

Hero, Victim, or Monster?

An author looks at depictions of sexual abuse survivors in YA fiction

AT AGE 10, JONATHAN WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED BY THE FAMILY PRIEST. “WHEN I started middle school and realized what sex is, that’s when I really started having a problem with this,” Jonathan, now a young adult, told me. “What happened with Father Jim made me feel like a lesser person.” Jonathan turned

to alcohol, drugs, and aggressive behavior to cope with his shame and prove that he could be “cool, a real man.”

It took the intervention of a perceptive teacher, the support of his family and counselor, and a revealing dream before he made the connection between the abuse and his own behavior. Once he got it, he told me, “my attitude totally changed.”

I spent several days with Jonathan when he was 17, interviewing and photographing him for *Strong at the Heart: How It Feels to Heal from Sexual Abuse* (Farrar/Melanie Kroupa Books, 2005). My purpose was to show—through their own words—how real teens and adults overcome childhood sexual trauma. I wanted readers to have a clear picture of what sexual abuse is, who survivors really are, and how people make choices that lead to a healthy outcome.

The survivors I interviewed have done a substantial amount of healing and come from a wide range of cultural, economic, and racial backgrounds. Our conversations showed me how much we have to learn, if we will only listen. I saw how teens hunger for stories about others, like themselves, who have coped with traumatic experiences. They also gave me new criteria for evaluating fiction that depicts this all-too-common experience of childhood and adolescence.

This is a subject we must not ignore. One out of five children experiences sexual abuse, according to the Adverse Childhood Experience Study from the Centers for Disease Control. Department of Justice statistics tell us that two thirds of reported rapes happened to people under 18 and half to children under 12. Sexual assault occurs in all kinds of families and communities. You might expect that trauma this pervasive would be examined—and its impact explored—in literature for the very people who are living it. Yet few of the teens I talked with had seen their experience reflected in a book.

It isn’t only survivors who seek insight. Annemarie, a 15-year-old reader, told me that when her best friend was

raped in 7th grade, she didn’t want to talk about it—she wanted to read a book that could help her understand what her friend was going through.

What do we have to offer readers like Jonathan and Annemarie? Here are questions I now ask when evaluating YA literature.

Does the story perpetuate stereotypes? For the teens I talked with, the biggest barrier to getting help was the stigma of being a sexual victim. When she was 14, Jenner was raped at an unsupervised party. She didn’t report the assault because, “I thought if I told people what happened to me, even my parents, they would think I was a bad person and blame me for it.”

The source of this shame is all around us. Popular culture projects images of survivors as pitiful victims and psychologically damaged monsters. So, too, does some YA fiction. In Barry Varela’s *Palmers Gate* (Roaring Brook, 2005), Colleen, a sad fifth grader, acts out in strange and disturbing ways. Her classmate and neighbor, Robbie, has uneasy feelings about her home life, but no way to frame his fears or concerns. In the end, when he overhears Colleen being abused by her father, Robbie sets fire to their house. He is sent to military school and Colleen’s family disappears. Readers are left with an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and the indelible image of a hopelessly damaged girl.

In contrast, this year’s National Book Award finalist Chris Lynch’s *Inexcusable* (Atheneum, 2005) portrays a survivor who is a person in her own right. Although readers only see Gigi Boudakian through the eyes of her rapist, Keir, they learn that she is thoughtful, articulate, perhaps too kind—but never pitiful or helpless. Gigi holds to her truth in the face of Keir’s determined denial. In the end, when she says, “You raped me,” readers believe her and know that she has the resources to face whatever comes next.

Does the survivor have agency? Sexual abuse and rape are crimes of power that leave many survivors feeling immobilized and isolated. From the teens I spoke with, I heard how important it was to take action on their own behalf. Tammy was 15 when, after years of sexual abuse by her stepfather, she found the courage to ask her younger sister, “Is he molesting you, too?” Together, the girls ran away and got help from family members. Three years later, when I talked with Tammy, she saw herself not as a victim, but as a hero.

Like the real-life Tammy, the protagonist in Laura Wiess's forthcoming suspense novel, *Such a Pretty Girl* (MTV, January 2007), chooses to act. At 12, Meredith reported her father for rape. Three years later he's out of jail and her mother wants to reunite the family. Furious with her mother and afraid of her father, Meredith ricochets between plans for escape and plans for confrontation. Afraid to trust adults after so many have failed her, she nonetheless agrees to help a retired police officer catch her father in the act.

