

Novel Themes: Bullying

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Bullying



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A Theme That Spans the Novel Continuum: Bullying

Great books can entertain. Great books can educate. Great books can also help readers deal with challenging themes by making connections to the circumstances created by an author and by asking questions about a character's behaviors. Whether part of an up-close look, as when explored in the classroom, or read independently, novels can also enable students to discover and uncover caring and uncaring relationships, such as those that characterize bullying.

The statistics are irrefutable. The headlines are frightening. The stories are painful. The issue of bullying plays a strong part in the culture of today's schools as educators struggle to help young people build better relationships. If we want to help young people live with integrity, civility, and compassion, then we need to introduce strategies and resources that help students come to an understanding of the complex issue of bullying. We need to help students understand why a bully behaves the way he or she does, and we need to provide students with strategies so that they will be prepared if caught in the bully web. Reading and discussing literature are powerful tools for such preparation.

For Younger Readers

In chapter books such as *So Long, Stinky Queen* by Frieda Wishinsky, *Jake Drake: Bully Buster* by Andrew Clements, and *Shredderman: Secret Identity* by Wendelin Van Draanen, young readers learn what it is like to survive the mean people who may be in their classrooms.

Three short novels describe the impact of bullying on children. *Scrambled Eggs and Spider Legs* by Gary Hogg explains what happens when a bully is assigned to be a project partner with the boy who is intimidated by him. In the short British novel *The Angel of Nitshill Road* by Anne Fine, a guardian angel helps three terribly unhappy children who are relentlessly bothered by a bully. In Katherine Paterson's *The Field of Dogs*, not only does a child named Josh have to deal with a bully when his family moves to a new neighborhood, but his dog faces a bully of his own.

Being overweight provides the impetus for bullying in a few key books. Judy Blume, the queen of realistic fiction, wrote one of the strongest books on mean relational and verbal bullying with *Blubber*. The story centers on the teasing endured by an overweight girl named Linda and another girl's growth as she learns that this kind of mean behavior is wrong. A comparative situation can be found in *Larger-Than-Life Lara* by Dandi Daley Mackall, who frames the story in a clever format. Using the writing techniques she has learned in school, a fourth-grader relates how an obese girl in class changes the lives of those around her, despite being bullied by her peers. On the somewhat similar theme of sticking out, *Fatty Legs* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton tells the true story of a young Inuit girl who becomes the laughingstock of the residential school she attends because of her thick stockings.

Two novels written more than 40 years ago still meaningfully address the bullying issue. With no friends and a family that seems to ignore him, Martin Hastings, the bully in *The Bully of Barkham Street*, realizes that he must do something to improve his reputation. Mary Stolz helps readers get inside a bully's head and see how a sixth-grader's world looks through Martin's eyes. In *Veronica Ganz* by Marilyn Sachs, readers meet a girl bully. Bigger and meaner than everyone else,

Veronica meets her match when shrimpy Peter Wedermeyer tries to gain power within the class.

For Developing and Fluent Readers

The titles of several novels for students from Grades 4 to 6 capture the themes of bullying for both developing and fluent readers. *Starting School with an Enemy* by Elise Carbone, *Bystander* by James Preller, and *The Present Takers* by Aidan Chambers each paint a picture of targets who are being tormented by scary kids.

Author Jerry Spinelli knows exactly what it's like to think and feel like a student in the middle-school years, and each of his books conveys the complexities of peer pressure and the challenges of being accepted. In *Wringer*, Palmer, who is coming of age, must accept the violence of being a wringer in his town's annual pageant or find the courage to oppose it. In *Stargirl*, a new girl in the school dares to do things her own way, challenging those around her to consider what is normal. In *Loser*, Donald Zinkoff exemplifies a kid who seems to rise above it all, as his optimism, exuberance, and the support of his loving family prevent him from feeling like the misfit his classmates view him as.

R. J. Palacio's *Wonder* is an important title to recommend for the bullying theme since the heroic August Pullman, born with a facial deformity, needs to confront bullies at his school who have little empathy or compassion for his quest to be "ordinary."

