

But for Jujube, friendship does provide an oasis of intimacy that supports her when she is the victim of harassment and slut-shaming. However, this friendship may also contribute to how she is stereotyped by her peers at school. Jujube and her mother share their home with Sophie and her mother, whose family life has been upended due to

domestic violence perpetrated against Sophie and alcoholism on her mother's part. In the time period before moving into their home and while her mother was in rehab, Sophie was placed in a group home. Rather than being comforted by friends at school, rumors circulated that she was "doing time for hooking," (Goobie, 2002, p. 34) which later affects Jujube when she is passed a note in school that reads: "*Getting into the family business*" (Goobie, 2002, p. 36). While both girls are impacted by such harassment and their status as outsiders, neither lets it affect their relationship, nor do they let it prevent them from responding to their tormentors. As Sophie says, "We'll show them family" (Goobie, 2002, p. 40). These young women work together to challenge the situation at school at the same time that Jujube supports Sophie to deal with her mother's decision to move back in with her father. In this novel, this friendship may be complicated by outside contexts, but it also provides emotional sustenance and a sense of sisterhood as these adolescent young women try to understand and respond to familial situations, peer interactions, and institutional failures within school (Goobie, 2002, p. 43).

If some aspects of female friendships offer heartening examples of intimacy and mutuality in these novels, the majority provide examples of the kinds of jealousy, rivalry, and search for domination alluded to by researchers in the real world on friendship. However, in these fictional worlds the examples are stark in the amount and levels of dysfunction included. Why this is the case will be discussed in more detail in this chapter and in Chapter 8.

### **Friendships: Not True Friendships**

Out of the seven novels in this study, five take as their premise a close female friendship that becomes problematic and, in fact, creates much of the conflict in the novel.

Rather than friendship as a source of emotional intimacy and support, these friendships lead to feelings of sadness, isolation, guilt, and in some cases emotional and physical abuse. If intimacy remains an integral part of friendships in the real world, in these novels such intimacies are in many ways the spark that leads to severe conflict both interpersonally among the friend pair, among the larger social circles of peers, peers in a student body, and intra-personally for the main characters.

If Annabel has made the choice to betray her friendship with Clarke in order to enter an “unchartered and open” new world made possible through her friendship with Sophie, Annabel is also quite clear that this choice is not without cost. She “envied” Sophie because of her “bravado,” because Annabel saw in her all the things she wished she could do, but would not: “I couldn’t say what I wanted, but I could always count on her to speak up, and the events she set into motion—always a little risky, at least for me, but fun at the same time—were ones I never would have gotten to experience left to my own devices” (Dessen, 2008, p. 68). Friendship with Sophie also provided access to the social worlds Annabel had only watched from afar previously: “...only once we were friends...I was popular[...] The bossy girls and whispered comments that had always unnerved me didn’t bother her at all, and I found it was much easier to cross the various social barriers once she’s already busted through them for me” (Dessen, 2008, p. 76).

On the other hand, Annabel tells readers, “there were moments when I felt uneasy around Sophie, although it was hard to put my finger on why, exactly” (Dessen, 2008, p. 68). If a sense of unease nags at Annabel, she adapts to it in order to reap the supposed benefits of having a friend, though in a relationship she clearly sees as conditional rather than mutual: “The truth was my relationship with Sophie was complicated, and at times I

wondered why she was my best friend, when more often than not I was either tiptoeing around her or having to ignore one barbed comment or another. But then I'd remember how much things had changed for me since we'd started hanging out..." (Dessen, 2008, p. 116). At the same time, Annabel expresses her fear that without Sophie, she will have no one: "Like maybe she was right, that without her I really would be nothing. A part of me knew this wasn't true, but there was this small sliver of doubt, nagging like a splinter" (Dessen, 2008, p. 119).

As described earlier, Annabel was in fact fearful of Sophie and how she would handle things if Annabel stood up to her (Dessen, 2008, p. 74). This fear comes to fruition when Sophie's boyfriend rapes Annabel at a party. When Sophie walks into the room where this assault takes place, she immediately turns on Annabel although readers have been told previously that rumors about Will's interactions with other girls have long plagued their relationship. Still, Sophie labels her a "slut" and warns her, "It's so over for you" (Dessen, 2008, p. 267). Despite Annabel's attempt to explain what has happened, not only does Sophie not believe Annabel, but sets out to punish her by seeing to it that *Sophie's* version of what happened is the version believed, as Annabel explains, "The lines had been drawn, and now I knew for sure I was standing outside of them" (Dessen, 2008, p. 18). Annabel's ostracism among their social circle is made more complete at school due to their friendship and how Annabel has acted in the past toward other girls: "My association with Sophie didn't help. [...] To the girls Sophie had insulted and isolated while I stood by doing nothing, my own taste of this medicine was nothing short of deserved. If Sophie couldn't be ostracized, I was the next best thing" (Dessen, 2008, p. 19). Sophie's decision to banish Annabel for her purported indiscretion

comes as no surprise to Annabel because Sophie had previously made clear the code she believed all girls must operate with: “If you know a guy has a girlfriend—especially if that girlfriend is me—there’s absolutely no reason you should do anything with him that could be taken the wrong way. It’s a choice, Annabel. If you make the wrong one, you have only yourself to blame when there are consequences” (Dessen, 2008, p. 124).

A similar story of friendship undone by a sexual assault victim who is not believed occurs for Regina. She, too, attends a party with her social circle, a party where drugs and alcohol are plentiful, and she too is assaulted by her best friend’s boyfriend. But before that attack changes her life, Regina understands, much like Annabel, that her friendship with Anna Morrison provides her with more than a confidante: “You’re either someone or you’re not. I was someone. I was Regina Afton. I was Anna Morrison’s best friend” (Summers, 2009, p. 1). Like many friends, they share clothes, but even this aspect of their friendship makes clear the hierarchy involved: “Anna loaned me a shirt and skirt, and everything she owns is nice. *I want you to look good for once, Regina*” (Summers, 2009, p. 3). At the same time, much like Sophie, Anna delineates her territory when it comes to Donnie, her boyfriend: “Anna likes to say that we’ve been hate-fucking ever since, which is too gross for me to contemplate. It’s a gunshot kind of thing for her to say—a warning. The way she says it, it’s like she can see it happening, and the way she says it lets me know I better not let it happen” (Summers, 2009, p. 6). Whatever intimacies may have been part of this friendship, they are quickly spent once Anna finds out that Donnie has attacked Regina. However, in a move of double-duplicity, Regina is betrayed not only by Anna, but also by Kara, another girl in their friendship group. Regina quickly realizes that she is the victim of a “freeze out” (Summers, 2009, p. 15)

when she encounters their group of friends at school, and led by Anna, they ignore her presence. Much later in the novel when this banishment has turned into emotional and physical abuse, Regina considers a memory of their relationship: "...all I see is us. Me and Anna. Kara and Jeannette and Mara. No Josh, no Donnie, no Michael. Nothing is complicated. We are the sweet side of thirteen ...[...] Anna is this carefree vision that makes my heartache, because I don't know what happened to her, but she used to be good" (Summers, 2009, p. 150). Despite this recollection of childhood innocence and unity among friends, or perhaps because this memory is such a stark counterpoint to how they have behaved with one another more recently, Regina can only come to one conclusion to answer her own question of what happened to them as individuals and as friends: "We're sick. We're sick. We're sick girls" (Summers, 2009, p. 150). In this novel, far less time is given to explicating this happy past, and far more narrative time focuses on the breakdown in this group of friends and how dangerous friendships become once they are derailed by boys, jealousy, and mistrust.

This interplay between girls, friendship, power, and disappointment shows itself as well in Sara's friendship with Brielle. When they first become friends in eighth grade, Sara describes herself as "hopeless," and is drawn immediately to her because "Brielle was—still is—fearless" (Maciel, 2014, p. 3). Sara's sense of Brielle as "the brave one" comes up during a conversation they have about Sara's decision to have sexual intercourse for the first time with her boyfriend Dylan (Maciel, 2014, p. 18). This conversation about an intimate decision, which Sara shares with no one else, is framed as a choice for Sara between her world view and Brielle's: "But like I said, Brielle doesn't get scared, and even if she did, I wouldn't know how to explain why I am" (Maciel, 2014,



p. 18). As the conversation between confidantes continues, Brielle pushes Sara to see that if she doesn't have sex with Dylan, another girl with whom they have conflicts, Emma, will. She reminds her that Dylan “won’t text Emma if he’s getting the good stuff from you” (Maciel, 2014, p. 18; p. 30), and even positions Sara’s decision to have sex with Dylan as part of a rivalry with Emma that may or may not exist: “Emma called you a tease” (Maciel, 2014, p. 27). Brielle’s role as life-coach for Sara extends to the section in the novel when Sara does have sex with Dylan at a party. She begins to laugh and scream and yells at Sara, ““OMG, you’re such a slut!”” (Maciel, 2014, p. 56). But this sharing of life experiences is a one-way street since Sara realizes while Brielle has told her that she has had sex, thereby making Brielle more knowledgeable about such choices, she also “[wonders] why I don’t know more about my BFF’s love life” (Maciel, 2014, p. 83). The secrets that Brielle carries and does not reveal to her “BFF” will be discussed below as they provide insights both for Sara as a character but also for readers in how to understand the machinations of a bully. Once Emma has committed suicide, Sara and Brielle are no longer allowed to be friends due to the nature of the legal proceedings facing both girls. Sara spends this separation processing this friendship and its role in her life as well admitting a sense of relief now that she is free of Brielle’s influence, especially when she begins a friendship with Carmichael, a boy from their school. Rather than be happy for Sara, Brielle, she is sure, would have mocked her for this new relationship because, as will be discussed in the next chapter, Carmichael is very much an outsider to their social world at school.

For Sam, friendship provides as much conflict as it does ballast for life, and her role in her friendship group never feels completely solid. She tells readers, “I feel like out

of the four of us I'm always tagging along, just there for the ride" (Oliver, 2010, p. 14). Sam's friendship with this group's leader Lindsay begins in seventh grade when "Lindsay picked me out. I'm still not sure why" (Oliver, 2010, p. 52). This feeling of being chosen matters all the more to her because Lindsay had been popular since first grade whereas Sam explains she "had only just clawed my way up from the social bottom to the social middle" (Oliver, 2010, p. 51). This achievement of social status is paired with the sense of Lindsay as special: "She's the kind of person who makes you feel drunk just by being around her, like suddenly the world's edges are dulled and all the colors are spinning together" (Oliver, 2010, p. 52).

However, silence is as much a part of their friendship as recognition of one another. Though their group, which includes leader Lindsay and two other girls Elody and Ally, spends a great deal of their time together, their relationship is predicated on the things they don't reveal or talk about honestly: "A good friend keeps your secrets for you. A best friend helps you keep your own secrets" (Oliver, 2010, p. 107). Of the many things they do not talk about including a parent's alcoholism and one girl's eating disorder, one thing Sam remembers but they never address is indeed her position with this group. She recalls, "We don't talk about the joke that for years trailed me down the hallways, into classrooms, and on the bus, that wove its way into my dreams: 'What's red and white and weird all over? Sam Kingston!' And we definitely don't talk about the fact that Lindsay was the one who made it up" (Oliver, 2010, p. 107). Later, this undercurrent to their friendship will lead Sam to tell Lindsay, "'We already know you don't give a shit about anybody but yourself. We've *always* known'" (Oliver, 2010, p. 191). This honesty with a girl who had been her best friend continues later in the novel when Sam admits,

“It’s the weirdest thing. I’m popular—really popular—but I don’t have that many friends. What’s even weirder is that it’s the first time I’ve noticed” (Oliver, 2010, p. 225). But Sam’s ability to be reflective and critical about her peer relationships comes at a great price as we will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter: she views her life as both participant and observer after she is in an automobile accident and has to relive her last day over and over. Only then does she allow herself to question the quality of her friendships, especially her relationship with Lindsay. But like the other main characters in these novels, their friendship provides social status and caché among their peers at school: “...we’re popular. And we’re popular because we can get away with everything. So it’s circular. [...] If you draw a circle, there will always be an inside and an outside, and unless you’re a total nutjob, it’s pretty easy to see which is which, it’s just what happens” (Oliver, 2010, p. 18). Sam’s understanding of the functioning of her social world includes a very clear cost-benefit analysis: “It’s nice that everything’s easy for us. It’s a good feeling knowing you can basically do whatever you want and there won’t be any consequences. [...] I know what it’s like to be on the other side. I was there for the first half of my life. The bottom, lowest of the low”( Oliver, 2010, p. 18). If her friendship with Lindsay and the other girls leave her lonely or unsure, Sam understands her social position has come about due to her acceptance as Lindsay’s friend. Only death leads her to question the quality of this friendship and who she has become as a result.

Death’s connection to friendship also appears in Hannah’s choice to commit suicide following her sense of betrayal by 13 people, including peers and adults, who are part of her social worlds of friendships and school. Of these 13, Hannah calls out two female friends in particular who have let her down. When Hannah first moves to

Crestmont at the beginning of her freshman year in high school, she gets to know Jessica, who is also new, along with a male new student, Alex. In fact, Hannah and Jessica are joined together as buddies by their guidance counselor, but Hannah's reluctance at this adult intrusion into her social life quickly turns to gratitude: "At that moment I would have paid dearly for Jessica's friendship. She was the most outgoing, honest, tell-it-like-it-is girl I'd ever met" (Asher, 2007, p. 61). Soon after they meet and starting hanging out at Monet's, a local coffee shop, Alex joins their circle: "Just three people, happy that the first day of school wouldn't be spent wandering the halls alone. Or eating lunch alone. Getting lost alone" (Asher, 2007, p. 61). While Hannah later admits that these three would not have necessarily become friends, the three continued a camaraderie at Monet's as they began the year at their new school, and privately Alex and Jessica begin a romantic relationship (Asher, 2007, p. 62). At the same time, Alex authors and sends around the school a list naming female students as "Who's Hot/Who's Not" (Asher, 2007, p. 63) When Hannah is on the list, but Jessica is not, she becomes angry and jealous. This list and Jessica's resulting break-up with Alex lead to a fight between the girls at Monet's. Their argument ends when Jessica attempts to hit Hannah, leaving her with a scar that became for Hannah a daily reminder of Jessica's betrayal: "But it's more than just a scratch. It's a punch in the stomach and a slap in the face. It's a knife in my back because you would rather believe some made-up rumor than what you already know to be true" (Asher, 2007, p. 68). In a similar fashion, Hannah believes she has become friends with Courtney, another girl at school, when she's invited to attend a party with her. Once at the party, she realizes Courtney was using her for a ride and that, in reality, Courtney is spreading rumors that Hannah has sex toys in her bedroom (Asher, 2007, p. 117). In both

situations, Hannah sees herself as the victim of rumors spread about her supposed sexual activity as well as the victim of betrayal by a female friend, whom she had hoped would understand her and act in a loyal manner.

### **The Mean and Powerful Friend: The Bully**

Each of these friendships includes bullying and harassment, either directly as part of the relational system or because the main character either victimizes and/or is victimized by a bully. In some of the novels, the main character has also acted as a bully. Bullying then is a quality of both the dyadic and group relations among the adolescents who populate these seven novels, and as will be discussed shortly and in Chapter 8, provide insights into how bullying functions as an aspect of power that these girls use in purposeful and meaningful ways.

Since Sam is best friends with Lindsay and part of the friendship circle that includes the both of them as well as Ally and Elody, she bullies indiscriminately following Lindsay's lead. As discussed previously, Sam enjoys the popularity that comes from her position as a member of this group. This position then allows them to judge and pick on other peers at school, especially other girls. In fact, the novel opens with the car accident that causes Sam's death but also with her final thoughts, which are focused on a memory of participating in the teasing of a girl in fourth grade. This event occurs before Sam is friends with Lindsay, yet she laughs along when Lindsay taunts Vicki Hallinan for being fat. As Sam considers that she's about to die, she also remembers that she "laughed along with everyone else" because "the whole point of growing up is learning to stay on the laughing side" (Oliver, 2010, p. 4).

But of all the peers they pick on, Lindsay has special animus toward Juliet. Although as Sam admits, “I’m not exactly sure why Lindsay started hating Juliet in the first place, or when,” she also describes how Lindsay has nicknamed Juliet “Mellow Yellow,” for supposedly urinating in her sleeping bag during a Girl Scout camping trip in fifth grade (Oliver, 2010, p. 41). Silly enough, still, this nickname follows Juliet into high school, and is one reason people don’t associate with her. Lindsay’s bullying, which will be discussed in more detail below, acts as a central feature of her character as well as an emerging conflict between she and Sam once Sam realizes she is reliving her final day of life over and over. Sam reflects on Lindsay, their friendship, and her bullying of Juliet in ways that make the novel a mystery of sorts; however, the mystery to be revealed is the origins of Lindsay as bully, and how unraveling that mystery will set Sam free after her death. Sam begins to piece together parts of Lindsay’s story, and considers the topics these friends never discussed but have shaped Lindsay into the bully she’s become. Sam shares Lindsay’s tale of date rape; she both admits it to this circle of friends, but also makes it clear this topic will not be further discussed (Oliver, 2010, p. 248). In the same scene, Sam discovers that Lindsay is bulimic. Later, Sam discovers that Lindsay and not Juliet had urinated in the sleeping bag, but had turned the story around to her benefit. This knowledge makes Sam realize “Lindsay’s not fearless. She’s terrified. She’s terrified that people will find out she’s faking...pretending to have everything together when really she’s just floundering like the rest of us” (Oliver, 2010, p. 407). This realization and a more intimate conversation between these friends allows Sam to ask why Lindsay started bullying Juliet, but rather than taking responsibility, Lindsay blames the victim by asking ““I thought she’d tell everybody what really happened. [...]

Why didn't she stick up for herself? Not once. She just—she took it. Why?" (Oliver, 2010, p. 408).

In a similar fashion, Sara describes how she became friends with Brielle: "I'm the same nobody I was when Brielle plucked me out of nowhere in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade" (Maciel, 2014, p. 243). And for her, like with Sam, being friends with Brielle offers access to a life Sara envies: "Everything is so easy for her—she's got plenty of other friends, she's got all the money in the world, she's pretty and effortless. Why did I think I could be that way too?" (Maciel, 2014, p. 245). But if Brielle enjoys status and material possessions, she also enjoys her role as bully in this novel. While Sara and Brielle pick on Emma because she's "creeping" on Sara's boyfriend Dylan (Maciel, 2014, p. 15), this animus is driven largely by Brielle's determination that "She [Emma] totally deserves this" (Maciel, 2014, p. 30) because while Brielle claims "boys don't know how to deal with sluts like Emma" (Maciel, 2014, p. 16), she clearly does. Brielle declares "I'm so gonna get her," and goes on to explain her justification for picking on Emma: "First she comes to this school and acts like a total spaz skank, and steals everyone's boyfriends, cries like a baby when people tell her to back off, flirts with *your* boyfriend, shows up at *my party* totally and completely *uninvited*, and then tattles to the principal about a stupid *joke* that she totally *deserved!*" (Maciel, 2014, p. 66). But also like Lindsay, Brielle's reasoning for being a bully are paired with a T-shirt that Brielle wears that states "Poor little rich girl" as if a pathos-tinged commentary on her life, which is echoed by Sara's mother who feels sorry for Brielle for being "lonely" (Maciel, 2014, p. 82). While Brielle's parents have provided her with a comfortable lifestyle, her cruelty is mirrored by the sense that she is unmoored and alone due to parental neglect. At the same time, Brielle confides in

Sara that she was raped at summer camp, which surprises Sara not only because she thought this had been a consensual sexual experience but also because this reconfigures Sara's understanding of who Brielle is: "Girls like Brielle don't get in trouble at all. Girls like Brielle get roses on Valentine's Day from half the damn school. Girls like Brielle get whatever they want" (Maciel, 2014, p. 94). Perhaps this information allows Sara to understand Brielle as a bully because she knows her teasing is "her survival instinct" (Maciel, 2014, p. 237), but whatever her reasoning, including a desire to keep her status, Sara follows Brielle's lead and their bullying of Emma continues up to her final decision to take her own life.

Annabel, too, admits that although she questions Sophie as both a friend and a good person, and though Sophie distances Annabel from Clarke, Annabel follows her lead and only stops being friends with Sophie when she turns on her, too. Annabel admits "Hanging out with her made me a party to all her various social crimes and misdemeanors—and there were many—" and that her participation while silent was in fact still cruel: "...the girls Sophie had insulted and isolated while I stood by doing nothing..." (Dessen, 2008, p. 19) and "I'd been the one who walked alongside Sophie while she did her dirty work" (p. 65). Annabel is no innocent, but she is also no bully without Sophie's direction as Annabel sees it.

Her role as silent participant may have been as much out of a desire for status as it was out of fear, leading to an understanding of Sophie as cruel: "You were either with her—or, more specifically, following her—or against her. There was no in between. So, while being her friend was often hard, being on her bad said would be much, much worse" (Dessen, 2008, p. 120). Sophie's power, like with Brielle and Lindsay, is coupled with a



family history that hints at dysfunction and sadness: her parents are divorced, and her father is absent from the scene (Dessen, 2008, p. 68). In fact, like with Brielle, parental neglect is one aspect of this character's life: "For all her bravado, I knew Sophie had her own problems. Her parents had just recently divorced, and while she'd mentioned repeatedly all her stuff her dad bought here [...] Mr. Rawlins supposedly wasn't in contact with Sophie or her mom at all" (Dessen, 2008, p. 68). In addition, she is described as being jealous of other girls, "especially pretty ones, even though she herself was gorgeous" (Dessen, 2008, p. 116), and one can wonder if this jealousy is included in the novel as a way to understand her motivation as a bully. This question will be addressed later in this chapter and in Chapter 8 as it relates to all of the characters of bullies drawn in these novels since they share similar circumstances that motivate their actions, but they also lack the self-analysis the main characters use as the novels progress.

While we know less about Anna Morrison's home life, we are told that her friendship with Regina is founded on similar inter-relationships of popularity and power. Regina admits that not only does she "need someone to tell me what to do," but that "Anna always tells [her] what to do" (Summers, 2009, p. 9), which suggests a kind of power differential tangled with the intimacy of friendship similar to other friendships in these novels. For Regina, like Sara and Annabel, believes she needs Anna in order to feel like a fully-realized person: "I was someone" through her friendship with Anna (Summers, 2009, p. 1), which Regina believes is not a small thing and "worth keeping her mouth shut for," which suggests both a desire to be known but also an understanding that she is complicit in Anna's behavior toward other peers (Summers, 2009, p. 1). Their friendship group, nicknamed the "Fearsome Five," is understood for the power it wields:

“Everyone is afraid of us” (Summers, 2009, p. 13). This power and Regina’s inclusion in this group, led by Anna, attracts Regina: “Anna, Kara, Jeannette, and Marta usually wait for me at the front so we can enter school the Fearsome Fivesome. It’s the only part of the day I sort of live, standing next to Anna, untouchable” (Summers, 2009, p. 13).

Regina’s conflict between the benefits of being in Anna’s orbit and how cruel Anna can be are addressed both in her reflections on the past and the present time of the novel when Anna and the other girls who had been her friends bully her. As she explains, “We’re the kind of popular that parents like to pretend doesn’t exist so they can sleep at night, and we’re the kind of popular that makes our peers unable to sleep at night. Everybody hates us, but they’re afraid of us, too. Anna thrives on it” (Summers, 2009, p. 21). Anna’s reasoning for her approach to the social world of school is plain: “*These people are nothing. They don’t matter. None of this matter. There’s a whole world outside of this hellhole. God, Regina. You could at least act like you give a damn*” (Summers, 2009, p. 21). As with Brielle and Sophie, part of Anna’s power and prestige come from her physical appearance, which Regina describes both to show who Anna is but also to denigrate herself: “Anna is beautiful, with her soft, fine auburn hair and the kind of body that brings guys to their knees. It’s a cliché, but she’s a Siren. Impossible to fight, there’s no better feeling than to hear her sing your name. [...] She wants me to feel like I’m not good enough to be acknowledged, and it’s working...” (Summers, 2009, p. 22). But Anna’s decision to turn on Regina and not believe her is both a result of their relationship and power as it is about another member of the group, Kara, who actually has set Regina up. When Regina confides in her that Donnie has assaulted her, Kara uses this information to get back at Regina for the ways Regina and Anna had taunted Kara for

being overweight. At the core of their friendship and this group's cohesion rests a sense of jealousy, rivalry, and revenge that the members ordinarily use to strike out at other peers, but in the novel strike out at one another.

For Hannah, Deanna, and Jujube, bullying is described against a wider canvas: multiple people are cruel or pass rumors about each of these characters so bullying in these novels becomes more a systemic problem faced by adolescent young women among peers, and in the institutions that should protect them like school and family. The milieu of all of these novels normalizes bullying as an inherent feature of peer relations as well as showing adults to be impotent in addressing it or stopping it. In some cases the adults reinforce the power of bullies and rumors through their inability to understand what is actually happening in the adolescent social worlds even as events unfold in the classroom or school hallways. Parents are as ineffectual as school personnel, and in the case of Deanna's father actually act as a bully and set into motion her mistreatment at school.

