LET'S TALK ABOUT RAPE: SEXUAL ASSAULT IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

MAKAYLA COLLEEN MOORE. Let's Talk About Rape: Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature. (Under the direction of Dr. BALAKA BASU)

Sexual assault is an incredibly mature, sensitive, and disturbing topic to discuss, but it can be even harder to teach. However, by examining literature that depicts sexual assault, readers can develop empathy for the characters by understanding how trauma manifests and acknowledging that no two assaults are the same. Readers gain insight into the victim and the perpetrator and people outside the abuse, such as family and friends. This thesis explores sexual assault narratives that cover incestuous sexual assault, stranger, acquaintance, and gray rape. These narratives are told from the perspective of memoir, semi-autobiographical, and fiction—realistic and historical—to adequately provide a much-needed platform for discussing these horrific and brutal acts of violence. The literature in this thesis also provides a model for educators who want to use this literature to better inform their students about what they may face as they go through life and how their education can protect others. Learning about these texts and teaching them is how the stigma attached to sexual assault gets destroyed.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is a powerful conduit for knowledge and education; even on its own, it is an educator for many people, including myself. Books have been a staple of my education, and I believe they are an invaluable asset to learning. When thinking about what I wanted this project to be, I knew I wanted to focus on something socially beneficial. Also, this project needed to reflect something I respect and support, recognizing and empowering women and girls. There are many injustices that women today face, but one I find particularly significant is the stigma associated with sexual assault.

According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, one in every nine girls under eighteen will experience sexual abuse or assault. 82% of all victims under eighteen are female. Between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, females are four times as likely to be victims of rape or attempted rape. In sexual abuse cases related to children, 93% of victims know their attackers. These shocking statistics show that we have not done enough to prevent sexual assault.

However, numbers do not create empathy; that is the responsibility of stories. With a story, readers can connect to the characters and place themselves in the characters' world and learn to feel what they are feeling. Writers such as Alice Sebold, Laurie Halse Anderson, and Dorothy Allison deliver profoundly moving narratives of sexual assaults on young people, including rape, molestation, and incest, that challenge how people view assault victims. Among the most personal of these books are autobiographical narratives; Alice Sebold, for example, recounts her own brutal rape in college, while Dorothy Allison writes a semi-autobiographical novel, where her teenage protagonist is molested and later raped by her stepfather in rural Greenville, South Carolina. Another influential writer in the "sexual assault" sub-genre of the

young adult (YA) problem novel is Laurie Halse Anderson, whose novel *Speak* while being a work of fiction, offers a realistic account of sexual assault and victim-blaming to show how the shame and humiliation attached to sexual assault damages victims.

However, in high school, I cannot remember ever reading a narrative that depicted sexual assault; in fact, the literature included in this thesis is literature that I have read only since starting college. I find this problematic. Neglecting to teach what I consider necessary material while students are actively maturing and developing and learning how to become empathetic does not adequately prepare them for interacting with others as they go out into the world.

What led me to this topic was an interaction that I had with a survivor of sexual assault. I thought I knew at least on some level as a woman how traumatizing the effects of sexual assault are on a person. I consider myself fortunate that I have never experienced the personal ramifications of sexual assault, but so many women worldwide are not so lucky. However, I was ignorant; I had a preconceived idea of what sexual assault was like and how it affected victims, and I allowed my ignorance to cloud my judgment. My interaction with a survivor was the first time I encountered someone who had been through this type of violence, and I remember feeling angry about the situation.

However, I allowed my anger to be directed at the victim because they were not acting how I had envisioned they would, and they did not seem as affected by the situation as I was. I was expecting a response that never happened, and I found this strange, and it made me wonder if they were faking. Being the somewhat naive person I am, I completely misjudged the person. I contributed to their trauma by questioning their credibility, completely neglecting the fact that every survivor gets through their assault differently. In the thesis, while I discuss different types

of sexual assault, I focus on the characters and their responses to their assaults because I want readers to see people, real people, not just characters in a story.

Chapter one focuses on incestuous relationships between fathers and daughters that develop out from an outside stressor. I wanted to incorporate incestuous sexual assault in such a way that described why it happens. When trying to explain these relationships, it can be challenging to do so without relying on the father's cruelty as the main reason why some daughters are at risk in their family. To be clear, I agree that fathers who hurt their children are cruel. However, I wanted to investigate whether the perpetrator in an incestuous relationship is simply evil. I think there is an underlying reason as to why fathers decide to commit these acts. There have always been dysfunctional families, and there will continue to be. However, my research looks beyond this dysfunction to examine its roots: isolation and loss of a mother.

Chapter two discusses types of sexual assault through a range of books, primarily realistic fiction and memoir. Engaging with these texts will allow readers to examine how while sexual assault is different for everyone, what is not different is the crucial responsibility of allowing the authors to find and utilize the voices. Voices matter significantly in narratives that depict sensitive and mature subject matter. Even in a book, the voices of characters, even fictionalized, represent real individuals who deserve to have their voices heard. Listening and recognizing survivors' accounts is how we change our thinking and assumptions about others and their struggles.

Additionally, the chapter focuses on trauma theory. Understanding that victims are traumatized after an assault is the first step to developing empathy. Another aspect is respecting and acknowledging that victims respond to traumatic situations differently. There is no right or wrong way to behave. However, what does exist for many victims is predetermined responses

that society, including friends and family, expect them to mirror without realizing that their response, while not understood by others, is understood by them. They need to deal with the trauma in the best way they can and how it works best for their healing and recovery.

Chapter three provides methods for instructors to approach sexual assault narratives while also incorporating them into the class curriculum. While chapters one and two discuss young adult literature, this chapter discusses what teachers can do with this body of work and how lessons in the classroom can be practiced outside the school and even after students graduate as they are still finding their path in the world. Educating students is crucial and comes with much accountability for educators who must be responsible for educating parents along with their children, so that they are open to and understand that while this literature may be difficult to read, it has numerous benefits for developing minds. We cannot protect children from the harsh truths of the world. Literature that features realistic elements provides exposure to real-world issues, thus providing individuals with the knowledge needed for success while also helping "children enlarge their frames of reference while seeing the world from another perspective" (Barbara Feinberg n.p.).

CHAPTER ONE: DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES AND INCESTUOUS SEXUAL ASSAULT

Like all fiction, Young Adult (YA) novels aim to entertain their adolescent readers. More significantly, however, these narratives seek to connect with teenagers on their own level in order to impart valuable knowledge about the world. Through this connection, they manage to educate adolescents about how to respond to issues that are relevant to their lives in the present or that could become relevant to them in the future. Because these novels are usually about 'problems' that adolescents encounter, many topics discussed in YA literature are unpleasant.

However, critics like Barbara Feinberg think the gritty realism in YA problem novels "disregards childhood fantasies and offers little comfort, hope, or humor to young readers" ("Feinberg, Barbara"). She argues that "many YA problem novels do not portray an authentic childhood perspective, but are instead laden with adult agendas. Such books basically tell children that they are on their own when dealing with life's challenges" ("Feinberg, Barbara"). Likewise, Meghan Cox Gurdon has a similar view. Gurdon argues that while the consensus on YA novels is that they "validate the teen experience, giving voice to tortured adolescents who would otherwise be voiceless" she, in fact, believes that it is likely "books focusing on pathologies help normalize them and, in the case of self-harm, may even spread their plausibility and likelihood to young people who might otherwise never have imagined such extreme measures" (Gurdon 2).

Both critics make interesting arguments. However, I feel they neglect to understand the realities faced by teenagers. Feinberg and Gurdon both have an outsider's perspective. Previous generations like theirs were often unable to acknowledge the existence of the distressing personal issues facing children and young adults. Today, however, there exists a strong presence of

various problems faced by young people in content, specifically literature, that solely focuses and offers support for teenagers, without trying to pacify adults of offering idyllic delusions about adolescence. Within the genre of YA literature, authors are able to reach out specifically to young readers whose maturity and mind are still developing; thus, they are more likely to retain this knowledge later in life.

While no one wants to think about a child hurt or in pain, the reality is that they are, and often, what they need the most is comfort. For example, a young girl whom her father is sexually abusing may take comfort in finding a book where the female protagonist also experiences this crime. Therefore, while the subject is naturally thought of as dark and disturbing, this young girl will find that her darkest secret is understood in the pages of that YA book. She finds solace in the knowledge that she is not alone.

In this chapter, I will focus on incestuous relationships in the YA narratives *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Tender Morsels*, *and I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. Incest in YA literature is particularly interesting because it deals not only with sexual abuse, assault, and violence that is the subject of my thesis, but also with an adolescent's relationship with their family, an extremely common topic in YA literature, because it has nearly universal relevance to almost all young people. To be successful, YA novels about incest need to avoid titillation while simultaneously engaging the reader fully. Even with the detachment that books provide, any discussion of abused children ought to be carried out responsibly and respectfully. This is partially because of the disturbing nature of the content, but perhaps more significantly, because of the possibility that readers may be triggered due to their own trauma and past experiences.

However, while a few readers may connect with such characters and situations because someone they know or they themselves have experienced incestuous sexual assault, most young

people have not been victims of this particular crime. Thus, it can be difficult for readers to empathize with these protagonists rather than simply sympathizing with them from a safe distance. Books that depict incestuous relationships, therefore, must work harder than most to create fellow feeling with readers. While addressing race in YA literature, Rudine Sims Bishop's essay "Window, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors" is also applicable with teaching sexual assault narratives. In her essay, she famously explains:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop n.p.).

She continues by saying,

> When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors (Bishop n.p.).

As with incorporating race, in teaching books that depict sexual assault, students need to see characters that reflect themselves so that they can feel like they belong and are not alone.

In this chapter, while I want to explore the contributing factors of incestuous relationships, I also want to establish how empathy is an integral piece in connecting to various works.

The betrayal resulting from an incestuous relationship is a trauma that, according to Jennifer Freyd, "encompasses the unique hurt associated with violation by those who have a basic obligation and duty to protect and nurture and extends to those who refuse to believe or help the victim, adding to the victim's traumatization." Likewise, revealing an incestuous relationship can cause serial retraumatization as a result of "being rejected by the family, which often rallies to the side of the accused." Following the revelation, relationships with family members moving forward often depend on the "perpetrator's role in the family, family loyalty, and shame than by the best interests of the child" (qtd in Kluft n.p.). The incestuous relationships in these novels develop out of dysfunctional familial dynamics, more specifically, two recurring issues that contribute to the dysfunction: isolation and loss of a mother.

In the article, "Incestuous Sexual Abuse Themes in Contemporary Novels for Adolescence: A Cultural Study," the author W. Bernard Lukenbill discusses how incest, while not a widely used theme in the genre, still appears in multiple YA novels. However, he notes that the overall characteristics of novels depicting incestuous relationships are unknown because "novels are creations of individuals who live in society we can expect them to be influenced by the cultural values of their society" (Lukenbill 151). His study seeks to learn how authors approach the incest theme while also being aware of the detrimental effects that incest can have on victims. The effects of incest are what led Lukenbill to observe how YA literature can influence and instruct adolescents. In his study, Lukenbill examined ten novels with the common theme of incestuous relationships and applied the following criteria:

> 1) the social and cultural backgrounds of the families involved in the abuse; 2) descriptions of behaviors of those who were directly affected by the abuse; 3) description of the family units of the abuse; 4) legal, social, and personal consequences of those affected by the abuse (153-154).

