

“Just Take One Step”:

How YA Novels Empower Bystanders to Stop Sexual Assault

In January 2015, a young college student, now seared into public consciousness as “Emily Doe,” was dragged behind a dumpster by a fellow undergraduate and sexually assaulted while she lay unconscious. At her assailant’s sentencing, Doe read a 12-page victim’s impact statement, which was later shared widely online. Her compelling account of post-traumatic survival describes both her physical pain and her ongoing emotional wounds. Within its pages, Doe also praised two Swedish graduate students who came to her aid. The students, who had been biking in the area during the night of the rape, discovered Doe’s naked assailant lying on top of her unresponsive body. They confronted and restrained the rapist until police arrived. “I sleep with two bicycles that I drew taped above my bed to remind myself there are heroes in this story. That we are looking out for one another,” Doe notes in the letter’s conclusion (2016, p. 12).

Emily Doe’s statement attests to the critical, lifesaving power of a bystander. While the term “bystander” might simply seem synonymous with “witness” or “observer” in the language of sexual assault education it takes on additional meaning, depicting an observer who is empowered to disrupt a sexually violent scenario. Within young adult literature, a growing corpus of *bystander novels* similarly contends that teenagers who witness sexual assault can make pro-social choices to stop violence. These fictional worlds deconstruct contemporary rape culture, indicting sports programs that create a toxic brew of hyper-masculinity and sexual entitlement, and revealing the tremendous pressures placed upon adolescent

girls to police their own dress, speech, and behavior for fear of victimization. Yet bystander novels also *place faith* in young people to enact profound social change. Within their narratives, we learn of characters questioning rape myths, developing empathy for others, building alliances across peer hierarchies, and interrupting sexually violent scenarios. A blossoming—and needed—genre, bystander novels represent a significant new educational resource in the fight against sexual assault.

Bystander Beginnings: Kitty Genovese, Psychological Theory, and Sexual Assault Education

Young adult literature has never shied away from exploring the difficult issue of sexual violence. During the YA social realism boom of the 1970s, both Richard Peck (*Are You in the House Alone?*, 1976) and Sandra Scoppettone (*Happy Endings Are All Alike*, 1978) took on victim-blaming and asserted that rape was a crime of violence against women.¹ More recently, Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999), a first-person account of rape trauma by a self-silenced teenaged survivor, has sold over three million copies and is frequently taught in schools.

Fortunately, today’s readers have access to a diverse array of topics about the aftermath of sexual violence. Recent YA novels have focused on drug-facilitated sexual assault and post-rape abortion (*Exit Pursued by a Bear*, Johnston, 2016), socioeconomic class and “legitimate” victimhood (*All the Rage*, Sum-

mers, 2015), social media shaming (*Asking for It*, O’Neill, 2016), survivor self-injury (*Faking Normal*, Stevens, 2015), traumatic behavioral changes (*The Way I Used to Be*, Smith, 2016), rape revenge (*The Mockingbirds*, Whitney, 2010), and even the Catholic Church abuse scandal (*The Gospel of Winter*, Kiely, 2015). These novels all address important aspects of sexual assault trauma and recovery, and nearly all are narrated directly by survivors. Young adult literary resources about sexual assault extend beyond the page as well; the librarian-designed website *Sexual Violence YA Literature* (#SVYALit) has, since 2015, collected information about depictions of assault in teen literature. Meanwhile, education researchers have begun mapping the correlation between classroom units on these novels and an overall reduction of rape-supportive attitudes among adolescents (Malo-Juvera, 2012).²

The bystander novel, which performs antirape work from the teenage observer’s perspective, represents another helpful resource. Its rise, however, must be contextualized within the larger paradigm shift of American sexual assault prevention education. Over the past two decades, colleges and high schools have abandoned *risk-reduction* models of prevention (which focus upon women’s self-defense and personal safety) in favor of *bystander education*, which recognizes the presence in many threatening scenarios of onlookers who can stop or alter the course of sexual violence. Bystander education curricula seek to empower those individuals to, in the words of Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante (2007), interrupt “situations that could lead to assault before it happens,” protest against “social norms that support sexual violence,” and “be an effective and supportive ally to survivors” (p. 464).

The bystander concept entered the popular lexicon following a high-profile murder in 1964. Kitty Genovese, a young New York City bar manager returning home late at night, was stalked, raped, and killed by a stranger in the vicinity of her own apartment. The perpetrator, Winston Moseley, first stabbed Genovese outside in view of her neighbors; subsequently, he tracked her inside her building, sexually assaulting and mortally wounding her. “For more than half an hour 38 respectable, law-abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks in Kew Gardens,” while “not one person telephoned the police during the assault,” began the famous account of her ordeal in *The New*

York Times (as cited in Lemann, 2014). While historians later revised downward the number of neighbors who were actually aware of Genovese’s ordeal, the incident has nonetheless lingered in popular consciousness as a symbol of anomie. Today, psychology students still study the Genovese case, for it galvanized the bystander thesis of Darley and Latané (1968), which claims an inverse relationship between the number of witnesses to a distressing event and the likelihood that any one person will intervene. A typical bystander, the duo write, assumes “his own intervention would be only redundant—perhaps harmfully or confusingly so. Thus, given the presence of other onlookers whose behavior cannot be observed, any given bystander can rationalize his own inaction by convincing himself that ‘somebody else must be doing something’” (p. 378).