### **The Weaker Girl: The Victim**

In order to be a bully, one must have a victim to target one's aggression and cruelty. In the novels under study, each book positions a character who is either in or is moved into a position of powerlessness, allowing them to become a victim. In this dynamic, the main character acts either as a silent partner or an active co-conspirator, although the limits of such behavior will be addressed below. On the other hand, in some of the novels, the bullying is directed toward the main character once her social status has been questioned and negated by the bully, a person who as explored above has often previously been a friend. Whatever the impetus for the bullying and harassment in these

novels, each situation illustrates how adolescents practice with and negotiate power in their relationships, even among the closest of friends, which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Though Sam slowly realizes the path to her redemption lies in helping Juliet Sykes, her understanding of why Juliet has been their target for years remains unclear to her for some time in the novel. Juliet first arrives in the narrative in the school cafeteria, a common setting for any YA novel since so much of an adolescent's life in school revolves around the hallways and cafeteria, locations mostly outside of adult control. When Juliet makes her appearance, Sam explains that she is ignored because she is "the definition of forgettable," except that Sam's group of four friends find it hard to forget her and taunt her by "making that screeching and stabbing motion from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*" (Oliver, 2010, p. 39). According to Sam, peers stay away from Juliet because "she's a freak" who doesn't talk and rumors abound about her strange behavior, rumors most often set into motion by Lindsay (Oliver, 2010, p. 40). As discussed previously, although Lindsay and Juliet had been friends in elementary school, Lindsay turns on her and leads the bullying against Juliet for years. Finally, Juliet defies their attacks on her when she initiates a confrontation with the four friends at a party (Oliver, 2010, p. 69). Although their reaction is to continue to mock her and even dump cups of beer on her head, Juliet's entanglement with this group lead to the car accident and the plot's central mystery: will Sam live or die as she repeats and revises the last day of her life that ended with a car accident on the way home from this party?

Along the way, Sam will decide to learn more about Juliet's actual life, because she understands that her fate is tied to Juliet's. As she starts to investigate Juliet's life, she

comes to learn that she, like Sam, has little sister named Marian as well as a challenging family situation due her father's alcoholism (Oliver, 2010, p. 291). As Sam uncovers Juliet's true story, she also realizes as described earlier that Juliet was a convenient target because of Lindsay's own issues. Juliet can be understood as weak in that she takes years of abuse by her peers before she confronts them in the middle of a party. However, she names them for who they are: "A bitch. A mean girl. A bad person" (Oliver, 2010, p. 69). At the same moment Juliet arrives at the party, Sam realizes she's never really seen Juliet before and now appears to recognize Juliet for who she really is: "...she's pretty. She has blue eyes set wide apart and high cheekbones, like a model's. Her skin is perfectly clear and white. I can't stop staring at her" (Oliver, 2010, p. 67). As the novel moves toward its conclusion, Sam's deeper appreciation for Juliet comes at the same time readers realize that Juliet's attempt at suicide is the inciting incident at the book's beginning that caused the car accident, which will also become the novel's dénouement. But Sam is the only member of her group who changes her attitude and behavior toward Juliet; thus, Juliet continues to be teased and victimized by the other girls until the book's conclusion.

While readers' understanding of what a bullying victim experiences are mediated through Sam's perspective, in *13 Reasons Why*, readers understand such situations through Hannah's narration following her death. Getting her story on cassette tapes before she commits suicide raises the stakes for readers to more closely comprehend how it feels to be victimized by one's peers and misunderstood by adults. Hannah's story, which is told in interlocking vignettes of those who have done her wrong, comes with a clear moral for her listeners and thus readers of the novel: "Don't take me for granted" (Asher, 2007, p. 10). While Hannah's stories imply an at times incidental kind of bullying

– rumors about her have continued from her old school; anonymous messages asking for help; people who have chosen to disregard rather than respect her feelings – her pain and her sense that she has been victimized by the overt and covert behaviors of others is present throughout the novel.

Suicide is also the fate of Emma, a girl that Sara and Brielle have bullied as a result of Sara’s fight with her for the affections of Dylan, Sara’s boyfriend. While flashbacks tell the details of this conflict, Sara must face her responsibility in Emma’s decision to end her life, a responsibility Sara refuses to accept throughout most of the novel. Sara and Brielle paint her as a “slutty girl” and boyfriend stealer (Maciel, 2014, p. 48) even as Sara acknowledges that Emma looks “always *injured*” and “fragile,” and wonders if Emma sees a therapist why “they haven’t just put her on antidepressants already. Or ones that actually work” (Maciel, 2014, p. 113). This information does not make either Sara or Brielle feel any sort of compassion for Emma, even after her death. Instead, Sara admits that when Emma arrived at their school as a new student and “everyone found out” that she was seeing a therapist she was “basically crucified,” and that their move to a new house, which precipitated her school transfer, may have also been the result of Emma being “a slut from way back,” all information easily located via the Internet (Maciel, 2014, p. 36). Thus, while Sara rationalizes their treatment of Emma for having a relationship with Dylan, Sara is well aware that Emma, even when she does fight back against the two girls and their bullying, is someone who might be “*troubled*” (Maciel, 2014, p. 36). In Sara’s mind, Emma deserves her victimization because she has taken what is not hers and because she is a weaker person, a person who may have been in need of help.

If Sophie had quickly phased out Clarke from Annabel's life and shown herself to be a cruel person to others at school, Annabel only becomes a victim when Sophie's machinations reconfigure Annabel as outsider from their social circle. Her change in status, decided by Sophie, also leads to her being bullied and harassed by people who had until then been her friends. Weakness, like power, is a trait that can be conferred by those at the top of the hierarchy. But this change from one who accesses power to one who is betrayed and buffeted by those in power also occurs for Regina once Anna refuses to believe her boyfriend Donnie assaulted Regina. In both of these novels the main character is sexually assaulted at a party, and her powerful friend who is both popular and a bully, believes the assault is instead a betrayal by a friend with her romantic partner and as such will not be tolerated. The ostracism of Annabel and Regina from the peer group and within the larger social world of the school leaves the characters doubly-victimized by power: first through sexual violence and then through the violence of peer relations, which will be discussed below.

For Jujube, her harassment follows the rumors that are spread at her school after she attends a school dance with a boy she likes. When this boy, Brent, takes her into the backseat of his car to make out, she stops him before they advance to sexual acts she's uncomfortable with since she feels unready for sexual intercourse. However, his version of these events quickly devolves into rumors of her being sexually permissive. When she discovers what is being said about her, she is shocked at first to discover that boys would talk this way about her: "They've never talked like that before. [...] I knew what he was saying. I'd even laughed sometimes, when they put another girl down. I guess I'd just never thought it could happen to me" (Goobie, 2002, p. 26). Jujube's realization that she

is a victim comes with her admission that she has been party to conversations where other girls have been sexually harassed or mocked in the past. Her understanding of how these rumors work still do not prevent her from feeling their sting: “I thought they were my friends” (Goobie, 2002, p. 26). Like the other character harassed and bullied in these novels, being picked on is complicated by the ways one can occupy multiple positions of friend and victim and bully. This phenomenon, which will be explored in Chapter 8, reflects the predicaments that face adolescents in the real world.

Another reflection of bullying is the victim who can do little to defend herself because her harassment precedes her arrival on the stage. In Deanna’s case, rumors of her sexual activity with a high school boy when she is still in middle school are well known before she enters her freshman year. As she explains: “Pacifica is a stupid small town, where everyone knows everybody else’s business and the rumors don’t stop until some other kid is dumb enough to do something that makes a better story. [...] The story had been told in hallways and locker rooms and parties and the back of classrooms since Tommy first came to school the morning after it happened. [...] By the time I got to Terra Nova for ninth grade, the whole school already thought they knew everything there was to know about Deanna Lambert” (Zarr, 2007, p. 5). In all of the novels, the process of bullying – the targets, the methods, the instigators, and the responses – coalesce around behaviors that span rumors and epithets to actual physical violence. For each situation, whatever the methods of bullying, the consequences of being ostracized and targeted are similar in that the main character must face important questions about what it means to be in relationship with other people – in families, in schools, in romantic partnerships, and in friendships.



### Bullying/Harassment

In all seven of the novels, rumors – negative stories passed by peers about peers – are used to create the sense that the subject of the rumor is the Other. That the character’s behavior is outside the social and moral code of her peers and as such she must be shunned. For many of the main characters, such pariah status becomes especially painful because not only is she betrayed by those she has trusted and counted on as friends but her loss of status means a central part of her identity is now in flux. The sense of not knowing what to do next permeates each character’s reaction to being bullied, a sense that grows as the bullying increases from rumors to harassment to actual violence done to personal belongings or one’s body.

Jujube first realizes rumors are being spread about her when male classmates begin to respond to her in new and knowing ways. Some tease her with a new nickname “backseat baby” while other boys tell her that Brent “said you were a 10 at the dance” (Goobie, 2002, p. 25). Carlos, a peer who attends Camera Club with her, informs her that rumors about her sexual activity are rampant among the students. But even more shocking to her is seeing the word “slut” next to her name written on the walls of the girls’ bathroom at her school (Goobie, 2002, p. 44). Indeed, if she thought boys were her persecutors she realizes as she looks closer at the wall “different girls had added comments about me” (Goobie, 2002, p. 44), and when she complains about this to Carlos, he tells her that such comments are also on the walls of the boys’ bathroom, and that the graffiti includes her name as well as the names of other girls at the school. When Carlos advises her to ignore such immature behavior, Jujube vacillates between despair that she’s being treated this way – “I felt nothing, as if I was nothing” (Goobie, 2002, p. 44) – to a desire to do something to create change at her school. Jujube critiques Carlos’s

advice when she explains how prevalent rumors are to their social world, “Rumors run this school. It doesn’t matter who starts them” (Goobie, 2002, p. 28). As Jujube poignantly explains, rumors have a distinct affect on one’s psyche: “They had never even touched me, but it felt like they had... wherever they wanted” (Goobie, 2002, p. 42).

While Jujube struggles to hold onto her sense of who she is, the power of the rumors eats at her: “It feels true in a way. Once they say it, that’s the way it feels. I *know* it’s not, but it *feels* like if everyone is saying it, somehow it must be true” (Goobie, 2002, p. 38). Jujube is fortunate in that her mother supports her, and even goes to the school to confront the administration. When Jujube reaches out to other girls who are being harassed as she is, Meghan shares that her parents have beaten her because the rumors confirm their fear that she’d “turn out this way” (Goobie, 2002, p. 56).

For Deanna, harassment at her school hinges on the story about their sexual relationship shared first by Tommy and then by all their classmates at their high school. Deanna alludes to the rumors and taunting she faces at school and in a two-page chapter recounts the “MOST POPULAR VERSIONS OF THE STORY” as told by her classmates (Zarr, 2007, p. 17). In these versions, she is described as “a total nympho,” a “slut,” and a “psycho” who pressures her brother’s friend into having sex with her using methods like pornography, threats, and manipulation as her modes of seduction (Zarr, 2007, p. 18). These rumors leave her vulnerable for sexual harassment in the hallway at school when one male student tells her she “[looks] hot” and another comments that her breasts have become “bigger” (Zarr, 2007, p. 4). While the majority of the novel takes place during summer vacation, Deanna still faces such moments at other spaces in her town like her summer job and the local mall.

When a group of kids from her school come into Picasso's for pizza, they immediately realize both she and Tommy work there. These peers, including Tommy, then taunt her: "I guess he's as good as they say he is" (Zarr, 2007, p. 90). At the mall, Bruce, another peer, not only harasses her, "...you want to go out with me? I've got two tickets to the parking lot behind Target" (Zarr, 2007, p. 138), he also physically assaults her in the middle of the food court: "Suddenly Bruce's voice was right in my ear, whispering, 'I guess this is a self-serve thing,' and he put his hand between my legs from behind" (Zarr, 2007, p. 139). Like Jujube, Deanna reflects on how these experiences add to her sense of shame at the same time that she tries to craft a counter-narrative in her own head about who she is as a young woman, a daughter, and sexual being. Her position as slut seems to inform not only her present but also how her future will be conditioned by her current situation: "This is my life, I thought. This is it. When I'm thirty-five years old...and I run into Jolene Hancock in the express line, she'll look at me and when she gets home she'll tell her husband, 'I saw Deanna Lambert at the store. She's this girl I knew in high school. Kind of skanky'" (Zarr, 2007, p. 90).

Similar connections between sexual activity, bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault appear for Hannah. In addition to being named by Alex on the "Who's Hot/Who's Not List," which precipitates rumors that she has been sexually intimate with Alex, Hannah becomes the victim of rumors following a chaste, first kiss: "*And everyone knows you can't disprove a rumor. [...] A rumor based on a kiss started a reputation that other people believed in and reacted to. And sometimes, a rumor based on a kiss has a snowball effect. A rumor, based on a kiss, is just the beginning*" (Asher, 2007, p. 30). Hannah's victimization by peers' rumors, though never fully detailed, predate her arrival

in Crestmont: “...*I had hoped—silly me—that there would be no more rumors when my family moved here. That I had left the rumors and gossip behind me...for good*” (Asher, 2007, p. 66). Her arrival in town as the new girl may contribute to the reasons people believe what they are told about her. On one of her tapes, she accuses, “*I know what you’re all thinking. Hannah Baker is a slut*” (Asher, 2007, p. 23). But one reason for the tapes is to counteract – to provide a counter-narrative – for what has been said about her: “*Hannah Baker is not, and never was, a slut. Which begs the question, What have you heard?*” (Asher, 2007, p. 23). During this tape’s narration, Hannah explains that while she and Justin did kiss in the park, she did not take off her bra or allow him to feel her breasts as people have said, and she is well aware her version of the story will disappoint her listeners but her intention is to force them to reconsider the content of these rumors, of which they participated, now that she is dead: “*Well, what did you want to hear? Because I’ve heard so many stories that I don’t know which one is the most popular. But I do know which is the least popular. The truth*” (Asher, 2007, p. 29). The structure of the novel forces readers to confront Hannah’s life and how she was treated in the context of her death, so that one cannot but understand this novel’s focus on the consequences of bullying. As Hannah explains, “*Betrayal. It’s one of the worst feelings. I know you didn’t mean to let me down. In fact, most of you listening probably had no idea what you were doing—what you were truly doing*” (Asher, 2007, p. 13). Hannah’s story is meant to provoke her peers into understanding their culpability; this novel, like the others in this study, act as morality tales for readers, a feature of the novels which will be discussed at length in Chapter 8.

If Hannah's story gives readers an inside perspective from the victim's perspective, Sam's story allows readers to see how harassment functions for girls who bully peers. As Sam tells readers, she and her friends are well as they "can basically do whatever we want and there are no consequences" (Oliver, 2010, p. 18). This knowledge is powerful in itself because no boundaries limit them and Sam explains that she feels a "rush that comes when you know you're doing something wrong and are getting away with it..." (Oliver, 2010, p. 30). Her descriptions provide some explanation for the bully's motivations, but the examples she shares of their victims provide more examples of how far they will go to feel that "rush."

This group of girls equally torments members of the student body from the students with special needs whom Sam labels the "short bus brigade" (Oliver, 2010, p. 37) to Anna Cartullo, a peer who they pick on because she is working class and artistic. However, they retain their most comprehensive bullying for Juliet whom they taunt for years and in a variety of ways because, as Sam has explained, they know they will not face any repercussions, even from Juliet. As discussed previously, they nickname her "mellow yellow" and "psycho," and each year send her a rose with a mean note attached, which is their bullying take on their school's Cupid Day Valogram used to convey affection between friends and couples on Valentine's Day (Oliver, 2010, p. 149). But their bullying becomes more personal and more public when they spread rumors that she traded her virginity for a "pack of cigarettes," leading other students to cough as she walks by and whisper the word "slut" (Oliver, 2010, p. 385). In addition, they posted nude pictures of her at school that they had taken surreptitiously while she showered (Oliver, 2010, p. 384), and further invade her privacy by hacking her emails where she

and another boy complain about how awful high school can be, which they then forward to “almost everyone at their school after giving them a new subject line: *Future School Shooters of America*” (Oliver, 2010, p. 385). But their cruelty comes under question for Sam once she realizes her death and Juliet’s pain are connected as she relives her final day over and over. In one iteration of this day, Juliet commits suicide by shooting herself, and while the group of girls discusses their shock at her death, but Lindsay cautions “You can’t be mean and sad she’s dead” (Oliver, 2010, p. 176) as if to make clear that to be a bully one must negate feelings of empathy and compassion for another person.

If compassion cannot be extended for peers that one bullies, compassion is unlikely as well for former friends who turn on one another. For Annabel, her supposed sexual interaction with Will leads Sophie to stop being her friend and ostracize her among their friends. Not satisfied with this betrayal, Sophie and their friends call her a “bitch,” “whore” (Dessen, 2008, p. 65), and a “slut” (Dessen, 2008, p. 137). While Annabel suffers as a result of Sophie’s bullying, her methods are not unknown to Annabel since she used to be a partner in such wrath: “So I’d sat there in the car as she got out, dodging the thrown brightness of the porch light as she walked up the driveway to the Jetta. I wanted to look away as she took the key clutched in her hand and dragged it across its pretty red flank, spelling out what this girl now was to her. But I didn’t. I watched, the way I always did, only turning away as she came back toward me, when I was already a partner to the crime” (Dessen, 2008, p. 125).

For Regina and Anna, friends whose bullying of one another provides the backbone for the novel as the girls’ anger at one another builds with retribution upon retribution. Regina first faces a “freeze out” by the other members of the Fearsome Five,

but this initial step in ignoring her continues as the girls up the ante on how vicious they will be to one another. The word “whore” is spray painted on her locker (Summers, 2009, p. 17), and as she surveys the damage other students in the school ask her about the rumor she “[boned] Donnie Henderson?” (Summers, 2009, p. 19). The students in their school watch as she is picked on, but they feel little sympathy for her as they “whisper and stare [because] half the student body relishes it; they’ve waited a long time to show me how much they hate me. The other half doesn’t know what to make of it after spending four years fearfully revering me” (Summers, 2009, p.21). Her shaming takes on an even greater public component when the girls create a YourSpace page where contributors share their hatred of Regina (Summers, 2009, p. 63). Later, they scan in notes Regina has written, private messages of gossip and personal feelings about her parents, sex, and friends, now public viewing for all of the participants of the YourSpace page to read.

But their bullying also becomes more physical when they put rancid meat in her locker and in another scene dump all of her books into the school’s pool (p. 156). Their anger turns toward her in an even more dangerous way when they push her down the stairs (Summers, 2009, p. 47) and Kara, one of the Fearsome Fivesome, punches her so hard in her back Regina realizes “Everything about her is predatory” (Summers, 2009, p. 113). And these physical assaults do not stop, but become more regular throughout the novel, so that Regina explains, “By the end of the day, my body was all bruises and scratches” (Summers, 2009, p. 116). This physical violence, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, comes to a culmination in a fight that leaves Anna and Regina bruised and bloodied.

But Regina doesn't offer an easy victim as she reciprocates their anger and violence throughout the novel. In fact, the interplay between the girls reads more like an ongoing revenge fantasy than a story of a cruel bully and her hapless victim. Still, Regina's exploits as aggressor are tempered with her feelings that she has no other option: "There's no such thing as justice" (Summers, 2009, p. 31). After Kara shoves her, Regina takes all of the contents of her locker and throws them in the garbage, and when Kara again assaults her by punching her in the back, Regina stands waiting at the top of a stair case imagining how she will push Kara down the entire set of stairs (Summers, 2009, p. 110). While this "blood lust" seems to scare her, it does not stop her from participating in and escalating the violence (Summers, 2009, p. 114). In addition to the ways she feels vindicated to engage in violence against the girls who had been her friends, her anger leads her to vandalize and steal Donnie's car (Summers, 2009, p. 150). Once she is aware that the YourSpace page exists, she also uses it for her own purposes when she writes messages betraying all the private knowledge she has of girls who used to be her friends (Summers, 2009, p. 181).

While the novel borders on melodrama, its morality tale aspects come into clearer focus when readers discover, as does Regina, that Kara has betrayed her and told Anna not that Regina was assaulted but that she had sex with Donnie willingly. This betrayal, which appears to be so unfair, results from Regina's cruelty toward Kara. When Kara had confided that she was struggling with weight issues, Regina agreed that Kara was "fat" and she should "do something about it," even going so far as to offer to buy diet pills for Kara to lose weight (Summers, 2009, p. 86). When Kara ends up using diet pills and purging, her health is affected. Rather than help Regina after her sexual assault, she sees



this as her recompense for Regina's mean treatment of her: "I just want you to understand what I've done to you this year is *barely* what you deserve" (Summers, 2009, p. 93). In this novel, bullying occupies two separate sides of the same coin: crimes and attempts at justice, though who is guilty and who is innocent is less clear.

Issues around justice take on legal ramifications for Sara following the bullying she and Brielle perpetrated against Emma. While Sara spends much of the novel believing she had not choice *but* to bully Emma, her descriptions of their harassment are similar to those found in the other novels. Verbal abuse begins in response to rivalry for a boy's affections leading to cyber attacks and intimidation. The girls call Emma "slut" (Maciel, 2014, p. 7), whisper "slut" as she walks by them in school (Maciel, 2014, p. 87), and write "SLUT" on her locker (Maciel, 2014, p. 117). This one word proves effective, and they know it: "She never says much, but that's almost scarier—just hissing 'Slut' at someone as you walk past, so quietly they're not even sure they heard it, is like a poison dart in the forest" (Maciel, 2014, p. 87). Sara can describe the emotional response of the victim as surely as she explains what motivates the bully: "...for no reason I could ever explain in a million years, I flip up my middle finger at her. [...] it feels strange. And kind of cheesy. But at the same time it feels really, like, *powerful*" (Maciel, 2014, p. 25).

This sense of power, in addition to their own feelings of anger that Emma appears to be staking a claim to boys that Sara and Brielle consider theirs, lead the girls to continue their harassment campaign. When Sara realizes Emma may be interested in her boyfriend, she warns, "I. Am. Going. To. *Kill her,*" and rather than suggest her friend should reconsider her anger, Brielle offers, "Lady, I am going to *help* you" (Maciel, 2014, p. 28). Their campaign morphs from cruel words to a cruel "Fat Beyotch"

FaceBook page they create loaded with photos of Emma (Maciel, 2014, p. 29) to sending Emma 50 roses on Valentine's Day (Maciel, 2014, p. 78). The use of social media to make their case against Emma further includes creating a fake Twitter account to tweet mean messages about Emma (Maciel, 2014, p. 251) and posting cruel comments about her on her own Facebook page (p. 286), as well as posting pictures of Sara and Dylan as a loving couple on FaceBook. But this harassment extends to Emma's home as well when Sara and Brielle make a "giant, glittery heart, that says 'Roses are red, violets are blue, Emma's a slut, and a skanky ho, too'", and plant this sign on her parents' front lawn (Maciel, 2014, p. 116). Involving her family does not end there since the two girls show up on Emma's front porch and speak to her mother Mrs. Putnam, and while they attempt to create the subterfuge that they care about Emma, their purpose is to insinuate that Emma is overly involved with many boys, including those who are older than she (Maciel, 2014, p. 193).

If their collusion in cruelty seems hard to understand, Sara reminds readers that her motivation remains emotions that *she* does not fully understand: "Every time I think of being with Dylan I get this feeling in my chest, cold and hot at the same time. Like I'm going to explode literally. And when I think of someone *else* being with Dylan...just the idea makes me want to throw up. [...] it's like I can't breathe. It's really intense. It kind of scares me, actually" (Maciel, 2014, p. 67). Such feelings seem to be balanced with the "weird rush of power" she feels when she confronts Emma in the girls' locker room about her interest in Dylan. Still, as she warns Emma to "stay the hell out of my life," Sara realizes "it's like my voice is coming from someone else" (Maciel, 2014, p. 68).

That someone else appears to Brielle, who pushes Sara over and over to carefully examine Dylan's behavior and intentions at the same time that she parses Emma's social faux pas along with Sara. Sara casts Brielle as a leader in many ways. Although Sara has been a willing participant in their initial harassment of Emma, she tells readers "I don't realize until a week later that that was Brielle's whole plan, to show Emma what happens when she fights back" (Maciel, 2014, p. 81), so although she targets Emma in multiple ways, such actions take on a more premeditated aspect from Brielle alone. Yet, Sara admits "we're practically on a mission to Get Emma" (Maciel, 2014, p. 87). Sara's willingness to cause another person pain is only amplified when Dylan does break up with her and has a relationship with Emma: "But he wants *her*. And we want her to suffer" (Maciel, 2014, p. 167). In fact, all of the intimidation and "mission to make Emma's life a living hell" are revenge for the interest boys take in her once she moves to their town, an interest that upsets social relationships including Sara's with Dylan (Maciel, 2014, p. 165).

Because this novel is based on the real-life story of Phoebe Prince, the novel opens after Emma's death and attempts to explicate issues as they were roundly debated in the media at that time: bullying and responsibility. The plot then evolves in both the past when Emma is still alive and the present when Sara must face the legal and emotional consequences of her actions. In the present time narrative, Sara also faces the wrath of her peers when she and Brielle are ostracized, gossiped about, and called "slut" (Maciel, 2014, p. 239). For the majority of the novel, Sara continues to see herself as the victim, and her compassion or sense of responsibility toward Emma are a long time in coming.