According to the article, incest is technically defined as "sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that law forbids them to marry" (152). However, that definition has narrowed over the years. It now usually refers to "the sexual exploitation of a child by another person in the family, who serves in a parental role, or in another relationship vested with significant intimacy and authenticity" (152). However, defining incest is only the first step towards ending familial sexual assault. Defining initiates discussion of the overall situation, but after that, it is essential to develop a method to help and support victims, hopefully aiding them to come to a resolution for themselves. As long as people continue to acknowledge the issue and then immediately look away, victims are continuing to suffer.

Children are supposed to feel safe with their parents no matter whether the parents are biological, step, or adoptive. Parents are meant to teach their children and guide them into the world while also providing shelter and protection. Home should not be the source of a child's pain. However, for some children, home is not a safe place. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright is subjected to molestation and beatings by her stepfather Glen Waddell, an emotionally emasculated man who deals with continuous business failure and rejection from his family.

Glen is a step-parent, a role that is stereotypically perceived as negative. In fairy tales, for example, step-parents are frequently portrayed as villains who try to ruin their step-children's lives. "Cinderella," in some ways, is similar to Allison's novel. However, where Cinderella loses

her mother, has an ineffectual and absent father, and is abused by her wicked stepmother, the child (Bone) in *Bastard Out of Carolina* never knows her biological father; in fact, the only father-daughter relationship she experiences is the one with her first stepfather Lyle. It is only after his death that her second stepfather Glen enters her life and begins to abuse her. Ironically, while Bone's biological mother, Anney, is theoretically still present in her daughter's life, she, too, might as well be dead, since she abandons her daughter in the wake of her husband's abusive tendencies.

As previously mentioned, Bone's stepfather Glen Waddell is an emotionally emasculated man who deals with continuous business failure and rejection from his family. His abuse of Bone demonstrates desperation to establish his dominance amongst those who perceive him as weak and less of a man. Glen's behavior reeks of toxic masculinity, a term derived from the traditional and stereotypical norms of masculinity that assume that men must be active, aggressive, challenging, and dominant. In Glen's case, he is none of these; he is weak. Therefore, his attempt to project these norms becomes toxic. This toxicity is "actively damaging to both others (violence, transphobic, misogynistic, homophobic or racist bullying, sexual assault or harassment) and the people themselves who subscribe to such gendered constructs (excessive drinking, physical injuries from fighting, steroids, body dysmorphia, drug-taking, inability to express emotions)" (Boise 147). Glen cannot hold down a job, and he has an uncontrollable need to be just as, if not more, dominant than the men in Bone's family. In his own family, Glen has been ostracized, especially by his father. When he impregnates Bone's mother, he is adamant that their baby must be a boy. He does not just desire a son; he *needs* one. To Glen, siring a son will show how much of a man he is and prove everyone wrong about his inadequacies.

In the novel, Glen's skewed idea about what it means to be man contributes heavily to the way Allison portrays Glen's behavior during the pregnancy. Allison describes his perspective, saying,

> Glen was like a boy about the baby, grinning and boasting and putting his palms flat on Mama's stomach every chance he could to feel his son kick. His son— he never even entertained the notion Mama might deliver a girl. No, this would be his boy, Glen was sure: "My boy's gonna look like the best of me and Anney," he told everyone insistently, as if by saying it often enough he could make it so" (44).

It is interesting that while Glen is so concerned with proving himself a 'real' man, he never realizes that the men in Anney's family do not show much interest in Glen's self-deluding notions about his potential son. When Glen tells Bone's Uncle Earle that the baby's a boy, Earle struggles to keep a straight face but later discloses his thoughts once Glen is no longer around to hear. Allison writes:

> " 'Never come between a man and his ambitions," Earle told Uncle Beau after Glen had gone. "Glen ever gets the notion that anybody messed up his chance of getting a boy child out of Anney, and he's gonna go plumb crazy' "(44).

Clearly Uncle Earle does not respect his brother-in-law's behavior.

Initially, I thought that Glen's abuse of his stepdaughter was initiated solely out of grief for the loss of the pregnancy and his potential son. Perhaps this loss was too much to bear and his moral self-destruction was compounded by the knowledge that Anney could no longer carry children and therefore his line would not continue as he expected. However, the particular devastation of Glen's loss is ultimately rooted in a disturbing ideology that claims he is less of a man if he does not sire a son. I still maintain my position that loss was a trigger for his criminal

behavior, but I think Glen's actions target Bone— his wife's firstborn— because she has the place he wants for his own child. He seems to believe that Bone's very existence is an act against him for which he wants revenge. Allison describes how when Anney is hugging her daughter, Bone catches a glimpse of Glen's reaction: "Over her shoulder I saw Daddy Glen's icy blue eyes watching us, his mouth a set straight line" (52). While not explicitly discussing revenge, this scene seems to hint at its imminent arrival and serves as a warning for Bone.

Rather than a man, Glen's mannerisms in fact make him out to be an overgrown little boy. While staying with her Aunt Ruth, Bone lets it slip that she believes Glen hates her. Ruth comforts her but tells her, "There's a way he's just a little boy himself, wanting more of your mama than you, wanting to be her baby more than her husband" (Allison 123). He is insanely jealous of anyone who takes Anney's attention away from him, and I think he views Bone as being in the way of his relationship with his wife. From the time of her birth, Bone had been her mother's priority and this constantly irritates and aggravates him.

In stories that depict incestuous relationships between a father/father figure and his daughter, I question what the role of the mother is and how much blame should be placed upon her for allowing her child to experience such brutality without doing enough (or, indeed, anything) to make it stop. In the book, *Father-Daughter Incest* by Judith Lewis Herman, the question of the mother's blame is considered in the context of familial dynamic around incestuous relationships. Herman's book contains many case studies; for the purposes of my examination, one involving an individual named Esther, is particularly relevant. Esther, who was sexually abused by her father, says that despite her father's actions she actually places more blame on her mother. She writes,

> I find that most of my anger is toward my mother rather than my father. I know that is not quite rational, but I can't help feeling that the bond between mother and child ought to be such that a child is assured protection. I somehow do not expect that fathers are as responsible for the welfare of offspring as mothers are (Herman 82).

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone is similarly angry at her mother for failing to choose her over Glen, thereby neglecting to remove Bone from the abusive situation at home that Glen has created. Herman also claims that

> The mother in the incest group, like other mothers, tends to obtain her basic life satisfaction only within the home and the family. What distinguishes her from others is that she seems to have been deprived of self-fulfillment even within the family. By brutality and by superior initiative, her husband has nullified her roles of wife and mother. Even prior to tolerating incest, she seems to have tolerated an increasing amount of deviant behavior, violent and/or non-violent, from him, and her forbearance seems to have encouraged his progress to the incest offense (Herman 48).

This is a theme that is prevalent in Allison's novel.

After losing her husband Lyle, Anney is miserably unhappy, and I think when she meets Glen, although there's no initial spark, she is desperate for a husband and father for her girls, and Glen seems to be a neutral choice. After getting pregnant with Glen's baby, she marries him and believes his sugary promises of love and his devotion to her and "their girls." Anney is so desperate that she ignores Glen's behavior toward the girls, especially Bone. When he complains to Anney that Bone will never love him, she reassures him of Bone's affection which, she claims reflects the positive emotions of the rest of the family. Anney also dismisses Glen's anger issues as well as his inability to hold down a job. When he begins to take out his anger on

Bone, whipping and yelling at her for disrespecting him, Anney, though upset, defends him and encourages Bone to be a good daughter so as not to upset him.

The role of the family is particularly significant in *Bastard Out of Carolina* not just because of the novel's incestuous dynamics, but also because of the region in which it takes place. In his book, *Yesterday's People*: *Life in Contemporary Appalachia*, Jack E. Weller talks about the life of mountaineers within impoverished rural communities like Bone's. He writes:

> To the outsider, the mountain family is apparently close knit, which would seem to lend security to mountain life. In some respects, this is true. The members of a family, however, are bound to one another by ties of emotional dependence which tend to increase insecurity. Since one's security depends upon the approval of others in the family, there is always a fear of being misunderstood, and hence rejected, by the group upon whom one depends (Weller 44-45).

Weller also discusses how as poverty creeps into these communities, "the struggle for available jobs gets fiercer, and life is dominated by an attitude of "look out for yourself, and grab what you can as it comes along" (Weller 23). Weller also talks about how marriage can be an escape for some individuals in such communities, although the courting phase can be relatively static because there is nothing to do. As a result, the rate of illegitimate children is high. However, illegitimate children are welcomed more than in middle-class society. People in the communities highly regard babies and children in these areas even more than older children.

We often hear the stories about how some victims go years without disclosing what happened to them, and it's because they have no idea how a revelation like that will affect them or their families long-term. They realize that their family may not believe them, often resulting in a family scandal where no one is certain what the truth is except for the victim. Bone is lucky in

a sense to have a family like the Appalachian Boatwright clan. The Boatwright family is depicted as a close-knit clan of heavy drinking men and strong-willed women. They are proud people, but they understand the value of family and that when times get tough, they have each other. Their way of living may look unconventional to others outside the community, but they have an unbreakable bond that becomes a valuable resource for Bone. As the novel progresses, Bone becomes closer to her extended family, staying with her Aunt Ruth when Anney decides that Bone leaving for a while is best for everyone and eventually moving in with her Aunt Raylene after Glen rapes her and Anney abandons her. However, the interwoven closeness of the family and its rural isolation are clearly contributing factors to the abuse.

In *The Trauma Myth: The Truth About the Sexual Abuse of Children-and Its* Aftermath, Susan A. Clancy incorporates research and case studies as a method of disclosing the complexities of child sexual abuse. In chapter four, Clancy writes, "Scholars in the sexual abuse field are coming to agree that understanding how and why sexual abuse damages victims probably has little to do with the actual abuse and a lot to do with what happens in its aftermath" (113). I agree with this position because in every sexual assault narrative I have read, a recurring theme is always how the victim responds afterward, how they move forward, and what that looks like.

In my research, especially my work on incest, I have found that what resonates in victims the most is the feeling of betrayal. Susan Clancy explains that victims feel betrayed because they have been. Children trust adults, especially parental figures, and when parents harm their own children, that creates a complete breakdown of trust. Incorporating a passage from two other researchers, she writes, "the victims have been deliberately violated by another person. The

crime was not an accident…It is the direct result of the conscious malicious intention of another human being" (123). Additionally, Judith Herman writes,

> Children may not understand the meaning of the sexual acts they are engaged in, but then at a later time in life suddenly realized that this behavior was inappropriate. Either the children learned more about sex, or they found out that such things did not happen in their friend's families…At that point the sexual meaning of all previous activity becomes clear to them. Thus, it is our impression that even when a young child at first fails to recognize the inappropriate sexual context of some behavior, the meaning of that behavior does become at some subsequent point in most cases (120).

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, following the encounter with Glen, Bone begins to question what he did to her, and she begins to question if it was sex. She wonders if sex was what she was doing to herself when she touched herself while envisioning violent thoughts such as being tied to a haystack and set on fire. The effects of Bone's traumatically influenced sexuality may remain with her for a lifetime.

While all stories of sexual abuse and assault are disturbing, some affect us more than others. The voice delivering the narrative and its level of authenticity play a major role in the reader's ability to be swayed by the story. While not necessarily factual, fiction often provides knowledge that readers have not gained through their own lived experiences. Readers learn and gain access to information, history, and the truth within the book's pages, but sometimes said readership neglects to consider the author of the work and whether they are writing about something they find fascinating or whether they are attempting to acknowledge or come to terms with a truth they need to share. Autobiographical accounts for example, offer readers access to

the author's most profound and most personal trials and journeys. For the authors, reliving their story through their writing can be cathartic. Writers are essentially teachers; through their accounts, others can be profoundly impacted and provided with courage and the knowing that someone has walked their path and understands.

