

For Boys Only:

Young Adult Literature about Girls and Dating

Dating is a complex coming-of-age experience. It is an uncertain and often humiliating and painful time for teens. While boys and girls alike have uncertainties and questions about relationships, boys may struggle more with expressing themselves and sharing their feelings. Socialized to be “manly” and fearing ridicule, many learn to bottle or avoid emotions. Young adult literature about girls and dating with which boys can relate can be a safe portal through which boys can explore emotions without fear of ridicule; such literature can provide answers to questions boys may never ask.

Unfortunately, little literature about girls and dating appeals to males. How many high school boys, for instance, want to read a Judy Blume or Louise Rennison novel? Boys need stories about relationships that are not feminine in nature: books about girls and dating must be realistic and gritty, not romantic or dreamy; they should contain action, suspense, or themes such as sports. Covers need to attract young men specifically; they cannot be cartoonish; nor can they resemble Harlequin romances. Titles, too, must capture males.

Novels featuring these characteristics are rare; however, as the young adult literature genre matures, authors are beginning to write about relationships that appeal to boys. Publishers are also becoming increasingly aware of the power of visual images and titles—if a young adult novel looks too much like something a boy read in middle school or looks too feminine, high school boys will likely be turned off. An analysis of recently published books that have covers and titles appealing to high school boys and that feature male

protagonists realistically wrestling with their feelings about girls follows.

The cover (a girl’s torso) and title of Markus Zusak’s *Getting the Girl* (2003) is a sure winner with boys. Within the pages is a rugged, yet tender story, about first love and brotherly solidarity. Cameron Wolfe lives in the shadow of his older, athletic brother, Ruben. While Cameron yearns for a girlfriend, he watches Ruben run through girls and listens as Ruben talks trash about ex-girlfriends. Ruben wants each girl only because she is his next conquest; he has no feelings for girls and has never loved. Feeling disdain for Ruben’s behavior, Cameron vows he will treat girls better; however, he must first find a girlfriend.

When Ruben and Octavia break up, Cameron’s desire becomes a reality as he and Octavia develop a tender relationship. Though Ruben has moved on to something better, he becomes jealous of Cameron’s sensitivity toward Octavia and beats Cameron up. Octavia ends her relationship with Cameron because she refuses to come between two brothers. Cameron feels lost and hopeless; Ruben feels guilty for destroying the relationship.

While a central theme of Zusak’s latest novel is brotherly love, the novel has much to offer boys about relationships. Ruben disrespects girls, while Cameron is affectionate and respectful. Newly comparing himself to Cameron, Ruben becomes angry and no longer feels his former pride in treating girls like trophies. Healthy relationships, he realizes, are not about conquering girls, treating them like prizes, or even having sex. Getting all the “hot” girls does not make him a man; in fact, it is treating women with

respect that shows strength and character. Cameron becomes his role model.

Zusak's novel raises an important issue for boys: respect. While some boys value girls, many emulate Ruben. Sometimes disrespect comes from family experiences; other times it may come from peer relations and other cultural forces. Because attitudes and behaviors are difficult to alter, it is unlikely that disrespectful boys will suddenly treat girls better after reading *Getting the Girl*; however, Zusak's novel can offer boys some insight into the nature of healthy relationships. Well-developed and realistic, Ruben Wolfe is a character with whom boys can easily relate.

While boys often exploit girls, boys can also be victimized. The male protagonist in Ellen Wittlinger's *Razzle* (2001) allows himself to be used, despite numerous warnings. When fifteen-year-old Kenyon Baker moves with his retired parents to Cape Cod to restore and operate a dilapidated resort, Kenyon believes he will experience the worst summer ever; instead, he meets Razzle Penney, a tall, skinny, eccentric girl, and the two become close friends. Their friendship is tested, however, when Kenyon falls for Harley, a gorgeous but trappy girl, despite warnings from Razzle and Harley's castoffs.

With the aid of Frank, a gay plumber, Kenyon learns that beauty is truly skin deep, a hard but important lesson. When Harley tricks him into shooting photos of her and displaying them in an art show, hoping she will be discovered and get off Cape Cod, Kenyon realizes Harley played him like all new boys to Cape Cod. Though Razzle lacks Harley's sexual appeal and physical beauty, Kenyon realizes he cares for Razzle because she is real and true. Despite his revelation, Kenyon must leave Razzle when his aging parents admit repairing the rundown resort is too labor intensive.