The bully issue is also explored in vivid stories by Canadian authors. Aaron, in *Better Than Weird* by Anna Kerz, Will Reid, in *Egghead* by Caroline Pignat, and Henry K. Larsen, in *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen* by Susin Nielsen, are three brave souls who are tormented even though they try to fly under the radar of bullies in their school. Newfoundland author Jill MacLean has written a trilogy: *The Nine Lives of Travis Keating*, *The Present Tense of Prinny Murphy*, and *The Hidden Agenda of Sigrid Sugden*. Each title can be read separately, but reading all three can help mature readers come to understand the complex relationships between the bully, the bullied, and the bystander, especially those who live in a small community.

For Young Adult Readers

For young adolescents, the issue of the bully, bullied, and bystander triangle helps readers carefully consider the relationships in their own lives. *The Misfits* by James Howe is about a group of four students who do not seem to fit in with their small-town middle school. When it is time for school council elections, the students join together to represent all students who have ever been called names. In Nicky Singer's *Feather Boy*, a strong story about a class target named Robert is told. When a strange senior citizen calls upon Robert to help solve the mystery of a derelict house, Robert learns what courage it takes to find his own voice and never give up. A teacher plays an important part in *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon G. Flake: the new teacher at the school helps Maleeka learn to be comfortable with herself.

The bullying problem, of course, continues in high-school settings, with novels sometimes addressing the consequences. When three popular girls go on trial in government class for their ruthless bullying of a classmate, everyone has to come to terms with the fallout. One book, *Poison Ivy* by Amy Goldman Koss, is pre-

sented as eight first-person narrators giving different versions of the same event. Legal proceedings are essential to the tough story *Tease* by Amanda Maciel, where a young teenage girl faces criminal charges for bullying after the suicide of one of her classmates. When the protagonist in *Inventing Elliot* by Graham Gardner becomes a victim of school bullying, he tries to invent a calmer, cooler persona by changing schools in the middle of the year; however, he soon attracts the wrong kind of attention from a group known as the Guardian, determined to maintain order at the school. Moving to a new school and finding a place to fit in also pose problems for other characters: Butterball, in *Playground: The Mostly True Story of a Former Bully* by 50 Cent with Laura Moser; Miracle Boy, in *Bullyville* by Francine Prose; Todd Munn, in *Scrawl*; and Paul Fisher, in *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor. The power of cliques and their manipulation over others are the foundation of two other novels: *Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles and *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Finally, a horrific picture of the bullying issue is described in Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun*, in which two boys, who have been mercilessly teased and harassed by the jocks at their high school, set out to get revenge and gather a small arsenal of guns from a neighbor.

War as a Novel Theme for Young Adults

Novels set in the First and Second World Wars provide much more than information about battles, heroes, and political leaders. Through the relationships, experiences, fears, and hopes of fictionalized young people living in wartime, these novels help readers to see the impact of war on individual children and their families, and the resourcefulness and inner strength that individuals needed to survive during wartime.

Michael Morpurgo is a highly recommended author of novels set during the world wars. Tommo's recollections of his life with brother and fellow soldier, Charlie, lead to a surprising and deeply emotional end in *Private Peaceful*, set in the First World War. Morpurgo's *War Horse* is told from the perspective of Joey, a farm horse sold to the army and later captured as a work horse for the German army. It is a story of friendship, courage, and determination. A remarkable theatre production from the National Theatre in London and a movie version by Steven Spielberg have added to the popularity of this book written early in the author's career.

Elizabeth Wein's *Code Name Verity* is a gritty, suspenseful novel set in England and France during the Second World War. The first half of the book is told from the perspective of Verity, a captured British spy who is handing over information to the Gestapo after a prolonged period of torture. Readers hear about Maddie, her friend and the pilot who dropped her into Nazi-occupied France, in Verity's account, but some of the holes are not filled in until the second half, when Maddie tells her story.

The early days of flight are the setting for John Wilson's *Wings of War*. Gaining flying experience in Saskatchewan thanks to his Uncle Horst, Edward achieves his dream of being a pilot when he joins the Royal Flying Corps in England. His story personalizes the statistics of the battles and loss of lives in the trenches and in the skies during the First World War.

Beyond those titles, several authors have series books for young adults set during the Second World War. These include Chris Lynch (*The Right Fight*: Book 1 in the World War II trilogy) and Canadian authors Kit Pearson (*The Sky Is Falling* trilogy) and Eric Walters (the Camp X series; see also *War of the Eagles*).

Novels on Selected Themes

These lists encompass certain themes, including war, bullying, and multicultural perspectives.