The article "The Social Function of Autobiographical Stories in the Personal and Virtual World: An Initial Investigation" has a similar view. Nicole Alea, Susan Bluck, Emily L. Mroz, and Zanique Edwards discuss how

> One function of autobiographical stories is to strengthen social bonds by getting to know strangers, by enhancing closeness in established relationships, and by eliciting empathy. Detailed, emotionally rich autobiographical stories about a specific experience can provide social benefits for both the person receiving and the one sharing the story (794-795).

Bastard Out of Carolina is a semi-autobiographical story and Dorothy Allison uses real experiences from her adolescence to reach out and connect with others to demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the struggle of another person.

While *Bastard Out of* Carolina relies on its realism to move readers, the next novel I will examine is Margo Lanagan's *Tender Morsels*. This Australian young adult fantasy is a retelling of the fairy-tale "Snow White and Rose Red." While many fairy-tales explicitly warn their audiences about incestuous desire and the danger of fathers who relate sexually to their daughters, "Snow White and Rose Red" is not one of them. Nevertheless, Lanagan's novel focuses on this theme. The novel tells the story of Liga, a fifteen-year-old girl who lives with her father in an isolated cabin far from town, her mother, having died some time ago. Liga's father is physically and emotionally abusive. He repeatedly rapes and impregnates his daughter and then

forcibly makes her miscarry using various supplements that he obtains from a local woman in town. Upon first meeting Liga, readers are immediately exposed to her abusive world. The novel begins with the first of Liga's two forced miscarriages. After using herbs to create a thick smoke, Liga's father locks her in their cabin. Soon after, Liga begins to feel sick and manages to get outside. Expecting that she needs to relieve herself, she is caught off guard after feeling something slip out, something weird. Returning to the cabin, she tells her father,

> "Something," she said. "I lost. Something fell out." He replies, "What do you mean, silly girl?" he said crossly. "You went for a shit and you had shit, as you said" (Lanagan 8).

Liga's father is gaslighting her; in other words, he is psychologically manipulating her into questioning her own sanity.

Later in the summer, it happens again. In providing some context, it is important to understand that Liga's father keeps track of her monthly bleeding. When it stops, he pays a visit to the local "witch" woman and procures a remedy from her that he tricks Liga into taking by saying it will strengthen her bones. However, tricking Liga is easy because she has no idea what is happening with her body. She has yet to connect menstruation with pregnancy. Her main concern is pleasing her father, which she finds difficult because he is disgusted when she bleeds and angry when she stops. However, this second time, Liga's miscarriage is different. For one, her pregnancy is further along than the previous occasion. During this experience, Liga finally realizes that she is having a baby, and she is excited until her baby comes out stillborn. Following this experience, Liga begins connecting the dots realizing that,

> When her bloods came in November, for the second time since the night of the dead baby, she put Da's relief together with the memory of his looming head—*Are you really so stupid?*—together with the events of the summer, and she

> realized that one was a sign of the other. No-bloods was the sign of a baby coming; bloods were the sign of no-baby (Lanagan 18).

As Liga continues to have her monthly bleeds, her father happily wonders if Liga can no longer bear children. Soon after, her bleeding ceases, and since this time Liga knows what has happened, she is determined to keep this baby.

As previously mentioned, Liga's relationship with her father is profoundly abusive. Liga appears to suffer from Stockholm syndrome which "occurs when hostages or abuse victims' bond with their captors or abusers" (Holland n.p.). I realize that this relationship is between a father and daughter and not between strangers; however, as in the case of powerless captives, it is evident that Liga's entire life is dependent on her abuser; she has no idea how to care for herself. This is why she tries to please him so much; not only does she need her father emotionally, she relies on him for all the material aspects of life as well. Additionally, like many victims of abuse, I think she believes that bonding with him will make him less angry. In traumatic situations, the most well-known trauma responses include fight, flight, or freeze. Fight is becoming aggressive, flight is running or fleeing the situation, and freeze is becoming incapable of moving or making a choice. However, there is another response, fawning. Fawning is immediately trying to please a person, thus avoiding conflict. This response often develops out of childhood trauma. In trying to appease their abuser, victims will agree, providing answers the abuser wants to hear and ignoring what they want or need (Gaba n.p.). In *Tender Morsels*, Liga relies solely on fawning; she does whatever her father instructs to keep him satisfied because when he is, he does not yell or beat Liga.

It is also important to discuss Liga's trauma. To readers, Liga is suffering, but in actuality, she may not be. In her book, Susan Clancy discusses a type of nontraumatic abuse "in

which victims are confused and trusting, do not resist, and care for and love the perpetrators" (154). In *Tender Morsels*, Liga is entirely too trusting of her father. This is most evident when he brings home the herbs from the "witch" woman and makes her tea instructing her to drink because it because will make her bones strong. Liga never once considers that her father has ulterior motives behind the tea, but instead, goes ahead and drinks.

Incest in *Tender Morsels* is not the main takeaway, but rather what in the familial dynamic allowed incest to manifest. As I discussed with *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I believe loss is the trigger for incest. Liga's mother is dead, and Liga and her father live alone and isolated from other people. I think that Liga's father is unable to cope with his wife's death. While he has the parent/child relationship with Liga, he lacks the partner/lover relationship with Liga's mother to which he feels entitled. Coupled with the isolation that causes intense loneliness, he turns to the one person that reminds him of the partner relationship he once had, i.e., the result of the partner relationship, his daughter. This explains why he makes Liga sleep in the marital bed and why every time Liga becomes pregnant, he forces her to miscarry. His perception of reality is skewed enough that raping his daughter does not implode his fantasy. However, her pregnancy does because whereas being with his wife was proper and expected, being with his child is not, and as long as she is pregnant, his fantasy remains shattered.

In fairy tales, the mother is often the core driver of incestuous relationships. In *All-Kinds-of-Fur*, the dying wife instructs her husband to promise that he would marry no one who did not match her in beauty. In trying to fulfill his promise, the father discovers that the only woman who fits his late wife's instruction is his own daughter. In this way, however, the promise helps protect the father's reputation by placing blame for the father's incestuous acts on the dead wife

as the king "can fulfill the promise made at her behest only by marrying his own daughter" (Ashliman n.p.).

Earlier, I mentioned isolation as a contributing factor in the manifestation of incest. Isolation is an intriguing factor to consider in both *Tender Morsels* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*. In both books, the characters reside in rural areas isolated from communities and members of the community. So, does isolation matter? Are incestuous relationships more likely to occur in isolated rural areas rather than urban areas? I say no. Incestuous relationships can occur anywhere; however, isolated areas do provide the abuser with advantages. In a remote environment, the perpetrator of the incestuous relationship would probably worry less about someone outside the home discovering what is happening.

For example, in *Tender Morsels*, Liga's father orders her to stay near the house while waiting for her to miscarry. He is worried that if she strays too far from home, someone may see her. The "witch" woman in town has already concluded that Liga's father buys the concoctions because whomever he is buying them for cannot be seen, especially in their condition. Likewise, in *Bastard Out of Carolina,* Glen moves Anney and the girls far away from the rest of the family. While he wants to prove himself self-sufficient, this move later becomes a way to hide the abuse because they are alone, and Glen never has to worry about someone seeing Bone's bruises or worry about someone seeing him beating her. Glen is also aware of Anney's situation and of her need for him; and he knows that even if Anney sees him abusing Bone, she will never risk leaving him nor revealing the abuse.

Another compelling narrative depicting an incestuous relationship is Jacqueline Woodson's *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. The book describes an interracial friendship between Marie, a financially well-off black girl, and Lena, a poor white girl. Various challenges

test Marie and Lena's friendship. First, there is the community in which they live. The story takes place in Chauncey, Ohio, where the community is predominantly comprised of well-off black families and a few impoverished white families. Due to her class, Lena is looked down upon in town and struggles to make friends until she meets Marie, with whom she is able to make a connection. Marie, on the other hand, has always fit in and felt accepted in her community. Her friendship with Lena challenges views ingrained into her about white people. Another challenge arises when Lena confides in Marie that her father is sexually abusing her. Marie wants to do something about the situation, but Lena refuses and tells Marie that she will be separated from her sister Dion if social workers are called to their house and discover the abuse.

Lena understands that what is happening to her is wrong. However, her love and devotion to Dion prevent her from speaking out about the abuse. Instead, Lena sets up emotionally distant barriers that initially are easy for her to maintain because her family moves a lot. However, this changes after their family moves to Chauncey. She meets Marie, the first person to genuinely take an interest in getting to know her, and Lena realizes that she has been craving an emotional connection to someone other than her sister.

Initially, Lena and Marie bond over the mutual loss of their mothers; however, as Marie eventually learns, the loss of Lena's mother is also the root of the sexual abuse by her father as in the first two novels I examine in this chapter. However, Woodson's novel, differs from *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Tender Morsels*. The narrative voice throughout the novel is Marie, who, while friends with Lena, is viewing Lena's situation as an outsider. Knowledge of Lena is limited solely to what she shares with Marie, and we never receive Lena's perspective from Lena herself—connecting with Lena's character is difficult because typically, when reading a narrative about something terrible happening, we as readers feel emotion for the suffering character in

particular. However, with Lena, we only know the bare minimum that she wants Marie to know. This is likely Lena's way of protecting herself and her sister.

As I said, unlike the other two narratives, Marie is the predominant voice in the novel; therefore, we never learn much about the abuse. However, Lena does reveal that her father likes her to sleep in the marital bed. She tells Marie this while explaining why revealing the abuse is not an option:

> She tells Marie, "She was a social worker, I guess. That's who I told. Just mentioned that he was wanting me to sleep in his bed all the time where Mama used to sleep, and she snatched us right out of there" (Woodson 76).

Lena is unwilling to be separated from her sister. She knows from previous experience that if social workers ever find a reason to return to the house, she and Dion will likely be separated for good. When siblings go into foster care, they are often separated because many foster homes lack the space necessary for sibling groups. Therefore, Lena endures the abuse for Dion's sake until Dion becomes implicated in the abuse.

A study, entitled *The Characteristics of Incestuous Fathers*, includes research that tries to answer why fathers sexually abused their children. Linda Meyer Williams and David Finkelhor suggest perpetrators of such abuse can be described as Instrumental Sexual Gratifiers. According to the study,

> "These men did not appear to experience sexual arousal specifically for their daughter, but used the daughter for gratification while fantasizing about some other partner. They had great feelings of guilt or remorse and their abusive activity tended to be sporadic" (Williams & Finkelhor 6).

Incestuous sexual assaults, then, are not random acts of violence. They are methodical, secretive, and damaging not just to the victims but to the families who endure the revelation that such brutality is occurring and do not know, or did know and felt powerless. However, as this chapter has explored, incestuous relationships develop out of deep personal struggles and vulnerability and one's environment. In the next chapter, I will discuss other types of rape and the environmental differences in the multiple spaces in which they occur in order to examine how survivors of sexual assault more generally respond.

CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING RAPE CLASSIFICATIONS, RAPE MYTHS, TRAUMA THEORY, AND THE AFTERMATH OF RAPE

This chapter focuses on different types of rape featured in Young Adult (YA) literature, specifically in realistic fiction and memoirs. These categories promote more authenticity among readers. A memoir "depicts the lives of real, not imagined, individuals" (Couser 15). Memoir "presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans' experience. Fiction does not; it creates its own lifelike reality" (Couser 15). Fiction narratives can tell meaningful, realistic stories while allowing readers more distance from disturbing or troubling topics.