Any boy who has ever felt used by a girl can relate to Kenyon's pain. Though teens place tremendous importance on physical attributes, Wittlinger's story illustrates that physical beauty means little unless accompanied by an attractive personality. Though some boys, like Zusak's Ruben Wolfe, are callous and exploit girls, boys can be exploited, too. Kenyon is a wonderful role model for boys who find themselves in exploited situations. Unlike many boys who become resentful and angry, who lash out and develop negative attitudes toward girls, Kenyon works

through his pain in grace. He walks away from Harley having learned an important lesson about attraction.

Sharon Draper's *The Battle of Jericho* (2003), a story with a strong hazing theme, shows how far some boys will go for the girl of their dreams. When Jericho and his cousin and close friend, Josh, pledge for the Warriors of Distinction, an exclusive club in their school, Jericho believes his life could not be better, especially when Arielle, a good-looking classmate, shows interest because he is a soon-to-be warrior. Believing Arielle is worth the price, Jericho endures brutal and dangerous initiation rituals. Only when a fatal accident occurs does Jericho realize the price of his newly acquired status.

Most boys will easily relate to Jericho's desire to impress Arielle. While girls may attract boys by wearing the right clothes and looking desirable, boys tend to impress girls through actions. Athletic boys often attract girls through sports; other boys, such as Jericho, use organizations or activities that bestow manliness or social status.

First relationships are tough, and many teens will go to extremes to maintain a relationship. Draper's work raises important questions: What are you willing to sacrifice for the person of your dreams? What are the consequences? Draper has written an important addition to the young adult genre.

While some boys sacrifice everything for a relationship, others are caught between two desires. Fifteen-year-old Gary Keeling in Kevin Waltman's *Nowhere Fast* (2002) feels torn: his friend Wilson wants his time; so does Lauryn, his girlfriend. Gary spends his summer dating Lauryn, drinking and getting into trouble with his friend, Wilson—a wild teen whom Lauryn dislikes. Wanting to be the best boyfriend ever but also wanting to please his friend, Gary keeps secrets from Lauryn. Lauryn is not easily fooled and confronts Gary for not resisting Wilson's pressure.

As the summer progresses, Wilson talks Gary into stealing a car, and Gary helps arrange a meeting between the car's owner, Mr. Roverson, a former teacher, and a student with whom he had an affair. The plot ends in disaster, when Lauryn, like most people living in the small town of Dearborn Springs, Indiana, treats Mr. Roverson as an outcast and turns irate when Gary is forced to reveal his secret.

Though Gary wants to be the ideal boyfriend, he

cannot resist Wilson's challenges; he has no self-confidence and needs Wilson's and Mr. Roverson's approval. He cannot, no matter how angry Lauryn gets, refuse Wilson or Mr. Roverson.

Dating is a transitional time for teens. Having established childhood friends, teens often feel torn between hanging out with old friends and dating. Making decisions can be difficult—boys, for example, are often teased when they break away from friends to spend more time with girlfriends. Long-term friends can feel neglected and are sometimes jealous and resentful. High school boys can relate to Gary's trapped feelings: On one hand, Gary wants to please Lauryn; on the other, he wants to hang out with Wilson, despite knowing Wilson causes trouble. Though he wants badly to be good enough for Lauryn, he cannot control his life and knows he risks losing Lauryn.

Many teens find themselves in abusive relationships. While child abuse is an ample theme in young adult literature, dating violence has been explored minimally. Young adult literature dealing with dating violence has focused primarily on the girl's perspective; *Past Forgiving* by Gloria D. Miklowitz is a case in point. Alex Flinn's *Breathing Underwater* (2001), however, features a male protagonist coming to terms with abusing his girlfriend.

Flinn's novel opens with sixteen-year-old Nick Andreas in court for hitting his girlfriend, Caitlin. The judge orders him into counseling and forces him to keep a journal. Nick and Caitlin's story unfolds through Nick's writing. Good looking, athletic, and popular, Nick seems to have everything; no one suspects he is a victim of his father's abuse. When Nick falls for Caitlin, his world is complete; however, Caitlin becomes increasingly popular, and Nick becomes obsessed with thoughts of losing her. He becomes controlling, insisting that Caitlin cannot have friends, go anywhere without him, or participate in social events. Knowing Caitlin is afraid of getting fat, Nick attempts to control her with nasty comments about her weight. He criticizes her weight in front of friends and convinces her to swim in a t-shirt so guys cannot see her body. The story's climax occurs when Caitlin goes against Nick's wishes and sings in a school event. Filled with rage and fear, Nick beats Caitlin mercilessly.

Breathing Underwater is a poignant and gritty

portrayal of a teenage boy perpetuating the cycle of domestic violence. Threatened by Caitlin's beauty and her independence, Nick uses cruel tactics to isolate and control her. Knowing he is emulating his father's behavior, Nick cannot stop—he is driven by fear. He feels small and cannot tolerate being dumped or humiliated.