Over the decades, the bystander thesis has been successfully replicated in multiple scenarios of distress, including falls, shocks, seizures, requests to help a child, and smoke filling a room (Thornberg, 2007). It is important to note that in their original article, Darley and Latané rejected labeling the bystanders as evil or uncaring, suggesting instead that their reticence was contextually driven. “If people understand the situational forces that can make them hesitate to intervene,” they observed, “they may better overcome them” (p. 383). Taking to heart the idea of empowering such bystanders, youth researchers in the 1990s began to integrate the theory into sexual violence prevention efforts.³ Early 1990s pilot programs, such as Northeastern University’s MVP (Mentors in Violence Program), focused on engaging peer leaders, such as male athletes, to “discourage, prevent, or interrupt an incident of sexist abuse, gay-bashing, or same-sex bullying” (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011, p. 686). Other models followed; today, hundreds of college campuses participate in similar programs, including Green Dot, Red Flag Campaign, and Know Your Power.

A typical bystander curriculum includes cultural discussion intended to challenge rape culture, defined by Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth (1993) as “a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” in which “women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself” (preamble).⁴ Students may discuss their reac-

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tions to various attitudinal statements identified on the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA), such as

“If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.” Interactive activities, such as role plays where students mull over how to safely get an intoxicated friend home from a party, allow the largely freshman audience to rehearse intervention scenarios. While efficacy research on bystander programs is still in its early stages, the findings are promising. Participants tested before and after one program expressed higher self-reported rates of willingness to intervene and lower acceptance of rape

myths (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Foubert, Brasfield, Hill, & Shelley-Tremblay, 2011).⁵

Bystander trainings, which are increasingly popular not only in colleges but also in high schools, workplaces, and other organizations, represent a profound reconceptualization of sexual assault from “private business” to a public problem demanding widespread social accountability. Even the United States government has embraced this philosophy, creating the “It's on Us” campaign (It's on Us, 2014) in which celebrity spokespeople urge Americans to “identify situations in which sexual assault may occur,” and pledge to “intervene” in situations where consent has not or cannot be given (itsonus.org). The inclusivity of the bystander approach, researchers argue, “reinforces the belief that everyone can contribute to prevention efforts” and recognizes that all citizens “are likely to be friends, parents, grandparents, coaches, teachers, brothers, sisters, and community members of rape victims” (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2011, p. 745).

Young adult novels narrated by bystanders are vehicles for teenage antirape empowerment. However, before delving into the individual contribution of these novels, it is important to contextualize the role that sports (particularly football and basketball) play within their pages. Indeed, *all six* novels studied here

contain sexual traumas involving men's high school athletics. Timothy Davis and Tonya Parker (1998) have succinctly deemed sport a “key component of our current gender order” (p. 774), and while women have made noted strides in participation in sports on all levels, historically and even today, sports' economic and social power is the primary domain of men. Furthermore, sports often shape young people's perceptions of masculinity, serving as “the preeminent arena where preteen and early adolescent boys establish a respected male identity for themselves in most communities” (Kivel, 1999, p. 131).

Organized athletics' codes of behavior can be taken to the extreme of hyper or hegemonic masculinity, where boys learn that maleness is affirmed both by acts of aggression and by the denigration of femininity and homosexuality. Many (though not all) players in bystander novels enact hyper-masculinity. Lucas, a sympathetic football player in *A Step toward Falling* (McGovern, 2015), provides a helpful illustration when speaking of his teammates: “They have this violent streak. Like if you hit someone pretty hard and then help them up afterward . . . [they think] it shows weakness. They think every game is a battle. If you don't go for the kill, you're a pansy-ass loser” (p. 110).