Specifically, in the chapter I address stranger, acquaintance, and gray rape. Discussing these varying types of rape will allow me to show how victim trauma manifests and how the portrayal of various kinds of assault affects the authenticity of the narrative that authors want to convey. Discussing rape from these parameters will also allow me to explore the way the public handles rape, rape victims, and rapists. I will begin first with stranger rape and utilize the autobiographical novel *Lucky* 1999 by Alice Sebold to aid my discussion.

Stranger rape is sexual assault by a perpetrator unknown to the victim. In *Lucky*, Alice Sebold describes being brutally raped and beaten by an unknown assailant while walking home from a party during her freshmen year at Syracuse University. After being grabbed from behind by a stranger, Alice is threatened at knifepoint, dragged into an abandoned tunnel, and forced to undress. Her attacker tells her, "I'll kill you if you scream. Do you understand? If you scream you're dead" (Sebold 13). Alice pleads with her attacker, who ignores her protests and forces her to perform oral sex on him before raping her vaginally before he finally allows her to get dressed and leave. Alice's story is particularly poignant because this is her truth. She recounts this

traumatic experience and discusses how the rape changed her and how she eventually recovered. Alice's story is incredibly intriguing because her printed works are not limited to her autobiography. She has taken a dark part of her life and transformed it into books such as *The Lovely Bones*; this writing helped her recover and heal through the years since the experience.

It can be difficult for individuals who have never gone through this experience to understand how sexual assault victims feel. Trauma manifests differently in everyone because every individual is different. In her work on trauma and narration, Judith Butler argues that constructing a narrative of the traumatic experience for some traumatized individuals can be a way to re-establish order and control in their lives. She writes

> [L]earning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life that otherwise suffers from fragmentation and discontinuity. The suffering that belongs to conditions of dissociation should not be underestimated (qtd in Borg 452).

To understand a sexual assault narrative, one must understand the victim-whether fictional or real-and acknowledge that survivors of every assault behave differently, because no two people react the same way to traumatic stress. In the article, "Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory," Susan Suleiman utilizes Judith Herman's definition of a traumatic event. According to Herman, "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (276). Notably, for many victims of sexual assault, their lives and bodies are at risk because they just endured a brutal act of violence. However, some rape victims do actually come very close to death during their assault. In *Lucky*, when Alice Sebold

reported her rape to the police, they told her that the tunnel where her rape happened was where another girl had been raped and dismembered; to them, Alice was lucky.

Suleiman goes on to expand on Herman's definition and defines a traumatic event from neurological standpoint. She writes,

> A traumatic event—or "traumatic stressors"—produces an excess of external stimuli and a corresponding excess of excitation in the brain. When attacked in this way, the brain is not able to fully assimilate or "process" the event, and responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, or shutting down of normal emotional responses (276).

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson, is a YA realistic novel that depicts acquaintance rape. Assaults deemed acquaintance rape occur when the rapist is known to the victim. The novel depicts Melinda Sordino's freshman year of high school after getting raped at a summer party and her struggle to voice her assault. Following her rape, Melinda, unable to cope, emotionally shuts down and loses all interest in life. She alienates her already distant parents, loses her friends, and is flunking out of school. She tries desperately to suppress the rape, but that ends up causing more damage to her already fragile person.

Repressed memories, otherwise known as traumatic amnesia, are another element of trauma studies that appear frequently in the rape narratives I examine. Repressed memories are unconsciously forgotten so as to provide a coping mechanism for individuals who have experienced serious psychic wounds. For Herman, "the more horrific and prolonged the trauma, the more the subject has a tendency to dissociate and therefore have no conscious memory of the traumatic event" (277). While this type of mental self-defense is understandable, it is also

maladaptive; Herman acknowledges that remembering the event is the only way to heal. She states,

> The patient may not have full recall of the traumatic event history and may initially deny such a history, even with careful, direct questioning…If the therapist believes the patient is suffering from a traumatic syndrome, she should share this information fully with the patient. Knowledge is power.
>
> …She discovers that she is not alone; others have suffered in similar ways… (277).

This statement implies that victims of trauma require therapeutic intervention to process and recover from their experiences. However, seeking the help of a therapist is often difficult for young readers due to stigma, lack of family support, and of course access to healthcare.

While the characters in *Girl Made of Stars* by Ashley Herring Blake don't pursue therapy in the narrative, the novel provides an excellent example of dealing with repressed memories. *Girl Made of Stars* revolves around Mara, a young high-school student who has to deal with her twin brother Owen being accused of sexually assaulting his girlfriend and her best friend, Hannah. Mara's life is turned upside down following the accusation because while she wants to remain loyal to her brother- and believes that he would never hurt anyone-she also wants to acknowledge and support her friend. Even though her parents are unable to follow through on their ideals when their own son is accused, trusting survivors' accounts of sexual assault is also one of the tenets of feminist discourse she has been brought up to believe and enact.

The three years leading up to the novel's opening have been difficult for Mara. She's been dealing with panic attacks; she recently broke up with her best friend/girlfriend Charlie because she could never be a "good girlfriend," and her relationship with her parents is

somewhat strained. When Mara first hears about the accusation, she is shocked but also appalled at her mother's insistence that it's nothing more than a misunderstanding. During an argument, Mara says to her mother, "You keep saying that." "Saying what?" "That it's a misunderstanding. That I know Owen. But . . . Mom, I know Hannah, too." Mara is also frustrated with her mother's disregard of Hannah and tells her mother, "…we can't just not listen to her. You've always said that we have to listen to girls no matter—" (Blake 58- 59).

Mara, however, also has a secret, a secret that is only revealed after Owen is accused. She was sexually abused by her teacher Mr. Knoll and the incident traumatized Mara so much that she unconsciously repressed these events until Owen rapes Hannah and subsequently triggers Mara's lost memories. I agree with Judith Herman that revealing trauma can provide relief, especially with the knowledge that someone understands. In the book, Mara finds that with Hannah. While initially not wanting to burden Hannah with her own story, Mara gains much needed support by sharing with her and Hannah, too, finds comfort with Mara. Later that night, Mara receives a text from Hannah that says, "Thank you" and Mara recognizes Hannah's need "to have someone to cry and scream and laugh with" (Blake 210).

Hannah's rape in *Girl Made of Stars* is of the type often referred to as gray rape. This is a type of assault where consent appears to be unclear. However, calling this type of rape 'gray' can be insensitive and even dehumanizing for some women. In Kate Lockwood Harris' article "The Next Problem With No Shame: The Politics and Pragmatics of the Word Rape," she includes the opinions of women who feel that labeling the assault as "gray rape" does not acknowledge the severity of what happened to them. She writes:

> For Jenn, ''gray rape'' minimized the severity of an experience. A clear line between rape and not rape helped her understand her own reactions. She said, ''Being able to label

> it rape made it click that, yeah, it really was that bad and it's okay that I'm affected by it.'' For Angelina, a gray area reduced the power of the word rape to condemn the man's behavior. She said, ''That's wrong, period. There's no gray area'' (53).

In the book, when Owen gets accused of raping his girlfriend, Hannah, he adamantly maintains his innocence. He claims he is not at fault because he and Hannah had sex before and because he was drunk and cannot remember Hannah saying no. The truth, however, is that Hannah did say no, and Owen did not listen. When Mara visits Hannah, her friend is very apologetic to Mara, telling her and Charlie,

> "Maybe if I'd said no louder," Hannah says. "Or . . . I don't know. Maybe if we hadn't already had sex, or—" "Stop," Charlie says, her voice tense. "That puts the blame on you, Hannah, and that's bullshit. Even if he was drunk. You said no, plain and simple" (Blake 123).

Due to the issues raised in Blake's book, it is necessary to more closely examine what consent is and what it means. Sexual consent is

> an agreement to participate in a sexual activity. Before being sexual with someone, you need to know if they want to be sexual with you too. Both people must agree to sex—every single time—for it to be consensual (Planned Parenthood).

Owen should never have assumed that just because he and Hannah had previous sexual encounters, it meant he could have sex with her whenever he wanted. It is also not acceptable to use excuses such as being drunk and conveniently not hearing or not remembering one's partner saying no. Owen, for one, should not have decided to have sex while intoxicated, but he also should have asked Hannah if it was okay and listened to her response. If he did not hear her, he should have asked her for clarification before continuing.

Why would a victim of a crime, especially a crime as damaging and traumatic as sexual assault, keep silent about what happened? Many victims feel as though they cannot tell, or they are afraid of what reactions they might receive from people. Chapter five of Susan Clancy's book "How the Trauma Myth Silences Victims," discusses how the reactions of others damage victims. The book features case studies of various participants. One question asked survivors, "what was the worst part of the sexual abuse/assault? To which participants responded, the worst part of the abuse was how other people reacted" (170). In *Lucky*, Alice Sebold relays a pivotal moment between herself and her father where she confronts his lack of a reaction over what happened. Alice has returned home for the summer, and since returning, news of her rape has spread through the community. No one knows what to say to Alice, and Alice is tired of feeling as though she has to hide what happened to her because it creates an issue for her emotionally closed-off family:

> "Your mother and I are doing the best we can," my father said. "We just don't know what to do." "You could say the word for starters," I said, stilled now, my face hot with screaming, but tears making their way up again. "What word?" "*Rape*, Dad," I said. "*Rape*. The reason why people are staring at me, the reason why you don't know what to do, why those old ladies are coming over and Mom is flipped out, why Jonathan Gulick stared at me like a freak. Okay! (Sebold 70).

Alice is used to her family avoiding their problems and she accepts that. However, after being raped, Alice realizes that this approach will no longer work for her. She develops an urge to talk about what happened with anyone who will listen. An important distinction to be made here is that between "hearing" and "listening." The first is simply a biological act; listening, on the other

hand requires that the confidant responds without offering weak, meaningless, and sadly standard responses like “I’m here for you” and “I’ll be praying for you.”

Likewise, in *Speak*, Melinda feels as though she cannot disclose what happened to her because no one cares, and honestly, that is true. From the start of school, Melinda has been ostracized by her peers because she called the cops at the party and accidentally got the party shut down. Shutting down the party was not Melinda’s intention, but no one else knows that; they never bother to ask her. If one person had bothered to ask why Melinda called the cops, Melinda might have gotten help sooner, and she may not have become as withdrawn and depressed. Towards the end, when Melinda finally gets the nerve to tell her ex-best friend about the rape, her friend’s immediate reaction is to call Melinda sick for lying. Both of these narratives address why victims are reluctant to discuss their assaults; they have no way to know if the people they tell will meet them with a positive or negative reaction.

As previously discussed, *Speak* is a young adult novel written by Laurie Halse Anderson that details Melinda Sordino’s freshman year of high school after being raped at an end-of-summer party by a senior at the same school. Feeling emotionally repressed, Melinda becomes almost entirely mute, refusing to speak about what happened. In *Speak*, emotional repression adds a complex dynamic to Melinda’s character. Throughout the novel, Melinda struggles to speak about being raped. Melinda has internalized rape myths or “false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists that perpetuate an accepted rape culture” (Chummee and Supaporn n.p.) and believes that being raped was her fault. Consequently, her beliefs prevent her from attaining much-needed help, and slowly, she begins the transformation into a sullen, depressed, suicidal loner who barely acknowledges her surroundings. Melinda recognizes her behavior but has no idea what to do. She says,

> I know my head isn't screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, warp myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closest is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them (Anderson 51).