## Violence

As discussed in Chapter Two, much has been made in recent years about the distinctions in bullying among the genders. According to researchers, boys use multiple methods to bully, including physical intimidation and violence, but girls utilize relational aggression rather than reacting physically to peers they target. In the seven novels in this study, such gender distinctions are less clear since everyone uses all modes of bullying as suits their purposes. Rumors are passed by both genders, and while physical violence is less prevalent, it still occurs. In addition, violence appears as part of the context for the novel.

In two of the novels, girls who are bullies – Lindsay and Brielle – physically push the girls they bully. Hannah is physically attacked by Jessica when they meet to talk about Alex, and her assault on Hannah leaves her with a scar since she both punches and scratches her during their altercation (Asher, 2007, p. 67). For Regina, animosity between her and Anna ratchets into ongoing violence. At varying points, Regina is shoved, pushed, tripped, hit with a door, and has a pencil jabbed into her. The resolution of this novel, which will be discussed in Chapter 7, becomes disturbingly violent.

But around these examples of anger turning physical are other examples of assaults. Hannah not only is attacked, she also witnesses a fight between male peers at a party, which so upsets her she ends up vomiting (Asher, 2007, p. 111). Male violence also provides the backstory for Owen, who has to attend anger management classes, and hits Will once he finds out that he raped Annabel. Similarly, Regina's boyfriend Josh attacks Donnie, largely due to Donnie's assault on Regina. In fact, sexual assault occurs in five out of the seven novels in this study as does the subplot of domestic violence faced by Jujube's friend Sophie.

If bullying is a repertoire of behaviors meant to hurt another person, it only makes sense that physical violence can be an important tool. Physical and sexual violence, which this study combines since both are assaults on the body based on the aggressor's sense of power over the victim, are employed in the novels as part of bullying strategies perpetrated by adolescents, but they also suggest that violence is a feature of adolescents run amok, but this study understands such acts as part of the practicing with power relations that adolescents must do as they learn to become adults because a part of being human means one must learn to navigate and negotiate power, which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

### **Main Character: Not A True Bully**

Another common aspect of many of the novels is the way the main character is positioned both as a participant in bullying, but not as the true bully. She will go to great lengths to provide evidence and explanations for what motivated her behavior, and in most of the cases, the blame falls on the true bully, who is most often her former best friend. This aspect of characterization provides one method for achieving the goals of the novel's plots, which are also a common thread in this study. The main characters occupy roles of bully and victim in order to provide a morality tale for readers as the main character comes to multiple epiphanies about relationships, being a girl, and redemption. The subtexts to all of this are discourses of power, gender, and sexuality, which will be discussed at length in Chapter 8, as will another purpose in crafting a main character who bullies, but is not really a bully: like women in the real world, a female character cannot be unlikable (Gay, 2014; Shriver, 2011). These authors, even when composing characters who are not nice, ultimately must write them as sympathetic both so readers can feel

close to the main character, and, as will be explained later, to continue societal discourses of women and likability.

Of all of the novels, the author of *Tease* walks a very fine line in this aspect of her novel because the main character, like the real-life bullies she is based on in the Phoebe Prince case, faces legal charges following the death of a peer she bullied. That case generated much publicity and public dialogue on Prince's death, her role in what happened to her, and the fairness in the prosecution of the teens who had bullied her. Even before one reads the book, a reader may have notions of how to think about a character considered a bully, and one who for most of the novel is both unrepentant and makes multiple attempts at blaming the victim. When Sara complains, "It's not my fault" (Maciel, 2014, p. 35), she truly believes anything she did was justified by Emma's actions, especially toward Dylan. It was, Sara, explains, "Emma [who] turned me into a mean girl" (Maciel, 2014, p. 238). Though she warns Brielle, "We're gonna get in trouble for this," (Maciel, 2014, p. 29), she also claims that the things she and Brielle are up to, including calling another person a "*bitch* or *slut*," are normal high school behavior (Maciel, 2014, p. 34). When Sara's mother confronts her with the enormity of what she has done and the possible consequences of a criminal record, Sara maintains her normalizing of the bullying she and Brielle committed against Emma and still blames Emma: "I didn't do anything wrong—everyone hated her, everyone was mean to her *all the time*. And even if they weren't, *she* was the one hooking up with everyone! She's the one with the problem!" (Maciel, 2014, p. 180)

Even Emma's death does not shake her conviction that "We didn't do anything" (Maciel, 2014, p. 127) because the final choice of suicide was Emma's to make: "No one

hung the rope for her” (Maciel, 2014, p. 4). In addition, Sara expresses frustration that “No one’s blaming Emma for anything” (Maciel, 2014, p. 10) because for much of the novel Sara very much sees herself as Emma’s victim especially in their rivalry for Dylan. Sara argues, if Emma killed herself, “She did that to herself” (Maciel, 2014, p. 128). And for much of the book, Sara repeats over and over, “I’m not sorry” (Maciel, 2014, p. 9, 10, 71).

But she is also quick to shift blame from herself to Brielle, while minimizing her own role in what has transpired. As she explains early in the novel, “...it wasn’t really me” (Maciel, 2014, p. 4) because “...that was really Brielle” (Maciel, 2014, p. 4), but as she is also quick to add she believes everything that happens between the three girls “...was Emma...” because it’s not like Emma was innocent” (Maciel, 2014, p. 4). As Sara visits her lawyer and her court-ordered therapist and even in her inner dialogue, Sara’s take on Emma’s decision is quite clear: “She did that to herself” (Maciel, 2014, p. 128). The judicial system and her therapist may want Sara to face her culpability in Emma’s death, but for much of the novel she resists any reflection on her responsibility in Emma’s death. In fact, she blames Emma for the situation Sara finds herself in with no friends, problems at school and home, and legal consequences: “She ruined my life also” (Maciel, 2014, p. 129). As the novel unfolds with present time chapters intermingled with flashback chapters Sara relives and reconsiders what has happened, her role in it, and what responsibility she does bear. That process drives the narrative of the book, and positions readers to contemplate guilt and innocence along with Sara. While empathy for Emma is late in coming, Sara does shift her understanding of what transpired during the months she and Brielle harassed Emma, until Sara realizes she must make amends as best she can.

Sam echoes Sara's thoughts when she rationalizes the bullying she has taken part in as normal behavior for American teens. As she deconstructs at the novels' start, "That's just the kind of thing that kids do to each other. It's no big deal. There's always going to be a person laughing and somebody being laughed at" (Oliver, 2010, p. 5). Sam, too, finds it hard to accept her role in bullying. In the immediate aftermath of the car accident which takes her life, she expresses anger at her death since "Lindsay's the one who lied about being friends with Juliet Sykes and then tortured her all those years. I didn't do anything; I just followed" (Oliver, 2010, p. 184). But Sam's growing disaffection with her friends as she realizes she has to relive her last day over and over provides her with new vantage points and thus a critical approach to understanding her social world. While they never ostracize her outright, a growing distance separates Sam and her friends, Lindsay in particular. At the same time, she begins to question not only what they have done but to wonder about the actual people they have been picking on. In one scene she is questioned directly by another one of their habitual targets, Anna Cartullo. When Anna asks her, "...why do you guys hate me?," Sam hesitates to answer since she realizes she is unsure *how* to answer but surprises herself when she replies, "I guess you need to take things out on somebody" (Oliver, 2010, p. 218). Sam's character development in the novel mimics Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief, which allow her to accept responsibility for her actions and her own death, which is held up until she can in fact assume the full burden of what she's done previously.

The question of guilt, blame, and forgiveness also forces Annabel to accept that if she is being tormented by Sophie and ignored by her peers, such treatment is her *just desert*. As discussed previously, Annabel admits she has been Sophie's willing



accomplice in all sorts of bullying of other students, and so she's not surprised when no one will come to her defense. However, she makes clear that Sophie instigates the bullying, with Annabel following because of her fears of what Sophie would do to her as well as her envy of Sophie's ability to do as she pleased (Dessen, 2008, p. 68). Annabel's resignation to how peers treat her comes across as self-flagellation for her past misdeeds, but any inappropriate actions on her part are balanced by the sexual assault that makes her a victim *and* an innocent now being bullied and as such Annabel becomes increasingly sympathetic to readers because she appears defenseless against Sophie, who is the true bully and always had been.

A similar narrative structure and character development happens for Regina, who enjoys her status in the Fearsome Five until its leader, Anna, turns on her for the imagined crime of having consensual sex with Anna's boyfriend. Like in Annabel's story, Regina is not believed when she explains that she was assaulted. Her torment at the hands of the remaining members of their group is observed and certainly condoned by other students, particularly in their use of social media to harass Regina. While Regina in this novel does engage in reciprocal acts of harassment and even physical assault, her sexual assault, bullying, and her responses to such events re-position her as someone who is not truly a bully, but responds as best she can to being targeted while, like the other main characters in this study, attempt to understand the choices they make and the consequences they have to live with. This aspect of reflection and learning from one's choices distinguishes Regina from Anna and her friends. Like the other main characters, the ability to be introspective offers examples of change and maturity for these young women.

If Regina had participated in previous acts of bullying, she tells readers she was not fully comfortable with the things Anna did. One such example is their targeting of Liz Cooper, a girl with whom Regina had been friends. However, Anna's jealousy at their friendship pushes her to pick on Liz (Summers, 2009, p. 59). While Regina admits she followed Anna's lead, she also wants to reach out to Liz: "I want to tell her it wasn't easy for me, either, watching Anna torture her every day until the light in her eyes went out" (Summers, 2009, p. 34). When she finds out that Liz attempted suicide due to their bullying, she does approach Liz to say she's sorry: "'I want to tell her she's brave, she's stupid brave for coming into school day after day knowing what's waiting for her, and I want to tell her she was the best thing in my life for one brief moment in time, and I want to tell her that I'm sorry I stood by while she was ruined, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I am so sorry*" (Summers, 2009, p. 76). Part of her motivation for apologizing is her discussion with Michael, who is another person Regina had formerly bullied as Anna's accomplice, when she tells him the story of her sexual assault. While Michael presses Regina on her culpability as bully, he also shows her great compassion: "Nobody deserves that" (Summers, 2009, p. 60). His kindness and their relationship, which will be addressed in the next chapter, provide her with support and new ways to think about herself. However, her own feelings of guilt make her question: "*Nobody deserves that*. But I'm starting to wonder" (Summers, 2009, p. 61).

Even Jujube has to confront her participation in the bullying of other girls. She admits, "I'd even laughed sometimes, when they put another girl down. I guess I'd never thought it could happen to me" (Goobie, 2002, p. 26). Her concerns about bullying, the graffiti in the school, and the use of the word slut bother her enough to take a public

stand; however, her efforts come not in defense of other girls, but because she has now become a victim. Her victimization allows her to see bullying from a new perspective but also forces her to reflect on her own involvement. Still, when she creates a platform to shift the narrative at school about girls, she does so on behalf of all the girls who are being targeted.

### **Discussion**

#### **Modes of Address: The Pathology of Female Friendships**

According to these seven novels, female friendships are troubled and troubling in that they are sites of contested power, resentments, and jealousies. Rather than images of female support and collective encouragements, the female main characters and their same-sex friends engage in verbal and physical battles largely instigated due to conflicts over boys and regulating female sexuality. In these novels, ideologies about women, sexuality, and power become clear and for me resonated with research I completed in my ethnographic study of girls in an American middle school. In that real world setting, similar discourses and ideologies as well as similar events were at work. These connections raise the questions of how YA fiction reflects adolescent lives in contemporary America and how it actually constructs what adolescent young women come to believe about their lives and relationships. In these novels, readers are addressed and hailed into subject positions that accept as normal the fraught relationships between adolescent young women portrayed in these books. As Annabel explains, such conflicts are the result of “the politics of girls” (Dessen, 2008, p. 26) and as such become a social skill one must learn in order to survive and thrive in one’s social worlds.

Stone's (2001) definition of a "political community [as] a group of people who lives under the same political rules and structure of governance and share status as citizens" is apt here (p. 19). In the social worlds of these novels, the female main character is a citizen of a peer group that is part of a interlocking set of peer groups that function as part of the adolescent social world of the schools depicted in the novels. As each female main character explains, rules and expectations about deportment, choices, and affiliations are clearly laid out and largely determined by one powerful girl in that group but agreed upon and enacted by others. Their willingness to follow such dictates, according to these characters, comes from the "status as citizens" they will enjoy as members of the popular set at their schools. Thus, these characters learn that behavior can and must be moderated in order to be successful and accepted within the institutions that matter: peer groups and school.

A willingness to play by these rules is connected to ideas of power and how power is negotiated among peers in social groups, but such negotiations are not unlike the systems of power that adults negotiate. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, adults insist on pathologizing adolescent behaviors and relationships as problematic; in fact, adults insist on categorizing adolescents as *the* problem. However, what becomes clear in an analysis of these novels and real world lives of adolescents through a poststructural feminist lens is that such behaviors are the result of an important lesson children learn quite early: power matters, and young people whose job it is to watch and learn from their elders in order to survive figure this lesson out and then enact all sorts of social practices and rituals that adults see as transgressive when in fact they are quite meaningful and instructive for young people and merely echo what occurs in the adult worlds they watch.

As Sam explains, she understands staying on the “laughing side” of bullies is an important survival mechanism (Oliver, 2010, p. 4). For Sara in *Tease*, her bullying “feels really, like, powerful” (Maciel, 2014, p. 25) and provides her with a “weird rush of power” (Maciel, 2014, p. 68). Given the torments and psychic pain described earlier in these chapters, why Sam sought to avoid such victimization and why it makes Sara feel powerful becomes clear.

Power in these novels becomes both a function of personal relationships and a tool to be utilized for status because as Foucault has argued “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are all endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (qtd. in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 490), and in the case of these novels the “particular society” is the social worlds of these adolescent young women. As such, power is enacted through strategic means in order to get others to do your will and follow your lead as well as access social status among peers. Foucault’s definition of power rests on an crucial premise: “When I speak of *relations of power*, I mean that in human relationships ... power is always present” (qtd. in Pierre, 2000, p. 489) and he goes on to suggest that these “power relations” are possible not because of one’s domination by another, but because of one’s acquiescence to the other person’s strategic moves. As demonstrated in these novels, the relationships between the adolescent female characters are an ongoing negotiation of who has power, how that power will be wielded, and how one agrees to follow that power. While the female main characters suggest an element of innocence to their participation in bullying behavior of a more powerful peer, their attempts at deniability forefront this approach to how power functions.

Their need to deny the role they've played in bad behaviors in the novels also raises discourses that women are damaged, and their damage causes them to behave in ways that can be seen as "monstrous" (James, 2009, p. 78). Brielle, Lindsay, Kara, and Sophie are written as socially powerful mean girls who bully others, but each character is also portrayed as damaged and that damage is often a secret they keep from their closest confidants, including the female main character. Brielle and Lindsay have both been the victim of date rape; Sophie has divorced parents and an absent father whose rejection causes her pain and anger; Kara has battled an eating disorder and used over-the-counter drugs in ways that lead to physical illness. While each of these characters appears in the novels as unremittingly cruel and unrepentant throughout the narrative, their need to use power against others originates in the need to heal some sort of emotional turmoil, or at least ameliorate their own pain and feelings of powerlessness by causing pain to others. This discourse emerges as if to both elicit sympathy in readers for these characters and at the same time demonstrate the pathology of the adolescent female.

The need for a mean girl who is the true bully also becomes necessary due to an important aspect of first person narration as well as discourses around characters and how readers relate to them as well as larger cultural discourses on women. Characters, like real women, must be likable (Gay, 2014; Shriver, 2011). In crafting a relationship between the main character/narrator and reader, "first person narration tends to push the reader into subject positions identical to those of the narrator, *unless* the narrator is particularly fallible" (Talbot, 1995, p. 30). These authors address their readers and hail them into the subject positions of the female main characters by creating situations that show these fictional representations of adolescents as making poor choices, and yet these

choices were not entirely of their own making. Readers' sense of liking a character rests on two points according to Shriver (2011), "moral approval and affection," by which readers may like a character but are also positioned to sanction the character's behaviors and when this occurs the "reader is complicit" in transgressive behaviors. At the same time, cultural theorists and authors like Gay (2014) and Adichie (2015) have raised the question of how likability functions for women in fiction and in the real world: "likability is an essential part of the space that you occupy in the world." The female main characters then retain some innocence in the midst of problematic choices and actions as a way to insinuate themselves with readers but also as a way to address adolescent women and instruct them on a key feature of femininity in the real world.

The need to negotiate power and remain likable are the sorts of convoluted moves women are familiar with in the real world, and thus are employed by these authors as they address their readers with narratives of adolescent girls who are both victim and victimizer. At the same time, the plethora of YA novels about bullying between girls reflect the anxiety among adults around bullying, relational aggression, and violence that has been discussed in Chapter Two and stems from a number of discourses around girls, girlhood, and adolescent prevalent in Western societies (Gornick, 2004; Gornick, 2006; Mazzarella and Pecora, 2007). Increasingly throughout the 1990s and 2000s, discourses abound about "youth in crisis" and "girls as a social problem" (Mazzarella and Pecora, p. 9) as well as the "problems with girlhood itself" (Chesney-Lind, Marash, and Irwin, 2007) and the representation of "adolescence as chaos" (Gornick, 2006, p. 13), which would be recognizable for adolescent readers because these conversations are so common and occur across media, in schools, and in homes. Adolescence becomes a focal point for

all sorts of anxieties and fears that rise with adult concerns about issues like gender, sexuality, and power that continue to shift and change as social institutions. Rather than admit and explore the fluid nature of these aspects of the human condition, adults whether acting as school officials, academic researchers, or fiction writers, construct reductive ways of categorizing adolescence as a fixed, developmental stage and adolescent behavior as *the* problem. Concurrently, the early twenty-first century's "spreading processes of individualization" (Gornick, 2006, p. 16) as part of a neoliberal agenda leave all adolescent women as both an "idealized autonomous subject" and "already risk of failing" (p. 19). Such a dichotomy seeps into these novels as part of the contradictory nature of female and male characters as well as the events of the plot.

Ultimately, relationships between female characters in these novels illustrate "complex power relationships that shape girls' relationships and their conflicts" (Ringrose, 2008, p. 511), but even more these novels suggest that female friendships of quality and emotional intimacy are not possible for girls, or at least are very hard to come by. As has been discussed in this chapter, such rarities are the result of the moral failings of these adolescent women and are portrayed in the most decontextualized of ways. The problems inherent in these relationships are caused by the girls and must be solved by the girls. Throughout this chapter, as is clear in the novels, peer relationships become problematic in all sorts of ways, for all sorts of reasons. One predictor in these novels for conflict among peers is romantic and/or sexual relationships, which in the case of these novels are all heterosexual. The next chapter will explore the sexuality of the main characters; their feelings toward their emerging sexuality; the discourses of sexuality included in these novels; and the opposite-sex relationships that occur in the novels. In



many ways, sexuality and romance are at the heart of the conflicts among girls, which will become clearer in Chapter 7 and will be explored in Chapter 8.

## CHAPTER 6

### READING POWER: READING SEXUALITY

*“Boys control us.” ~ Melanie*

In addressing the ways power assumes an integral role during adolescence in relationships, romantic and sexual relationships must be considered. During adolescence, teens increasingly move into the world of school and the “social worlds” of friends and peers freed from the constrictions of parents and family and begin to explore meaningful relationships with others (Finders, 1997, p. 9). As discussed in the last chapter, adolescents find friendships meaningful for many reasons, but as with all relationships power plays a role in how people negotiate the terms of those relationships. This remains true for relationships with others that are focused on romance and sexuality.

Using Ashcraft’s (2012) definition for sexuality, which includes the “biological aspects of sex, but also too the emotional, relational dynamics around sexuality,” the seven novels in this study were analyzed for the inclusion of the female main character’s sexual choices, attitudes, and experiences as well as the “emotional and relational dynamics” that were set in motion due to sex in the plot (p. 599). Due to the content of these novels, sexuality and romance must be included because these issues are uniformly and intrinsically tied to the same-sex friendships and power negotiations discussed in the previous chapter. As this chapter’s epigraph states, “boys control” much of what occurs for the female main characters when it comes to sex, romance, and friendships, at least according to these novels and in a way that echoes the ethnographic research I have done with female adolescents.

These novels all utilize heteronormativity (Wagner, 1991) as the backdrop for the plot and as a given for one's sexuality in the fictional world and the real world. Questions about one's gender and/or sexual preferences are never raised or even that such options might exist, so that "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1980) appears as the "common sense" expectation for gender and sexuality (Gramsci, 1971). In only one novel does a gay character appear, and he is an adult who becomes a confidante to one of the female main characters. Other than that, no gay characters are included, nor does any character engage in questioning his or her sexual preferences or gender, nor do any characters experiment with homosexuality or homosexual sex acts making heterosexual love, romance, and sexual acts the rule of life and love in these novels. At the same time, the novels explore two aspects of sexuality as defined by Ashcraft but positions them as polar opposites – sexual "biological" acts and "emotional" dynamics of love. In each novel, a clear distinction exists between who the female main character *has sex with* and who the female main character will *find true love*, and this distinction is reinforced because this relationship remains chaste or near-chaste. This division is emphasized through the ambivalence and conflict the female main characters experience about sexual choices as well as the ways sex is paired with risky and/or dangerous outcomes, including violence. Concurrently, the possible male partners included in these novels create a similar dyad of dangerous/safe options, so that there are good boys and bad boys, but knowing which is which can be confusing due to the material trappings people normally look to when selecting a partner in contemporary American culture with its emphasis on consumerism. This partner selection has great import in these novels since finding her true love will also allow the female main character to know herself in deeper, more authentic ways

made possible through discovering this mate. The implications of such narrative events and discourses will be addressed later in this chapter.

### **The Boy Next Door: The Predatory Boy/friend**

Literature for children and adults abounds with versions of Prince Charming, the attractive, socially accepted and perhaps even popular, young man who offers a female character a story with a happy ending (Botelho and Rudman, 2009). He offers her love, acceptance, and a place in the world he controls, either literally as the prince or as the most popular boy in school. In the novels in this study, all of the stories include a physically attractive male peer that the main character either has feelings for or sees as powerful in the social world of which they are members. This Boy/friend is positioned in these novels as someone who has power in its many forms: social, class, gender, and sexual. In these novels, while this character appear to possess much that would make him attractive as a partner, he is revealed to be a bully or cruel, and in many cases a sexual predators.

When Brent Floyd asks Jujube to the Valentine's Day dance, she is happy to attend with him, even after her friend Carlos warns her that Brent is nicknamed "Mr. Warp Speed" (Goobie, 2002, p. 5). While descriptions of Brent are limited due mainly to the length of this text, Jujube makes clear that she likes him and that he is a well-integrated member of their social world. However, when she attends the dance with him, he lures her into his car by telling her that he needs to get something for the band playing at the dance. While she willingly goes with him into his car's backseat, she is uncomfortable when he begins to push her into being more sexual than she is ready to be. When she rebuffs him, they still spend the evening together at the dance and end their

date on a positive note at her front door. However, when she arrives at school on Monday morning, it becomes clear to her very quickly that Brent has not only shared with his friends that they were intimate, he has embellished the story and started a rumor that they had sexual intercourse, which leads to Jujube being harassed and bullied.

For Sam, her feelings for Rob Cokran are fairly ambivalent from the beginning of the novel. While she makes it clear, she considers herself lucky that he likes her, she begins to question his role in her life because the car accident makes her re-vision all aspects of her life up until that point. The novel's plot and structure necessitate a re-examination of her life choices so that she can make her peace with what has happened and accept her eventual fate. Rob is another member of their social world that she has known for a long time, and she explains that in the sixth grade, he thought she was a dork (Oliver, 2010, p. 135), but as they aged and she became more popular, he became more interested in her and she in him. After all, she asks, "who wouldn't want to go out with Rob Cokran?," and goes on to describe her feelings for him before the start of their relationship: "...every time he looked in my direction I would get this bubbling, fizzling feeling so strong it would make me dizzy" (Oliver, 2010, p. 34). Yet, at the same time, she wonders "Why I liked him in the first place," and has to remind herself of specific reasons, which include his looks and his popularity: "...everyone knows him and likes him and probably half of the girls in school have a crush on him" (Oliver, 2010, p. 34).

