

Don't Look and It Will Go Away:

YA Books—A Key to Uncovering the Invisible Problem of Bullying

Adapted from a panel presentation given at the 2006 ALAN Workshop in Nashville, Tennessee, November 20, 2006

C. J. Bott opened the session by posing this question to the entire 480 in attendance: How many of you have been bullied at some time in your life? Raise your hand. How many of you have been a bully? Older brothers and sisters must raise their hands here. I am the oldest of four and I admit that I resorted to bullying to keep my sisters under control. How many of you have witnessed a bullying incident at anytime during your life? And finally, how many wish you could had done something differently?

All those hands in the air are the only statistic you need to know this is a problem that we cannot ignore any longer. If we are all carrying the bruises from bullying, what is happening to our students?

At this ALAN conference in Nashville, we have the largest audience ever with 480 people. If two-thirds of you are classroom teachers, and that is a low estimate, that means 322 of you will go back to your classrooms. If you average four classes, that is 1288 classes, and I know many of you teach more than four. If we take an average of 25 students in each of those classes—that means that what is said on this panel today can touch the lives of 32,200 students. Think

about it; think about the ripple that will start here today and could change the lives of over 32,000 kids.

Let's start with the official definition of bullying created by Dan Olweus, the international authority on this problem. "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, *REPEATEDLY AND OVER TIME*, to the negative actions on the part of one or more other students." A student can't call someone a name once and be classified a bully. It has to happen repeatedly—and it can't be all in one setting; it has to happen over time, day after day. I would also add that there is an imbalance of power, one who has power over one who does not.

You know this, if I give you pairs of stereotypes, you can pick which is more likely to be the harasser. Ninth-grader or fifth-grader? Golfer or football player? Cheerleader or choir member?

Besides not looking and hoping it will go away, another thing we do wrong is we don't start early enough. We should be starting anti-bullying programs in elementary school. Another statistic from Olweus: "Bullies identified by age 8 are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age 24 and five times more than non-bullies to end up with serious criminal records by the age of 30." Age 8, that is third grade. If that child gets locked into bullying behaviors to get his or her power needs met, that child's potential is lost. Males who

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are confirmed bullies often turn into abusive partners, and females who are confirmed bullies turn into abusive moms. We have to start early, and we have to work with everyone. Bystanders make up about 75-80 percent of your school's population. If you were going to sell a product, wouldn't you want to market it to the largest population? We have to create programs that call upon the witnesses and bystanders to be responsible friends and citizens.

There are different ways to categorize a bully, but the most common is direct bullying and indirect bullying. Direct bullying is face to face and the target knows the bully's identity—e.g., the big kid saying, "Give me your lunch money." The target knows where the threat is, and if the bully is not around, can enjoy a certain degree of safety. Indirect bullying is not like that. It happens behind the back, and the bully could be anyone. It's notes written on bathroom walls, lockers, desk tops, slips of paper dropped into book bags—it is a secret and scary attack because the bully could be anyone. Cyberbullying is the fastest growing form of indirect bullying. A kid sitting in the security of his or her own home, gets on line, and finds a message directing him or her to a website. When that child opens the website, it is all about him or her. It contains embarrassing photos taken by cell phone in locker rooms, hallways, classroom—anywhere. There are bulletin board postings from unknown students and sometimes votes for being the dorkiest, ugliest, fattest, whatever-est imaginable. That teen or preteen has no idea who created this and suddenly the whole world becomes enemy territory. He or she cannot tell anyone because the first thing that person will do is look at the site. The target feels afraid and ashamed and very alone. For more information on cyberbullying, check out the website < www.cyberbullying.ca > .

You are going to hear from three authors in this order, Nancy Garden, Patrick Jones, and Julie Ann Peters. A bibliography is attached to give you a fuller introduction. Knowing we had a very short time to impress you, each author picked the question she or he most wanted to speak to. Trust me, we know this topic. Listen carefully; take notes; there will be an assignment. Each author has one question to answer.

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"How can teachers create and maintain a climate that discourages bullying in the first place?"

Nancy Garden

Some of what I'm about to say will serve as a bit of a review to what C.J. has said.