Most portrayals of sports culture in YA bystander novels also emphasize homophobia and aggression toward women. Readers of *What We Saw* (Hartzler, 2015), for instance, encounter the basketball team bullying a smaller male student with the epithets “faggot” and “sweetheart” (p. 88). Language of sexual violence related to sports is also manifested later in the novel at a pep rally, when the audience is encouraged to “BUCC” any “losers” who “run up against the Buccaneers” team (p. 130). *Leverage's* (Cohen, 2011) players continue such discourse, describing football tackles as enacting violent penetration, as of “a virgin on prom night” (p. 240). Through their varied individual plots, the novels studied here suggest that the “revenue sports” of football and basketball create a poisonous hyper-masculine atmosphere that confers unearned social dominance upon its players, encourages the sexual exploitation of women, and persecutes boys judged insufficiently “tough” and/or heterosexual.⁶

Bystander novels' connection between athletic privilege and sexual violence is echoed in the popu-

lar press. In recent years, college teams and the pro leagues have been rocked by multiple high-profile incidences of sexual assault and domestic violence. Notorious high school cases like the one in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, where football players gang-raped a mentally disabled girl (which I discuss in greater detail later), and Steubenville, Ohio, where multiple athletes filmed and shared an assault of an Ohio teenager, have reinforced the connection between sports and sexual violence in the public eye. Some college researchers have indeed found overrepresentation of athletes in data collected on reported rapes; most caution, though, to focus less upon the numbers than upon the outsized *influence* that student athletes can wield.⁷ As high-status individuals and role models, student athletes can indeed reinforce sexist and homophobic attitudes—or they can change them.⁸ Bystander novels also work to affirm that adolescents can create social justice through individual alliances across gender, social subculture, and class. Yet first they ask us, as readers, to journey through their worlds and experience the self-silencing and emotional trauma that female and male victims face in a sexually violent landscape.

“We Are Taught Fear, We Girls”: Female Bystander Novels Confronting Rape Myths

Three recent bystander novels—Cammie McGovern’s *A Step toward Falling*, Kristin Halbrook’s *Every Last Promise*, and Aaron Hartzler’s *What We Saw*, all published in 2015—inhabit the minds of young women confronting the sexual assault of a female peer. Each novel provides sophisticated political critique of high school sports and players’ sense of sexual entitlement. Most also vividly demonstrate rape culture’s psychological impact on young women; the female characters’ fear of being assaulted leads them to self-police “appropriate” behavior and dress and to *dis-identify* with female victims. While girl-centric bystander novels paint a toxic picture of victim-blaming rape culture, they also suggest young women’s power to manifest positive change. McGovern, Halbrook, and Hartzler portray characters who find meaning in social alliances with other young women and who take the difficult step of reporting sexual assault to create a more equitable culture for girls everywhere.

A Step toward Falling presents a negative example of bystander education, chronicling the consequences of a young woman’s failure to act. Emily, a high school student, witnessed the attempted rape of a classmate named Belinda at a football game but did very little to stop it, in part because she incorrectly assumed another individual had reported it (in fact, Belinda’s screaming saved her). Emily expresses her contrition both through personal interactions with Belinda, a girl with an intellectual disability, and through her school-mandated community service work. The two girls also alternate narration, a literary technique that allows us access to Belinda’s recollections as a victim and brings the costs of Emily’s inaction home to readers.

Emily is introduced as a bright, compassionate student who co-founded the Youth Action Coalition, a social justice group that sponsors an antiviolence ribbon campaign each year. However, she failed to live up to her own principles at a school football game, where she witnessed an expelled male student pushing a girl she recognized against a wall. “*Wait, I kept thinking. Wait a minute,*” Emily recalls. “I should have screamed *anything* to make it clear this didn’t seem right . . . I didn’t do that, though. I was struck mute in that instant.” Emily’s choices illustrate the bystander redundancy principle, for she justifies her nonintervention by assuming another person is managing the situation. “I know that at some point, a football player ran out from the locker room, which must have jolted me momentarily out of my panic,” she narrates. “Maybe I thought, *It’s okay to leave because he’s here now and he will take care of this*” (p. 20).

Wracked with guilt about her inaction, Emily generates alternative endings in her head. “I could have screamed NO! I could have rushed out to the crowd fifty feet away and yelled at the top of my lungs about what was happening. If I’d done any of those things, I would have changed the story,” she despairs (p. 33). She does not attempt to fight the school’s disciplinary

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sanctions, which include volunteering in a healthy relationships classroom, that serves people with disabilities. Drawn to the individual students, Emily helps them learn about sexual consent, personal space, and positive romantic interactions.

Through the community service plotline and through Belinda's story, McGovern emphasizes the unique vulnerabilities experienced by special needs

adolescents, who are frequently subject to predatory behaviors. In fact, sexual predation is evident in McGovern's classroom story. The special needs teacher tells Emily that many past volunteers attended for inappropriate reasons, and one male volunteer in Emily's class is clearly "cruising" the class for sexual partners. Unfortunately, assaults like the one perpetrated against

Belinda are far from rare. The United States Bureau of Justice's most recent report on crimes against persons with disabilities indicates that "rates of serious violent victimization—rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault—were more than three times higher for persons with disabilities" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013).

