

## **Too Hot to Handle: The Trend Towards too Realistic**

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Many teens learn early on that “life is one damned thing after another.”(1) Teens learn that the world is full of violence, prejudice, and brutality. They learn that some adults - even trusted parents, teachers, and neighbors - are not models of benevolence and caring like those seen on reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show*. In 2001, 903,000 children - one-quarter of them teens - were neglected and abused either physically, sexually, or emotionally.(2) Some teens runaway from abusive homes. According to the National Runaway Switchboard, between 1.3 and 2.8 million runaway and homeless youth are living on the streets of America, and one out of every seven children will runaway before the age of 18.(3)

Teens face other challenges and issues as well. Half of all teens experience the break up of their parent's marriage. Since most divorced parents will eventually go on to form new relationships, many teens will find themselves being brought up in families with nonbiological caretakers. A 1993 study conducted in Great Britain found that the safest environment for a child is living with both biological parents who have never been divorced; the least safe environment - which is 33 times more dangerous for the child - is living with the biological mother who is cohabitating with her boyfriend. (4)

Teens who witness violence at home are likely to practice what they have experienced on their peers at school. Forty percent of teens report knowing someone their age who has been hit or beaten by a boyfriend. (5) The National Education Association estimates that 160,000 students miss school every day due to fear of attack or intimidation by a bully. (6) Some teens, like Gene Taylor, the fictional high school student in Chris Crutcher's short story, "Guns for Geeks," endure endless taunting and harassment until one day they snap and become bullies themselves by striking back at the students and teachers who made their life miserable. (7)

Ever since the late 1960s when the realistic problem novel first became a genre, adults have at different times voiced concern about the topics and issues addressed by these stories. Many adults feel uncomfortable with the gritty characters, the harsh settings, and the use of colloquial language and profanity. Furthermore, adults may not agree with the philosophical basis of the realistic problem novel: "the idea is that young people have a better chance to be happy if they have realistic expectations and if they know both the bad and the good about the society in which they live". (8)

Even though realistic problem novels always have been racy and edgy to some degree, they are more so now. As one YA editor noted, "teen books are dealing with issues that hadn't been dealt with before: oral sex, male rape, and incest." (9) While this trend has led to increased discomfort for librarians who sometimes wonder if any "happy books" featuring normal, well-adjusted kids are being written, it has paid off for publishers in a big way. Teen books are selling like hotcakes; they are one of the few growth areas in an otherwise dull publishing market.

Eliza Dresang, Associate Professor of Information Studies at Florida State University, theorizes in *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*, (10) that contemporary books for children and teens are indeed different. Dresang describes these changes as fundamental and “departing from the usual or traditional in literature for youth” (11). According to Dresang, contemporary literature has changed in three ways: format, perspective, and boundaries. (12)

First, many teen books have veered away from standard narrative to incorporate free-verse poetry, blank spaces, creative word arrangement, and multiple fonts to tell the story. Some books are formatted in unusual ways. (13) Examples of a changed format are Alex Flinn's *Breathing Underwater* (14) and Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun*.(15) In *Breathing Underwater*, a story about relationship violence, the main character's court appointed punishment for hitting his girl friend is to attend six months of anger management counseling and to create a journal describing the violent relationship. The story is formatted as a diary but uses multiple typefaces to distinguish between the present and the past. *Give a Boy a Gun* tells the story of a Columbine-like school shooting by interweaving the fictitious voices of students, teachers, friends, and the gunmen with snippets of factual information which is scattered throughout the text. This factual information adds urgency to the story's subject - school violence.

Second, contemporary teen books may use multiple perspectives, previously unheard voices, and youth who speak for themselves. (16) One topic that is receiving increased attention is homosexuality. This is quickly becoming a high school issue because teens are “coming out,” or revealing their sexual orientation, at an earlier age.

“Coming out” used to occur at 19 or 20, but it has dropped to 14 to 16. (17) *Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez,(18) features a trio of homosexual high school boys who are in various stages of “coming out”. The chapters alternate between each boy as he tells the story of his homosexuality, his family's response, and the harassment he encounters on a daily basis. In one chapter, Nelson, who has unprotected sex with a man he meets at a bar, panics when he believes he has acquired HIV. While some adults may view this as sensationalism, HIV is a very real concern for young adults of all sexual orientations. Officials at the Centers for Disease Control acknowledge an increase in HIV cases, especially among young people who account for a “sizable number of new diagnoses.” (19)

Third, contemporary teens books are tackling subjects previously forbidden, settings previously overlooked, characters who are portrayed in new and complex ways, and with unresolved endings.(20) *Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman (21) exemplifies these changes. In this story, Shawn McDaniel - who calls himself a retard - has cerebral palsy. Even though he is unable to control any of his muscles- he can't feed himself, brush a fly off his face, or communicate in any way - he has a rich inner life that nobody suspects. Shawn believes his father is planning to murder him after he overhears him say, “Maybe you'd be better off if I ended your pain.”(22) As the story unfolds, readers are frightened for a boy who has absolutely no control over his world. This book makes us wonder what happens to kids like Shawn? Is the expense of keeping Shawn alive justified? Perhaps Shawn would be better off dead.

Many books written today leave some librarians feeling vaguely uncomfortable and puzzled because they are so different than what they are accustomed. We suspect that as these books become more controversial, we may be called upon to defend them to parents, teachers, and other adults who are themselves uncomfortable with the format, perspective, or topic and want to limit teen's access to information and stories.

More so today than at any time in history, it is necessary to understand the challenges and issues facing teens so we can both develop collections that are meaningful to teens and defend resources that teens are actually using. For the past several years I have taken teens to the book store to select books for a special entertainment section in the media center. One librarian I know said it was inappropriate to allow teens to select books because, as she said, "Selection is the sole responsibility of the professional."

I disagree. I would tell this librarian that I value teen involvement in collection development because I am not an expert on teen culture and teen entertainment reading. The experts are the teens. I am sure Eliza Dresang would come to my defense. She writes: "The focus is on what young people want to know and how they want to know it, rather than on what *adults* want them to know and how they want them to know it."(23). It is about them, folks, not about us.

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5. Liz Claiborne. The Facts About Relationship Abuse, <<http://www.nrscrisisline.org/>>. Accessed 18 November, 2003.
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7. Chris Crutcher, "Guns for Geeks," in Paul Gallo's *On the Fringe*. (New York: Dial, 2001).
8. Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, (New York: Longman, 1997), 78.
9. "New Answers to Old Questions: Issues Raised at the Recent PW Summit Continue to Spark Debate," *Publishers Weekly*, Mary 26, 2003.
10. Eliza T. Dresang, *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*. (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1999).
11. Ibid, 5.
12. Ibid, 17.
13. Ibid, 19.
14. Alex Flinn, *Breathing Underwater* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
15. Todd Strasser, *Give a Boy a Gun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
16. Dresang, 24.
17. Jennifer Egan, "Lonely Gay Teen Seeking Same," *New York Times Magazine*, Dec. 10, 2000, 110+
18. Alex Sanchez, *Rainbow Boys* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

19. Jennifer Stein, "It Hasn't Gone Away" Rising HIV infection rates are causing worries about a resurgence of AIDS Amid Public Complacency," Los Angeles Times, Aug. 18, 2003, F1+
20. Dresang, 26.
21. Terry Trueman, *Stuck in Neutral* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
22. Ibid, 21.
23. Dresang, 191.