When Columbine happened, I, like all of you, was shocked and saddened. And as time went on, I was also shocked when I read people's assessments of what had made Eric and Dylan shoot up their school. That was when I found that the fact that they'd been bullied was usually mentioned only as an after-thought. I found that to be the case, too, in accounts of other school shootings, both before and after Columbine, and that led me to realize that bullying hasn't really been considered a serious problem in America. That's why I wrote my novel, *Endgame*, which is about a boy who's so badly bullied, so ignored, and so devalued by his school, his peers, and his family that one day he takes a gun to school and shoots a number of his fellow students.

For generations, we've considered bullying a natural part of childhood, almost a rite of passage for some kids. We've said, "Boys will be boys," and we've told bullies to stop bullying because it isn't nice and it is hurtful; we've given them detention, suspended them—and we've also ignored them. We've told victims not to react, not to "ask for it," and to become less like themselves; we've told gay and lesbian kids and gender-queer kids to act straight, and we've told sensitive, gentle kids to fight back.

But bullying hasn't gone away.

Are kids bullied in your school?

Have you seen kids systematically tease, exclude, spread rumors about, or beat up other kids?

Have you heard them call other kids names in a mean way? Have you heard kids use the put-down "It's so gay!"?

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Have you heard about kids who extort money from other kids, steal from them, damage their belongings, threaten them, force them to do things they don't want to do?

All of these examples, of course, are forms of bullying.

Even if you're well aware that bullying does exist in your school, you may be seeing only the tip of the

iceberg. Most bullying goes on in places where teachers and administrators don't—and often can't—see it: on the playground, in the lunchroom, in locker rooms, parking lots, on the bus, and—especially—in bathrooms. Increasingly, too, and far easier to hide, a surprising amount of bullying occurs online, as cyberbullying.

Bullies who are allowed to go on being bullies are at risk of continuing their pattern of escalating cruelty and violence into adulthood, becoming criminals or adult bullies.

Yes, but maybe, since this and the statistics C. J. quoted show that bullying is so common as to be ubiquitous, it might be better to ignore it. Maybe it really *IS* a necessary rite of passage that kids have to weather.

It's hard for me to accept that my having been beaten up periodically on my way home from elementary school was a necessary rite of passage, or that it was a necessary rite of passage for a young lesbian to have been raped with a coke bottle by a group of girls in a school in which I was student teaching, or that it was a rite of passage when a boy who my partner and I helped bring up was hung by his feet from an upper story of his high school. Years later, shortly after Columbine, that boy, then an adult, told me that if he hadn't had basketball and music and people like us to talk to, he might well have taken a gun to his school and done what Eric and Dylan did at Columbine.

Again, many, perhaps most, school shooters have been victims of bullying. That's one reason why stopping bullying is so vital. But even when they don't end up shooting their classmates and teachers or bombing their schools—and most, of course, don't—bullies who are allowed to go on being bullies are at risk of continuing their pattern of escalating cruelty

and violence into adulthood, becoming criminals or adult bullies.

Victims of bullies often skip school because they're afraid, or can't concentrate on their lessons. They lie awake at night dreading the next school day because someone has threatened to "get" them. Bullied kids become depressed, insecure, or even suicidal because of being bullied. And, of course, some end up becoming bullies themselves.

Bystanders who witness bullying but don't report it or otherwise act to help victims frequently feel guilty and are afraid themselves of becoming victims, especially if they do report bullying incidents.

So what are we to do? My research tells me that a good start involves having a firm, specific anti-bullying policy that is followed consistently by *ALL* staff members and *ALL* kids—not a one-size-fits-all zero-tolerance policy that doesn't allow for special situations, but one that does set up a predictably escalating scale of reprimands, warnings, and punishments for repeated bullying incidents. But it's equally important to remember that *bullies* frequently need careful professional counseling, as well as punishment. Remember that many bullies have been bullied themselves. It's important to treat the cause as well as the result.

Any bullying prevention policy also needs to address the problems of bystanders. It needs to encourage them to report bullying incidents, and—this is vital—it needs to provide reliable protection for them when they do report incidents.

Of course, anti-bullying policies should address the needs of victims in a way that ensures that victims are *NEVER* made to feel that they brought the bully's actions on themselves.