Also contributing to Melinda's troubling behavior is the ignorance of adults around her as well as her peers.

Instead of a cry for help, Melinda's behavior is seen as a nuisance or at best typical teenage rebellion. Melinda's peers ostracize her and the adults—except for her art teacher Mr. Freeman—refuse to take Melinda seriously; they will not consider whether her behavior stems from anything beyond teenage defiance. After seeing her daughter's scraped arm, Melinda's mother dismisses her daughter's suicidal ideation. Melinda describes her mother's thoughts on suicide:

> she says suicide is for cowards. This is an uglynasty Momside. She bought a book about it. Tough love. Sour sugar. Barbed velvet. Silent talk. She leaves the book on the back of the toilet to educate me. She has figured out that I don't say too much. It bugs her. (Anderson 88).

Invalidating Melinda's lived experience damages her almost as much as the rape itself.

Unlike the other adults in the novel, Mr. Freeman, is someone who all teachers, mentors, and guardians should strive to be. Mr. Freeman's creativity is what allows him to see Melinda, in her own right; he sees and recognizes her pain, realizing her antisocial behaviors are not purposeful, but a symptom of trauma. While Melinda does not see a licensed therapist, Mr.

Freeman's practice of indirectly using art for therapeutic purposes gives Melinda a way to process her assault and save herself. Unlike other teachers, Mr. Freeman never forces Melinda to talk. As a result, she is able to take advantage of the opportunities to communicate that he offers her. When she vents, he offers her an understanding ear and is thus able to advise and counsel her.

Survivors of rape and other trauma often perceive themselves as broken without the possibility of repair. Countering this, Mr. Freeman encourages Melinda to embrace her flaws and not be afraid to express even her ugly emotions in her work because he understands that these elements are not only therapeutic but in fact the things that make art powerful. During class, he tells Melinda that,

> Art without emotion is like chocolate cake without sugar. It makes you gag." He sticks his finger down his throat. "The next time you work on your trees, don't think about trees. Think about love, or hate, or joy, or pain-whatever makes you feel something, makes your palms sweat, or your toes curl. Focus on that feeling. When people don't express themselves, they die a piece at a time. You'd be shocked at how many adults are really dead inside-walking through their days with no idea who they are, just waiting for a heart attack or cancer or a mack truck to come along and finish the job. It's the saddest thing I know. (Anderson 122).

With his support, Melinda expresses all her internalized thoughts and emotions into her art, and through that project, she heals and emerges stronger and more confident.

As we can see, victim-blaming plays a major role in all three books I have discussed in this chapter. The assaults in these novels are really only the first violations that Alice, Hannah, and Melinda encounter. Placing the onus of the rape on the victim often makes people feel safer;

if an individual can control whether they get raped or not, then they need not be afraid if they simply follow 'the rules': dressing to avoid eliciting sexual desire, avoiding deserted or dangerous places, and employing self-defense tactics successfully. This perceived agency is illusory. In truth, there is nothing one can do to guarantee their safety from rape. Thus, more often than not, rape victims find it difficult to trust again not just because they have been raped, but also because in the aftermath where they are incredibly vulnerable, they are regularly met with blame instead of support. The perception that they are the ones at fault (rather than or even in addition to the rapist) extends the violation and trauma beyond the precipitating physical assault.

In his article "How We Still Fail Rape Victims: Reflecting on Responsibility and Legal Reform," Francis Shen contributes insightful questions to the discussion of how we collectively treat sexual assault. He writes,

> What happens when we discover that someone in our community has been sexually assaulted? How do we respond? Do we engage in the discomforting process of addressing it? Do we take any responsibility, as a member of the victim's community, for the crime? Or do we simply point our fingers at something or someone else? (Shen n.p.).

Too often, it is the last of these responses that takes place.

Consider the following true story: in 2008, an eighteen-year-old resident of Lynwood, Washington named Marie, reported being bound, gagged, and raped by an unknown assailant who broke into her apartment late one night. The detectives working on her case found inconsistencies with her story and questioned her credibility. Feeling pressured, Marie confessed that she made up the story. Following her admission, Marie was charged with a gross misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail. The charge against Marie surprised Marie's

lawyer, who guessed that although no suspects were arrested or questioned, the police felt used, that she had wasted their time. Legal consequences were not the only punishment that Marie was facing; her story had made the news, she lost her independence, not to mention countless friendships and a sense of worth. In the end, Marie was offered a plea deal. After a year, the charges would be dropped if Marie went to counseling, went on supervised probation, and stayed out of trouble. Marie would also have to pay a five-hundred-dollar court fee. Marie accepted.

Understanding trauma can be complex because it manifests internally in a person. The way it manifests can be different for everyone, which is what people find difficult about treating a traumatized individual. Why did the detectives not believe Marie? Why did they rely on what they could see instead of what they could not see? The most straightforward answer is that Marie did not behave the way the detectives were ingrained to view rape victims, and by not fitting into the preconceived mold, people wondered if Marie lied about being raped.

In 2019, Netflix released an eight-episode limited series entitled *Unbelievable* that documents Marie's life through the years, starting when she first reported the assault to when she finally gets closure. Her story interweaves with the story of the two female Colorado detectives who join forces to find and arrest the rapist and then connect him to Marie's case, thus proving that she was telling the truth. While a fictionalized depiction of actual events, the show is a compelling portrayal of a traumatized individual attempting to put the pieces of their life back together and move past the assault.

The series begins with Marie reporting her rape. Initially, detectives believe her; however, that changes when the detectives start finding inconsistencies in her report. The detectives grow frustrated with her, and eventually, Marie confesses that she lied. This revelation brings unfathomable destruction for Marie. As the series continues, Marie's mental health

declines, and she begins engaging in risky behaviors such as drinking and drug usage. This behavior is not uncommon for rape victims. Often, victims find it difficult to move on, and they turn to substance abuse as a numbing effect and escape from reality.

Towards the end of the series, Marie attends a court-mandated therapy session. During the session, a pivotal moment occurs between Marie and her therapist when her therapist asks what Marie would do if faced with this situation again. Marie says,

> I know I'm supposed to say, if I had to do it over, I wouldn't lie. But the truth is, I would lie earlier... and better. I would just figure it out on my own, by myself. No matter how much someone says they care about you, they just don't. Not enough. I mean... maybe they mean to or try to, but other things end up being more important. So, yeah, I guess I'd start with that. Lying. Cause even with good people, even with people you can kinda trust, if the truth is inconvenient, if the truth doesn't fit, they don't believe it. Even if they really care about you, they just don't. ("Episode 7" 48:20).

People underestimate the effect their actions have on others. Obviously Marie should not have to accept that lying is the answer. However, the reality is that victims of rape worldwide keep silent about their assaults because they believe no one will help them, and the idea of remaining silent seems better than persecution.

In Amy Dellinger Page's article "Gateway to Reform? Police Implications of Police Officers' Attitudes Toward Rape," she talks about how law enforcement treats sexual assault cases. She discusses that "due to the discretional power of police and prosecutors, one must assume that their personal beliefs, along with organizational ideologies, may affect the investigation, charging and prosecuting of sexual assault offenders." Page questions "whether

police officers use legal standards when assessing the validity of rape complaints or whether rape victims are held to a different standard than are other victims of crime," finding that often "police officers endorse stereotypical ideas about gender and rape. For example, only cases meeting the characteristics of an "ideal" rape (i.e., victim and offender are strangers, the victim incurs physical injuries and there is physical evidence of a sexual assault) will be deemed credible and will thus be investigated" (44-45).

If we want to understand what the victim of rape endures, then first, we need to observe rape outside of the physical act. Ann J. Cahill's article "Foucault, Rape and the Construction of the Feminine Body" discusses an argument made by Michael Foucault in 1977. He "suggested that legal approaches to rape define it as merely an act of violence, not of sexuality, and therefore not distinct from other types of assaults" (Cahill 43). Foucault asks, "why should an assault with a penis be treated any differently in the legal world than an assault with any other body part?" (qtd in Cahill 44-45). If we (as a society) do not legally distinguish rape from other types of physical assault, we ultimately ignore the rippling effects of sexual violations. The consequences of rape are different than other crimes against a body. When a person gets raped, the violation does not end there. First of all, there is the potential of pregnancy for people with uteruses; the survivor must then make difficult decisions that carry lifelong consequences. Secondly, rape unlike other assaults, mimics a natural human activity. Thus, it can be hard for survivors, especially women, to lead sexually healthy lives with chosen partners.

If the survivor chooses to report the assault to the criminal justice system, she must then go through an extensive and intrusive examination that includes photographing her body and being exposed on a table so medical professionals can try to collect DNA from inside and outside her body. After that, the victim is subjected to questioning from the authorities, and she must

recount what happened several times, further subjecting her to intense scrutiny, most likely from men.

The legal ramifications of rape are examined in the historical YA novel *Blood Water Paint* by Joy McCullough. In this adaptation of real events, Artemisia Gentileschi, a painter in early seventeenth-century Rome who is raped by her tutor Agostino Tassi. A gifted artist, Artemisia's skill surpasses that of her father, who hires Tassi to further Artemisia's "career" while also promoting his name. As this was the seventeenth century, despite Artemisia's talent, she still had to put her father's name on the paintings she completed because, as a woman, she had no agency over her work and was expected to remain unseen and unheard. However, after her rape, Artemisia must decide to live in silence or live with the consequences of telling the truth. She chooses the latter.

Artemisia's story is an excellent example of how rape victims are betrayed not just by the legal system but society in general. Artemisia legally has no rights, no bodily autonomy, and no voice. She lived in a time of strict social and religious laws where premarital and forced sexual intercourse found resolution with the promise of marriage. In Elizabeth S. Cohen's article "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," she discusses how,

> The law gauged damage to economic and social assets rather than suffering and psychological trauma. Best reparation was to marry the victim to the criminal, who thereby restored the honor he had wrecked and bore the financial burden he had inflicted (60).

In Artemisia's time, money, class, and social image mattered more than the traumatized woman. It was easier to write off a brutalized woman than it was to help her. However, Artemisia decides

to fight back against society and the disparaging stigma placed on victimized women. Cohen further explains that

> Bearing legal witness must have been a double-edged experience. While fraught with anxiety, shame, and later, the pain of torture, testifying still allowed her to work toward restoring her reputation. As Artemisia speaks, she adopts a posture of self-assertion striking for a young woman in her situation. The persistent theme of her self-portrait is to identify herself with her honor, her public name as a respectable woman, whom many others, including her guardians, have betrayed (67-68).

Unlike many other women at the time, Artemisia chooses to fight against her oppressive circumstances because she knows in her heart that what happened to her was wrong. However, McCullough shows that although Artemisia wants justice, she understands that even if the case ends in her favor, the likelihood that it will be a victory for her is slim because her image will remain smeared, and people will continue to doubt her story.

During the trial, Artemisia is so determined to tell the truth that she risks ruining her career when the court decides to use the Sibille on her. The Sibille was a type of torture where cords were wrapped around Artemisia's fingers and pulled tight enough that they crushed her fingers, a particularly vicious action when taken against an artist who relies on her fingers to pursue her profession. Artemisia also has to endure being examined by midwives to determine that her hymen is broken. During this moment in the novel, she says,

The first midwife
before the judge
presents her case:
she's been a midwife
for eleven years,
lest anyone should
question her authority.
After thorough examination
of my pudenda,
She declares I am no virgin.
My hymen,
ruined, like
my reputation (McCullough 247).