The trusting Belinda was first victimized by the football team's physical and verbal abuse and subsequently by an opportunist's sexual predation. Like many other YA novels about sexual assault, *A Step toward Falling* critiques how, in Emily's own words, "football players have too much power at our school" (p. 16). When Belinda shows up outside the locker room with homemade gifts for a team member who had sarcastically "flirted" with her, she becomes a sexualized flashpoint for the boys' anger about their losing season. A player confides to Emily that Belinda's game-night presence symbolically transformed into "our whole problem this year . . . they said it was her fault we were losing." He adds that the players "made all these threats about what they were going to do to her when they got out there. They were going to rip her a new one for bothering Ron in the middle of a game. They were going to show a few people *what*

happens when you ask too much of football players" (p. 228, emphasis added). Belinda recounts her own dehumanization, remembering being shoved, yelled at, and kicked. "Someone stepped on my hair which hurt more than the kicking did," she recalls. "Someone said 'What the fuck is this?' I didn't know if he was talking about me. After that, I don't remember much" (p. 223).

It's important to remember that Belinda's perpetrator is *not* a member of the football team; he is in fact an expelled student who silently watched the attack and pretended to "help" Belinda before his unsuccessful rape attempt. Nevertheless, McGovern has written the dynamics of the mob scene in particularly resonant ways. The boys' use of sexualized and contemptuous language serves as male bonding and brings to mind Peggy Sanday's work (2007) on group sexual assault, whereby a "wounded girl who is unable to protest" often becomes an object upon whom "boys both test and demonstrate their power and heterosexual desire by performing for one another" (p. 7). The predation of football players upon a mentally disabled girl will also recall, for many adult readers, the previously mentioned 1989 national-headline-making case at Glen Ridge, New Jersey. The conviction of several standout athletes who brutally raped and sodomized a mentally challenged girl who believed she was going on a "date" exposed a suburban town that prioritized male athletic achievement above all else, including basic compassion for a brutalized young girl.⁹

McGovern's novel consistently emphasizes reader empathy by providing us with Belinda's narration. Her feelings of shame and guilt and her ongoing bouts of post-traumatic stress all make clear for readers the imperative to intervene before assaults occur. Emily, who has advocated for the rights of those with disabilities in the abstract, must also make personal amends to Belinda.¹⁰ Directly apologizing for her failure, Emily also decides to work with Belinda to create a school theatre production. The girls' partnership makes the point that adolescents can work across social hierarchies to form new empathetic connections. Emily concludes that respectful community is essential, for her own experience has taught her that "bad things happen when people don't help each other" (p. 327).

This lesson reverberates for another bystander, farm girl and Midwestern homebody Kayla, in Kris-

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tin Halbrook's 2015 novel *Every Last Promise*. The complex narrative, told half in flashback, details the aftermath of a car accident. Prior to the crash, Kayla had witnessed the gang rape of her barely conscious friend Bean by two members of the football team; when the perpetrators pursued Kayla, she wrecked her car, killing one player/rapist in the process. The sexual assault, however, was never reported, allowing the surviving athlete to continue his social dominance over the school. Holbrook's novel explores the personal and emotional costs of female bystander intervention within rape culture. Kayla misguidedly believes that staying silent about the rape is some sort of feminist act; these thoughts are rooted in her cultural knowledge of rape scripts—particularly the maelstrom of blame, anger, and reprisals confronting female victims.

Every Last Promise situates the sexual assault narrative within a larger discussion of male athletic privilege in Kayla's high school. The quarterback/rapist Jay is smiled upon by teachers and administrators alike. Jay tells a flunking teammate that "no one's going to fail you. I'll make sure of it," in full view of an adoring cafeteria worker who "piled noodles on [Jay's] plate, paused to glance up at him, then piled some more" (pp. 83–84). Jay's privileges also extend to sexual access; in Kayla's childhood memory, he asserts that "he always got what he wanted," causing her to cross her arms over her chest in protection (p. 55). In fact, the whole town acts as bystander to Jay's behavior, ignoring his past domestic abuse of a girlfriend.

Jay continues to dominate the high school ecosystem to which the "amnesiac" Kayla returns several months after the accident. It's clear to readers, though, that Kayla remembers all. Readers, in fact, become the audience to whom Kayla attempts to justify her failure to report the rape. In running interior monologue, she tells us that the victim Bean's silence justifies her own nonintervention. Not telling is "*what we've decided, right?*" she asks Bean in her head. "*To go along like nothing happened? Right? Right?*" (p. 187). At other times, she naively speculates that Bean does not even remember being raped. Her cognitive dissonance is also textually manifested in repeated self-questioning. "Is telling Bean that I remember clearly what happened that night the right thing to do?" Kayla wonders. "Or does she want to bury it,

pretend it never happened, as much as I do?" (p. 47). Careful readers discern the right moral path from the beginning. When Kayla cautiously mentions that "maybe I will remember" the night of the accident, for instance, Bean's "entire body perks up," clearly seeking her old friend's help (p. 46).