Just as important as having a consistent anti-bullying policy, it seems to me, is the atmosphere of the school itself. Is your school a happy, friendly place, in which all kinds of people are valued? Or is it one in which some groups—athletes, for example—are valued above all others and given special treatment. Or is it a tense, unfriendly place in which all students are divided by clique and hierarchy?

As an author, I've visited happy classrooms in which kids and teachers have been relaxed and eagerly engaged, and grim ones in which everyone has seemed tense and uninvolved. It's easy to guess which schools or classes might be likely to have a problem

with bullying, and which probably would not.

Because bullies so often single out kids who don't fit in or who are "different," it's vital for schools to do everything they can to be welcoming and inclusive, and it's equally important for schools to have books that are inclusive, as well. Patrick and Julie will be talking about both those vital areas. It's important, too, for schools to offer a range of clubs and organizations that validate and empower minorities—including sexual minorities.

When I was growing up, my mother often said to me, "Put yourself in the other guy's shoes." Encouraging kids to imagine how other people have felt in various situations, both real and in the books they read, can foster empathy—which in turn can contribute to a climate that doesn't accept bullying.

I think all of us are baffled to some degree about bullying; despite everything I've said here, I know I sure am. Luckily, there's now helpful information both in books and on the Internet. Just Googling "Bullying" can lead you to much of it. One resource that I've found especially valuable is a pamphlet developed in Maine by the Maine Governor's Children's Cabinet in response to that state's antibullying law. It's called "Maine's Best Practices in Bullying and Harassment Prevention." Its URL is < < www.maine.gov/education/bullyingprevention/index.shtml > >

I hope you'll all go home after this conference to examine your school's climate in general and your school's bullying situation in particular. And if you find either needing repairs, I hope you'll be able to talk about it with your fellow teachers and your administrators—and yes, your students and their parents, as well—and begin to work together on making changes. That can be a long, difficult process, but it's one that, in addition to improving academic performance and fostering student mental health, can also save lives. I don't think there's anything more important than that!

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"Hammers and Nails: the Hardware of High School."

Patrick Jones

Let me introduce you to Bret Hendricks, the main character in novel, *Nailed*:

"Freak faggot."

I outwardly ignore All-American asshole Bob Hitchings' usual greeting as I take my seat, but the words beat me down inside. It's first period on the first day of my junior year in English class, the great melting pot that makes big fat fibbers out of Our Founding Fathers. All men are not created equal; some are smarter, some are stronger. If Jefferson, Madison, and the rest of their ilk had spent a day at Southwestern, they would have flushed that claptrap right down the toilet. I'm smarter than a lot of people in this room, more talented in the things that matter to me. But guys like Hitchings, who are stronger than most people, and guys like me, who are smarter than most people, are not equals. A born athlete, Hitchings cares about kicking a football, capturing a wrestling pin fall, and catching a baseball. I'm a born artist who cares about books, music, and theater. In my eyes, he isn't better than me, nor am I better than him; we're just different, and different is okay with me. (26)

Bret's a nail: a kid who doesn't fit in. Hitchings is a hammer: a kid who does. It seems increasingly the hardware of schools consists of hammer and nails.

Not all nails are like Bret: artistic kids, creative kids. Odd kids. Underdogs. Readers. But the kids who get bullied are often those outside the mainstream. Nails that stick out.

Not all hammers are like Hitchings: jocks, popular kids. Water walkers. Non-readers.

These are created characters, but they are also types. The types of kids we find in our schools and libraries.

We need to challenge the hammers and stand up for the nails.

Especially now as standardized testing is so prevalent, it seems we seek conformity as a good thing. Everybody falls in line.

But there's a problem.

You can't really test creativity.

You can't test for sensitivity.

You can test for respecting diversity.

You can't test for empathy.

Because bullies so often single out kids who don't fit in or who are "different," it's vital for schools to do everything they can to be welcoming and inclusive, and it's equally important for schools to have books that are inclusive, as well.

But this work isn't just about giving kids a list of great books, it is about listening to them tell about their lives. It is about relationships.

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Listening to real teens, like Johanna in my novel *Things Change*, trapped in a violent dating relationship; teens like Bret in *Nailed*, a well-rounded victim of violence trapped in a square box; and teens like Christy in my forthcoming novel *Chasing Tail Lights*, trapped in a generational poverty and a horrific family life. These are made-up teens, but the stories of real teens need to be heard. But they're afraid to talk, not fearing retaliation, but afraid to admit their victimization and thus unable to find validation.