We can see that the survivors discussed in this chapter have one thing in common, a forced voicelessness. In *Speak*, Melinda finds it challenging to speak about her rape because she has ingrained ideas about how people will treat her if they discover she was raped. In *Girl Made of Stars*, Mara has repressed her assault, and after her brother is accused of rape, she feels like she cannot speak up because after witnessing her parent's reaction to Owen getting accused, she feels they will not care. Similarly, in "An Unbelievable Story of Rape," Marie loses her voice even after reporting what happened to her because the police decided to rely solely on physical evidence because Marie fails to conform to the stereotypical ideal of what rape victims look like and how they behave.

Likewise, in *Blood Water Paint*, Artemisia Gentileschi deals with predetermined judgment. As a woman in the seventeenth century, she was expected to keep quiet as that was the social norm placed upon women of the time. The fact that she refused to accept her invisibility brought her immense scrutiny from powerful men and other women who refused to assist Artemisia in advocating for herself and fighting an unfair system set prejudiced against the so-called 'weaker' sex. Like Artemisia, in *Lucky*, Alice does not struggle with speaking up, but she does struggle with people not wanting to hear what she has to say and wanting her to stay silent.

As this chapter has demonstrated, victims of rape respond in many ways, and there is no correct way to recover from an assault. The process of healing is an individual journey that is personal and unique to the survivor. They have things in common, of course: they all have to readjust to life and coming back from trauma is not easy for anyone; however, while no two victims process the same, that does not mean that their voices are equally valuable. The YA narratives in this chapter encourage readers to acknowledge and take responsibility for survivors by supporting their voices and encouraging survivors to speak up. While these stories can be challenging to read, the support they provide for rape survivors is essential for recovery. In the next chapter, I will show how teachers can sensitively approach this subject matter in the classroom so that young people can enact change.

CHAPTER THREE: INCORPORATING SEXUAL ASSAULT NARRATIVES IN HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULA

While chapters one and two analyze Young Adult (YA) narratives that depict various examples of sexual violence, this chapter focuses on how educators can incorporate sexual assault narratives into their curriculum. Teachers of young adults need to avoid censoring this type of sensitive material as this body of literature has an invaluable place in the classroom. Since many high school instructors are unsure of how to teach this material for fear of backlash from parents and school boards, this chapter will provide specific teaching methods that successfully and empathically incorporate YA narratives into their syllabi.

In Victor Malo-Juvera's article "*Speak*: The Effect of Literary Instruction on Adolescents' Rape Myth Acceptance," he discusses alarming statistics regarding sexual assaults. Between 15% and 25% of women will experience rape or attempted rape, while girls aged twelve to seventeen are more likely to suffer forcible rape and represent 33.5% of all reported rapes. Additionally, 44% of students between seventh and twelfth grade who have been assaulted were assaulted at school (410-411). These statistics are why educators cannot be hesitant to acknowledge and discuss sexual assault in their classrooms. Students need to be protected and they deserve to feel safe especially at school. As I have previously discussed, voicing stories of survivors and making them visible is necessary, not just for people who have experienced sexual violations, but also for the community in which these assaults occur.

Censorship of texts in schools and communities is a serious issue. Parents and school boards in communities frequently try to control what books and other reading materials students have access to and what educators in literature and language are allowed to teach. Banned books are books or other printed works prohibited by law or to which free access is not permitted by

other means. The concept of banning books is a form of censorship that occurs from political, legal, religious, moral, or (less often) commercial motives (Webb n.p.). Books that are banned within certain communities are usually censored because they feature themes that are considered too dark or too controversial. All the literature in this thesis could be banned. However, as I have shown in the previous two chapters, while challenging and graphic, such YA novels and memoirs provide valuable material for both educators and students.

Indeed, it is the most difficult and distressing reads that often require classroom guidance to be put in context. In her article, "We Dare Not Teach What We Know We Must: The Importance of Difficult Conversations," Jocelyn A. Chadwick writes, "objectors [to] sensitive texts forget about the student audience of *now*, with regard to teaching literature and writing. We think back to the way we were taught and the way we have always taught text" (89). She continues,

> "if at times teachers, at whatever level they teach, hit a roadblock, perhaps this impediment is due to our own predilections of codifying our students, stereotyping them before we even listen to them. We can learn much from students if we listen and allow ourselves to learn along with them" (91).

Although the focus of her article is teaching books with racial stereotypes, Chadwick's advice for managing difficult conversations can easily be applied to approaching sexual assault narratives. As the article discusses, objectors to sensitive texts refuse to realize that times have changed since they were young. Parents and school board officials fear students being exposed to issues deemed too mature for them, forgetting that students today live in a very different world, with unprecedented access to information. Teachers are responsible for preparing students for what they will face later in life, and parents cannot expect these lessons to follow the rules that

they are accustomed to when so many things that were once never spoken of in public are now coming into the open.

Young people see stories of sexual assault gain notoriety on social media, and students have perhaps more exposure to that information than their elders do. They are aware of problems and injustices; they might have been personally affected by these issues; and they are almost guaranteed to know people who have been. They need concrete ways to handle their feelings and learn about what they can do for themselves and others. Additionally, sexual violence thrives in secrecy. In order to combat the alarming statistics I mentioned earlier, educators must arm their students, young women in particular, to fight back.

The books I have examined for this project for the most part fall into two major categories: memoirs and semi-autobiographical novels and realistic fiction both contemporary and historical. These are the genres that I think will be the most useful in the classroom because they are the likeliest to generate empathy and they do not require much suspension of disbelief. This way, teachers can guide students through challenging narratives by having open discussions and assignments that offer students the opportunity to engage with sensitive and mature content, without questioning their veracity. I also suggest offering realistic fiction depicting sexual assault as independent reading; this would allow students to take the books home, and encourage them to discuss the reading with their families and ask questions. Outside the classroom, students need the guidance and openness of their parents because parents are their child's first teachers, and they must do their part to ensure their children's success in and out of school.

I also suggest that teachers make themselves available to their students by offering time after class for discussions or questions that students may have regarding independent reading or clarification with any concepts or terms from class. If teachers are going to teach material that

contains themes such as sexual assault, then teachers need to be present for their students and be a resource for their students to seek out if they need help. One of the significant lessons in sexual assault literature, especially in *Speak* and "Unbelievable," is that adults fail children a lot whether they mean to or not. If we want children educated on content like sexual assault, teachers need to be mindful of their students' experiences and be tactful and supportive because teachers can learn from their students just as their students learn from them. They need to teach and not ignore this content because this lack of oversight contributes to the problem instead of assisting with the solution.

When using autobiographical narratives in the classroom, teachers should also be aware that some texts may re-traumatize students. Unless the student(s) have previously shared, teachers have no way of knowing if a particular student has either been sexually assaulted or knows someone who has been or even knows or is aware of someone who assaulted someone else. These texts can be triggering to some individuals, and that is why it is necessary to teach this material in a way that is still respectful and tactful while also being informative. To avoid re-traumatizing, I advise teachers to create an open and inviting atmosphere and encourage parents and guardians to be present in their child's education.

If teachers include sexual assault narratives in their curriculum, they will need the parents to 'buy in.' I suggest sending home a reading list to parents and encourage parents who have questions or concerns to come by and discuss them with the teacher, perhaps in a group setting. The same would work for students. Depending on what students may have experienced in their lives, narratives depicting sexual assault may be harmful to their mental and physical health. It would be beneficial for teachers to make their classrooms a safe zone, a place where students feel comfortable sharing potentially personal information about themselves or others.

Anderson's *Speak* provides a model when Mr. Freeman's art room becomes Melinda's safe zone. In his classroom, no one is judged or ridiculed, only encouraged. When introduced, Mr. Freeman greets his class, saying, "Welcome to the only class that will teach you how to survive" (Anderson 10). Surviving is what Melinda learns. Mr. Freeman's class is the only class that Melinda feels noticed and important. For his students, "He is an enabler of healing, coaching his students in the cathartic value of art, who also happens to be an authority figure" (Mohamed 10). Mr. Freeman also is genuinely interested in the lives of his students, and he lets them know this. He supports Melinda without pushing, telling her, "If you ever need to talk, you know where to find me. You're a good kid, I think you have a lot to say. I'd like to hear it" (Anderson 123).

In the article, "But She Didn't Scream': Teaching About Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature," the authors Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, Henry Miller, and Jennifer Cheveallier discuss teaching sexual violence in YA literature and provide suggestions for educators planning on teaching literature depicting sexual assault. In teaching literature that describes sexual assault, the authors recommend that teachers first define rape. Teachers are encouraged "to develop a list of related terms and definitions *before* they begin teaching assigned novels so that students have access to accurate, fact-based definitions" (4). Without accurate information, teachers are essentially discussing their ideas without the evidence to back up their thinking. In understanding different terms, the article suggests that teachers create vocabulary reference sheets, thus making sure that "definitions are clear and universally used by students in their class discussions and writings" (5). By doing this, teachers can normalize discussions about sexual assault and minimize the hesitancy and fear from parents and school boards.

The article also discusses the importance of dispelling rape myths and subsequently victim-blaming. Rape myths are "ideas that exist in society to legitimize sexual violence" (5). Popular rape myths include implying that a woman got raped because she was wearing something revealing, or that she was walking somewhere unsafe at night, or that she was drunk and should have been more mindful of her own safety. These myths place the responsibility on the victim, rather than the perpetrator, where it belongs. If one out of every three girls attending school have been subjected to sexual assault, it is vital to discuss and dismantle these myths for the other two girls as well as the boys in the classroom so that students can understand the impact of believing such damaging prejudices, hopefully in the process creating empathy for the victims they may not even realize that they know.

Such false narratives are dealt with in much of the YA literature on sexual assault that I have read. For example, in *Speak*, Melinda gets raped not because she was drinking but because her rapist took advantage of her and overpowered her. In "Unbelievable," the detectives refused to believe Marie because she did not resemble the picture they had ingrained in their minds about what a rape victim looks like after the assault. In *Lucky*, Alice is raped not because of a revealing outfit or because she was walking alone; she is wearing long pants and a sweater when attacked, and during the assault, people are walking by just close enough to see their silhouettes, but somehow never realize that someone is getting raped.

Rape myths exist because people believe what they want to, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It feels safer to believe that if people simply behave in certain ways, they can avoid being assaulted, although this is clearly untrue. This is why teaching sexual assault narratives is crucial in school. Students need to hear these things from authority figures and not just their peers. As we can see from the work of growing numbers of young adult

activists, this and future generations are going to be developing solutions to the problems they have inherited from us. It is our responsibility to acknowledge these problems and accurately depict them, so that they can find or create solutions.

Much of the literature and studies on teaching about sexual violence and assault center around Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, a narrative that does not focus solely on the rape but instead on healing and effectively reaching a sexual assault victim and getting them to trust enough to disclose their story. The most crucial aspect to emphasize when teaching this book is how one can heal from trauma. Throughout the novel, Melinda is basically on a journey of self-discovery. On this journey, she recovers from the self-blame she had been feeling following the assault. People who read *Speak* are usually most affected by how Melinda goes an entire year, barely speaking a word. An interesting activity that educators could implement in their classes is to have a few students refrain from speaking in the class for a week. By doing this, they may develop empathy for Melinda, who felt as though not speaking was better than speaking because, in her mind, no one wanted to hear what she had to say. What would make this activity even more interesting and educational is to give the rest of the students who can speak scripts that throw pre-determined insults at the students not talking. This will further develop a student's empathy but appreciation for using their voice because the goal with this is they will understand what it is like to have your voice metaphorically taken away. Scripts are necessary so that the teacher can control the classroom narrative to avoid creating more trauma in their classrooms.