Novels on the Theme of War

Lynch Chris. *World War II: The Right Fight* (trilogy)
 Morpurgo, Michael. *Private Peaceful*
 _____. *War Horse*
 Pearson, Kit. *The Sky Is Falling* (Guests of War trilogy)
 Walters, Eric. *War of the Eagles*
 _____. *Camp X* (series)
 Wein, Elizabeth. *Code Name Verity*
 Wilson, John. *Wings of War*

Multicultural Novels

Alire Sáenz, Benjamin. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*
 Baskin, Nora Raleigh. *Anything but Typical*
 Bond, Victoria, and T. R. Simon. *Zora and Me*
 Boyne, John. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*
 Edwardson, Debbie Dahl. *My Name Is Not Easy*
 Engle, Margarita. *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*
 Guest, Jacqueline. *Outcasts of River Falls*
 Jordan-Fenton, Christy. *Fatty Legs: A True Story*
 Kacer, Kathy. *Hiding Edith*
 Little, Jean. *Willow and Twig*
 Maccoll, Michaela. *Promise the Night*
 Manzano, Sonia. *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano*
 Marsden, Carolyn. *My Own Revolution*
 Molnar, Haya Leah. *Under a Red Sky*
 Perkins, Mitali. *Bamboo People*
 Pinkney, Andrea Davis. *Bird in a Box*
 Preus, Margi. *Shadow on the Mountain*
 _____. *Heart of a Samurai*
 Rhuday-Perkovich, Olugbemisola. *8th Grade Super Zero*
 Robertson, David Alexander. *The Ballad of Nancy April*
 (Shawnadithit)
 _____. *The Land of Os: John Ramsay*
 _____. *The Peacemaker: Thanadelthur*
 _____. *The Poet: Pauline Johnson*
 _____. *The Rebel: Gabriel Dumont*
 _____. *The Scout: Tommy Prince*
 Sepetys, Ruth. *Between Shades of Gray*
 Skrypuch, Marsha Forchuk. *Underground Soldier*
 _____. *Daughter of War*
 Slipperjack, Ruby. *Little Voice*
 Spiegelman, Art. *Maus* (Also: *Maus II*)

Spinelli, Jerry. *Milkweed*
 Stewart, Elizabeth. *The Lynching of Louie Sam*
 Williams, Michael. *Now Is the Time for Running*
 Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*

Novels about Bullying

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*
 Bloor, Edward. *Tangerine*
 Blume, Judy. *Blubber*
 Carone, Elise. *Starting School with an Enemy*
 Chambers, Aidan. *The Present Takers*
 Clements, Andrew. *Jake Drake: Bully Buster*
 Fine, Anne. *The Angel of Nitshill Road*
 Flake, Sharon G. *The Skin I'm In*
 Gardner, Graham. *Inventing Elliot*
 Giles, Gail. *Shattering Glass*
 Hogg, Gary. *Scrambled Eggs and Spider Legs*
 Howe, James. *The Misfits*
 Jackson III, Curtis. "50 Cent." *Playground: The Mostly True Story of a Former Bully*
 Jordan-Fenton, Christy, and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton. *Fatty Legs*
 Kerz, Anna. *Better Than Weird*
 Koss, Amy Goldman. *Poison Ivy*
 Maciel, Amanda. *Tease*
 Mackall Dandi Daley. *Larger-Than-Life Lara*
 MacLean, Jill. *The Nine Lives of Travis Keating*
 _____. *The Present Tense of Prinny Murphy*
 _____. *The Hidden Agenda of Sigrid Sugden*
 Masters, Anthony. *Bullies Don't Hurt*
 Nielsen, Susin. *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*
 Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*
 Paterson, Katherine. *The Field of Dogs*
 Pignat, Caroline. *Egghead*
 Preller, James. *Bystander*
 Prose, Francine. *Bullyville*
 Sachs, Marilyn. *Veronica Ganz*
 Shulman, Mark. *Scrawl*
 Singer, Nicky. *Feather Boy*
 Spinelli, Jerry. *Wringer*
 _____. *Stargirl* (Sequel: *Love, Stargirl*)
 _____. *Loser*
 Stolz, Mary. *The Bully of Barkham Street*
 Van Draanen, Wendelin. *Shredderman: Secret Identity*
 Wishinsky, Frieda. *So Long, Stinky Queen*