Kayla's strategy of muteness is itself morally complex. She is motivated in part, of course, by self-preservation. Katz, Heisterkamp, and Fleming's bystander research (2011) reveals that "anxiety about rejection from the group" is cited by witnesses "as the main reason for their reluctance to intervene" in many scenarios (p. 690). In addition, Kayla, a homebody who does not wish to leave town even for college, longs for the comfort of her previously established peer community. Yet she also misguidedly believes that keeping the rape quiet offers Bean a sisterhood of social protection. Holbrook demonstrates that though Kayla's reasoning might be flawed, it is rooted in her lived experience. The threat of male violence clearly shapes the behavior of the female peer group, most notably Bean's former best friend Selena, who now shuns her and dismisses all rumors about the rape. Selena shows why she keeps quiet when she hisses to Kayla that "we both know," speaking of Bean's rape and subsequent harassment, "they'd do it to us, too" (p. 249). "We are taught fear, we girls," Kayla agrees (p. 266).

As Kayla's bystander dilemma approaches crisis, she weighs her love for the community against her internal desire for social justice. In a rather unlikely ending, she reveals that she is in possession of the rapist's cell phone, which displays the attack. "*Why doesn't [Bean] ask for it? Take it. Make the choice for me,*" Kayla thinks, realizing that she must autonomously make the decision to "do the right thing" (pp. 219–220). There are indeed personal consequences when she does, including exile. Yet Kayla's resilience is evident in her reconceptualization of home as not a zip code but as ethical comfort, a place "where you can live with yourself" (p. 272).

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Every Last Promise portrays a world where girls feel too silenced and intimidated to even report sexual violence against others. Aaron Hartzler's bystander novel *What We Saw* (2015), meanwhile, shows us how rape culture's climate of fear leads some young women to disavow female victims. *What We Saw* tells the unique story of a bystander to a bystander. The protagonist, Kate, left a party before a rape occurred;

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its alleged perpetrators were her boyfriend's basketball teammates. The narrative involves both literal and cultural detection. While Kate searches for material evidence in the form of a purported "rape video," she also investigates cultural scripts about sexual consent and "appropriate" victim behavior. Ultimately, when she alone becomes physical witness to her boyfriend's complicity,

Kate must choose her course of action.

While the sport in *What We Saw* is basketball and not football, its narrative of power abuses is, by now, familiar. When four key players are arrested for sexual assault, the school quickly lauds them as "examples of fine sportsmanship" who "have rallied our community, despite a difficult economy, as members of our most winning basketball team in recent history" (p. 99). Kate finds her school's overt expressions of allegiance uncomfortable, musing that she wants "to know what [the victim] has to say" and that "not everyone has decided who's guilty or picked a side" (p. 139).

Kate's female peer group, though, has. In a revealing look at female adolescent conduct in a rape culture, her three close friends repeatedly parrot rape myths, some of which could be plucked from the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, particularly the sections "She asked for it" and "She lied." One insists that clothing signals sexual consent, affirming "this is not rocket science. It's common sense. If you don't want to work a guy into a lather, keep your cooch covered up" (p. 115). Another explains the unwritten social rules that place the onus of rape prevention squarely on women: "You don't get wasted. You don't

take off your top. You don't flirt with raging drunks. You don't dress like a slut. You have to play by the rules. If you don't, this is what happens" (p. 244). Yet another sadly accepts rape as the natural consequence, or "learning the hard way," for a girl who "drinks too much and wears a short skirt" (p. 257).

While her friends emphatically dis-identify with the victim for psychological self-preservation, Kate emotionally identifies with Stacey, the prototypical wrong-side-of-the-tracks victim (here signified by too much eyeliner and a trailer park address). She reminds her friends of the childhood bond they shared with Stacey before the socioeconomic stratifications of adolescence separated them. Kate also stresses her own situational similarity to Stacey on the night in question, asking her boyfriend Ben, "I was just as wasted as she was. Why do I get driven home and kept safe but not her? Why not just leave me to Dooney and Deacon and the boys in the basement?" (p. 184, emphasis added).

In rejecting the rules of female self-policing, Kate embraces another set of lessons about consent, self-determination, and integrity. They are offered as impromptu classroom pedagogy after a geology student sarcastically refuses to attend a field trip on the grounds that a "wasted" girl might falsely accuse him of rape (p. 280). Kate's teacher addresses the relationship between intoxication and consent and enjoins the class to create a chalkboard list of interventions for a "wasted" friend; their examples include "*Find her friends. Call her parents. Get her a pillow. Some Advil. Make sure she has a safe place to sleep. Don't let her drive*" (pp. 282–283, italics in original). The teacher further challenges a male student's assertion that male sexual response is uncontrollable. When "you say that you 'can't help yourself' if a girl is wasted," argues the teacher, "you're saying that our natural state as men is 'rapist.' That's not okay with me, Reggie. That's not okay with the rest of this class, either" (p. 283). Mapping bystander education onto the classroom setting, Hartzler demonstrates how such conversations can evolve organically from students' concerns and how teachers can thoughtfully teach consent and peer intervention.