Throughout much of the novel, Sam will continue to question not only her feelings for Rob, but also if she should have sexual intercourse with him, which will be discussed below as will the necessity of her ambivalence in that Rob, like all of The Predatory Boy/friends in these novels, is only half of a male dyad created and written into

these novels. As will be discussed in the next section, The Predatory Boy/friends that the female characters interact with become problematic for many reasons, and they are in direct opposition to The Other Boy, who will offer the main characters another vantage point on several aspects of human relationships. When Sam's uncertainty about her feelings for Rob appears, it is often in response to her ambivalence about being sexually intimate with him: "I *hate* the way he kisses" (Oliver, 2010, p. 38). However, her main concerns revolve around the ways he lets her down and is not emotionally supportive: "I think about today, when he told me to trust him, when he said that he'd never let me down. I should have told him he was full of it" (Oliver, 2010, p. 118). As Sam's journey toward understanding and redemption unfolds throughout the novel, her relationships with lots of people fray as she understands in new ways how these relationships are both part of and the reasons for the bad choices she has made. In order to free herself, she must address and even end these relationships. Her feelings for Rob crystallize when he continues to act in a boorish way toward her while at a party where he has gotten drunk: "Anger bubbles inside of me. He's looking me up and down like his eyes are fingers and he's trying to touch all of me at once. I can't believe how many nights I spent on his basement couch, letting him slobber on me. Years and years of fantasy fall away in that one second" (Oliver, 2010, p. 372). Later, when she ends their relationship, Rob reminds her of the hierarchy within their partnership: "'*You,*' he says, almost spitting the word, 'cannot break up with *me*'" (Oliver, 2010, p. 437). This admission of his power over her reminds Sam of his attitude about her from long ago and how it affects his treatment of her now: "He remembers that in sixth grade he said I wasn't cool enough for him—remembers it, and still believes it. Any sympathy I still feel for him vanishes in that

moment, and as he's standing there, bright red with his fists clenched, it amazes me how ugly I find him" (Oliver, 2010, p. 437).

The fall from grace that accompanies Rob's character occurs as well for Dylan, Sara's boyfriend. As she explains, he was "the best thing that's ever happened to me" (Maciel, 2014, p. 15) as a popular senior who was successful at school and played varsity baseball. She also wondered, "Why would Dylan want me?" (Maciel, 2014, p. 21), and like Sam, her feelings for him are visceral: "when I see Dylan—even just the side of his face, just for a second—my heart sort of convulses. My stomach tenses like I'm going to throw up, but in that good way, like when you're just so excited about everything you can't handle it" (Maciel, 2014, p. 57). These feelings of not being able to "handle it" will become the impetus for Sara's harassment of Emma because she becomes incensed when Emma and Dylan become friends. Later, it will become apparent to Sara that they are more than friends, and Dylan will admit to his own sense of ambivalence as he ricochets between the two girls. At various points, he will defend Emma to Sara and urge her to stop picking on her (Maciel, 2014, p. 89; p. 147; p. 170; p. 172; and p. 176), but will have sexual intercourse with both girls. When Dylan's relationship with Emma becomes public knowledge, as does her purported intimacies with other boys, he's labeled a "manwhore on Facebook" for hooking up with Emma (Maciel, 2014, p. 166). But Dylan's desire for both girls continues and leads him and Sara to have sex in his car, which then causes him to admit, "This was a mistake," and "This can't happen again. I'm sorry" (Maciel, 2014, p. 228). If Dylan's confusion disappoints and hurts Sara, it also leads inadvertently to the continued bullying that Emma faces at their school by many peers, including Sara and Brielle. Still, while Dylan may make what seem like perfectly human choices in his

dealings with both girls, he makes those choices well aware of their feelings for him; their feelings for one another; and the climate of bullying that has tormented Emma as well as her past history of seeking therapy for being targeted at her old school. He knows the stakes for all of them, yet continues to have emotional and sexual relationships with both girls.

The correlation of ambivalence within relationships figures into Deanna's bond with Tommy, her older brother's best friend. Like the other female characters, she describes the physical reaction she has to Tommy: "His voice shot through me. It's amazing, the things your body will do just when you don't want them to: heart speeding up, finger aching. I'd always liked his voice, low and laid-back, the kind of voice that made you listen..." (Zarr, 2007, p. 55). While her attraction to him is clear, so is her anger and resentment as when she describes him as "white trash" (Zarr, 2007, p. 69). Tommy not only engages in sexual intercourse with her, but he also shares the story with his friends at school after her father catches them in Tommy's car. He is able to use his social position to enhance his own image and escape the harassment that befalls Deanna once she arrives at the high school they attend. While Deanna claims, "I didn't love him. I'm not sure I even liked him" (Zarr, 2007, p. 1), she also admits, like many of the other female main characters, "...there was a part of me that remembered how it felt when he chose *me*: that first time he told me I was pretty, that first time I kissed him...It was something real happening between two real people. Me, I felt real; feeling real feelings, saying real words" (Zarr, 2007, p. 97). Tommy offers her a depth of emotion and relational space that provides Deanna with not only a genuine bond but one that feels tangible in the emotions and physical response they have for one another. In fact, while



she comes to regret their relationship once it is clear to her that Tommy has “described the story to everyone...[making] it into a joke. He made *me* a joke” (Zarr, 2007, p. 97), she also continues to believe Tommy offered her something of value: “Tommy had chosen me, and whatever it really was, the two of us were *something*, something that we weren’t without each other” (Zarr, 2007, p. 121). If Deanna does blame him for sharing the story of their most intimate moments, she pushes at him with her anger and pursuit of accountability until he finally admits: “If I really did that...I mean, I know I did, but if all of that was true about how you felt and everything...and, you know, how I talked about it, I’m sorry” (Zarr, 2007, p. 129). Later, when they talk about his apology, he admits that saying it makes him feel changed, as if he “[doesn’t] have to feel like a piece of shit every time you look at me” (Zarr, 2007, p. 181). While Tommy is one of the few Boy/friends who take responsibility for poor choices and hurting another person, he still provides an example of the kind of romantic partner these novels depend on: the socially powerful boy for whom the female main character feels a physical and emotional connection such that she makes choices that may not be in her best interest. Tommy, like these other male romantic partners, appears to offer romance and emotional connection, but ends up hurting and betraying the female character who has placed her trust and romantic hopes in him.

Hannah had dreams of romance as well in her relationship with Justin, and describes her imaginings of what their first kiss would be like. Then, like with Tommy, Justin betrays her faith by sharing their private moments with other people at school, and by adding to the kissing episode and making it seem like they have engaged in more sexual activity than occurred. Justin, like the other male characters in these novels,

appears to be a boy Hannah could like: popular, well liked at school, and polite to parents. But Justin's betrayal of Hannah connects with a more profound betrayal in the novel that Hannah is both party to and victim of when Justin, Hannah, and many of their school peers attend a party together. At this party, Justin and Hannah do nothing to prevent the rape of Jessica after she has passed out drunk in a bedroom. While Hannah remains hidden in the bedroom closet, Justin does not defend Jessica when another male character Bryce decides to rape her (Asher, 2007, p. 226). While Bryce's character has been drawn as someone who harasses female characters, his actions and Justin's complicity together demonstrate the aspects of date rape by male characters who are members of the community along with their victims. The sexual harassment and sexual assault become incidents that Hannah, and other female characters, must deal with, but deal with personally as no justice or redress happens for those who have been targeted. These further incidents only push Hannah closer to her final decision to commit suicide, and both male characters again on the surface are valued members of this social world.

Date rape and the aftereffects for victims become integral in the plots of two other of the novels under study. In both cases, the perpetrator is an important peer in the social world of the novel, and neither victim is believed when she first tries to tell what has happened. The setting in both novels, like the party Hannah attends, is a high school party where teens, drugs, and alcohol mix freely. For Regina, her attendance at the party is predicated on her role as designated driver, so she is the only sober person at the party because "everyone is wasted" (Summers, 2009, p. 2). Her boyfriend Josh, who is in attendance also supplies many of their friends with drugs (Summers, 2009, p. 35-37), and while he attends the party, he is also inebriated, which leads Regina to "strong-arm Josh's

clientele” and make sure they pay for what they purchase. Donnie, another male character and Anna’s boyfriend, not only deals drugs; he is also on his way to college: “I’m going to *Yale*. Who will supply these poor kids while I’m gone?” (Summers, 2009, p. 4).

During the party, Josh will not come to Regina’s aid because he has been drinking so much, and later he will turn on her once Anna and the other girls begin to harass her following her sexual assault by Donnie. Donnie, like many of the male characters, offers the trappings of success: he owns a convertible (Summers, 2009, p. 6); he has academic success (his acceptance at Yale), and he is on the basketball team. He is, until Anna and her friends target him as well, an important member of their social world. But both male characters will betray young women who care for them and believe in them, and in Donnie’s case, will assault Regina not once but twice because as he tells her, ““What have I got to lose?,”” which indicates his anger as well as his sense of entitlement that he has lost things of value to him due to his victimization of her, and because of that he will hurt her once again (Summers, 2009, p. 136).

Similarly, Will Cash is a serial rapist who attacks Annabel at a party even though she is his girlfriend’s best friend. Like Donnie, Will holds a power position in their social world, despite or perhaps because of the rumors that he is unfaithful to Sophie with other girls. He is “good looking and incredibly popular,” but Annabel finds him unnerving because he is “hard to read, the kind of guy who is just attractive enough that a warm personality is almost required to make him approachable” (Dessen, 2008, p. 122). His attack on Annabel precipitates the events of the novel’s plot, but later in the novel his rape of another girl brings the novel to its conclusion. Annabel, who had worked so hard to tell no one of her assault, ends up choosing to testify when he goes on trial for that rape.

Because of this court case, Will ends up convicted of 2<sup>nd</sup> degree rape, sentenced to six years in jail. But Will's good looks, his charm, and his status as a popular boy had protected him previously. Only once the charge is lodged against him do other rumors surface that he had sexually assaulted other girls at the prior school he had attended.

In all of these novels, a young male character is presented who seems to embody all of a young woman's desires: good looks, charm, sexual magnetism, and material things like social status, money, and academic standing. But whether the young male characters are involved in a romantic relationship with the main character or merely know her through their social world, they end up betraying these young women and acting in predatory ways. Every Boy/friend in these novels wants to be sexually intimate with the female character, and he will do so with or without her permission. In three of the novels, a sexual assault takes place including the vaginal rape of two characters and a digital rape of another. In two of the novels, the backstory of the main character's best friend includes sexually assault, and this event provides insights into her behavior, their relationship, and even the main character's choices. In *Story of A Girl*, while Deanna admits she had a consensual sexual relationship with Tommy, given their ages at the onset of their relationships, 13 and 17, this is an example of statutory rape. Even in the examples of romantic relationships, elements of manipulation and coercion occur, leading the female characters to question the motives of their partners and even their own sexual desires. This aspect of the novels will be discussed later in this chapter. What becomes apparent in this study is that The Predatory Boy/friends who seem to offer so much in the way of partnership provide negative examples of heterosexual relationships. But in novels that are clearly taking up a heteronormative script, such maneuvers by authors

seem puzzling until one recognizes another male character present in all of these novels, *The Other Boy*.

### **The Boy on the Margins: The Other Boy**

In all of the novels, another male character provides the female character with a different experience of an opposite-sex relationship. However, from the outset of the novels, this young man, whom this study labels *The Other Boy*, is presented as marginalized and for various reasons an outsider to more popular and powerful peers in the social world. This young male character is marked as *Other* in the novel by a variety of mechanisms: race/ethnicity, class, social status, or sexual orientation. What sets this boy apart as *Other* even more is the way he is positioned in the social world of the female main character as someone she has paid little attention to before but comes to see in a new way. The female main character either knows *The Other Boy* as an opposite-sex friend as in two of the novels or as a school peer who has either been known in passing or has been the target of bullying and/or ostracism by others, including at times the female main character, which occurs in five of the novels. The transformation in the relationship between *The Other Boy* and the female main character occurs as part of the plot but plays an integral role in the transformation of the female character as well. In fact, *The Other Boy*, who will become the object of her affections in every one of these novels, provides many of the insights and reflections that propel the character development of the female main character. Without him, such change might not be possible because *The Other Boy* appears to know the female character so well that he understands her better than she knows and understands herself. His position as *Other* allows him to see her and their social world from a supposed objective and more distanced perspective in the workings

of the novel, so that he becomes an observer/sage about their social world and her. But this character is also part of a dyad with the predatory Boy/friend in which male characters are either good boys or bad boys, which will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Carlos Rojas, who attends school with Jujube and participates with her in the extra-curricular Camera Club, is marked as an outsider because he is Latino living in the white, English-speaking majority country of Canada. His arrival in Canada included being targeted because he did not speak English: “Most of the first English words I learned were the names they called me” (Goobie, 2002, p. 70). As the novel begins, Carlos is revealed to hold undeclared romantic feelings for Jujube, and these feelings may lead him to initiate his role as observer/sage when he warns her about Brent and his reputation as ““Mr. Warp Speed”” (Goobie, 2002, p. 5-6). Once Jujube begins to be targeted by their peers at school, he defends her at various points, including in their English class where the teacher and students are discussing *The Taming of the Shrew*, though the teacher is unaware of the subtext to the conversation when boys begin to make comments about the play that are actually about Jujube and her supposed intimacies with Brent (Goobie, 2002, p. 19). While the adult in the room remains clearly oblivious to the boys’ harassment, Carlos, who normally is not considered a strong or even participatory student, defends Jujube through his commentary on the text under discussion. Similarly, Carlos lets Jujube know about the texts she is oblivious to: the graffiti in the boys’ bathroom about her as well as the rumors circulating about her sexual activity. As Carlos becomes her confidante and her friend, he changes from the “loner type [who] doesn’t talk much” Jujube describes at the novel’s start into someone who defends her and helps

her create a way to respond to the bullying of her and other girls at their school (Goobie, 2002, p. 5).

In addition to the perspective Carlos provides on what has happened to her, Carlos also offers Jujube literally a new way to see her situation when he invites her to go with him and his father for a plane ride. Mr. Rojas, who owns the private plane, takes the two of them, along with Jujube's friend Sophie, for a ride and allows Jujube to handle the controls for a few minutes. Two transformations happen for Jujube as a result of the flight. First, like in all the other novels, she sees The Other Boy in a new way: "Something in Carlos seemed to almost lift him off the ground. *This guy is gorgeous*, I thought" (Goobie, 2002, p. 63). More important, she sees her school from high above and by doing so, understands her situation with fresh insight: "I saw our school again, underneath us. I took a deep breath and felt very light. *It's that school that's the problem, not me*, I thought. I wasn't going to let it drag me down again" (Goobie, 2002, p. 66).

When Annabel is ostracized by her friends and other schoolmates, she begins to hang out alone in the courtyard of her school. She has no other option for lunch and other downtimes of the school day. This peer isolation and separate physical space brings her into closer proximity to Owen Armstrong, a loner at her school. While Annabel does not know him well at first, she is well aware of what has been said about him. After Owen was suspended from school for fighting with another student, she heard alternating stories that "he'd done time in juvenile hall, been kicked out of his previous school, and was in a gang. There were so many rumors that a few months later, when I heard he'd been arrested for fighting at a club over the weekend, I just assumed it wasn't true. But then he'd just disappeared, never coming back to school" (Dessen, 2008, p. 22). In fact, Owen

does have anger management issues, and was placed in a court-ordered program to help him deal with his feelings in a healthier way. Throughout the introduction of this character to the novel, he is described in various ways as someone who is both physically attractive and physically imposing: “he was tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and thick biceps” (Dessen, 2008, p. 21); “his size, of course, you saw first: the height, the big wrists, the enormity of his mere presence” (Dessen, 2008, p. 67); “the sleeping giant” (Dessen, 2008, p. 67); “Owen didn’t really look like a monster” (Dessen, 2008, p. 22). And true to the often-quoted malapropism, “Music soothes the savage beast,” Owen “loved music, and his iPod was always either in his pocket, his hand, or lying on the wall beside him” (Dessen, 2008, p. 66), and acts as a DJ for a local radio station, which will figure prominently in Annabel’s change in the novel. Their relationship begins though with his first rescue of her after he goes to her aid when she has been in a verbal and physical altercation with Sophie. While other students look on, the two girls argue and push one another, and though Annabel reacts in a “primal and immediate” way to Sophie’s bullying, she immediately feels so “horrible and embarrassed” that she ends up vomiting (Dessen, 2008, p. 88). Other students have merely watched and laughed, and no one comes to help her until Owen comes to where she has run and “...was reaching out for me” (Dessen, 2008, p. 88). As they begin to spend more time together, Annabel admits, “Clearly, I had really misjudged Owen Armstrong. I wasn’t sure who I’d thought he was, but it wasn’t this person sitting beside me” (Dessen, 2008, p. 104). Once she has opened her mind to the possibility of Owen as a friend, their relationship becomes much more the longer she spends time with him. In their conversations, Owen accepts her feelings without being angry or rejecting her (Dessen, 2008, p. 136), and shares advice



and lessons he's learned through his anger management classes (Dessen, 2008, p. 140) that he offers to help her deal with Sophie, but she uses to think about her rape, although this stays the one topic she does not discuss with him.

Their time together leads her to realize ““You sure have a lot of answers,”” but also that she feels deeply for him, “Then he smiled at me, and I felt a flush come over my face...One I never would have thought I'd feel around Owen Armstrong” (Dessen, 2008, p. 152). His attitudes on life provide her with new ways to think about her life and how she behaves, and she understands his effect on her is profound: “...Owen inspired me. I was also cognizant of how good it felt to actually be able to say what I thought to someone” (Dessen, 2008, p. 163). In fact, one of Owen's life philosophies provides the novel with its title: ““Don't think, or judge. Just Listen.’ [...] Whether it was a song, or a person, or a story, there was a lot you couldn't know from just an excerpt, a glance or a part of a chorus” (Dessen, 2008, p. 165). Their relationship, of course, provides the clearest example of this attitude as Annabel not only becomes friends with Owen and “trusts him” but she also learns from him about how to deal with her own feelings, including anger, and how to give voice to what she feels (Dessen, 2008, p. 91), so that by the novel's end, she explains that he “saved” her because he alone had been the one to “[offer] his hand in friendship” in response to how “alone and scared, and yes, angry” she had been and was willing to help her when “everyone else had chosen to look away” (Dessen, 2008, p. 293).

When Sara attends summer school to make up for the classes she could not finish following Emma's suicide, she ends up as lab partners with Carmichael, a peer who “during the school year, [she] wouldn't have talked to,” largely because Brielle would

have written him off for being both different and “carless” (Maciel, 2014, p. 43). When he first appears in their chemistry class, he looks much as he does during the school year: wearing all black, including a T-shirt that reads Disco Kills Art, a fashion statement suggesting to her that he’s “trying to look terrifying” (Maciel, 2014, p. 42). His outsider status was completed when during ninth grade “everyone called him Bomb Boy for basically the whole year” because of his clothes and his affinity for heavy metal music (Maciel, 2014, p. 125). Not only was he not involved in any bomb threat, but there was *no* bomb threat; it was mere rumor. This incident allows Carmichael to understand how Sara feels when she is the target now of rumors, and while she cannot remember if she participated in taunting him, she is “sure I did” (Maciel, 2014, p. 126). Whatever menacing qualities he may exude, they are offset by his green eyes that “twinkle” (Maciel, 2014, p. 113), and her recollection that she had a crush on him in middle school (Maciel, 2014, p. 44). In another example of Brielle’s power over her decision-making, Sara explains that “Brielle saved me from all of that” (Maciel, 2014, p. 44) by mocking Carmichael and his interests.

When the school year resumes, Sara remains ostracized for her role in Emma’s suicide. Her only possible friend becomes Carmichael who on the first day of school walks her to homeroom. His presence comforts her: “*I’m not alone*, I think. Carmichael’s height, his black T-shirt, black jeans, and dark hair feel like a protective wall beside me” (Maciel, 2014, p. 136). As they continue to spend time together, they become friends, and Sara admits it “feels good to talk to someone” (Maciel, 2014, p. 44). Carmichael also begins to take on the role of observer/sage who provides Sara with comfort as well as pushes her to understand the depth of her role in Emma’s death, something she resists for

most of the novel. Carmichael actually remembers that Sara never did taunt him as “Bomb Boy,” and his memory of her kindness as well as his own suffering allow him to tell her, ““But sometimes what everyone says isn’t the whole story”” (Maciel, 2014, p. 183), which positions him as her ally. At the same time, he prompts her, ““Don’t you feel bad about what happened to her?”” (Maciel, 2014, p. 184). Later in the novel, Sara admits to him that she is struggling with “trying to figure out how to...how to apologize” because she is unsure how she can possibly “fix anything *now*”( Maciel, 2014, p. 282), and his role as observer/sage re-asserts itself as he physically comforts her by holding her hands “like an offering” and through his words: “I don’t know if anything you say now is really supposed to fix anything. But I don’t think it can hurt” (Maciel, 2014, p. 282). When he suggests to her that she should try, he reminds her that Emma has precluded any such new chance from her own life: “You have a chance. [...] She didn't give herself another chance, you know?” (Maciel, 2014, p. 282). In the next chapter in present time, Sara has completed her apology statement and is on her way to court. But like with all of *The Other Boys* in these novels, Sara’s feelings for him morph from appreciative and friendly to romantic: his touch makes her feel “dizzy” (Maciel, 2014, p. 237), and they go on a date together. This date is meaningful to her because of her feelings for Carmichael as well as its symbolic significance as part of a narrative of romance that she is familiar with: “And for the first time ever, I get to do that thing of walking down the stairs while a boy waits at the bottom, looking up at me” (Maciel, 2014, p. 278). Carmichael presents a fresh take on how Sara understands a romantic relationship, but also how she sees her situation and herself and because of his perspectives Sara changes her attitudes about how she handles relationships and thus herself.

When Sam's death in the car accident affords her with the possibility to make amends for her mistakes, she is also given another chance at love. Instead of the disappointment of her relationship with Rob, Sam revisits her feelings for Kent McFuller, who had been her "best friend as well as ...first kiss" since they had been "super close" until middle school when Kent "started getting weirder and weirder" (Oliver, 2010, p. 31). Kent's social status may be tenuous since he was "just holding on to the lower rung of the [social] ladder, but hosting a party means the most popular juniors and seniors at their school will show up," and this party will figure prominently in the cause of the accident and Sam's redemption (Oliver, 2010, p. 64). Kent's social location as outsider stems from how he dresses including blazers and a bowler hat (Oliver, 2010, p. 31) as well as his artistic bent since he draws cartoons for "the school humor paper" (Oliver, 2010, p. 28), and prefers to sit "in the back left corner of the room," which Sam describes as "weird" (Oliver, 2010, p. 29). But this vantage point allows him to witness the goings-on of his peers and understand Sam from a more intimate position. Thus, he can become an observer/sage. As he tells Sam, "I see right through you" (Oliver, 2010, p. 72), and though she rebuffs his claims on her motives, she admits, "He's always doing things like that: acting like he knows me better than anyone else" (Oliver, 2010, p. 33). From this perspective, he can confront her about her harassment of Juliet (Oliver, 2010, p. 71) while also comfort her by when he reminds her that he knows another side of her, "*You are too good for that*" (Oliver, 2010, p. 202). Despite seeing him as someone socially unacceptable, Sam respects Kent because "he doesn't do bad things" at the same time that her romantic feelings for him grow (Oliver, 2010, p. 243). As she attempts to figure out how to make things right, she wants to tell Kent that she is dead and trapped in an Earth-

bound limbo, but she does confide in him her own sense of guilt at how she has behaved in the past: “I don’t think I can be fixed” (Oliver, 2010, p. 244). Despite her claims of personal weakness, he rebuffs her concerns: “You don’t need to be fixed, Sam” (Oliver, 2010, p. 244).

When she realizes her course of action to set herself free, she enlists his help, asking him to become her “knight in shining armor” (Oliver, 2010, p. 433) at the same time she fears nothing she can do will right the person she has become: “Even if I lived the same day into infinity I could never be good enough” (Oliver, 2010, p. 396). But as Sam accepts the reality that she has misdeeds to rectify and knows that doing so will lead her life to end with finality, she also understands how important Kent is for her: “Nothing exists but him” (Oliver, 2010, p. 429). This relationship, which exists outside of ordinary time as Sam repeats a day over and over that is already ended, provides her with the impetus to make her final transition by helping Juliet: “And it’s the weirdest thing, but standing there with Kent McFuller in a room so pitch-black it could be buried somewhere, I feel the tiniest of things spark inside me, a little flame at the very bottom of my stomach that makes me unafraid” (Oliver, 2010, p. 266).

While Regina’s concerns are less about redemption and more about revenge, Michael Hayden, a high school peer, offers a similar viewpoint as *The Other Boy*. During her days as a member of the Fearsome Fivesome, she both ignored and picked on Michael as the “unstable Emo Writer Boy” (Summers, 2009, p. 26). When he arrived as a new student at their school in ninth grade, his presence as someone “quiet...removed, above it all” led them to target him because “he just didn’t care about” the social world of the school (Summers, 2009, p. 26). Even though Regina was seeing his mother who was

a therapist, she bullied him even after his mother's death in a car accident when Anna started rumors that he was so unhinged by his mother's death that he became someone to be afraid of: "torturing-small-animals kind of anger management problems, that he's on meds, and his Moleskin hold school-shooting manifestos" (Summers, 2009, p. 26). His aloofness may have led them to harass him, but their bullying pushes him to an actual remove from his peers as he eats lunch alone at the "garbage table" in the cafeteria, and spends much of his time writing in a journal (Summers, 2009, p. 25). When Regina has no choice at lunch but to join him at the table, she accuses him of liking his exclusion, and he becomes the observer/sage who claims, "I'm not afraid to be alone like you are" (Summers, 2009, p. 41). Later, she wonders what he does notice because "all you do is watch us and write" (Summers, 2009, p. 49), and his observer status again sets him up to comment on her inner thoughts: "Everyone is afraid. But no one more than you" (Summers, 2009, p. 49).