Domestic violence is a serious societal issue. While seeds for domestic violence are sown during childhood, relationship experiences during adolescence play important roles in molding young men and women. Though painful to read, Flinn's book paints an accurate portrait of a young man headed toward a life of domestic violence. Boys who are possessive and controlling and who lack insight into their own behavior may do some self-examination as a result of reading Flinn's novel.

One topic given little attention in young adult literature about boy/girl relationships is teen pregnancy. While many young adult novels have been written from the female point of view, few have been written from a male perspective. (*Too Soon for Jeff* by Maryiln Reynolds is an older example.) Margaret Bechard's *Hanging on to Max* (2002) is a recent work that features a male protagonist struggling with becoming a parent.

Sam Pettigrew should be enjoying his senior year in high school; however, when his girlfriend becomes pregnant and decides to give the baby up for adoption, Sam gives up his college dreams and chooses to raise it alone. Sam and his eleven-month-old son, Max, live with Sam's widowed father, who agrees to support them until Sam graduates and begins a construction job. Sam's father helps little with Max, and Sam struggles to juggle parental responsibilities and school. Despite trying his hardest to care for Max, Sam never feels good enough. His life brightens when Claire, a former classmate who has her own baby, enrolls in Sam's alternative school. They begin dating and spending time together with their babies. When Max cuts his hand on broken glass at a party, Sam panics. After realizing Max will be okay, Sam knows he cannot care for Max and makes the agonizing decision to give him up for adoption. In doing so, he also ends his relationship with Claire—if he cannot have his own son, he cannot take on the responsibility of someone else's child.

While this book addresses the fears and struggles

of a teen dad, it also portrays the complexities of dating as a single parent and/or dating someone who has a child. When Sam gives up Max, he also sacrifices his relationship with Claire, for he cannot spend time with Claire and her daughter without feeling guilty for giving up his son. In a time when most young adult literature about teen pregnancy is written for girls, this work is an important contribution.

A second riveting novel featuring a teen dad as a protagonist is *The First Part Last* (2003) by Angela Johnson. Bobby is an ordinary urban teenager—reckless, impatient, carefree. He hangs out with his best friends, cuts school to celebrate his birthday, eats pizza, and watches movies. His life changes abruptly when his girlfriend, Nia, becomes pregnant. In chapters alternating between “then” and “now,” the reader learns of Bobby’s bittersweet relationship with Nia and his current role as a struggling, but devoted, single dad. Though his parents are supportive, they insist Bobby assume all parenting roles. Bobby is determined to be the best dad to Feather, his daughter; however, sometimes he yearns to be a child again.

Johnson’s characters are memorable and well-developed. Flashbacks reveal that Nia is in an irreversible coma, which explains why Bobby has custody of his daughter. Johnson’s language is sparse, her story fast, suspenseful, yet tender; it is a terrific read for boys.

Relationships are complex, particularly for teens who are dating for the first time. Young adult literature provides teens an opportunity to read about peers working through similar problems. Unlike girls, boys

have had little opportunity to explore dating issues in young adult literature. Respect, exploitation, physical attraction, dating abuse, and teen pregnancy are dating issues facing today’s teens. Other issues such as interracial dating and dating older women need exploration, as well. Hopefully, young adult literature will offer boys more as it continues to mature.

Dr. Pam B. Cole is Associate Professor of Middle Grades English Education at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Georgia, where she teaches courses in reading, adolescent literature and literacy. She is president of SIGNAL, a special interest network of the International Reading Association devoted to adolescent literature and co-editor of SIGNAL Journal. She has served as a reading strand contributor to McGraw-Hills’ 2002 mathematics series. Former Vice-President for the Georgia Council of Teachers, Dr. Cole currently coordinates Kennesaw State’s Annual Conference on Literature for Children and Adolescents.

Works Cited

- Bechard, Margaret. *Hanging on to Max*. Brookfield, CT: Roaring Brook, 2000.
- Draper, Sharon. *The Battle of Jericho*. New York: Simon, 2003.
- Flinn, Alex. *Breathing Underwater*. New York: Harper, 2001.
- Johnson, Angela. *The First Part Last*. New York: Simon, 2003.
- Miklowitz, Gloria. *Past Forgiving*. New York: Simon, 1995.
- Reynolds, Marilyn. *Too Soon for Jeff*. Buena Park, CA: Morning Glory, 1994.
- Waltman, Kevin. *Nowhere Fast*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.
- Wittlinger, Ellen. *Razzle*. New York: Simon, 2001.
- Zusak, Markus. *Getting the Girl*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.