The last third of *What We Saw* focuses on Kate's sleuthing for, and finally uncovering, a whispered-about "rape video." The clip narratively functions as much more than sensationalism, however; it creates

a way for Kate to act as the victim's ally. Kate frames viewing it as an act of witness, telling her brother: "We have to see what happened, so we can tell the truth about it. Stacey can barely remember. We have to help her" (p. 297). The ending footage reveals the blurry image of Kate's boyfriend on the periphery. Kate refuses the role of virtual bystander; she submits the evidence and bears significant social reprisals from her peers. Her choice, contrasted with Ben's, provides two different readings of the word *bystander*. While Ben was the classic *passive* bystander to Stacey's rape, reminiscent of the Genovese case, Kate represents the *empowered* bystander who acts pro-socially to help another girl.¹¹ If female bystander novels portray a worrisome landscape in which young women police their dress, drinking, and behavior lest they be culled from the herd, then the complex moral actions of characters like Kate, Kayla, and Emily symbolize the promise of change.

"Just Take One Step": Male Bystander Novels and the Challenge of Hyper-Masculinity

Like their fictional female counterparts, male witnesses in bystander novels also wrestle with feelings of fear and guilt as they confront social exclusion and threats of violence for their interventions. The YA bystander novels *Leverage* (Cohen, 2011) and *Swagger* (Deuker, 2013) explore the trauma of sexual violence between boys. Both critique the hyper-masculine culture of elite athletics for denigrating femininity and homosexuality; both also indict it for creating punishing expectations of invulnerability amongst the players themselves, which too often prevents victims from reaching out for help.

By discussing intra-male sexual assault, *Leverage* and *Swagger* enter a landscape that remains under-reported and under-studied. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 1.7% of the current American male population (or almost 2.0 million men) have been raped during their lifetimes.¹² Like their female counterparts, male victims are typically assaulted by those they know. Michael Scarce (1997) warns that male violence is more likely to occur in all-male settings, including athletic teams. "Whether it is a sense of macho competition, violence as a rite of passage, an expression of dominant status, or an

initiation of hazing, groups of men have traditionally inflicted pain on others at rates much higher than individuals who act independently of such peer influence," Scarce notes (p. 35). Male survivors face many of the same traumatic after-effects as do women; they may also encounter attitudes of homophobia (regardless of whether they are themselves gay). Historian Raymond M. Douglas, who was raped as a boy by a Catholic priest, writes that the American public does not even provide "a vocabulary with which to describe the events to oneself, much less to others," relying instead upon "the crudest possible stereotypes" like "Hollywood films," thus exponentially increasing trauma for male survivors (Rabin, 2016).¹³

The YA novel *Leverage* enters this unknown territory through the traumatic narratives of two boys who occupy divergent positions in the high school social hierarchy. Both the small, timid gymnast Danny and the hulking football star Kurt witness a rape and sodomy committed by three other football players. *Leverage* sagely analyzes how the two boys' bystander behavior is rooted in past experience. Both have experienced hyper-masculine violence—Danny at the hands of the football team's pranks and Kurt by years of his foster father's abuse. In the rape's aftermath, Danny chooses silence, fearful for his own safety. Kurt, meanwhile, physically disrupts the rape but is unable to further act as an ally, trapped by his learned philosophy that masculinity prohibits any discussion of pain. When the football players' victim commits suicide, both bystanders must decide whether or not to report the assault. Creatively combining Kurt's explosiveness and Danny's eloquence, the boys make the sports public their witness, securing postmortem justice for the victim and emotional relief for themselves.

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Leverage's high school landscape looks familiar; it is ruled by the football players, who are granted under-the-table cash, gifts, and steroid prescriptions. Males who do not meet a hyper-masculine standard of large body size and domineering rhetoric are terrorized. As a gymnast, Danny and his teammates are constantly assailed with sexist and homophobic

slurs like “needledicks” and “midget pussies” (p. 43). Of course, not every football player embraces the team’s ideology. Kurt, a hulking new transfer with a pronounced stutter, is quite different. Physically scarred by foster care abuse in childhood, Kurt is also psychically haunted by the rape and murder of his foster brother, Lamar, long ago. While Kurt’s teammates view their body strength as a source of pride and privilege, Kurt

understands it as armor. “All I ever needed to know [about weightlifting] was that it made you bigger and stronger,” he remarks. “And if you got big enough, you’d never suffer someone else’s temper ever again” (p. 34).