Though Michael resents Regina for her previous torment of him, he comes to her aid not once but twice after she herself is assaulted by the girls who used to be her friends. Theirs is a fractious friendship at first, but he offers her a deal: he will become her protector of sorts and walk her to class if she will tell him why she was seeing his mother (Summers, 2009, p. 58). In this scene, she not only tells him what brought her to his mother's office but also confides in him about her sexual assault. His response, "'Nobody deserves that'" (Summers, 2009, p. 60) provides her with the only compassion she has received following the attack, and allows him to see her more sympathetically. As their relationship grows, he offers her more and more protection and compassion, "'Please let me help you'" (Summers, 2009, p. 160). Their emotional closeness leads to romantic

feelings that Regina describes when she sees him one day at school: "...I try to ignore the funny feeling in my stomach, but when he smiles, it gets worse in a good way, and it goes straight to my head in a good way" (Summers, 2009, p. 163).

Romantic feelings draw Hannah and Clay together, though they never become romantic partners and remain only friends until her death. That closeness is one reason Clay is baffled when he receives a copy of her cassette tapes and map directed to those she blames for her suicide (Asher, 2007, p. 73). His role in her story allows the author to use a two-voiced narration (though both from a first-person narrator) that provides more perspective on the plot as well as helps to build suspense toward who was responsible for her death and why. At the same time, while Clay works with Hannah at a local movie theater as an afterschool job and is her school mate, his role in the novel is one of observer of much of the action, an after-the-fact observer, whose understandings of what happened to her allow him to become the observer/sage, but not in a way that will ever benefit Hannah, adding poignancy to her story and setting up the ending for the novel: "I wanted to know her more than I had the chance" (Asher, 2007, p. 10). But Clay's regret that he never became closer to Hannah is one of self-blame as well since he admits that he had feelings for her, but stops himself because of his own fears: "...I couldn't stop thinking about Hannah. How she looked. How she acted. How it never matched up with what I heard. But I was too afraid to find out for sure. Too afraid she might laugh if I asked her out" (Asher, 2007, p. 127).

On her tapes, Hannah's description of Clay reveal how she felt about him as well as make clearer how he is The Other Boy. On the tape dedicated to Clay, she calls him "Romeo" and goes on to explain that in school "my ears perked up whenever I heard his

name. I guess I wanted to hear something—anything juicy. Not because I wanted to spread gossip. I just couldn't believe someone could be that good" (Asher, 2007, p. 199). When Hannah attends the party that will play a pivotal role in her decision to commit suicide, she decides to attend because she heard Clay will be there, which is unusual since he remains outside of the high school party scene (Asher, 2007, p. 203). At the party, Hannah "for the first time in a long time...was connecting—connected—with another person from school. How in the world was I alone?" (Asher, 2007, p. 212). Still, his presence in her life will not save Hannah: "I feel so much hate toward myself. I deserve to be on this list. I might have told Hannah someone cared. And Hannah might still be alive" (Asher, 2007, p. 181). But in addition to Hannah, Clay has had feelings in the past for Skye, another peer who shows up in the middle of the novel adrift and alone: "Why does she insist on being an outcast? One day, at least it seemed that fast, she just stopped wanting to be a part of anything" (Asher, 2007, p. 105). His stance as observer in all that has happened to Hannah allows him to reach out to Skye at the novel's conclusion because, unlike the other students around them who "recognize...but don't see everything" (Asher, 2007, p. 288), he does.

For Deanna, *The Other Boy* character appears twice, first as a counterpoint to her romantic partner and second as an inter-generational counter to her male parent, both of whom have shamed her due to her sexual choices. Their behavior results in public embarrassment as well since they fuel the rumors that have dogged her since entering high school. But her opposite-sex friend Jason, whom she describes as her "my hero [and] best friend," (Zarr, 2007, p. 7) has her complete trust. Deanna wonders "why other girls" are not more interested in him, which she attributes to the fact that he is quiet and



short, though he is also biracial (Zarr, 2007, p. 8). But their loss is her gain as their friendship provides her with emotional nurturance and support as when he reminds her, ““You’re not what Tommy says or what Bruce or Tucker say. Or what your dad says”” (Zarr, 2007, p. 140). His faith in her and loyalty has been a foundation of their relationship, and though she develops romantic feelings for him and they kiss, Jason remains a true friend and not more, one who defends her against the bullying and cruelty of other boys at their school. While they do kiss, since Jason is dating Deanna’s other best friend Lee, they are precluded from developing a romantic relationship (Zarr, 2007, p. 145), which affords Deanna platonic love from an opposite sex friend.

At the same time, Deanna receives a similar form of love and support from her boss Michael. Because Michael is gay, there are no sexual overtones or subtext to his interest in her, and because he is a contemporary of her father’s, his guidance provides parental wisdom without judgment. As Deanna laments, “It was nice, you know, the way Michael looked out for me that way. Too bad I didn’t know him when I was thirteen” (Zarr, 2007, p. 119). But as a force in her life now, she understands that he is “gay. For some reason that made me feel better, like maybe he’d be on my side” (Zarr, 2007, p. 54). She confides in him about her past and also seeks out his advice about her present circumstances, and he becomes the only adult in the novel in whom she places such faith: “I knew I could talk to him. He wasn’t all wannabe guidance counselor, going *sometimes it helps to talk and how does that make you feel?*” (Zarr, 2007, p. 152). He willingly shares his life experience with her, and since he is both older and not interested in her as a possible love or sexual partner, he adopts the position of observer/sage, “I guarantee you that I’ve screwed up more than you have, and I’m still in the game,” (Zarr, 2007, p.

152), and thus can be a resource for her both financially and emotionally. She trusts Michael and looks to him for examples of someone who has made mistakes yet has thrived (Zarr, 2007, p. 54). In both cases, a male character who lacks social status or is outside the family system offers the female main character emotional and intellectual reinforcement as she tries to make sense of her life experiences. In both cases, they provide insights she might otherwise not have, and by doing so help her to see herself and her past in new ways.

One other common feature of the main character's relationship with The Other Boy is the way this relationship remains chaste or near-chaste throughout the novels. Even in the case of novels where the two are physical with each other, these interactions never veer toward intercourse or sexual intimacies. They may and do kiss; they snuggle and feel close to one another; bodily responses are described. However, the ambivalence and rapacious nature of the main character's relationship with The Predatory Boy/friend are absent; thus, setting up a conflict between the male partner who will use a woman for his own sexual needs and the male partner who truly understands and loves a woman. This dyad and its implications will be discussed later in this chapter, but they are parallel with the ways the novels introduce and discuss the sexual choices and sexuality of the female main characters.

### **Desires and Dangers: Sexual Attitudes and Experiences**

Using Ashcraft's definition (2012) of sexuality as noted in the introduction to this chapter, a careful analysis of the sexual experiences as well as the intra- and inter-personal relationships of the female character related to her sexuality became integral to understanding the ways these seven novels construct and use discourses about sexuality

and sexual practices for adolescent women in the contemporary world. In all of the seven novels, the female main character must consider, respond to, and/or deal with the aftereffects of a sexual situation. In three of these novels, rape or attempted rape take place. In four of the novels, the main character engages with a male character in sexual intercourse, though her feelings, which will be discussed below, border more on ambivalence and shame than they do on desire and pleasure, which will be discussed in the final subsection of this chapter. In one of these novels, while the female main character consents to sexual intercourse, the description of her consent to a male character she knows to be a rapist, skirts assault because her true motivations are murky at best. In two of the novels, the female main character dates a Boy/friend who pressures her to be more fully sexual with him, despite her own misgivings. Thus, in these seven novels, desire and pleasure with a partner is missing, and instead sexuality is framed as rife with danger, risk, and painful consequences. In all but one of the novels, the decision to become sexually active or the sexual assault of the main character leads directly to public shame, inner turmoil, bullying, and harassment. However, in that one novel, the decision *not* to be sexually active also has serious consequences for the main character.

When Jujube accompanies Brent to his car on his purported mission to get something for the band that is planning at their school dance, she goes willingly into the backseat. She admits “as soon as we’d started kissing, I’d know Brent didn’t have to get anything for the band. It hadn’t mattered,” and so they begin to kiss with Jujube as a full and complete participant (Goobie, 2002, p. 8). Brent was, after all, someone she was interested in: “I wasn’t about to check out of a dream come true” (Goobie, 2002, p. 8). But as he begins to work at her clothes, her desire for him shifts as she realizes “there

was a bad feeling crawling around my stomach that wouldn't go away" (Goobie, 2002, p. 9), which was largely the result of how he begins to talk to her "as if Brent thought he'd pulled one over on me—as if I was some beginner he had to explain things to" (Goobie, 2002, p. 9). Her choice of words is interesting since it hints at a level of experience perhaps at a previous sexual experience or merely in her own knowledge about sexual interactions between partners. No matter her meaning, she remains confident in what she does not want, and refuses to go further, though Brent lectures her, "Girls are always a bit afraid of this'" (Goobie, 2002, p. 10). Her admonishment to him echoes back to Carlos's warning: "I'm not diving into things at warp speed, Brent" (Goobie, 2002, p. 10) so that she asserts herself due to her own feelings and Carlos's words. For Jujube, whether or not she has engaged in sexual intimacies will not matter because once Brent relays part of this story to his friends, rumors abound that Jujube and he have had sexual intercourse.

Although Sam and her boyfriend Rob never have sexual intercourse, she shares Jujube's willingness to consider being physically intimate with a partner; however, her motives are less about her desire and thus her most frequent response when she considers having sex for the first time is ambivalence. Because the novel begins and ends with Sam's death, she remains, despite her feelings for Kent, a virgin and chaste in that all she has ever done is a kiss the boy she truly loves. Sam admits that she and Rob have gotten "close a few times," but that ultimately "it's always felt wrong" (Oliver, 2010, p. 14). Most important, her interest in having sex with Rob rests more in her feelings for her friends than in her feelings for him: "This is the one reason I'm happy I decided to have sex with Rob tonight: so Lindsay and Elody won't make fun of me anymore" (Oliver,

2010, p. 14). Her feelings about sex run even deeper to her own ambivalence about being ready: “I decided to have sex with him to get it over with, and because sex has always scared me and I don’t want to be scared of it anymore” (Oliver, 2010, p. 62). When she tries to imagine what such an encounter will be like, she admits that she will “sneak off to the bathroom and text Elody and Lindsay and Ally. I did it” more than she can imagine actually having sex with Rob (Oliver, 2010, p. 101). As discussed earlier part of her hesitancy may be that her attraction to Rob is also ambivalent: she “hate how he kisses,” (Oliver, 2010, p. 38) and wonders if “the idea of him is better than the *him* of him” (Oliver, 2010, p. 146). Despite the novel’s narrative structure that repeats the same day over and over, a day which was supposed to end with them having sex for the first time, Sam and Rob never consummate their relationship.

But the day’s repetition propels Sam through a plethora of emotions as she comes to term with her own death, and one of them is the feeling that she has nothing to lose and can behave exactly as she wants with no consequences. Such a realization leads her to dress provocatively and flirt openly with one of her teachers, Mr. Daimler, during her math class. Any sort of ambivalence she had expressed previously no longer matters: “His eyes are so deep and full of something it almost frightens me off. But it doesn't” (Oliver, 2010, p. 205). Her desire for Mr. Daimler contrasts with her descriptions of Rob: “Warmth spreads over my whole body; it reminds me of standing right under the heat lamps ...I’ve never felt that way with Rob,” (Oliver, 2010, p. 196) and this sense of warmth continues in the scene as a “kind of electricity in the air, a zipping, singing tension, running all in all directions; it feels like the moment right before a thunderstorm, like every particle of air is extracharged and vibrating” (Oliver, 2010, p. 201). While they

end up making out in the classroom, the scene veers toward her ambivalence when she realizes “all of a sudden it’s not fun anymore” (Oliver, 2010, p. 207). Whatever she had hoped or wanted from her interaction with him, Sam remains intrigued by but ultimately unsure about sexual intercourse.

This sense of ambivalence pervades Sara’s relationship with Dylan, though they do end up having sexual intercourse. Like with Sam, much of Sara’s interior monologue on her decision to engage in sex with her boyfriend rests on her relationship with Brielle who has been urging her toward sex “since losing her V-card,” though Sara is unaware Brielle lost her virginity due to sexual assault and thus her own decision-making around sex is inter-connected with Brielle’s victimization (Maciel, 2014, p. 18). Sara admits she’s “kind of leaning to *not*” (Maciel, 2014, p. 18), and sees Brielle as “the brave one” because sex “it’s freaking scary” (Maciel, 2014, p. 18). Despite knowing that “everyone does it,” Sara worries about her inexperience but also cannot exactly explain what frightens her most (Maciel, 2014, p. 18; p. 276). She remains, however, well aware that she does not truly want to have sex. Still, Sara does have sex with Dylan on a bedroom floor during a party at Brielle’s house after a night of drinking, and her reaction sums up the speed and lack of eroticism during their encounter: ““That’s it”” (Maciel, 2014, p. 54). But Sara’s motivations for having sex with Dylan continue to revolve around her relationships with peers, like Brielle and Emma. When Sara finds Emma also in attendance at the party “it occurs to me. That bitch can’t call me a tease any more” (p. 59), much like her later recognition, that she “had sex with Dylan, so Brielle would be nicer” (Maciel, 2014, p. 148). For Sara, her sexual choices rest less on her desires for Dylan or intercourse than her relationships, both positive and negative, with same-sex peers. In

fact, when she discovers that Brielle was not a sexual pioneer but had been raped, this information angers Sara and reinforces her loneliness: “I could scream. I had sex with Dylan so she’d be nicer to me, so we’d have something in *common*, finally. So she’d like, respect me” (Maciel, 2014, p. 148). If sex with Dylan offered a tool Sara could use to build her relationship with Brielle, she also sees it as a tool that can help her hurt Emma and make her jealous (Maciel, 2014, p. 67; p. 81). Because while Sara remains conflicted about her sexual relationship with Dylan, she wants to believe “the warmth and power and excitement had to be the real thing” since it provides her with a sense of ownership over Dylan, an insurance policy on his fidelity, and a way to mark her territory, but in this novel it is never about her sexual pleasure (Maciel, 2014, p. 247).

Convoluting feelings toward sex also plague Deanna who has a sexual relationship with Tommy who is seventeen when she is only thirteen years old and still in middle school. The novel starts with her protestations that “I didn’t love him. I’m not even sure I even liked him” (Zarr, 2007, p. 1), and her initial description of their sexual interludes appear that she disassociates from what is happening: “in my head I wrote the story of a girl...while Tommy did his thing” (Zarr, 2007, p. 2). She later remembers that “one of the last times I cried when Tommy and I had sex for the first time” (Zarr, 2007, p. 70). But as she admits, by the time her father discovers them in Tommy’s car, they had “been there doing pretty much the same thing a dozen times before” (Zarr, 2007, p. 1). Although she has known Tommy for years as her brother’s friend, Deanna “[tunes] into Tommy...like I’d landed on a new radio station that was going to tell me everything I’d ever wanted to know about myself” (Zarr, 2007, p. 64). This sense of new information she gains from him rests on “knowing someone else thought about me for more than one

second, maybe even thought about me when I wasn't there" (Zarr, 2007, p. 65), and this feeling of being wanted is irresistible to her as is the physical response they have for each other: "We stared at each other in the mirror, something crackling between us" (Zarr, 2007, p. 65). While their relationship never amounts to more than them "[getting] stoned and [messing] around" (Zarr, 2007, p. 53), she wonders what it feels like to be kissed as if "to declare: *We are each other's*" (Zarr, 2007, p. 37). For Deanna, while she engages in sex with Tommy, including intercourse and oral sex, her true motivations rest in her need to be noticed and appreciated. But when Lee, her friend, asks her about making the decision to have sex, Deanna's inner monologue includes thoughts that coalesce around sex's positive qualities: "I'd tell her about sex; the good stuff, like how it could be warm and exciting—it took you away—" but she also admits that "sex is like a trade-off" that is given in order to get what is really desire, "you might think you want to do it and then halfway through or afterward realize no, you just wanted company" (Zarr, 2007, p. 79). Still, whatever uncertainty Deanna feels about sex, when she and Tommy end up at the same summer job, she acknowledges "Tommy has something" (Zarr, 2007, p. 97) as if her attraction to him is a quality he alone possess instead of being motivated by her own desire for sex or sexual intimacy. Despite her clear descriptions that she engaged willingly in her relationship with Tommy, he remains an older young man who acted on a mutual attraction. Legally in most states, this behavior would constitute statutory rape, which Michael asks Deanna about. But as she recounts "my dad knew he could press charges, but it was clear from the beginning that was never going to happen because it would mean talking about it. Talking about it was one thing he could never do" (Zarr, 2007, p. 53). At various points in the novel, Deanna connects her decision to have a



sexual relationship with Tommy with its concurrence with her father's job loss and subsequent depression. Later, when he discovers the affair, he shames her by being emotionally distant and contributing to ostracism she faces at school. Throughout the novel, Deanna veers from insinuating that her choice to engage in sex was a reaction to two men who did not care about her feelings, to describing her own feelings of desire for Tommy and physical intimacy. But, as with other female main characters, her decision is not simply one of desire and pleasure; rather it is inter-connected with intra-familial issues, which affect how she sees herself and her sense of self-worth. Sex is not for pleasure, but it is a "trade off" she willingly makes to gain emotional closeness, but she is punished by her father, her partner, and her peers for this choice.

Annabel loses the ability to choose if she will be sexually active or not when she is raped by Will. Previously, she had feelings for and kissed another boy, an event that led to her losing her best friend Clarke; however, other than that, she has no sexual partners or experiences until she is assaulted at a party where everyone has been drinking (Dessen, 2008, p. 75; p. 263). When she is bullied and harassed by Sophie, part of her response is to reflect on the injustice of the accusation that she engaged in consensual sex. But since she chooses silence and tells no one about the truth, her reaction also includes the difficulties of holding onto such a secret because she had "sucked the story in and held it there" (Dessen, 2008, p. 301). The other consequence of her assault connects to her sense of guilt when she finds out another female peer has been raped by Will, an event she believes she could have prevented if she had spoken up (Dessen, 2008, p. 247).

However, as her feelings for Owen turn romantic, they also turn physical as they kiss on several occasions (Dessen, 2008, p. 222), an experience that Annabel describes as

“unforgettable” (Dessen, 2008, p. 225) but without much reflection on any sexual attraction she feels for him or thought on how her rape might impede or affect a new sexual partner. This absence becomes possible as Owen and Annabel’s relationship remains uncorrupted by sex. Will may have victimized her through sexual intercourse, but Owen treads carefully and slowly with respect, support, and emotional intimacy as they begin a romantic relationship, and he does so with no knowledge of her rape.

Unlike Annabel, Regina does tell her peers when she is sexually assaulted, but no one believes her, including her best friend and Josh, her boyfriend. Prior to being assaulted, Regina and Josh had an active sex life. They met during school hours in a storage room for “impromptu make-out sessions,” times that she desired as she “lived for him against me under that forty-watt bulb” (Summers, 2009, p. 106). But even this consensual relationship has a predatory element in that Josh gave her a necklace to mark the first time they had sex, which he does again when he and Anna begin dating after the sexual assault reconfigures the couples of the Fearsome Fivesome (Summers, 2009, p. 217). This piece of jewelry, which Regina gladly accepted, signifies the import of the event, but given that he repeats the gesture with Anna, it has an element of marking his territory rather than marking a mutual experience. When she is assaulted by Donnie, Regina describes a common enough feature of parties until the situation becomes more dangerous: “The inevitability of every party: Someone will kiss you and you won’t want it. Except this is worse than that. Way, way worse...I really, *really* don’t want it,” until she realizes he will not stop attacking her and she admits, “I’m afraid (Summers, 2009, p. 7). But because the focus of the novel is not her assault, it merely acts as a plot device, the majority of Regina’s time is spent being bullied by her former friends and her

attempts to enact revenge on them. Their battle of the wills drives much of the plot at the same time does her burgeoning relationship with Michael, *The Other Boy*. However, in that relationship, once their uneasy friendship turns to romance, they engage in what appears to be a physical relationship. They kiss on several occasions, and in their most physical experience lie on his bed together “a tangle of arms and legs” as “his hand slides up my shirt, and I kiss him and I kiss him again” (Summers, 2009, p. 190). Like Annabel, Regina embarks on a physical relationship without much exploration of her attitude after being assaulted by one peer and betrayed by her boyfriend. Her own past as a bully is the main impediment to her relationship with Michael, the horrible ways she has treated him and if she is deserving of his love and attention, not that she has been betrayed by those she had placed her own faith and feelings in. As in the other novels, sexuality entails risks, but a more virtuous and pure love is presented as the counterpoint to sexuality.

Hannah may have dreams of being kissed by Justin and what a romantic relationship with him will include (Asher, 2007, p. 26), but peers quickly target her when they pass rumors about her purported sexual activities. None of them are true. In addition to the verbal harassment, Hannah faces several incidents of sexual harassment by male peers, which include being named as “hot” and having the “best ass” by Alex, another male peer, on lists that were circulated at their school (Asher, 2007, p. 40), and being preyed on by Tyler, who spies on her through her bedroom window (Asher, 2007, p. 85-89). But she is also physically touched twice by male peers in an aggressive and unwanted way. When she sees Bryce at a local variety store his “*cupped hand smacked my ass*” (Asher, 2007, p. 47). When she responds in anger, he tells her, “*I’m only playing*” (Asher, 2007, p. 51), but Hannah resists his facile dismissal of her protest: “*If*

*you touch a girl, even as a joke, and she pushes you off leave ...her...alone. [...] Your touch sickens her*" (Asher, 2007, p. 52). Later in the novel, Hannah is again assaulted in a public place, Rosie's diner, when another male peer, Marcus, attempts to touch her in a sexual way: "*Below the table, my fingers were fighting to pry your fingers off. To loosen your grip. To push you away*" (Asher, 2007, p. 142). When Marcus continues to assault her with his "*hand immediately [sliding] up from my thigh. All the way up*" (Asher, 2007, p. 143), Hannah defends herself by "*throwing [him] to the floor*" (Asher, 2007, p. 143). But for Hannah this episode makes clear to her that while other people in the diner were around "*they knew something was going on in that booth, they just didn't feel like helping*" (Asher, 2007, p. 143). Hannah's inability to protect herself from such unwarranted encroachment on her body as well as the idea that no one else will protect her add to her growing sense of alienation and despair. Additionally, she knows that both of these incidents are connected to the verbal sexual harassment she has faced due to Alex's lists at school: "*...when you hold people up for ridicule, you have to take responsibility when other people act on it*" (Asher, 2007, p. 53), and they are the result of the rumors that have plagued her, leading to her understanding that she is "*Miss Reputation*" among her peers (Asher, 2007, p. 140).

Hannah's ability to protect herself and set boundaries around sexual assault are stymied when she becomes complicit in another girl's rape. Hannah is a silent witness, hidden in a closet, to Bryce's rape of Jessica during a party when she and the peers in attendance have been drinking a great deal. Jessica's vulnerability comes from the fact that she has passed out due to alcohol and because Justin, who she had been in the bedroom with, allows Bryce to rape her. While Hannah listens to what is going on, she

“could have stopped it,” but she chooses to do nothing, admitting “it doesn’t matter what my excuse was” (Asher, 2007, p. 227), and later “you have no idea how much I wish I hadn’t ruined that girl’s life” (Asher, 2007, p. 230). Hannah sees herself as guilty as Justin and Bryce are: “Justin, baby, I’m not blaming you entirely. We’re in this one together. We both could have stopped it. Either one of us. We could have saved her” (Asher, 2007, p. 229). Hannah’s feelings of remorse lead her to have sexual intercourse with Bryce, despite the fact that she finds him disgusting and she knows he is a rapist (Asher, 2007, p. 265). While having sex with him is consensual, “I knew exactly what I was doing” (Asher, 2007, p. 264), this encounter is neither about desire or pleasure: “All I did was turn my head, clench my teeth, and fight back tears. And he saw that. He even told me to relax” (Asher, 2007, p. 265). Her decision to have sex is the result of her remorse at not saving Jessica, and becomes a way to punish herself and is the final act of betrayal towards herself before she commits suicide (Asher, 2007, p. 266). If Hannah had once had dreams of romance and the physical intimacy of kissing a boy she liked, such dreams have been destroyed by the sexual violence that surrounds the female characters in this novel. Sex is not about pleasure; sex is about power and danger.