Sometimes we provide them a sanctuary, as my friend Cathi Dunn MacRae mentioned earlier. A sanctuary for these kids to be themselves. A place for kids who read, write, paint, create, sing, and dance. A place for kids to read, then talk about books, and thereby talk about their lives.

But sanctuary isn't enough, because it's temporary. The problem isn't going away.

And the problem *IS* the problem approach. The problem isn't bullying, the problem is looking at kids as problems to be solved.

Instead, we need to look at the assets of the nails and the assets of the hammers.

A strength-based approach, like that of the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets framework, challenges us to see the strengths that kids have and shines light on the assets they need to develop. (Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota. <<http://www.search-institute.org/assets/>>)

The assets are a different kind of test. Not about reading and writing. Not about math and science. The assets are the essence of adolescence. And the key to building assets is building relationships. Relationships we can build through literature.

You can't test for humanity.

Maybe you can't test for it, but you can teach all these things to your students.

Three words: Young adult literature.

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Helping kids, though literature and through listening, build assets is our test.

It is how we test our humanity in this world of hammers and nails.

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Is there proof that such books need to be available and read by our young people?

Julie Ann Peters

What is the proof that such books need to be available and read? My mail.

I wish you could read one week's worth of the mail I receive from young people, so you could see what's going on with them. Wow. It's brutal in the trenches. For the most part, kids are resilient, but we forget how fragile they are. They break.

Ms. Peters,

Hello. My name is Laili (lay-lee) and I'm an 18 year old who just graduated from high school and im queer. I don't like to label myself as lesbian or bi, just queer. Ive been having some troubles with my "fellow peers" and I feel very discouraged . . . when I started coming out there were friends who decided not to be friends with me anymore, others who totally shut me down, calling me disgusting and saying I'd lied to them, then sasha my best friend told all her friends, and now its all spiraled out of control. Ive become so depressed . . . I've started cutting myself again (I had stopped for a year) and I am thinking of taking my own life. There is no support here at all. I know you aren't a counselor Ms Peters but I just needed to tell someone my story. I don't expect you to have solutions but did you ever have times like this? I don't think there is any solution anymore other then suicide . . . im sorry to burden you but I really needed someone to know me.

For me, for my community, bullying extends to verbal and physical assault. When you have this constant barrage of negative messages about who you are; when you are never celebrated as a person; when you are not even equal in the eyes of the law, you develop so little confidence and self-esteem. You feel diminished.

Bullying is disrespect and dismissal. It's the total denigration of a person.

Every day is a struggle, people don't accept me for who I am. Some teachers even treat me differently. But my English teacher, Ms. Wolfe, saw me reading *Keeping You a Secret* one day, and asked me what it was about. So I told her. She asked if there was anything really inappropriate in it, and I said not really, so she said she'll read it and see if she can put it on the summer reading list. Wouldn't it be great if all those people who make fun of us would read this, and understand? Understand what they're doing? Understand who we really are? Understand who THEY really are? It would be amazing.

—Catherine

Discrimination infests my school. To admit that you're lesbian, gay, or bisexual is like writing "attack me" on your forehead. I cried twice while reading *KYAS* [*Keeping You A Secret*] because it reminds me so much of how it is here. Luckily, I'm not alone because my two best friends in all the world are bi and gay. We stick together when it comes to fighting the disease of prejudice.

—Rose

I was wondering two things.

1) Do you get a lot of annoying emails like this, from crazy fans, that aren't actually fanmail?

2) I'm trapped in a stereotypical Middle School. Meaning: Everyone is always saying, "I don't like this assignment. Its gay." And "you're stupid. You did something stupid. You're a fag. Haha, wasn't that funny?" I am lesbian, not that these people know. It really hurts me and I want to stand up for everyone who doesn't stand up for themselves. Do you know what I should say?

—Cheez

My friend David is on the newspaper staff. He wrote this LONG article on gay relationships, and the marriage amendment here in VA . . . It was an AMAZING article. It became our front page story . . . David got 6 death threats and 137 hate emails in response to the article.