As I stated earlier, *Speak* is by far the most recognized narrative detailing sexual assault. Although rape is the main topic of Anderson's book, *Speak* also touches on the difficulties of high school such as popularity, friend groups, and dating which most students will find relatable. Thus, educators tend to rely on Melinda, the protagonist of the story, to educate students about

sexual assault and have them learn from Melinda's story. However, while Anderson's novel is a powerful narrative, Melinda is a fictional character. This is not to say, though, that fictional characters are not valuable assets to this conversation. They are. Fictional characters provide a sort of safety net. They allow students to explore sensitive topics—like sexual assault—from the perspective that while sexual assault is a prevalent issue, they are not dealing with a real person, but only someone who *could* be.

However, there are many other books besides *Speak* that address this topic and some of them could be even more useful. As a historical fiction novel based on actual events, *Blood Water Paint* offers another way to provide students with a safe distance; the events of the novel, although true, happened a long time ago. McCullough's story contains poignant insights into a rape victim's struggle to speak up as well as the value of listening to their story. In the classroom, this book offers unique pedagogical opportunities for educators and students. I suggest that first educators offer context to life in seventeenth-century Rome: while incredibly talented, Artemisia's work does not represent her but rather her father. As a woman living in this period, Artemisia has no legal voice or agency. Understanding this way of life will further help students understand why Artemisia fighting against societal norms was incredibly significant. Educators should also provide a background of Artemisia's paintings and show how her work reflected her assault (one of her most famous works is *Judith Slaying Holofernes*). Understanding Artemisia's life and times are crucial in understanding why she chose to paint and why she chose to tell the truth.

For assignments, educators have a chance to be creative with their students. Since Artemisia was a painter and many of her works reflected her life, they could have students create a piece of art that reflects the reading and incorporates a pivotal moment of their life. Then

students could write an essay that demonstrates how the moment they chose made them feel and how it impacted their life. It's important to note students need not reflect a trauma with this assignment. What happened to Artemisia was horrifically brutal and traumatic. While her experience helped create some magnificent art pieces, they are incredibly graphic, and students should not feel expected to recreate a similar version. The idea behind this assignment, however, is to demonstrate how trauma—like other important events in a person's life—can turn into something impressive.

While any of the literature included in this thesis would be helpful in the classroom, I suggest using *Lucky*, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Girl Made of Stars* because the dysfunctional familial ties they show ought to elicit a more profound emotional response with students. For example, after reading or listening to the book(s), draw on the knowledge gained during lectures/discussions and create a writing assignment. Instead of asking about general thoughts and feelings, teachers should create prompts that are specific to the books mentioned above. Specificity will provide variety for students. Example writing prompts could include:

1. How did the dismissive behavior of Mara's parents in *Girl Made of Stars* make you feel? How does their behavior contribute to negative stereotypes about rape culture?
2. In *Lucky*, why do you think Alice's parents refuse to acknowledge/engage with their daughter's rape? What message does this send to rape survivors?
3. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, why do you think Anney continually chooses Glen over Bone even though she is aware of the abuse? What would you do if this abuse was happening in your home?

4. After discovering that they ran away, what do you think Lena's father will do to both her and Dion if he ever finds them?

By providing questions specific to the literature, students will develop an emotional connection to the characters and their struggles. Through this connection, students will develop a stronger understanding of the importance of trauma narratives.

Girl Made of Stars is singular in this list of books because it is a sexual assault narrative of the twentieth-first century that also supports and validates members of the LGBTQIA community through its authentic portrayals of bi-sexual and non-binary characters. The rape in the book raises questions of consent and what giving consent means. In teaching this book, educators should first discuss inclusivity and the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals while also acknowledging the importance of respecting pronouns that individuals use. Educators also need to discuss consent with students and explain what giving consent means. For an activity, teachers could split the class into two groups and provide them with various scenarios depicting sexual encounters and test their knowledge of consent by asking them to discuss as a group if the scenario is consensual or not. For the non-consensual scenarios, ask students to describe why they are not consensual and what should have happened to make them consensual. This book also deals with repressed memories following traumatic events. Another assignment would be to have students write about how hearing about a traumatic event could re-traumatize someone and steps to avoid that from happening.

Another important element to address with this book is slut-shaming and the detrimental effects that this behavior can have on young people. Since students today live in the information world and everything is online, there are significant bullying issues. It would be beneficial to discuss bullying experiences with students and have them, if they are comfortable, talk about

their experience and what that felt like, and then apply it to the bullying that Hannah goes through while trying to navigate the trauma of the actual assault.

In Chapter One, I discussed the benefit of autobiographical narratives and how those narratives offer readers access to the author's personal life, including their trials and tribulations. When teaching sexual assault narratives, I think it would be valuable to utilize an autobiographical story to accompany narratives with fictional characters. To be clear, I am not suggesting that utilizing fictional characters is wrong or not as beneficial as true-to-life accounts. What I am suggesting is that if we want students to be truly affected an autobiographical account would do that. I understand that parents and members of school boards have reservations about exposing students to mature, sensitive content. However, students need to be prepared for what they might deal with in the future. They may never directly find themselves the victim of sexual assault, but they may know somebody who could be. By educating students at a young age educators have the opportunity to facilitate and manage discussions that tap into emotional responses, offering actual guidance so that students don't have to rely on anecdotes shared on the internet.

As previously discussed, I examine two autobiographical narratives in my research – *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison and *Lucky* by Alice Sebold. While *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a powerful read that depicts a family dynamic that is a product of their environment and of violence that threatens to destroy them, it is likely too dense of a read for high school students, especially those who are limited in their knowledge of sexual abuse. Since *Bastard Out of Carolina* is semi-autobiographical, if suggested for independent reading, the intense physical and sexual real-life abuse, in its pages warrant trigger warnings to students. They should also be and educated on what trigger warnings are before beginning any discussion. Trigger warnings

are "'explicit notifications' that the material used in a specific learning environment is potentially disturbing, upsetting, or offensive" (Bentley 471). The book also depicts the familial relationships—of a hard-working yet impoverished family in 1950s South Carolina—and how the incestuous relationship affects them. In giving context for the novel, discuss incest from the family's perspective and talk about how this abuse can destroy families following revelations of incestuous sexual abuse. In addition to the incest and physical abuse, Allison's novel also depicts issues of race and class. In teaching this book, teachers should have students discuss why they think that while the Boatwright family is an example of "white trash," they also believe it okay to be racist towards the black people in the town? The Boatwrights have a bad reputation in town and are thought of as lowly people, so while being white, they might be the only people who can come close to relating to similar economic struggles. The book also depicts issues in the household after the abuse is revealed. Anney refuses to leave Glen, and therefore she neglects the emotional and physical well-being of Bone. It would also benefit students to talk about why family members concern themselves more with the abuser than the abused and how that will affect victims moving forward. In a writing assignment, have students put themselves in Bone's shoes and write about how they would deal with Bone's abuse if it were happening in their family.

I feel *Lucky* is more useful within a curriculum than *Bastard Out of* Carolina. As a memoir, rather than a semi-autobiographical novel, *Lucky* is a true story told from Sebold's perspective, and that is what makes the narrative at once disturbing, transformative, and triumphant. It's important to note that teachers should not shy away from teaching memoirs because there are excellent lessons to be learned from the first-hand experience that the narrator provides readers. For a class assignment, I suggest having students write their own memoirs and

once finished, sharing with the class what they found most challenging about the experience. Teachers can prompt students to apply their answers to Alice's story and ask students to discuss whether they agree with Alice's choice to write a memoir based on her sexual assault and ask students if they themselves could write about a traumatic event happening to them such as sexual assault. Reading and writing memoirs help students develop empathy and appreciation for storytellers, especially ones who choose to write about their innermost personal experiences for the entire world to access.

Elizabeth Dutro has contributed numerous works to the study of trauma theory. In her article "Writing Wounded: Trauma, Testimony, and Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms," she describes the difficulties of teaching trauma and the hardships that educators (including herself) face when applying such literature that depicts trauma in their classrooms. While she believes educators would agree that "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" she does not think that educators have figured out what this means nor how to make it effective. At times educators tend to focus more on politics of their job instead of focusing on their students and what will be successful in the classroom for their students. She also discusses the personal effects of trauma in an educational space. She writes,

> Trauma is destabilizing, at least in part, because challenging circumstances, function differently for some of us than others when we carry them into public spaces—they function for teachers differently than for students, and how those experiences function for students is related to power, privilege, and social positioning (195).

In fact, power-imbalances factor into all the narratives I have touched upon.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, Bone and Lena are both viewed as "white trash," and Bone especially already has a negative reputation because of her family. Therefore, with their non-existent social standing, both Bone and Lena hide their trauma and look for outlets outside the classroom. For Bone, religion and gospel music become her outlet. Another example of a survivor with low social status is Melinda in *Speak*. As a freshman, Melinda is at the bottom of the totem pole. This adds to her already ostracized status amongst her peers, further contributing to her social withdrawal and depression following the rape.

While class is a large issue in those two novels, Hannah from *Girl Made of Stars*, displays the privilege-power dynamics of systematic misogyny. After returning to school following the rape, she is mocked and ridiculed by fellow students who say things like, "Hey, slut, welcome back" (Blake 174). Hannah's lack of power is rooted in her being female and residing in an environment perpetuated by toxic rape myths. I find it difficult to believe that Owen would face ridicule and shame by his peers if the reverse happened and Hannah was the perpetrator. In fact, he might even be applauded by his friends, since gender undoubtedly factors into social standing at school.

Further in the article, Dutro talks about how what helped integrate trauma in her classes was "sharing and exposing personal stories that "were not easy to tell and certainly, not easy to hear. I kept sharing them, though because I was convinced that they were positively affecting my and my students' experiences in our classroom" (204). Difficult material has just as much value in classrooms as easier or less emotional material. Additionally, difficult material can have a stronger emotional impact on students. Dutro also references Jeffrey Berman's book *Dying to Teach*, where he discusses a teaching experience in which he read a eulogy for his dying wife to his students and then gave an optional writing assignment where he asked them to express their

feelings and opinions. He discussed how the students who participated showed that they felt the experience was profound and educational and though difficult made them feel more connected to Berman. He explains that

> "my new self-disclosure was different, and they now saw me differently. I was still their teacher, but I had now become another member of the class, one who was struggling, like everyone else, with a personal issue" (205).

Berman's teaching experience regarding grief offers a model that would be incredibly beneficial in teaching sexual assault narratives.

Those who determine high school curricula often resist the inclusion of YA literature in general, favoring 'canonical' 'classics' that fit easily into the dominant paradigms of white, straight, male, cisgender, and adult perspectives. However, the popularity of the YA genre is rooted in its usage of adolescent voice that allows the genre's young readers to feel connected to the book's characters since they can more easily relate to the stress of growing up depicted in these novels. Educators support the inclusion of such literature because they want their students to "read literature and other texts not only to become "critical thinkers" and do well on standardized tests, but also to become "critical feelers" (Alsup 159). YA literature also challenges how these social issues are presented to adolescent readers by exposing them to the world's realities, both positive and negative. Additionally, by reading about adolescent characters who experience real-world problems, young people are less likely to feel alone when faced with similar difficulties. It can also make space for students to talk about these sensitive subjects.