## **Discussion**

### **Modes of Address: Female Sexuality**

In her qualitative research project focused on the lives of thirty women in the northeastern United States, Phillips (2000) explores “hetero-relational subjectivities,” which she argues “all women regardless of sexual orientation or sexual identity are engaged in” because all women in a “male dominated society must spend enormous amounts of energy sifting through the complex and pervasive messages about pleasure,

danger, and entitlement regarding sexuality and male power” (p. xi). These “pervasive messages” are the very sorts of modes of address that the authors of the novels in this dissertation study operationalize in their novels as parts of their fictional worlds, and they do so because such discourses are at work in the cultural and social contexts which readers must live with and negotiate in the real world. One aspect of Phillips’ research is particularly resonant for the modes of address employed in the construction of the male characters in these novels. While this dissertation study identifies and analyzes these male characters as The Predatory Boy/friend and The Other Boy, Phillips theorizes a similar male dyad found in the research she completed with the women participants in her study. For Phillips, this dyad also echoes the sense that there are ““good guys”” and there are ““bad guys”” and as such these “...categories do not overlap,” and she connects this dyad to what she terms the “normal/danger dichotomy discourse” of sex and violence in Western societies (p. 52). Thus, not only does the heteronormative script play a role in discourses around “hetero-relations” but it also frames a particular take on that script, which then sets up specific discourses around sex and romance omnipresent in many cultural artifacts, including these novels.

Female adolescents, be they in the novels under study or the real world, can find good boys and bad boys, and figuring out what boy belongs to which category becomes vital not only to finding a healthy and happy romantic relationship with the good boy, as Phillips argues and these novels make clear, but also to protecting one’s self from the bad boy. This added dimension to discourses around men and sexuality makes clear that woman’s safety hinges on her discernment in selecting a romantic or sexual partner. Inherent in these discourses then is an element of victim blaming, because if a woman

does not carefully choose between these good and bad boys, she will have no one to blame but herself (Phillips, 2000). Such tensions in these novels exists as the female main character must identify the actual failings and rapacious nature of The Predatory Boy/friend and the moral rectitude and wisdom of the Other Boy, an outsider she has already judged and cast aside or regularly ignores. Only once she has seen the error in her ways does the female main character find true happiness and love. But her desire and/or interactions with The Predatory Boyfriend first will lead to serious consequences, which she alone must pay: ostracism, sexual violence, and even death.

In these novels, Prince Charming ends up being a sexual predator, despite his attractiveness, and becomes the bad boy despite what looks good on the surface. But how could the female characters have made better choices? Herein lies the true conflict at work in these novels: they remain at their core morality tales because these novels, like much cultural production and YA literature in particular, serves multiple purposes, the least of which may be to tell a good story. Teaching lessons and helping adolescent assume their role as a healthy, functioning adult, as Trites argues (2000), gives YA literature, especially the sorts of realistic novels used in this study, its didactic quality. In addition, the use of The Other Boy does not critique or destroy the romance myth of Prince Charming but merely shifts its locus from the attractive, good guy that the female main character, and thus the adolescent reader, has assumed is worthy of her time and attention to the Other Boy, whose characterization includes aspects that make him appear weird or different, or plagued by social isolation or anger issues. He may be an outsider in many ways and has previously struggled in relationships in the social world of peers, but now he becomes the observer/sage who saves the female main character not only

from The Predatory Boy/friend but also from herself and her circumstances. This sense of danger differentiates the male characters in these novels as well as the ways sex and sexuality are constructed.

Trites (2000) argues that YA literature “[shares] the same ideological message that sex is more to be feared than celebrated” (p. 85), and this message is apparent in all of the novels in this study. These novels include rape and predatory sexual behaviors, sexual activity not as celebration but due to peer pressure or expectations, or a character’s knowledge that sexual activity is an expectation for adolescents within her peer group. But nothing connected to sex in these novels celebrates desire, pleasure, or physical intimacy. Quite the opposite: these novels may suggest an open or empowering attitude toward adolescent sexuality because the novels recognize and include the adolescents are engaging in sex, but in fact they represent to their readers and hail them into subject positions that see sex as dangerous, unhealthy, and deadly.

For Foucault (1990) this “deployment of sexuality” (p. 106) as a discursive practice transmutes sex and sexuality from “bodies and pleasure” (p. 157) to a potent method of repression and control. If, as he argues, “sex is placed by power in a binary system” (p. 83), this binary of pleasure and pathology appears in each of these novels as if the authors intended to write a morality tale because the narrative arcs of these novels make clear for adolescent readers that “sex leads to disaster” (Trites, 2000, p. 93), reinforcing social control over bodies through the not-so-subtle reminder that adolescents perhaps should leave sex where Foucault argues society has centered it: within the family as part of the marital contract and reproduction and even then as “an object of great suspicion” (p. 69).



This repressive quality of sexuality highlights not only that engaging in sex is problematic but also determines what sexual practices are normalized or made deviant. As Epstein and Johnson (1981) argue, “sexuality is... a site of struggle in shaping social relations as individuals construct their sexualities drawing from an array of sexual discourses that privilege some and marginalize others (p. 599). In these novels, the privileged discourse remains heterosexuality and an assumption that readers are heterosexual, want to be heterosexual, and have no questions about their sexual orientation. Thus, in the same ways privilege is granted to white, middle class subjects in these novels, the heterosexual adolescent centers these novels as well as the sexual world view and subject position adolescent readers will be willing to understand and take up in their own lives. As with race, silence around “an array of sexual discourses” that may exist in the real world not only negates those discourses but also makes them disappear because they are not normal; they are not valued; they are Other.

Of the various discourses perhaps none is as anxiety provoking as female sexual desire, which is why Foucault (1990) argues the female body was understood to be “saturated with sexuality” and had to be contained and controlled leading to female sexuality as being made pathological, the territory of the medical sciences, and needed for reproduction but not a woman’s pleasure (p. 104). Constraints on women’s sexuality may not be new, but readers might find them surprising in novels published in the span from 2002 to 2014 in a time decades after the feminist movement of the 1970s. For adolescent readers, like many people, choices around sexual activity can be anxiety-provoking and fraught, especially in light of concurrent fears of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, which are both real concerns and parts of the discourses used to

control and pathologize sexual activity. The modes of address in these novels around partnership and sexual activity do little to resolve or salve those anxieties. Rather than provide readers with ways to celebrate “bodies and pleasure,” these novels remain true to the genre of YA literature by asserting through the experiences of these female main characters, as Kraus wrote in 1975, “the sexual act itself is never . . . joyful, and any show of intimacy carries a warning of future danger” (qtd. in Trites, 2000, p. 93).

All the novels in this study include female main characters who do not willingly have sex, but are coerced or forced into doing so by a variety of factors, least of which is their own desire. Instead, peer pressure and social expectations; wanting to please the boy they are interested in; and sexual violence propel these characters toward sex. Only Jujube rebuffs the advances of a young man, but by doing so she still is victimized by public shaming and bullying. Every female main character suffers as the result of sex from the internal conflicts about the decision to have sex to rape. Sex has risks. But in place of such dangers true love and a more chaste relationship offers the characters not only a second chance at romance but more importantly the opportunity to better know herself. If the opposite sex partner she was initially attracted to has betrayed or hurt her, The Other Boy rescues her from such sadness and from her own misunderstandings about herself. These elements of sexuality, romance, and the predatory Boy/friend/The Other Boy dyad become integral pieces to the resolutions of the novels, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### READING POWER: READING RESOLUTIONS

*“It’s not necessarily just guys. I just don’t want people to be like, ‘Oh, there goes Lily, insert insult here.’ I don’t like that.” ~ Lily*

As novels come to an ending, the author works to weave together the disparate parts of the novel, the plot, setting, and characters, and tie them together so that readers believe that the story, and thereby their reading experience, has come to a satisfying but also earned conclusion. If a book is like a journey, the reader must have a sense that she is arriving at a place that makes logical sense given the stops along the way; the reader realizes in retrospect the twists and turns of events and character changes could have ended at no other spot. By doing so the author underscores the journey of the main character because if at their core novels are sites of conflict, that conflict must lead the main character to change, so that the ending is also a new beginning. At the same time, a novel’s end confirms what hints have been scattered along the way about the author’s intentions and theme. *Ah*, readers often feel as they close a book for the final time, *it all makes sense now*. The seven novels in this study read individually do meet such criteria; read together very clear themes emerge that are common across the novels in how they resolve the narrative as well as their use as morality tales, intended by the author or not, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The discourses of the female subject, sexuality, and power, which have been present since the novels’ beginnings, are themselves very present in how each novel ends.

### Using One's Voice

In each of the novels, the female main character has struggled to understand the situation she finds herself in, and for these novels, it is a situation of bullying and harassment connected to sexuality as has been discussed in the previous chapters. The female main character gets embroiled in a situation often not of her making. When the situation is of her making, the plot and other characters provide a way for her to retain an element of innocence because she may have done inappropriate things, but they were not her idea after all. Once she is entangled in these events, due to her friendship with another female character who acts as the true bully and/or the sexual advances of a male character she may have had romantic feelings for, she realizes that few people see this situation as she does, and her sense of alienation from those who had been her friends contributes to her internal conflicts as well as how she navigates her changed social world. Much of the novel becomes a search for answers to the questions of how she came to be in this situation, what truths are being shown to her about herself and those around her, and how she can resolve this troubling circumstance. In five of the seven novels, the main character uses her voice, through a variety of media, to communicate with others what she has learned about herself but also as a way to gain agency and control when she believes she has none.

Before she commits suicide, Hannah records cassette tapes that not only tell the story of what led her to choose death, but to also indict specific people for crimes against her and other people. Her legacy is to speak the truth, even when she incriminates herself: *"I hope you're ready, because I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why"* (Asher, 2007, p. 8). Hannah's final tape is unique in that it includes a recording she made

when she went to talk to Mr. Porter, because she decided to “[give] life one more chance. [...] I’m asking for help because I cannot do this alone. I’ve tried that” (Asher, 2007, p. 269). However, when she visits Mr. Porter in his classroom, an English teacher who is doing double-duty as a guidance counselor, she finds his advice so upsetting, she is confirmed in her choice to kill herself: “A lot of you cared, just not enough. And that...that is what I needed to find out” (Asher, 2007, p. 280). But Hannah does not just kill herself; instead, she takes the time to record thirteen cassette tapes, creates a map to go along with the tapes, mails them to the first person on a list of recipients, and builds in a fail-safe measure to ensure that people who receive the tapes do pass them on. This effort hints at Hannah’s motives for the tapes as well as connecting to one of the novel’s larger themes: “I wanted people to trust me. I wanted them to know me. Not the stuff they thought they knew about me. No, the real me. I wanted them to get past the rumors. To see beyond the relationships I once had, or maybe still had but that they didn’t agree with. And if I wanted people to treat me that way, then I had to do the same for them, right?” (Asher, 2007, p. 135). But the understanding Hannah seeks once she decides to commit suicide will not benefit her, and that irony also provides insights onto the discourses at work in this book not only about bullying but also about death and the feminine ideal, which will be discussed later in this chapter as well as at length in Chapter 8. While Hannah’s answer to the problems that confront her question is a problematic one, part of that decision rests in the truths she has learned about herself as well as her need to set the record straight about who she was versus the things that have been said about her.

Once Annabel begins to spend time with Owen and listen to his philosophies on everything from dealing with anger to music, she accompanies him to the local radio

station where he acts as a DJ. As he opens her eyes to new genres of music, he also opens her eyes to new ways of thinking about life. Concurrent with the growth of their relationship, Annabel finds out that not only has Will raped another girl in their social circle, but also that “Emily told” (Dessen, 2008, p. 301). When Annabel hears this news, she experiences a fleeting sense of vindication that is soon replaced with guilt that she remained silent after her own rape, and by doing so perhaps contributed to Emily’s victimization. Throughout the novel, one site of conflict for Annabel has been her desire to acknowledge what happened to her with her sense that she needed to remain silent, largely out of a fear of how people would react to her and how she has learned to hide her true feelings and problems in her family of origin. In considering these two options, she imagines that she hears Will’s voice in her head, talking to her as he did on the night of the rape. However, as the novel draws to a conclusion, she realizes, “This voice, the one that had been trying to get my attention all the time calling out to me, begging me to hear it—it wasn’t Will’s. It was mine” (Dessen, 2008, p. 340) and that by listening to her own voice she realizes that “the story was really all that mattered” (Dessen, 2008, p. 333). With this new perspective, Annabel testifies against Will at the trial that takes place after Emily goes to the police.

In addition, when Owen is grounded from his radio show, Annabel subs as the DJ and so is provided with a public space to be heard. This “new life” comes to her out of her choice to speak out for herself through both her own efforts and Owen’s (Dessen, 2008, p. 366). Annabel enjoys her new role as DJ as it allows her to reveal herself to others, and with far more freedom than she has previously felt: “There was something really great about being able to put something into the world—a song, an introduction,

even my voice—and let people make of it what they wanted. I didn't have to worry about how I looked, or the image of me people had fit who I really was. The music spoke for itself and for me, and after so long being watched and studied, I was finding that I liked that. A lot" (Dessen, 2008, p. 365). Annabel uses her voice both to "put something into the world" while feeling a sense of release from the judgments of others that have plagued her in the past. By testifying in court Annabel gets justice as a result of her testimony when Will is sentenced to prison.

When Deanna's English teacher tells his students that they should keep a journal as a "place to express your personal feelings," she at first thinks this advice is "so fourth grade" (Zarr, 2007, p. 19), until she realizes she in fact has already been writing stories in her head about a girl. After she buys a composition notebook to document the "stories in my head" (Zarr, 2007, p. 20), she continues to write about this imaginary girl. She uses the journal as a place to transfer her own pain and objectify it in ways that make it more tolerable: "personal feelings I didn't want to feel, I gave to her" (Zarr, 2007, p. 20), much like anyone would do in a personal diary. However, her journal provides her with a way of "getting the truth into the wide open" as much as any interactions with other characters in the novel do because she writes this story of the girl as a running narrative along with the one she is sharing with readers, and thereby giving the novel its title (Zarr, 2007, p. 169). This writing space gives Deanna a way to think about herself and what has happened to her as a narrative that she has power to shape in ways she does not in her life, until the novel's conclusion when she begins to make choices and act rather than be acted upon by other characters like Tommy and her father. By doing so, she can also make decisions about how she wants to behave towards others, including both of them and her

best friend Lee whom she has wronged. In her last piece of writing in her journal Deanna's story of the girl echoes what happens for her in novel's conclusion: "*Sometimes rescue comes to you. It just shows up, and you do nothing. Maybe you deserve it, and maybe you don't. But be ready when it comes, to decide if you will take the outstretched hand and let it pull you to shore*" (Zarr, 2007, p. 189). This "outstretched hand" works both ways for Deanna's story as it allows her to be forgiven by Lee and heal their friendship while it also provides her with ways to forgive Tommy and her father, and thereby heal herself.

In addition to creating the Slut Club at her school, Jujube enlists her friends and fellow "sluts" to create a project for her English class that will act as a counter-narrative to all that has been said about her and other girls. The English project, which is a combination of photography and performance art, utilizes pictures of the bathroom graffiti in a slide presentation. While Jujube delivers her project in class, the other members of the Slut Club tape posters of the graffiti throughout the school: "It wasn't the words themselves that were the shock. It was the place they were written. Next to the toilet, they fit right in. Out in the hallway, they didn't" (Goobie, 2002, p. 82). Jujube's idea for the class project comes out of the assignment itself, which asked students to think about the "ways we communicate ... ways we pass ideas back and forth" (Goobie, 2002, p. 67). Jujube, a victim not only of rumors and gossip, saw her name in print connected with her purported sexual encounters in ways that made her at first feel horrible about herself but then made her question and resist not only what had been said about her but also the ways people communicate about girls at her school. Through her project and her decision to speak out, Jujube believes she "was stepping over an invisible line. As if I was really



saying to everyone, ‘You can’t make me take this any more.’ As if I had my life back and was I ever going to make it move” (Goobie, 2002, p. 69). Jujube’s sense of control over her own life ends up impacting in positive ways not only the other members of the Slut Club, but also the school overall when the administrators reverse an earlier decision and decide they do have the money to pay for the repainting of walls where harassing graffiti has been posted.

When Sara finally understands her contribution to Emma’s suicide, she must prepare and deliver a written statement acknowledging her guilt to present in court. Her statement, which she has resisted writing throughout the novel, becomes important to her when she delivers it at the hearing attended by her parents as well as Emma’s: “They deserve to hear this. I want to say this, I want them to know. I’m not even looking at my notes anymore, because I know what I want to say” (Maciel, 2014, p. 307). In addition, she writes letters of apology to both Emma and Brielle though they will never read them; letters tinged with regret that she had not been a better friend to both. While she admits she and Brielle were “toxic” (Maciel, 2014, p. 316), Sara also apologizes for not “knowing how to help” Brielle whose pain she did not recognize (Maciel, 2014, p. 319), and expresses to Emma her recognition that she can’t “know everything about someone just by how they act,” and hopes that this new awareness will make her “deserving [of her] forgiveness (Maciel, 2014, p. 321). But these are letters Sara will never send, so they offer hindsight onto the events of the novel as well as a hint into who Sara is now as the novel ends. In addition, Sara talks to Carmichael about her wish to “do something good” and to create “the opposite of Facebook” (Maciel, 2014, p. 314) showing both her regret for how she has acted as well as her hope to help others know how to do right: “Maybe

there are other people like me, people who said all the wrong things and just want to a chance to apologize, or try to apologize. Or just to say something—but maybe, it’s too late for them” (Maciel, 2014, p. 315). Once Sara has accepted certain hard truths about herself, she becomes energized to share with others her sense of culpability as well as chart a course that will benefit herself and other people. Through her use of writing and ideas about social media, Sara sees new possibilities for her life.

In all of these cases, the ability to speak means one can have one’s say and receive validation in knowing that others hear your story and your version of events. This counter-narrative provides the female main characters with a sense of agency in that they become the authors not only of the story about themselves but also the author of what happens to them in the final moments of the novel, the now of the narrative, when plot, conflict, and character development leave the main character changed and in Annabel’s words ready for a new life. By doing so, these movements from what has happened in the novel to what might be extended to readers as well who are positioned to use the morals of these novels to learn from the mistakes of the female main characters and see their own lives in new ways. The purpose of such authorial choices as well as the larger cultural discourses these choices are in the service of will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 8.

### **Living in Community**

While all of the novels focus on the idea of community, be it family, school, or friends, five of the novels end with the female main character in a scene that posits her in relation to other people, able to embrace and enjoy fellowship with other characters

almost as if her experiences and realizations throughout the novel are rewarded with the solidarity of others as a sign of her worthiness.

As Clay finishes hearing Hannah's story through her cassette tapes, his regret at not understanding the depth of her problems forces him to confront his participation in the rumors that followed her. While he never passed those rumors along, he listened to them and believed them, and by doing so he stopped himself from exploring his feelings for her and seeing if they might have a romantic relationship. His choices to keep Hannah at a distance along with sense of regret push him during the final moments of the novel to follow Skye out of their classroom and down the hall. Earlier in the novel as has been discussed previously, she has been described as socially distant and alienated from her peers. But prior to listening to Hannah's tapes, Clay does little more than acknowledge Skye's presence and wonder about her. Now, armed with Hannah's story, Clay experiences "a flood of emotion...pain and anger. Sadness and pity. But most surprising of all, hope" (Asher, 2007, p. 288). And it is with that feeling of hope that he walks toward Skye and calls out her name. The last word in the novel is, in fact, her name as Clay calls out to her. While Hannah has died and cannot be saved, Skye can. She can be brought back into the mutuality of a relationship with another human being and through that community perhaps she can be saved from the same fate as Hannah. This chance to change Skye's future is actually what provides Clay with his feelings of hope and by helping Skye, he acts a role model for readers to do the same and reach out to others they may have wronged or who appear alone or adrift.

For Jujube and the Slut Club, their victory in school leads not only to an admission by the administration that they must act to deal with and end the verbal

harassment that has plagued their school in the form of bathroom graffiti. The Slut Club sees this as such a victory that they “have a party to celebrate” with “a cake and twelve candles—one for each” girl in the club (Goobie, 2002, p. 85). Jujube’s idea for her English project begins and ends not with her focus on herself and her harassment, but she enlists the other girls who have been targeted and asks their permission to use the bathroom graffiti that names them. This solidarity continues when she asks the girls to meet with her to talk about her assignment and its true purpose: to change the school culture (Goobie, 2002, p. 73). Her first meeting with the other victims takes place in the cafeteria where it will be plain to other students “why we’re all together” (Goobie, 2002, p. 71), and later the young women hang up posters to re-enforce Jujube’s project, which she has just delivered in English class. Jujube’s elation at the work of the club and its success makes her wonder: “I think Slut Club should have regular meetings—keep this school in line” (Goobie, 2002, p. 88). This cohesion among the female students, many of whom are described as previously not knowing one another, is created as they counter the ways they have been targeted and harassed as individuals, but their success and actual change to the school community is achieved through the work of the group, not the individual.

After Sara pleads guilty and shares her statement of apology in court, her life resumes the typical arc of a high school student. Since the novel’s last chapter is “November,” she is in the midst of applying to college now that her life moves forward. That last chapter focuses on the novel’s final scene, a Saturday night with her family and Carmichael having dinner together. While her family had been fractious in earlier sections of the novel, including Sara’s resentment toward her mother, they join together

“around the table...not like the perfect American family” but to cook and share a meal as a cohesive unit (Maciel, 2014, p. 318). Much of unity is made possible because Sara’s mother has “actually made good on her promise to spend more family time” (Maciel, 2014, p. 317). In this particular scene, Carmichael and Sara also work on their college applications, debating the topic for the required essay with Sara’s younger brother Tommy. As Sara considers a worthy subject, she shares her ideas about creating an online space to help others “say nice things” because she understands after her experiences that she “[deserves] a chance to make something of” her life (Maciel, 2014, p. 314). As she ponders these possibilities, Sara is surrounded by the love and support of family and a friend who she has begun a romantic relationship with, so that what happens next for her in life is in the context of community.

Despite the fact that Deanna has kissed Jason and by doing so been disloyal to Lee, by the end of the novel as will be discussed later in this chapter, she has been forgiven. Still, as the school year begins anew in the novel’s final scene, Deanna is afraid their friendship has been altered permanently by her decision to act on her romantic feelings for Jason. As she arrives at school she sees that both Lee and Jason wait for her at their usual spot before they enter the building, and so Deanna will not be alone all school year as she feared; instead, she will have her friends as a resource and support. As she greets them, Deanna “let our her breath for the first time since getting out of the car” and walks with them as Lee says, ““Okay, then...let’s go”” (Zarr, 2007, p. 192).

Whatever might await Deanna at the school where she has been harassed, she has not only made peace with parts of her life as will be discussed later in this chapter, but she has retained her place in a community of friends that has and will continue to sustain her

come what may. Deanna is not “ready for junior year,” but she can face it with her two best friends as her allies (Zarr, 2007, p. 192), and whatever she has done that showed disloyalty to Lee has been forgotten, so that she is once again an accepted member of their group.

When Owen is grounded from his DJ responsibilities at the radio station by his mother for punching Will, he convinces Annabel that she should fill in for him. At first, she balks at the idea, but as she takes over she begins to feel “something really great about being able to put something out into the world—a song, an introduction, even my voice—and let people make of it what they wanted” (Dessen, 2008, p. 365), and though her show, called “The Story of My Life” (Dessen, 2008, p. 364) is about her vision, her efforts are very much a result of her involvement in a new group of friends: Owen, Rolly, and once again Clarke. Annabel’s relationship with Owen, which had grown from friendship to romance, introduced her to Rolly, his best friend, and allowed her to re-establish her relationship with Clarke since she and Rolly are in a romantic relationship. As Annabel delivers her radio show, Rolly acts as producer and supports her through a glass divider, marking the time for songs and commercials. At the same time, Clarke sits nearby doing a crossword puzzle, there to hang out with her boyfriend and her old friend. While Annabel had been doubtful about doing the show, she begins to enjoy it and is so good at it, Rolly “was already bugging [her] to take the community radio prep course” (Dessen, 2008, p. 365). If earlier in the book, Annabel had feared the loss of friends and community as a result of her rape and telling others about it, the novel concludes with her settled into a new group of friends with her sights set on new activities that bring her joy

and a feeling of accomplishment, a “new life” as she’d remarked earlier, largely the result of this new community of which she is now a fully-accepted member.

If many of the female main characters find themselves in situations out of their control, situations that lead to their ostracism and isolation, by the end of several of the novels, their social isolation has been resolved. Rather than solve the conflicts of the novel for the main character alone, these endings posit this main character as a member of a newly acquired or improved community, a move that echoes the discourse of adolescence as a site for growth into a socially acceptable adult. However, this membership in a new community often occurs in relation to or is made possible by the most common element in the novels’ endings: finding true love.

### **Finding True Love**

As described in Chapter Seven, The Other Boy appears as an antidote to the Predatory Boy/friend whose salacious behavior set plot events in motion or provides internal conflict for the female main character regarding her sexuality. In each novel, he represents a romantic or sexual partner who appears to care for the main character and often is characterized by financial or social status, though in the end his selfishness shows him to be a disappointment as an intimate partner. On the other hand, The Other Boy offers not only love but also a relationship based on mutuality and respect. In most cases, this partner allows the female main character to come to understand herself in ways she never could have on her own. As such, in six of the novels by the end of the story, the female main character and The Other Boy are involved in a romantic relationship. In two of these novels, the romantic happy ending is limited by the death of the female main character; still, true love is realized even in light of death’s finality.