The reserved, wounded Kurt is a thoughtful literary application of masculinities scholar Paul Kivel’s “man box” (1999), an oft-used teaching tool that helps students reflect on the social expectations for men and boys. “The key to staying in the Box is control,” writes Kivel. “Boys are taught to control their bodies, control their feelings, control their relationships—to protect themselves from being vulnerable” (p. 14). Kivel emphasizes the “man box’s” emotional costs, including the loss of closeness with others; the need to self-monitor behavior, clothing, and activities to avoid being “labeled gay”; and a constant, free-floating anxiety that accompanies a culture of male peers “constantly challenging each other, putting each other down, hitting each other” (p. 13). Though he visually exemplifies the box, thanks to his athletic prowess and his invulnerable verbal facade, Kurt, as readers learn, becomes willing to step outside its borders.¹⁴

Kurt interrupts a graphic scene in which three football teammates take turns anally raping Ronnie, a freshman gymnastics recruit, and sodomizing him with a broom handle. The perpetrators use disciplinary language to reassert their masculine dominance over the victim, chanting, “See. If. You. Dis. Re. Spect. Me. Now” as they violate him (p. 167). Danny, inadvertently trapped in the supply room, is a silent bystander—not for reasons of transferred responsibility or disinterest, but because he legitimately fears he will be next. “As I’m forced to hear all of it, my nose runs and a sickness enters me like poison gas, burning out my lungs and brain,” he agonizes (p.168). Kurt, meanwhile, runs into the room kicking and punching. “I return fire. I *rock* them,” he recalls. “I heave a lifetime of damage and pain at them, teach them they can’t do this” (p. 173).

Kurt’s corporal response is unusual and a cautionary tale for some critics of bystander intervention. Chief Elk and Devereaux (2014) have disputed the model’s efficacy on the basis of transferred risk, arguing that “bystanders who ‘did what they were supposed to’ have ended up injured, incarcerated, or killed.” Many bystander intervention programs respond to this critique by asserting, as does MVP, that “numerous options” beyond physical intervention exist, including locating adult assistance or making a third-party report (Mentors in Violence Prevention, n.d.).¹⁵ Kurt’s intervention is made possible by his intimidating physique; however, as immensely helpful as he is in the moment, his inability to frame the rape outside of his own abusive history means he is of limited post-traumatic efficacy. When Ronnie later seeks to file a report, Kurt rebuffs him, thinking, “He’s got to toughen up if he’s going to survive. Brush it off. That’s how me and Lamar handled it” (p. 192). Danny, meanwhile, struggles to find a language for what he has seen, which speaks to the larger social silence surrounding male assault. Like the girls of *Every Last Promise*, he too dis-identifies with the victim out of fear for their similar subject position. “I despise that it was only luck and timing,” Danny thinks, “that kept the two of us from switching places in those awful moments” (p. 190).

Bereft and alone, Ronnie commits suicide; subsequently, Kurt and Danny must reassess their bystander decisions and work together to provide a measure

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of postmortem justice. Kurt uses his social silence strategically, allowing the perpetrators to brag about their actions and berate him, while he surreptitiously records their conversation. Danny, meanwhile, acts as Kurt's mouthpiece, entering the locker room—the zone of masculinity he has always most feared—to verbalize their story to the coaches. “*One step. Just take one step,*” he thinks to himself, “and then my mouth opens—not to scream but to fight. To protect Kurt. To be his and Ronnie's voice” (pp. 402–403). In a dramatic display, Kurt's fan-cam-equipped helmet broadcasts the locker room confrontation across the packed stadium. Thousands of spectators witness the sexist and homophobic rhetoric of rape culture; the teammates brag about how the victim “wanted it” and “loved it” and how “popping fresh meat” like Ronnie is the “best way to keep 'em in line” (pp. 369–370). Like other bystander novels, Cohen uses recording technology (the fan cam) to enact a dramatic ending. Perhaps these digital denouements represent our wish for “tangible” evidence in sexual assault cases, which will support and reinforce the bystander's actions. In real life, of course, such *deus ex machina* endings are rare.

Leverage's drama reaches resolution on the football fields, in keeping with Cohen's critique of hyper-masculine athletics, big money, and rape culture. Yet Cohen does not simply indict sports; he also establishes that football's order and discipline provide needed structure for Kurt. Furthermore, athletics offer genuine leadership opportunities, which Kurt's fellow (non-offending) team members recognize in the finale. *Leverage* uses the language of sports to speak to readers; so too does another bystander novel, Carl Deuker's *Swagger* (2013).

Deuker's sports fiction is acclaimed both for its serious themes (which include steroid abuse, anger management, and corruption) and for the fully realized athletic worlds it portrays. In *Swagger*, new transplant Jonas arrives on an established high school basketball team and befriends the quiet, stable Levi. The pair struggles against the elderly coach's staid rules of play, but they find him quickly displaced by a flashier assistant who is all too eager to provide the team with beer, soft-core porn, and test answers. Levi subsequently confesses to Jonas that Hartwell, the assistant coach, sexually assaulted him. Jonas is

supportive but also pragmatic about his own future, in which a scholarship hangs on the line. “Once the title game is over, then we'll get help—you and me,” he tells Levi. “We'll go to the principal or a counselor or whoever you want. It'll be your choice, but I'll be with you every step of the way. I promise. Okay?” (p. 237).