—Ang

For what I have in intelligence I lack in size and strength. I'm one of the shortest and tiniest kids at my school, so an easy target. There would be days when

there would be large groups of guys. GUYS. And they would grab me and push me up against the walls. They would just hit me and hit me over again. And nobody would stop them.

—Quinn

Stephanie, a 13-year-old, was asked to choose her favorite book and do an oral report in school. She chose *Keeping You a Secret*. I wrote and told her how brave I thought she was. Because that takes courage. I wished her luck and told her I'd be there in spirit. She wrote to say that after school, she was ambushed and beaten. Her arm and three ribs were broken. I told Stephanie to please report this as a hate crime. Please tell people at school; they'll know what to do. Stephanie, I said, they'll take care of you. Her reply:

One of my friends went to the counselors and principals at our school asking about it and how we could report that sort of thing. The most of an answer we got to that question was the guidance counselor telling us that she would 'see what she could do.' So we just had to let go of the problem, because nobody was willing to help us figure out what we could do about it.

—Stephanie

What you can do is step up. Stand up. Give young people role models. Give them tools and trust in you. It saddens me to hear how few trusted adults young people seem to feel they have in their lives.

The other day I was at work when a gay couple walked in and a co-worker of mine was making fun of them and I ended up arguing with him about how wrong I felt that it was for him to be saying what he was saying and I realized it was because of YOU that I spoke up. I began to cry and to myself asked why do people had to make it so hard for other people to be happy with themselves? Thank you because with this one book you gave me and so many others a voice and a place in our hearts for what others go threw day to day.

—Gabi, 18

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Recently, Ms. D came out at school. A girl at school was being harassed, and there was a board meeting. Ms. D spoke up for the girl, and basically said, “look, I know what it is to be harassed. But our school doesn’t do enough to stop it, even for teachers like myself. We hide who we are everyday.”

—Ang quotes, “I believe we are given the gift of a poetic platform so we can use it to speak for all the millions who are silenced.”

Books can provide comfort and solace, strength and solutions. Books can be friends when you don’t feel you have a friend in the world.

It’s amazing how cruel people are. I would think, “maybe I’m going through so many things that no one

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else goes through” but when I read your book and so many things are exactly like things in my life, it was interesting and calming for my mind. The spray painted locker, to the harassment by big

groups of people, it all matched my life and things that I knew my friends had gone through too. Keeping You a Secret was like my reassurance that I wasn’t alone. So I really want to thank you. You’ve put a smile on my face, that had been missing for a long time.

—Jessy

People listen to books in a way they listen to nothing else, partly, I think, because they identify and get lost in the story world (you can really start to see things from another point of view, put yourself in someone else’s place), and partly because when people read a story they let their guard down. People don’t think of a story as something that will change their minds, so they fully open them—and look what happens. I never gave thought to TG people before I read Luna and now I’m astounded and sympathetic to what they go through.

—Elizabeth

Bullying is a pervasive problem, and it’s not limited to peer interactions.

Hey my name is Angelle . . . I decided to try out for the basket ball team and I did. I thought I did good and so did every one else but I didn’t make it . . . and I asked around and EVERY one I asked said the coach hates lesbians. I look just like most girls, pretty, smart, lots of friends . . . love sports . . . but ever since I came out it all went down the drain. How do I handle this how do I react to the basket ball situation when I absolutely love the sport. I cant handle this I love being gay but sometimes I wish I could have a break on it.

Me too. Why should we care? We dedicate our lives to growing good people, to making a difference in the world. We should care out of love.

Hey dude,
I went to my very first anime con and made friends with what seems like every hot gay guy alive. I even held up a sign that said “Hug me, I’m gay” and like 390,674,530,956 people hugged me.

I love being alive.

—Miles, age 12

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C.J. Bott: Did you hear it? Did you hear your assignment? I am very proud of my profession, but I am also embarrassed because for too long we have supported the Don’t Look philosophy, and the problem has NOT GONE AWAY.

Your assignment is simple—Do Something. YOU. MUST. DO. SOMETHING.

Yesterday someone asked my why I do this work, and I thought about it all night. The answer is simple. How could I not? And now, how could you not? The lives of over 32,000 students depends on it.

(And if every teacher who reads this article decides to do something—think of how many more lives could be touched.)

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