Despite Jujube's hope that the Slut Club can continue as a force for social change at her school, she has other objectives as the novel comes to a close. As was discussed in Chapter Six, Carlos acted as a friend and confidante for Jujube as well as provided a perspective on bullying and sexual harassment at their school, information she had not been privy to or had willingly ignored in the past. When she goes with him and his father for an airplane ride, her viewpoints on both the situation at school and Carlos change, leading her to assert herself as a spokesperson at school. As the novel draws to an end, Jujube considers an ongoing role for the Slut Club, but is more focused on Carlos and a future with him: "I looked at his lips. They were so close. I could spend a lot of time kissing them. 'Maybe. But then, maybe I'm too busy,' I said" (Goobie, 2002, p. 88). Since this moment is the last few lines of the novel, a reader can infer that the Slut Club will take her time while Jujube also enjoys her relationship with Carlos.

As Annabel finds meaning in her new role as a radio DJ and a revived friendship with Clarke, her friendship with Owen also transitions into a romantic relationship. If her initial feelings about him had been fear or disdain, she comes to value Owen as someone who is both protective of her and whose life philosophy is admirable enough to adopt as her own. Her physical attraction to him paired with her feelings of appreciation lead to romance by the novel's conclusion: "So I moved closer to Owen, leaning my head on his shoulder to listen, as we settled into the sunlight coming through the window beside us. It was bright and warm, catching the ring on my thumb as Owen reached for it, spinning it slowly, slowly as the song played on" (Dessen, 2008, p. 371). For Annabel, whatever comes next, in the now of the novel's conclusion her life has been changed by Owen, and she revels in the warmth of their relationship.



When Sara's family gathers for their newly instituted Saturday family dinners in the novel's conclusion, Carmichael joins them. Sara and Carmichael sift through college application materials, debating their essay's topic, while he makes conversation with her younger brother and mother; he is clearly integrated into their family at this point. At the same time, Sara shares that her affect on Carmichael has been as profound as his has been on her as discussed in the previous chapter: "He doesn't skip. He won't be in summer school—he'll graduate, with me. He'll go to UNL with me too, maybe. Hopefully" (Maciel, 2014, p. 315). Sara here insinuates that their relationship is important to her, one that she wants to continue and be a part of her future. Any plans she is making for college and her future, she hopes, will include Carmichael, The Other Boy she had also felt contempt for at the novel's start.

While Regina had spent much of her time as part of the Fearsome Fivesome bullying other students like Michael, by the novel's conclusion, they have also become a couple. In fact, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the weightiest change for her character has been her willingness to do right by him and prevent Anna from setting him up for ridicule and worse when she steals and reads his journal. In the novel's final scene, Regina sits alone on the front steps of her high school until Michael joins her and "reaches over and puts his hand on top of my hand, curling his fingers into the spaces between mine" (Summers, 2009, p. 246). As he takes her hand into this symbolic gesture of unity, Regina reflects on the now of her fight with her former friends: "school [was] behind us, and I realize Anna is right. A whole world exists outside of that hellhole" (Summers, 2009, p. 246). If Regina sees her high school as so problematic, she now has

her sights set on a larger world, but one that includes Michael as important and so close they are, like their hands, “locked together” (Summers, 2009, p. 246).

While Hannah’s death prevents her from ever acting upon her romantic feelings for Clay, her tapes allow Clay to understand how she suffered without others knowing the extent of her pain. This knowledge drives him to follow Skye out of class and down a hallway, but given his admission to romantic feelings for Skye, the possibility of friendship and romance exists for these two characters as well. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Hannah’s relationship with Clay echoes his relationship with Skye in purposeful ways on the part of the author, so readers can infer that he will seek the future, including romance, with Skye that he was never able to find with Hannah.

Death also precludes Sam and Kent from having a happily ever after in this novel; the final scene of the book, which will be discussed later, is her death. However, before she dies, Sam and Kent are a couple and kiss during the various iterations of her life that she enjoys before her final passing over. As the novel ends, Sam reflects on her most important memories as she realizes her life is over, and her thoughts turn to Kent once more: “*And kissing Kent, because that’s when I realized that time doesn’t matter. That’s when I realized that certain moments go on forever. Even after they’ve over they still go on, even after you’re dead and buried, those moments are lasting still, backward and forward, on into infinity. They are everything and everywhere all at once. They are the meaning*” (Oliver, 2010, p. 470). Though Sam dies, her life is complete owing to the way The Other Boy has not only helped her to set herself on the correct path but has also allowed her to know what true love feels like.

As novels end, their final moments are the now of the story; the female main character is in present time, evaluating all of the events of the plot and taking stock of what she has learned from them about herself and about life. One lesson in these novels involves the search for romantic love and a partner who can offer emotional intimacy, respect, and loyalty, and that in finding such a relationship one gains the ability to change one's self for the better. In these novels, the female main character develops and changes largely through the interactions she has with The Other Boy, the observer/sage, who offers her fresh insights onto herself and his heart as well. Love appears as the path to self-knowledge as well as the happily-ever-after consistent with fairy tales of childhood and cultural discourses that will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **Seeking Forgiveness and Redemption**

When Jujube hears the things people at school are saying about her after her date with Brent, her first reaction is confusion and shock. These are her friends, after all, and she cannot believe they would talk this way: ““They’ve never talked like that before,”” but Carlos reminds her that they have always talked this way, but just not about her” (Goobie, 2002, p. 26). This perspective forces Jujube to admit that she was well aware that they talked “like that” about other girls before, and she had “laughed sometimes, when they put another girl down,” but her victimization forces her to re-examine the social world of which she has been a part (Goobie, 2002, p. 26). This review of her own past behavior, coupled with her feelings of distress, propel her to act rather than merely react and by doing so, Jujube decides to champion the rights of female students to attend school free of sexual harassment and bullying. Her efforts, initially to benefit herself, are

extended to the members of the Slut Club as well as changing the ways of thinking of the entire student body and even the school administration. While Jujube never directly apologizes for how she has acted in the past, she has put herself in front of a cause that benefits an entire class of people at her school.

Sara faces serious legal charges due to her bullying of Emma and her suicide, so the statement of apology she writes to read at the hearing results from a requirement of the court. However, her sense of responsibility takes on added weight when she thinks about Emma's death and that perhaps other people are suffering as Emma and even Brielle did. Sara understands she has done wrong and appreciates that she has a chance that Emma never will: "...maybe I don't have to hide, just wait for people to change their minds or give me a second chance. Maybe I don't even have to apologize to everyone or explain myself. Maybe I can try to do something good," so while she tries to accept the others might never understand her or her actions, her energies will be directed to making a difference for other people in the future as a result of her mistakes and what she has learned from them (Maciel, 2014, p. 314). Perhaps she cannot save Emma, but she has the chance to save others. At the same time, even though she can never speak to Emma again and chooses not to reach out to Brielle, she composes letters to both girls admitting her failures and asking for their forgiveness: "I wasn't a good friend to you. I didn't know how to help you. I didn't know how to stop all the stuff we did to Emma. I should have said it was wrong. It felt wrong, but it felt good, too, to be angry and hateful and mean. But maybe there could've been another way" (Maciel, 2014, p. 319). Despite her past misbehaviors, Sara's lessons she believes do not absolve her of guilt but do qualify her to reach out to others to help them find "another way" to behave.

While Annabel had been a mean girl before, largely due to her friendship with Sophie, her ostracism within their peer group and at school re-positions Annabel, so she must see her life in very new ways. This vantage point of alienation and suffering both as a rape victim and at the hands of her former friends allows her to be uniquely sympathetic to Emily when Annabel discovers that Will has raped her as well. Her own rape is a closely guarded secret, which she has confided in no one (except for Sophie who did not believe her), not even Owen. This silence has allowed her to hold at bay her own sense of shame and her fears at how others, especially her mother, will react: “What if even if I had told, or did tell, nobody believed me? Or even worse, blamed me for it?” (Dessen, 2008, p. 272). However, she makes the decision to break her silence and help Emily once she has gone to the police with her charge that Will has raped her, and one factor in this choice is Annabel’s own sense of complicity: “Maybe I couldn’t have changed any of that. But now, too late, I was realizing I might have been able to change something. Or one thing” (Dessen, 2008, p. 247). Annabel continues to wrestle with her possible contribution to what happened to Emily until she literally has to look into her face and see their common pain: “...I could feel her staring at me, willing me to turn my head, pulling my gaze in her direction. I fought it as hard as I could. But just as she passed I gave in” ((Dessen, 2008, p. 251). Once Annabel recognizes in Emily her own “dark-rimmed, haunted, and sad” eyes, she knows her story is an important piece in building a case against Will and getting a conviction ((Dessen, 2008, p. 251). But this decision does not come easily to her as she has feared speaking out, but as Emily had suggested, her testimony could help to “make it stop...Make him stop” ((Dessen, 2008, p. 314). While several factors in the novel come together to prompt Annabel’s testimony, her

participation in the court case benefits not only herself and Emily in their desire for justice, but also for the young women who will not be raped now that Will has indeed been stopped. Annabel's decision to open herself up to cross-examination both inside a courtroom as well as in the public realm of school and community demonstrate her acceptance that doing for others, even at great cost to one's self, is the correct choice.

Deanna carries much resentment and anger toward both her father and Tommy as she sees herself as a victim of them both. However, once she commits a great wrong by kissing Jason and thus betraying her best friend Lee, she begins to understand forgiveness in a new way. The ideal of forgiveness, as well as faith, is threaded throughout the novel in Deanna's relationship with other characters as well as through Lee's characterization as a person with a strong religious faith. Once Deanna finds out that Lee forgives her, this kindness on the part of her best friend shifts the way she thinks about her past with Tommy and her relationship with her father. In both cases, she forgives them for the things they have done to her and the pain they have caused her, which shifts her thinking about life: "It came down to the smallest things, really, that a person could do to say I'm sorry, that it's okay, to say I forgive you. The tiniest declarations that built, one on top of the other, until there was something solid beneath your feet. And then...and then, Who knew?" (Zarr, 2007, p. 187). If forgiveness becomes a healing gift for Deanna, it also opens up possibilities for her relationships with others, from family to friends, as well as opening up the options for her life and what might yet happen to her.

Once Anna figures out that Regina has romantic feelings for Michael, she decides to use their relationship to do more damage to Regina. Michael's journal is stolen, allowing Anna to read his private thoughts, including his wish "to kill everyone in this

stupid school” (Summers, 2009, p. 199). Knowing this inflammatory information could get him in trouble with school authorities and the police, Anna uses it to leverage Regina into rejoining the Fearsome Fivesome. However, Regina, aided by Liz, decides to fight back and protect Michael from Anna’s machinations. Regina literally fights with Anna, and both are badly beaten in the process. Despite being in terrible physical pain, Regina wills herself to school in order to warn Michael that Anna is preparing to share his journal with the school principal: “Michael. Michael. Michael. The thought of him drags me to Hallowell, drafts me down the back streets, past my empty house, and all the way to the school, because I have to tell him. He has to know what’s coming” (Summers, 2009, p. 235). But Michael has been saved because of Regina’s beating. Liz has threatened to tell the principal about the physical violence and thwarts Anna’s plan. Regina may have previously participated in cruel bullying of Michael, but now in an attempt to protect him from harm she willingly takes a beating, and in a very symbolic way atones for her past sins against him by her physical and emotional suffering.

Soon after the car accident and the repetition of this last day of her life, Sam realizes that her fate is tied to Juliet’s fate as the car accident that led to her death occurs as the result of Juliet’s suicide attempt. As has been discussed in Chapter Five, Sam in the past had engaged in bullying behavior toward Juliet and enjoyed her social status, so much that she knows “I’ve never *really* done something good for anyone else, at least not for awhile” (Oliver, 2010, p. 305). The thought of doing for another reminds her of her English class’s study of Dante and the dispensation of souls that have been cast into purgatory: “some modern Christian thinkers believed you could go *up* from purgatory into heaven once you’d done enough time there,” which prompts her to wonder if “maybe

the whole point is I have to prove that I'm a good person. Maybe I have to prove that I deserve to move on" (Oliver, 2010, p. 306). Once she realizes their interconnectedness, she seeks to make things right with Juliet and ensure that she does not take her own life: "I try to tell myself that Juliet Sykes isn't really my problem, but I keep imaging how horrible it would be if this were her day. If she had to live it over and over again. I think pretty much everyone—even Juliet Sykes—deserves to die on a better day than that" (Oliver, 2010, p. 295). At the end of the book, Sam pushes Juliet out of the way of oncoming traffic, knowing that "I have to save Juliet—I feel that. It's my good thing" (Oliver, 2010, p. 313). Whatever cruelties Sam has been guilty of in the past, she proves herself worthy of a good death and a spot in heaven when she decides to do right by Juliet.

While Hannah cannot undo that Jessica has been raped by Bryce, her sense of guilt and complicity lead her to two important decisions as a character. While she commits suicide as the result of numerous factors, which will be discussed in the next section, she also chooses to have sex with Bryce as was explored in the previous chapter. As had been outlined, Hannah readily admits that this sexual episode was consensual, but it was by no means pleasurable and reads as if Hannah is subjecting herself to similar treatment that Jessica experienced. In a masochistic twist in this section of the novel, Hannah punishes herself for letting Jessica be raped and also appears to put herself into a position from which she cannot be saved.

In these novels, characters enact the very human dilemma of choosing between good and evil when they decide to help another person even at risk to themselves. Even more, these novels explore how characters who have previously chosen to act in bullying or mean ways still have the opportunity for change and to help others, either those they



have wronged directly or those akin to their victims who can benefit from the lessons they have learned. Similarly, readers are positioned to take up these lessons of right and wrong, forgiveness and redemption, and by doing so find that they, too, can make better choices and become better people. These discourses of forgiveness and redemption play powerful roles both in the fictional and real worlds, which will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 8.

### **Sacrificing All**

The ultimate act of redemption in three of the novels is to die for another person, enacting the Christian faith tradition of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed his life for the salvation of other. However, the death of a female character raises important questions about how the trope of death often becomes paired with the feminine in literature and other forms of media as a result of discourses about the female subject as both self-sacrificing and a dangerous entity, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

When Hannah commits suicide by overdosing on unnamed pills (Asher, 2007, p. 255-256), she tells her listeners she has done so because she is “*sick of this town*” (Asher, 2007, p. 118), and her feelings of alienation from friends and parents are explained in detail throughout her cassette tapes. However, Hannah explains that her “*thoughts about the world are shaken*” when she understood that few people knew or understood her life (Asher, 2007, p. 124), but her decision to kill herself rests as much with lack of connection she feels with herself: “*You can’t decide not to see yourself any more. You can’t decide to turn off the noise inside your head*” (Asher, 2007, p. 178).

But if Hannah’s argument for her death deepens throughout the novel, a part of her remains hopeful if she can reach out to others perhaps she should stay alive. When

Hannah “*decided to find out how people at school might react if one of the students never came back*” (Asher, 2007, p. 145), she writes an anonymous note that is shared in one of her classes. While Ms. Bradley, her teacher, does have a class discussion about how to help the anonymous student, the class’s reaction overwhelmingly is annoyance and insensitive since they believe the note’s author may only be looking for attention since he or she remained unnamed (Asher, 2007, p. 171). As Hannah finalizes the day when she will commit suicide, she wonders about that final day: “*The only difference being I’ll know it’s the last day. You won’t. And you’ll treat me how you’ve always treated me. Do you remember the last thing you said to me? The last thing you did to me?*” (Asher, 2007, p. 257). These questions, which Clay listens to via her tapes, force him to try to remember how he might answer those questions, and since he can do nothing for Hannah now he is filled with regret about their shared past. Still, Clay’s experience, thanks to Hannah, allows him to reach out to Skye, who is in danger herself. While the novel then ends, readers can assume that Clay will be able to make an impression on Skye and by acting save her life. Hannah’s death now has meaning and purpose because she has sacrificed all for another because her tapes force people to reconsider how they treat one another.

The entire narrative arc of *Before I Fall* rests on Sam’s recognition that she has died and the only method she has at her disposal to pass on completely is to save Juliet. At first, she finds death liberating as she can act in any way she chooses without consequence. However, she quickly surmises that such behaviors are ultimately unsatisfying, and she makes a concerted effort to figure out why she repeats the same day over and over. Her death, she realizes, is incomplete because she has unfinished business.

In the repetition of this day, Juliet's death by suicide becomes prominent. In one iteration, Juliet commits suicide by shooting herself, and Sam becomes troubled by that death as well as the reaction among her friends, who previously had bullied Juliet (Oliver, 2010, p. 173). In another version of this day, Juliet jumps into oncoming traffic, which allows Sam to see that this action led to the car accident, which acts as the inciting incident at the start of the novel. In the novel's conclusion, Sam pushes Juliet out of the way of an oncoming car and by doing so saves Juliet. This decision is quite purposeful in that Sam accepts her obligation in helping Juliet: "I want to help you,' I say to Juliet, though I know that I can't make her understand, not like this. [...] I am not afraid" (Oliver, 2010, p. 467). Sam's peace only arrives through her interrogation of her choices toward Juliet and other peers and in sacrificing herself allows Juliet to live: "*You saved me. A hand on my cheek, cool and dry. Why did you save me? Words welling up on a tide: No. The opposite*" (p. 468). The decision to sacrifice herself to save another person is connected to another running theme of this novel as well as the others in this study: the possibility of change. As Sam mulls over something Kent has said to her, she begins to believe "Everyone can be fixed; it has to be that way, it's the only thing that makes sense" (Oliver, 2010, p. 388). Through this philosophy, Sam can become a better person by helping someone she used to hurt, and Juliet can become a stronger person, healed of these past injustices. But in this novel, change will only occur through Sam's sacrifice.

When Emma commits suicide, Sara initially refuses to acknowledge that her bullying has affected Emma so much that she would kill herself. As the novel shifts between the past and present, Sara confronts how she behaved but with the new perspectives possible through her relationships with her family, her therapist, and

Carmichael as well as her separation from Brielle and the looming court hearing.

Through these influences and her own reflections, Sara finally understands what she has done wrong and is changed so much that not only does she accept her responsibility in Emma's death but hopes to help others. She re-envision herself as having done wrong, but also as someone who needs to be forgiven. This new awareness allows her to try to make amends to Emma and Brielle through the letters she writes to both of them, but also in her idea to create a social media space for people who "have something to say" that is otherwise too hard to say in real life, but where they could "say nice things" (Maciel, 2014, p. 314). When Sara imagines this online platform would be "the opposite of Facebook," this idea is also her way of "actually [helping] Emma...Or not Emma, exactly, but people—people in a similar situation" (Maciel, 2014, p. 313). While Emma's death is tragic, the possibilities for change and help for others in a "similar situation" shift Sara from perpetrator to savior while also suggesting to readers how they might also do right by others.

Death may be the final end in life, but in fiction death, especially of a main character, becomes an important tool for reflection, character development, and the workings of a plot. Here, death also adds another element to novels, which at the core are morality tales, aimed to impress upon their readers the full weight of bullying behavior in the service of a larger moral narrative. In particular, the death of female characters, particularly the female main characters who had in the past acted as bullies, reifies conflicting discourses of the female subject as caretaker of others but also as dangerous, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

## Discussion

### **Modes of Address: Earned Happiness**

While only two of the novels in this study utilize death as an aspect of the narrative, this element provides a focal point for understanding the subject positions afforded female adolescents in all of the novels because of the connections between women, sexuality, and power inherent in the trope of death in literature (James, 2009; Trites, 2000). In order to understand how these novels address readers regarding these discourses, death becomes the way in to analyze and understand the resolutions to the novels because these discourses thread their way through the entire narrative but come to their largest effect in the dénouement of each story.

When Sam dies at the end of *Before I Fall*, readers are left to mourn alone. The other people who have known and loved Sam, including her friends, parents, Kent, and Phoebe, the girl she saves, are silent in their mourning as the novel concludes with Sam's passing over. Readers never know how those in Sam's life respond to and deal with her death. However, Sam tells readers she has had a happy death as she finds meaning in her ability to save Phoebe, and thus right all the wrongs Sam has committed as a bully and mean girl. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah's last tape provides the backstory for her decision to kill herself: She attempted to find out who cared about her, and she realized no one did despite her attempts at reaching out to teachers and peers. Her sense of isolation coupled with her sexual exploitation, harassment, and complicity in another girl's victimization leave Hannah, she believes, with no other option. Hannah's last words are "*And I'm sorry,*" and while readers can assume she is apologizing for her suicide, her meaning remains unclear (Asher, 2007, p. 280). She could be sorry for any number of things given the tale she has told about her own actions leading up to her death.

In this novel, though, Clay provides the sense of disbelief and grief any reader would expect at such a time. Yet, his grief is quickly assuaged as his focus transitions from grieving Hannah to thinking about how he might save Skye. Hannah's death, caused she has argued by her feelings of social isolation and guilt, has left Clay with the lesson, however sad, that if a peer is suffering, one must reach out before it is too late. Again, death may be tragic, but it can offer, in Clay's words, "hope" (Asher, 2007, p. 288).

If Trites (2000) is correct that death in YA literature is the "defining factor that distinguishes it both from children's and adult literature" (p. 118), one must wonder why death plays such an integral role in fiction for this reader. What does death mean for adolescents, and why is death such a consistent trope for authors of the books that adolescents read? Finally, and more important, how does this trope reify cultural discourses about women, sexuality, and power?

In order to function in any coherent way in our lives, all of us must resolve an inherent tension of the human condition: as we go about each moment in our lives, we are aware that we will die. This reality can by its very nature provoke an existential crisis, so every person must find a way to live within this reality in order to function. Death's omnipotence creates such fear precisely because it is the ultimate Other, and this connection with the Other leaves death, like women, "as radically other to the norm" (James, 2009, p. 15). Death and women have become intertwined in ways that make them both a "metaphor for disruption and transgression," (James, 2009, p. 15) which becomes ever heightened as "death" is also seen as "the 'price' for sexuality" (James, 2009, p. 18). Female characters who violate social mores, especially those that relate to sexuality, and who are punished for such behavior, are not new in fiction or other cultural artifacts.

They are in fact quite common and appear in all sorts of genres, images, and plots, but their commonality, argues Creed (2009), is their position as “monstrous” because “female sexuality is abject” (qtd. in James, 2009, p. 78) picking up Kristeva’s idea of abjection whereby “children must disavow or *abject* the ‘improper,’ ‘unclean,’ and thus disorderly aspects of corporeal existence” (James, 2009, p. 19). The discourse of what becomes “unclean” is woven through discourses of power because by naming some things as Other and some behaviors as “improper” individuals and groups of people will end up identified as such and then can be controlled and punished, and employed as examples to keep others in line. Women and female fictional characters “who transgress and who are subsequently abjected are an example to all to conform to the regulations imposed,” and these regulations emanate from discourses used to regulate human behavior particularly that of women and around their sexuality (James, 2009, p. 80).

Hannah and Sara die both as a result of their own actions and choices, but also to save the life of another person, which makes their deaths, especially in light of their ages, seem tragic yet meaningful. However, their deaths also occur as punishments for the ways each girl has been transgressive, and by doing so have crossed boundaries that adults hold inviolable (Lewis and Durand, 2014; Kokkola, 2013). The transgressive behaviors these two characters exhibit are found in all of the novels, and are the kinds of behaviors that adults attribute to adolescents. They are also the sorts of behaviors that must be moderated if one is to learn how to become a functioning and socially acceptable adult, which, as Trites (2000) has argued, is the core function of YA literature: to help adolescents understand how to negotiate power and the social institutions of which they are a part. Thus, the stakes are high, and thus the element of retribution and penance,

including death, that occurs for characters, particularly female ones in these novels, who choose to act in ways that break taboos on how women should behave.

While the novels focus on the relationships between female characters, each also portrays sexual or romantic relationships with opposite sex peers. As has been discussed previously, a very clear dichotomy has been constructed in these novels around the suitability of these partners. The female main characters seek emotional intimacy but are stymied when the object of their affection cannot engage in such intimacies. At the same time, the female main characters make choices regarding these relationships and sexuality, and their desire for physical intimacy becomes clear. Yet, such feelings are portrayed in the novels as contradictory in that the female main character appears to want to be sexually active but she also articulates numerous fears and misgivings about engaging in sex. This generalized ambivalence does not negate their yearning for physical intimacy, but raises how problematic sexuality can be. None of these characters have healthy sexualized lives, and three of them are victims of sexual violence. Sex activity then is paired with danger and many problems occur as a result.

This admission of female sexuality paired with their involvement in bullying and cruelty to others confronts readers with characters who are living outside of the boundaries adults have constructed for what is socially acceptable for adolescent behavior, especially female adolescent behavior. It is no surprise then that each of the girls in these novels faces some sort of strife, or punishment, that forces her to reconsider her relationships, her choices, and who she has become. This morality tale aspect of the novels becomes clear as the books conclude because the characters in these books have a happy ending, which will be discussed in more detail below, which gives readers a sense



of hope that forgiveness and redemption are possible. But each female main character has done things she must first be sanctioned for. Jujube must admit that she has participated in rumors about female peers without a thought until she is victimized while Sara, Annabel, and Regina were socially prominent mean girls who also gave up more authentic friendships in their pursuit of popularity. Hannah believes she has committed the most grievous of sins when she stays silent when she witnesses a schoolmate's rape. Deanna not only engages in sexual intercourse with an older boy, but also violates loyalty ties with her best friend by kissing her boyfriend. Such choices and other situations of which she is a part leave the female main character unhappy, socially isolated, or worse. These problems become theirs to solve, and in ways that echo the emphasis on individual as positioned by neoliberalism and the American ethos of rugged individualism as discussed in Chapter Four. Any contexts that have given rise to these problems or any hint that one's problems in life are part of a complex web of relations between person, others, and society is ignored (McRobbie, 2004). Instead, these problems must be solved by the main character and by doing so she transitions from adolescent folly to the stability of adulthood, the main characteristic of the "*Entwicklungsroman*" (Trites, 2000).