The best of the books already in our collections show young survivors making choices and taking action, even when their options seem limited or they feel helpless. In Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (Farrar, 1999), Melinda is unable to talk after a traumatic rape at a party, yet she does scrawl a warning on the walls of a school bathroom. Her silent shout gives voice to other girls, whose answering messages let Melinda know she is not alone. Other YA novels in which survivors discover their power to act include Catherine Atkins's *When Jeff Comes Home* (Putnam, 1999), Cynthia Voigt's *When She Hollers* (Scholastic, 1996), Chris Crutcher's *Chinese Handcuffs* (HarperCollins, 1989), and Jacqueline Woodson's *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You* (1994) and *Lena* (1999, both Delacorte).

Are the complexities of abuse dynamics portrayed in age-appropriate ways? Telling, getting help, sorting out what happened are challenges, especially when adults themselves are confused. In Chris Lynch's *Sins of the Fathers* (HarperTempest, 2006), Drew, Hector, and Skitz are rowdy junior high boys attending parochial school in a working-class Boston neighborhood. The three friends are obsessed with sports and engage in gross-out humor. But Drew is also increasingly aware of the interplay of power and secrecy among the three priests who control their small universe. Eventually, he figures out that Hector is being sexually abused by one of them. Young teens will be attracted to the boys' hearty friendship and Drew's growing awareness of adult fallibility; Lynch wisely steers clear of depicting the abuse itself. A friend like Drew—real or literary—might have let a middle-school-aged Jonathan know that he was not a “lesser person.”

For older teens, R. A. Nelson examines the subtle terrain of a victim's complicity in *Teach Me* (Razorbill, 2005). Carolina, a vibrant and articulate high school senior, is passionately in love with her English teacher. On her 18th birthday, she eagerly has sex with Mr. Mann. Without preaching, Nelson makes clear the power imbalance when a young woman's crush gone wild meets an older man's manipulations. Then, when Carolina discovers that she's been duped, she chooses rash and dramatic ways to vent her rage.

As a newly minted adult making adult choices, she must face her own responsibility in the near-tragic outcome.

Is the potential for healing acknowledged? There is no question that childhood sexual abuse can have devastating psychological and emotional impact. But that's not the whole story. As Jonathan told me, “Things can always get better. But you've got to make it happen.”

One place that healing doesn't happen is in Catherine Ryan Hyde's *Becoming Chloe* (Knopf, 2006). Chloe has been raped repeatedly in foster care and has no will—and no place—to live. A young, gay street hustler named Jordy takes her on a road trip across the United States where they encounter such homey and trusting people that Chloe decides life is worth living after all. But when the going gets tough and Jordy is set upon by thugs, Chloe's response is to slit her own wrists. There's only room for one victim in this dyad. Chloe is both pitiful and a monster of sorts, who shows no sign of growth.

There is no question that childhood sexual abuse can have devastating psychological and emotional impact. But that's not the whole story.

The psychological effects of trauma are more accurately and hopefully portrayed in Beth Goobie's *The Place Where the Losers Go* (Orca, 2006). Sixteen-year-old Skey has blocked out all memory of being gang raped. When her anxiety builds, she escapes into “the tunnels,” a fantasy world that contains clues to her past. There she meets a shadow of a boy who cannot forget the sexual trauma inflicted on him by a sadistic older brother. Dissociation and post-traumatic stress are honestly portrayed, as are two likable teens who struggle to make sense of the past and move toward a better future.

How well is the newest fiction serving young readers? The fact is, as good as some individual books are, our collections as a whole still fall short. If you were to judge by YA fiction, you might think that sexual abuse happens only to white kids, and almost exclusively to girls. You'd have little idea of the role of race, culture, and class in abuse and healing. And you would have a limited picture of how people move beyond trauma and put their lives back together.

But if you are selective, you can find compelling stories with vivid characters that convey insight and hope. It is up to us—as writers, publishers, and librarians—to make these and more good books available.

Carolyn Lehman is the author of Strong at the Heart: How It Feels to Heal from Sexual Abuse. For more recommendations and book discussion, visit her Web site strongattheheart.com.