In addition to rape statistics, Malo-Juvera's article discussed earlier in the chapter, also explores why sexual assault narratives are not usually listed on class curriculums. This is due to

standardized assessments controlling the classrooms and limiting teachers' creativity with their students. However, success in language and literature classes should not be based on standardized test scores but instead on what students take and retain from the material as well as their teacher's enthusiasm for the text. These elements make a pedagogical difference because while students are there to learn from authority, the classroom environment should not feel restricted but instead engaging and challenging. Most importantly, the classroom should be inviting. Students should feel safe in their classrooms because otherwise they will not be able to speak, let alone learn.

In her article, "Politicizing Young Adult Literature: Reading Anderson's "*Speak*" as a Critical Text," Janet Alsup describes teaching methods and pedagogy courses to preservice teachers (teacher candidates pursuing teaching licenses, who have little to no experience teaching in the classroom) and discusses their hesitancy to utilize books like *Speak* in their classrooms. She writes,

> They worry that parents, colleagues, or their principal would condemn their choice of such a book, and they might consequently lose their jobs. They hear horror stories about teachers being called before school boards for teaching controversial books, and they recognize the risk involved, especially in a rural or small-town community (Alsup 162).

However, Alsup argues that teachers "should try to teach or make available for independent reading such books and thereby politicize their literature classrooms" (162). I agree with Alsup's argument. I grew up in a small conservative community and looking back, the literature we read stayed within "safe" boundaries. I remember that even books for independent reading stayed within the boundary of the reading curriculum.

Although Alsup understands the restraint put upon educators she worries about "self-censorship" and the damage created by a fear of what might happen instead of what is happening. She discusses how,

> While teaching or making available a book such as *Speak* might be a risk, we can no longer draw a thick line between what students are really doing after school hours and what we can talk about in school. I believe we can no longer pretend that after classes end students go home to stable families and hot dinners. We can no longer waste the ethical opportunities literature provides in the face of increasing teenage apathy, anger, and violence. The stakes are too high. (162).

Alsup is correct in her thinking. We live in a society that no longer fits into the Norman Rockwell ideology of perfect families and perfect lives. Life can be messy, unpredictable, and unfair, and the reality is that many students understand this reality more than we know. Therefore, trying to hide reality is useless, and educators should instead focus on normalizing reality rather than covering it up.

Another element to consider is how students feel reading books like *Speak* and whether they are mature enough to handle the content. Maturity is often questioned because educators and parents believe that students are innocent and naive and not ready for discussions stemming from such content as *Speak* and other sexual assault narratives. However, students may find these discussions to be incredibly beneficial since they mirror experiences that they or someone they know might have in the future.

Mark Jackett's article, "Something to *Speak* About: Addressing Sensitive Issues Through Literature," discusses how educators might approach the challenge of teaching sexual assault narratives in their classrooms. Jackett addresses maturity by suggesting small-group discussions-

of, selected questions or an article and then coming together as a large group. He reasons that going from small-group to large-group "allowed students to first formulate their thoughts on the questions or article in the relative comfort of the small group, which then made it more likely that all students would participate in the large group" (102-103). I agree with Jackett's method. High school is a highly judgmental environment. Students never want to feel separated or ostracized from their peers; they want to blend in and not feel weird for having a differing opinion from their classmates.

While not in the same environment as high school, I remember a literature class when I was an undergraduate where my professor utilized small-group discussions for nearly every class. Looking back, I realize how valuable those small-group discussions were because I am a student who rarely speaks up in class, and in the small groups, I found my voice, and it made volunteering to talk in the large group easier. I also found that small-group discussions made me feel protected in class. What I mean by protected is similar to what Jackett says when he discusses how small groups allow students to formulate and try out certain opinions before sharing with the larger group. In the small group, I discovered that I had views that my peers agreed with and even helped me expand with their thinking, and that was a real confidence booster for me. When discussing a topic as sensitive as sexual assault, I think it would be crucial to find common ground with your peers instead of arguing and creating unnecessary tension.

Also, I found it intriguing that while Jackett suggests what women and girls can do to prevent sexual assault, such as staying with their group at parties and not going off with people you do not know, he mostly refrains from blaming or projecting stereotypical misogynistic views of females onto his students. He explains that the female-centric discussion in his class stems from the prevalence of female survivors in these narratives. Jackett's acknowledgment of this

divide is crucial when discussing sensitive content that primarily affects one group as sexual assault narratives tend to do. It is impossible for Jackett to avoid repeating these well-trodden ideas. However, as he recognizes that women are affected more by sexual assault, he concerns himself with the important issue of what men can do to prevent sexual assault from happening. In the article, he discusses how he asked his class what rules boys should follow. He says,

> "I got them started with "If you've been drinking, you should…," to which one boy, a boy who generally struggled in class and did not participate much, mumbled under his breath, "Keep it in your pants." I shouted, "Exactly!" before repeating what he said for the whole class to hear" (103).

Starting conversations in the classroom does not need to be complicated or feared by educators. I think students can handle sensitive topics and understand more than adults realize. What adults—both parents and educators—fail to see is that teenagers live in multiple worlds. There is their world at home, their school world, and the social world that they reside in with their peers. This world is the one they hide from adults and leads adults to wonder if they can deal with mature and sensitive content.

Amnesty International, a global movement founded in 1961, intends to end human rights abuse worldwide. One way the group contributes to the well-being of people is by providing educational resource modules on a wide variety of topics. The module entitled: "Sexual and Reproductive Rights Are Human Rights," seeks to support young people and empower them to advocate for their sexual and reproductive rights. Chapter one entitled, "Breaking the Silence," includes ways for educators to learn and be objective in their teaching practices.

While this chapter's motive is educating young people on sexual and reproductive health, it has significant implications for discussing how to talk about sexual assault in classrooms. The

chapter first encourages educators to be self-aware. It is important to understand one's strengths and weaknesses as well as their assumptions and biases. For example, it is necessary to think about topics that you are unwilling to discuss and why. Understanding yourself is essential to the process of assisting people in creating empathy with others. Also important is understanding sexuality, sexual behaviors, and what, as an adult, you know about the sexual relationships of young people. It is crucial to meet students where they are and not where adults think they should be. Projecting assumptions about students and their experiences will not build trust and valuable discussions for students. Lastly, the language teachers use is very important. Language referring to sex and sexuality can alienate others; educators need to self-examine in order to become less biased and more neutral in their thinking.

The chapter also discusses the importance of handling emotions. As previously mentioned, there is the risk of specific literature retraumatizing students. Therefore, it is essential to handle emotions delicately and be mindful of students' pain and vulnerability. It is also necessary to understand and value privacy and treat personal information with respect so that students will trust you as someone they can come to if they want to talk about their trauma. While it is difficult to listen without reacting, students need someone who can be objective and can be real with them.

The only book I discuss in this thesis that I would not recommend being taught is *Tender Morsels.* Lanagan's depiction of incestuous sexual abuse is far too violent and disturbing for students and parents. While incest and physical abuse are horrific, it is the forced miscarriages that students would have difficulty engaging. While this thesis aims to support the teaching of dark and challenging material, there are boundaries that teachers must respect, especially if teachers want parents to be on board, and this book crosses them. This book is for future reading

after the student has learned and been exposed to narratives that depict incestuous abuse and understand more about the female body. While pregnancy happens following sexual assaults, forcing a child to miscarry while also keeping them in the dark about what their body is doing is too graphic to be taught in school.

Teachers have a unique obligation in that as they educate their students, they are also educating parents and guardians. Parents must have an active role in their child's education because they need to know what material their children are being taught. That way, if they have questions or reservations, they have the information necessary to ask informed questions, thereby having their reservations resolved. I suggest that teachers create lists for each book they wish to teach, and on the list include the level of graphicness, themes, and maturity rating. Teachers should send the lists home to the parents and let them look over the lists and decide if they agree to the selected books. If they do not, teachers should invite the parent(s) in for a parent/teacher conference and air their concerns in a neutral, open space where the teacher can explain their reasoning for including certain books. Another suggestion is if the parents feel uncomfortable or nervous at the prospect of their child being exposed to mature, sensitive content, teachers should send home books, articles, and other scholarly literature for the parents to read that demonstrates to them the benefits of being taught difficult material. There are valuable lessons in these books for both survivors of sexual assault and those who could benefit from learning their stories. As I previously mentioned, independent reading outside of the classroom would also help both students and their parents. If the independent reading is an extension of the curriculum reading, families can discuss the material with their children even if they have not specifically read the books.

By exploring teaching methods and practices that educators can adopt in their classrooms, this chapter demonstrates the value of teaching sensitive material such as sexual assault narratives to their students. Teachers can prove that conversations about sexual assault do not have to be depressing; they can be enlightening and invaluable for students as they continue to integrate themselves into the real world. It's true that teachers also possess a tremendous responsibility to create safe spaces their students. However, this responsibility does not include censoring what students have access to; teachers can protect while also being transparent about the realities of the world.

CONCLUSION

Sexual assault is not going away, but how we, as a society, respond to these atrocities and victims of these acts can change. In 2006, Tarana Burke began using the phrase “Me Too” to raise awareness of abused women. The phrase gained worldwide recognition in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano became one of several women to accuse Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault. The issue was reignited in 2018, when Dr. Christine Blasey Ford accused Judge Brett Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her when they were in high school. However, it is not enough to show support only after well-known individuals admit to having been assaulted; we need to think of everyone.

If we can educate young people, we have a better chance to change how we respond to victims of sexual assault. Instead of immediately finding fault with a victim, we can provide compassion and support rather than preconceived judgment. Phrases like #MeToo and #WhyIDidntReport (solidarity for Dr. Ford following her allegation) have not always existed; just now, in the last few years, people, women especially, have taken more direct action in fighting against these injustices.

However, as the stories in this thesis show fighting for justice amidst a world content to ignore this issue is challenging and sometimes feels downright impossible, for example, in thinking about the legal ramifications that Artemisia went through when she and women everywhere were expected to remain silent about sexual violence and abuse. However, if women like Artemisia had not chosen to fight back and resist the mores of their oppressive societies and challenged the expectations of women, the #MeToo Movement might not exist today, and women would not have a celebrated, encouraged, and recognized platform.

Similarly, in *Lucky*, after getting raped, Alice decides not to run away and instead fight for justice, fight to get her rapist in jail and fight for what she deserves. That is the key: fighting for what you deserve but, more importantly, recognizing that you deserve better because you matter and what happened to you matters. However, for Mara in *Girl Made of Stars*, while she has parents who think they fight and support injustice, they fall short when their son is accused of rape. Afterward, their daughter wants to share what happened to her but feels afraid after witnessing the nonchalant attitude that her family develops following the accusation. Likewise, in *Speak*, had Melinda not been fearful of what would happen to her, she might have told the truth earlier and then saved herself much hardship. However, she allowed society to decide what was best for her, and had it not been for the support and genuine care she received from Mr. Freeman, Melinda might not have recovered from the trauma of the assault.

In the introduction to this research, I suggest that while the narratives of sexual assault themselves are important, the characters are of even greater consequence because they represent real people who have dealt with this crime. It is through the characters in these novels and memoirs that readers can recognize the importance of voice and making their voices heard. As I discuss in chapter two, what these characters have most in common is a forced voicelessness because the community responsible for their care and wellbeing falls short on their duty to listen. Ultimately, that is what I want people to take from reading my work; listen to the people around you because everyone is going through their own struggles. It is up to us to support one another and be there.

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