At the end of the novels, except for Sam and Hannah, the female main characters have been accepted back into their communities, although who comprises that community may have changed since the novels start. For Deanna, she returns to school and finds herself forgiven and welcomed back by Lee and Jason. Sara's story ends with a family dinner that Carmichael attends, and the image of her family gathered around the dinner table while she talks about her plans for the future, show she has been redeemed and welcomed back into the family fold. Jujube and the rest of the Slut Club decide to

have a party to celebrate their victory at school, and while Jujube is clearly imagining where her relationship goes next with Carlos, she also imagines she will be busy with the next efforts of this group now committed to social change at her school. Annabel regains her friendship with Clarke at the same time her relationship with Owen is solidified, so they are part of two couples who work at the radio station and enjoy their leisure time together. While Regina is with Michael alone, she believes her life now focuses on him and the world that awaits outside of high school. For all of these character, what has been monstrous in them has been repaired through their own efforts and the support and guidance of The Other Boy who helped the female main character learn important lessons and by doing so become a stronger, more unified, and happier self.

As the narrative arc bends toward a conclusion, whatever setting the author has used in the fictional world shifts into the now, a narrative time when the main character takes stock of all that has preceded this moment. In this moment, resolutions and insights to both inter- and intra-personal conflicts are possible, and the main character, as well as the reader, is positioned both at the end of a journey and at the start of another. In these novels, the female main character describes a sense of accomplishment as well as new understandings of her situation, how she came to be in that situation, and the truths she now knows about herself. These understandings provide her with a new way to live in this fictional world. But as cultural artifacts, these novels also offer readers insights into the real lives they lead, but these insights are immersed in discourses that take up, refract, and perpetuate ideas about the female subject, power, sexuality, and morality, and as such are not nearly as freeing as the novel's endings might suggest. If the female main characters feel liberated through the work they have undertaken throughout the novel,

such freedom to imagine new possibilities are not without reflective and intellectual work on the part of readers, which will be explored in Chapter 8, and much of that work remains constrained by the discourses used in these novels because these discourse frame not only the fictional world adolescent females read about, but they worlds they inhabit.

## CHAPTER 8

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

*“I found that/lately I, I feel like my friends don’t really care what I wear or how I act, so I’m feeling a lot more self-confident, too.  
Once I started making friends I cared less and less and less.  
Now I feel like I shouldn’t go totally out of style, but as long as I’m within the basic realm I can just about be myself and not worry about that.” ~ MaryJo*

#### Summary

In the years since Phoebe Prince’s suicide, state laws and school policies have been enacted to protect young people from harassment and to punish others for cruelty. Adults, most especially teachers and school staff, have been trained and mandated to foster a positive school climate and intervene directly in instances of bullying and, in some states, to report to authorities any instance of bullying. Adults like to believe they can easily discern what young person needs help either as a perpetrator or a victim. But, as Walton (2005; 2011) argues, the reality defies such clear categorizations and easy solutions because young people continue to be targeted and bullied, and young people continue to die as a result through suicide. The complexities of these issues belie a simple answer, and perhaps this is one reason for the plethora of young adult novels focused on bullying, particularly among adolescent women. In these fictional worlds as in the real world, resolutions to bullying situations are not easy to discern. While adults struggle to “get the story straight” around issues of power and bullying, adolescents spend their days in our classrooms reading the stories adults construct and offer them about imagined worlds that represent the social worlds of adolescents but that, as I have shown, take up adult fears, adult challenges, and adult ideologies about any number of issues, including adolescents themselves. This dissertation has analyzed seven YA novels in an attempt to

understand the stories adults tell to and about adolescents and how such stories teach adolescents lessons about female sexuality, gender, and power.

Each of the novels that are part of this dissertation employs traditional elements of narrative – plot, characters, setting – to tell stories of young women who are bullied and/or act as bullies. In some cases, the main characters are both victim and victimizer, and by the end of each novel, this main character has had to reckon with issues of sexuality, power, betrayal, guilt, and responsibility. But in crafting these stories and making them recognizable to readers, what modes of address have authors used to encourage readers to take up, understand, and appreciate their novels, and by doing so, what “ideological constructs” have been employed so that the reader can access the stories within these novels and the stories we tell ourselves about how the world does and should work?

In this chapter, I will first review the modes of address used in and across the novels as previously discussed in the Findings chapters as well as explore the implications this analysis has for adolescents, adults who work with them, and researchers. Later in the chapter, I will discuss the implications for adults and adolescents based on the work of this dissertation.

In the chapter entitled Reading the World: Constructing Contexts, readers are assumed to be and willing to take up subject positions of white, middle class, suburban, heterosexual girls. In looking for texts to include in this study, it became apparent very quickly, as has been discussed previously, that the YA genre portrays a largely white and middle class version of the world. When I was able to find novels centered on bullying that included diverse female main characters, the bullying aspect was not focused on

female sexuality but on conflict around race. Thus, my study is both limited to white, middle class female characters and reflects a larger issue within American publishing. In situating the narratives in these settings and descriptors, the authors take up discourses that normalize middle class, suburban life as well as heterosexuality as defacto. Issues around race and class are largely absent and thus frame the world as not only white but also so embedded with white privilege that race need not be considered. Although all of the novels mention class and family financial status as part of the narrative, only two – *Story of a Girl* and *13 Reasons Why* – connect the unhappiness of the female main character with the financial pressures faced by her family. However, these references are oblique and fail to critique that economics actually is at the center of the dysfunction in the family dynamics and contributes to a sense of isolation these two characters feel from their parents. At the same time, adolescence itself is portrayed as a period of development that leads to impulsive and problematic behavior such as the bullying and harassment that occurs in the female friendships. Such conflicts as well as the use of drugs and alcohol, petty animosities, the desire for social status, and a general sense of ennui are also accepted by the female main characters as the way things are in high school.

In the chapter titled Reading Power: Reading Female Relationships, female relationships are portrayed as so problematic that a reader is left with a bleak sense of the impossibility of female friendships as supportive and communal. Instead, in the seven novels only one female friendship has positive qualities and appears to be a relationship based on emotional intimacy and mutuality. The remaining six novels include friendships that span from non-supportive to mired in jealousy, dishonesty, arguments, and jockeying for social power. In five of the novels, former friends turn on each other and utilize

relational aggression and social ostracism to punish and police the offending female main character. In two of the novels, physical violence occurs. In all of the novels, these conflicts have at their core a fight over the affections of a male peer and the social positioning and status inherent in their social worlds. These female relationships rather than being grounded in affection, camaraderie, and a shared purpose as intimates, rests in tensions of having, wanting, and accessing power, which is possible only through peer relations and relationships with boys, thereby reinforcing heterosexuality as the norm.

The connections between female friendships, power, and male peers are emphasized in the chapter on Reading Power: Reading Sexuality. In these seven novels, heterosexual activity between adolescents operates as a given, with little to no conversation about the consequences for engaging in sex such as risks of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. No discussions about birth control or safe sex are included in the narratives. Sex acts, whether making out in a car, sexual intercourse, or rape, occur all seven novels, so that heterosexual activity by adolescents becomes a normal or necessary part of adolescence. However, at the same time, female sexuality is problematized and depicted as fraught with danger, ambivalence, social consequences, but little to no pleasure. In fact, in five of the novels a female character is or has been raped, and in all of these examples the character is victimized by either a friend or a potential partner. Of those novels where a female main character either engages in sexual intercourse or considers doing so, she is caught up in ambivalence and articulates that she decides to have sex for any number of reasons the least of which is her own pleasure. Female desire then appears to be non-existent, as the female main characters decide to have sex in order to satisfy the expectations and pressures of a male partner; in order to

salve her own feelings of loneliness; and, in the case of two of the novels, to feel closer to female friends that the female main characters sees as more agentive and sexually experienced. This connection implies that the female character who is agentive around sex and a bully is the epitome of a bad girl. Those same friend characters become the actual bullies in the novels, tying sexuality and sexual experience to a complicated confluence of power, sex, and mean girls.

In analyzing the male characters in these seven novels as addressed in this chapter a clear dichotomy was observed as these male characters were split into two categories: The Predatory Boy/friend who will do a girl wrong, though he is socially important; and The Other Boy, who is marginalized in their peer social world at school but becomes the female main character's savior once she has been ostracized due to bullying and harassment. In addition, The Other Boy presents the female main character with alternative ways of seeing her situation, so he becomes a sort of patriarchal observer/sage who understands her better than she understands herself.

In analyzing the seven novels under study, their didactic nature becomes clear especially when one arrives at the end of the narrative. Like any good morality tale, a reader can assume a happy ending is in store for the main character who has learned her lesson. While The Other Boy and the female main character begin a romantic relationship in five of the novels, their pairing makes clear that while she has been able to resolve the major conflicts facing her in the novels, a female main character must still be rescued by and made complete by a male. His love and her ability to see herself in a new way, often through the use of writing, speaking, or asserting herself through an institution like school or the courts, allow the female main character to solve her problems. In this



convergence of romance, dependence, agency, and resolution, the female main characters figure out how to solve their problems, which have largely been decontextualized from any social forces at work in their lives. Because she is able to shape a new version of herself and her life, the female main character achieves a happy ending by doing right by others, sacrificing for others, and/or understanding her role in social institutions like family, peer groups, school, or the larger society. By doing so, the female main character is valorized and appears in the final scenes of the novel in community with others, be it working with friends in a radio station, back at school with her best friends, a family dinner, or a celebratory peer group party. On the other hand, in two of the novels, the female main character dies, not necessarily because she has not achieved the same reflection and renaissance as the other female main characters. Instead, her death portends ideologies that conflate woman with death, because the female is so abhorrent she must be rejected and destroyed, as the same time she is afforded a good death because she dies in the service of others, to save the life of another female character.

According to Newkirk (2014), narrative meets an inherent need people across cultures and time have to “reassure ourselves that we live in a comprehensible world (p. 25), and he uses this claim as part of his larger argument that all genres of writing employ narrative structure because of narrative’s ability to provide coherence and shape to an otherwise chaotic world. But what is the process by which readers use narratives to understand the world and with what implications for the sense, or knowledge, they make of the real world out of the stories they read and watch? Texts are never neutral, and my findings in these seven YA novels illustrate the need to examine critically the stories we

read and what they teach us about ideologies in the real world because what we read does affect how we see the world and ourselves.

These interactions between ideology and narrative are not always apparent to the reader, including myself when I first read each novel. In order to complete a literary and discourse analysis of these seven YA novels, By answering the question of why and adopting an analytic stance, I needed the analytic tool of modes of address introduced in the Methodology chapter of this dissertation (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 22). As previously discussed, an analysis of the modes of address in a text makes overt the discourses in a text, how readers unconsciously use these discourses to interact with the text, and then utilize them as well in their understanding of the real world because these discourses reflect and reify what readers know to be true about the worlds of which they are a part.

If Newkirk is correct that narrative provides coherence in an otherwise unpredictable world, such coherence is not due to some magical quality of narrative but that all narratives are imbued with ideologies that we recognize and that construct the ways the world works as well as the subject positions we occupy. This feature is less a function of narrative structure and more a function of ideological and discursive structures and how familiar they are to readers. As Boardman (1994) argues, "...literature both produces and reproduces ideology...various readings wrought from a story will inevitably be ideological constructs something from which we can never totally escape" (p. 205), and these ideological constructs, such as what it means to be female or who can be labeled a bully, are at the heart of narrative's comforting framework. What we take as narrative's common sense moves and predictability leaves a reader satisfied at the story's

end, and this predictability allows a reader to close her book and return to the world with a sense of what can be expected in the real world as well.

While these ideological constructs rely on a reader's ability to recognize them even intuitively, understand them, and willingly take them up, this relationship between reader and text is always one of negotiation. We are "textual subjects...and social subjects" (Boardman, 1994, p. 193), and as such we bring our own lived experiences to any reading. Thus, the "ideal reader" of any text is one who does "possess competencies expected by the author and who can bring this knowledge to the reading activity" but that any "reader fills in the gaps" and acts "as co-creator of meaning" (p. 200). This negotiation allows readers to determine not only how one responds to a text aesthetically but also how – and if – that reader will take and use any parts of the text outside of the book's pages. How does a story inform what a reader believes about happy endings, or one's sexuality?

When Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of Her Own*, "women write back through their mothers," she refers to the inter-generational connections between mothers and daughters and how those connections frame female existence as a sort of legacy of gender and knowledge about the world and how to operate in it as a woman. At the same time, she hints at the ideas of intertextuality and interdiscursivity by which authors produce texts in dialogue with other texts and the social and historical contexts from which they emanate (Fairclough, 1992). No text is ever neutral because texts are composed out of the material available to authors in historical moments and cultures. In this dissertation, analysis was completed to fully understand not only how narrative construction was undertaken by these seven authors in works of YA literature, but more how these works

are in dialogue with contemporary discourses on adolescence, female sexuality, and power, and to what effects. If texts become ways of making meaning about the world, then what they tell us about the world, even from the vantage point of a fictional world, is of great import. The plot points and narrative resolutions in these novels afford an overview of discourses about adolescence, female sexuality, and power and as such provide ways of thinking about how these texts confirm and produce knowledge about the real world.

In analyzing these seven YA novels through the lens of “modes of address,” I argue the authors of these seven novels have employed a variety of discourses that all center on two key elements: power and the idea of adolescent as the Other. As works of literature composed and marketed by adults these texts operate first as an example of “*heterology*” or a “discourse on the Other” because of the power differential inherent in a text written and voiced by adults but purported to be about adolescents because all of the elements of the novels employ discourses on adolescent as Other, and largely so due to the aberrant nature of their behaviors and their in-between status as *not* an adult (Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 16). As Nikolajeva (2009) goes on to argue, YA literature, like all children’s literature, exemplifies what she terms “*aetnormativity*” which is “manifested in the relationship between the ostensibly adult narrative voice and the child focalizing character” (p. 16). This discordant note of who is actually speaking highlights the ways YA literature reflects far less about adolescents, their views of their worlds, and their experiences, and far more about the anxieties, fears, and meaning adults want to ascribe to them (Trites, 2000; Kokkala, 2013). Thus, these novels like all of YA literature may

provide adolescent readers with entertainment and reading experiences but the genre's aim is rooted in adult attitudes and discourses about the world.

In these novels, these discourses presuppose a problematic adolescence challenged by one's own failings as well as the failings of potential partners, friends, and parents. Conflicts inevitably arise, largely as a result of mean girls who cannot get along due to their own fears and insecurities and in fights over boys as if this territory is the only piece of ground a female main character has power or control over. Thus, discourses around female relationships and sexuality center on an inherent need for heterosexual partnership while at the same time rejecting in the plot the possibility of a healthy sexuality for a more chaste relationship, yet still with an opposite sex partner. While the novels offer the female main characters a sense of what might be called agency and power through the counter-narratives they construct about their experiences, these novels locate this power in the female main character's ability to coalesce her weaknesses, bad behavior, poor choices, and regrets into a coherent, self-actualized person. In addition, this self-actualized person must also be one who is able to relate to others, both same-sex friends and opposite sex romantic partners, in new ways that confirm her as socially acceptable and likable person as if, as Adichie (2015) argues, this space is the only one afforded to women. Power, then, is not about access or achievement or independent knowing about one's world; power for women is relational and rests in their ability to get along with others and be pleasing to them. In YA novels, these discourses are prevalent and illustrate Trites's (2000) argument that one aim of the genre is to teach adolescents how to become adults who can negotiate power and social institutions that frame adult experience.

## Implications

Feminist critical discourse analysis takes as its purpose the “[creation of] social awareness” around issues of gender and power, and thereby prompt social change (Lazar, 2007, p. 145). I have utilized this theoretical framework in order to examine the discourses within the seven YA novels under study, but in order to also offer new ways of thinking not only about YA novels but also about discourses on adolescents, female sexuality, and power in the real world because these discourses impact the lives of young women with consequences for how they see themselves and their place in the world. In this section of the chapter, I will outline the implications for adults, including teachers and researchers, who can play a role in the kind of social change I believe is possible.

With the adoption of the Common Core standards for curricula in English and literacy classes, a new focus on close reading of texts has assumed primacy in the classroom as *the* way to read a text. But this pedagogy assumes a neutrality around the production and consumption of texts that is reductive in its approach to the ways texts incorporate and operationalize discourses and ideologies. For English language arts (ELA) teachers who are concerned with administrative expectations, annual high-stakes testing, and an emphasis on accountability, following these mandates becomes necessary for one’s job security. At the same time, ELA teachers have been trained in methods of literary analysis, so their instruction focuses on teaching students how to analyze fiction for its literary elements and how these elements coalesce into a complete narrative. These factors contribute to an emphasis on close reading that ignores the potentiality of adopting a critical approach to reading and working with texts.

Rather than asking students to closely read texts, ELA teacher must ask students to read critically in order to understand not only what a text says but also how it has been

composed, by whom, and with what ideologies. While Patel Stevens et al. (2007) argue against the role of the teacher as guide for students in adopting a critical reading stance, one implication of this study is that adolescent readers must be afforded opportunities and methods for interrogating texts about power and social relations. We can both assume adolescents are knowledgeable about the discourses at work in these texts while also assisting them with adopting a critical reading stance. Most important, teachers can create classroom cultures and relationships with young people that make them feel they have a right to question adults. This critical stance will empower students to reflect on, discuss, and even resist what often is presented to them as “regimes of truth” about how the world works, including their social worlds (Foucault, 1991).

Many of the “regimes of truth” that underpin the work of the ELA classroom, and schools in general, result from research done in many disciplines from psychology and adolescent development to sociology and cultural and literary studies. Researchers, then, are also implicated in the kind of social change possible once we adopt a more critical stance in recognizing discourses of adolescence, female sexuality, power relations, and even text production and consumption. Researchers, as was explored in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters, have provided ways of thinking about adolescent peer relations and bullying that defines such behavior as aberrant and pathological. This pathology has been understood as symptomatic of adolescents, and more recently female adolescents in particular. However, human beings are complex and complicated, and adults engage in many of the behaviors we ascribe to adolescents as well with far less judgment and without being labeled as out of control or driven by hormones. While adults must be concerned about situations where young people are tormented or harassed,

the reductive categories of bully and victim need to be retired. These labels do not serve to explain such situations, and in thirty years of research they have done little to solve the problem of targeting of one person by others, verbally and/or physically. Instead, adults must consider that when young people, no matter the age, attack another person they are engaged in the power relations they see operating in the world. While bullying and harassment of other people is concerning, researchers should investigate such behavior as particularly human, and not indicative of a particular category of people. By doing so, a more nuanced and complex exploration of power relations as a human phenomenon becomes possible and perhaps a clearer understanding of how best to intervene when such behaviors occur be it in a classroom or workplace.

Similarly, researchers whose work focuses on cultural studies and literary analysis, particularly children's and young adult literature, must also adopt a more critical approach to textual analysis. It is not enough to focus on content analysis; instead, a rich and more thorough examination of texts is necessitated, which requires the approach I have taken in using both a literary and discourse analysis. Works of fiction are produced as part of our social relations and thus represent the discourses that make up those relations, including constructs of power, gender, sexuality, and adolescence. In order to understand how such discourses operate in society, researchers must adopt a critical approach to text production and ideologies. As I have argued, language and ideology construct the subject positions open to use in novels but also in the real world. But these reading positions, and thus these subject positions, can be critiqued and resisted. If we are to disrupt misogynistic, heterosexist hegemonic discourses, researchers must adopt a critical stance as part of their theorizing around cultural products, such as YA literature.



Another implication that adults must consider is a more critical approach to their own anxieties around adolescents, and in particular adolescent sexuality. Adults must be willing to see young people as agentive and sexual human beings. In these seven YA novels, female sexuality offers little but turmoil for the female main characters, suggesting a discourse of danger regarding sex and sexuality for adolescents, and female adolescents specifically. This discourse is not surprising due to the morality tale aspect of YA literature combined with ideologies that position women as “monstrous” and dangerous by their very natures. As Egan and Hawkes (2008) have explained, “in the history of Western culture, female sexuality outside the domain of reproduction has been considered ‘dangerous to both individual and social order’” (p. 305). This sense of danger, apparent in each of these novels, rests on a discourse that “[insists] on deploying the dichotomy of innocence/corruption as the central dynamic [which] renders it impossible to move beyond the regulation of desire and the need to police the sexual subjectivity of women and girls” (p. 305). This need to police women and girls appears as part of the narrative in these novels as the female main characters are sanctioned for their sexuality and reconsider being intrigued by and wanting to have sex and move instead into a more chaste romantic partnership with *The Other Boy*.

At the same time, each of the female main characters articulates such ambivalence about being sexually active, one sees a complete negation of sexual desire as well as the ways danger and sex are coupled. However, Tolman and McClelland (2011) suggest “adolescent sexuality must not only be framed in terms of risk and danger but must include qualities of sexual well-being, including entitlement to pleasure, efficacy in achieving pleasure, and subjective experiences of enjoyment” (p. 250). Egan and Hawkes

(2008) further argue, “If we want to promote a culture where children are viewed as sexual citizens and collaborative social agents in policies concerning this integral part of their everyday lives—we need to move away from protection and toward sex positivity” (p. 309). Adults must be willing to see all people, including women, adolescents, as “sexual citizens” with rights to their sexual expression incorporated as part of their “lived experiences” (Lesko, 1996, p. 152).

My analysis of these seven YA novels includes an exploration of a female main character who has been forced to re-envision herself and her life after a change in her social status and her experiences as the victim of bullying and/or harassment. In these novels, this victimization has occurred as a result of conflict around sexuality and peer relations. As is typical of any novel, the main character faces internal and external conflicts that lead to change. But in thinking about these novels through the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism, the changes that occur in these novels also hint at social change made possible through “conflicting discourses which [constitute] us as conscious thinking subjects and [enable] us to give meaning to the world and act to transform it” (Weedon, 1997, p. 31). The implications I have outlined here offer modes of transformation for adolescents and adults.

### **Conclusion**

This study began when a group of my female students talked to me about the situations of their lives, the issues confronting them, and the experiences that mattered to them. Through my work with them, I reconsidered my own complicity in the “regimes of truth” about adolescence and female sexuality (Foucault, 1991). Once that reflection started for me, the next step was to interrogate the texts I offer to students as well as the

methods and strategies I used to work with students and texts. In analyzing these seven young adult novels, I find much that concerns me about the ongoing discourses for adolescent women about their sexuality and their right to engage in Foucault's "relations of power" (qtd. in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 490). Still, this dissertation is my contribution to the change a feminist poststructuralism believes is possible when we critique and question how language, discourse, and power intersect and function in our lives and societies. As Audre Lourde (2004) believes, "Our visions begin with our desires," (p. 91) and the vision of this dissertation rests on an embracing of our desires to live in ways "in which mind, body, and culture depend on one another," so that we live ourselves whole (Lesko, 1996, p. 152).

As a teacher and a parent, it has been painful to discover that young people I care about have been embroiled in bullying situations either as perpetrator or victim. At the same time, as a woman in her early fifties, it has been frustrating to see young women limited by the same ideologies about gender and sexuality that existed when I was growing up. As I listened to my students, I felt sad that their lives were so constrained by other people's ideas of who they could be, and even more so by the ways they had internalized these constraints. These feelings, as well as my work as an English language arts teacher and researcher, have led me to the same conclusion as researchers I discussed in the Introduction chapter, like Harmon and Henkin (2014) who argue for the use of texts centered around bullying as serving "important instructional purposes" (p. 8). However, where I part with such researchers is what those lessons are and the implications of such lessons. In line with Walton (2005), I believe these lessons teach us to see bullying as a socially-situated, historical practice that requires a nuanced approach

to understanding complex human behavior. Rather than seeing bullying as a problematic aspect of adolescence or female friendships, we must accept that power relations are an aspect of the human condition. When we denigrate one category of people as the problem, we limit our ability to understand the complexities of human existence. We create a category of Other, and more important, we limit our ability to confront and transform these challenging aspects of social relations. Transformation only becomes possible through the processes of reflection and re-envisioning that the female main characters in these novels have undergone. My work in this dissertation then has been to offer ways of re-envisioning adolescence, female sexuality, and power relations in order to disrupt the hegemonic discourses that constrain us all.

Since Phoebe Prince's suicide, adolescents continue to bully and be bullied. Other adolescents have contemplated or committed suicide. Each loss, each moment of emotional pain must remind us that our failure to examine critically discourses of adolescence, female sexuality, and power has lasting consequences for young people, those who care about them, and society as a whole. My work as a researcher remains committed to a vision that allows all people the opportunity to follow their desires.

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