However, in a textual move similar to the fate of Ronnie in *Leverage*, the victimized Levi kills himself. “All that time, I asked myself the same question,” Jonas thinks in the aftermath. “*What should I have done differently?*” (p. 268). Sacrificing a scholarship that he achieved with the facilitated cheating of the abusive coach, Jonas discloses the assault to the authorities. Interestingly, Jonas frames his decisions in courtside language. In arguing that he “couldn't let Hartwell take basketball from me too,” he separates the skill and power of sports, as well as the genuine pleasure it provides young athletes, from the culture of corruption and abuse in which it is often mired (p. 296). Determined to “work hard both on the basketball court and in the classroom” and “scratch my way into college somewhere,” Jonas also symbolically pledges to carry his fallen teammate (p. 296). “I'm going to do all these things for myself, and I'm going to do them for Levi, too,” he declares. “I owe him” (p. 297).

Without resorting to excessive gender stereotyping, it seems fair to say that boy-centric sports fiction is generally marketed to adolescent male readers. Sullivan (2009) reminds us that such novels often go unrecognized for literary merit and are frequently dismissed by adults as “so external, so physical, and not inward or reflective” (p. 65). Yet both *Leverage* and *Swagger* create narrative worlds with satisfying physical rhythms and meaningful moral dilemmas for readers. Amidst Deuker's immersive chapters of breaks, drills, and fouls, careful readers may note—even before Jonas does—how Hartwell's aggressive court style and isolation of players prefigure his sexual predations. Furthermore, both novels utilize the drama, interpersonal conflicts, and powerful potential of team sports to tell stories about the development of male leadership without violence or exploitation. In so doing, they reaffirm what intervention programs, including MVP and Green Dot, have long claimed—male athletes can be empowered bystanders, rejecting sexism, homophobia, and cultures of silence.

“Good Guys Aren’t Rapists”: When Readers Are Bystanders

What happens, though, when young adult authors tackle the perspective of the *offender*? Chris Lynch’s acclaimed novel *Inexcusable* (2005), recently repackaged in a tenth-anniversary edition, undertakes this challenge. The narrative unfolds from the perspective of high school football player Keir, who is accused of raping Gigi, a friend. While *Inexcusable* is not a

Keir’s obstinate, repetitive discourse, coupled with his abdication of moral responsibility, show the extent to which he expects others to set boundaries for him.

bystander novel by any traditional interpretation, I include it here due to the reading audience’s implication in Keir’s story. Bystanding readers of *Inexcusable* are powerless to stop the explosive chain of events leading to Gigi’s rape, but through careful textual attention, they can read “around” Keir; that is, they can discern textual gaps in Keir’s presentation that point to alternate ver-

sions of events. *Inexcusable* is thus both compelling narrative and also, through the power of close reading, moral exercise.

Keir’s narration also serves as his bid for audience exoneration. Much of the novel is dedicated to his attempts to avoid the label of “rapist.” He calls up his family for self-defense, offering his “two brainy, insightful older sisters, Mary and Fran” as witnesses who “love me to pieces and respect me” and “would not do that if I were capable of being monstrous” (p. 4). His widower father is similarly reeled in for support: “You had to be a good guy if you were Ray Sarafian’s kid. You couldn’t possibly be anything less” (p. 10). According to Keir, family bonds prove his excellence; so too does football, which he interprets as a set of absolutes. When his tackle paralyzes another football player, for instance, Keir evades any discussion of the harm he has caused, emphasizing only his lack of “official” culpability. “I did what I did, what I always did, what I still always do,” he insists. “I followed things to the letter of the law” (p. 16). When Keir’s sisters suggest he may feel a complex range of emotions about the incident, he demurs, saying he

was “waiting to find out if I was responsible for what happened . . . and I found out, and I’m not” (p. 29). He even admits feeling “just so happy that it was decided *officially that I wasn’t bad*” (p. 32, emphasis added). Keir’s obstinate, repetitive discourse, coupled with his abdication of moral responsibility, show the extent to which he expects others to set boundaries for him.

Tarr (1997) has discussed ways in which members of the young adult audience, as “active participants in the reading process,” are able to “flesh out the skeleton” of underdeveloped characters (p. 61). Such a reading process occurs in *Inexcusable*, where Keir’s narration trails off, ends obliquely, or otherwise stifles important content. The introduction, for instance, is rife with his exclamations of regret for something. “I sure as hell feel sorry. I am sorry. I am one sorry sorry bastard. And I feel very sick. I am so sorry,” he tells us. Yet he is unable to answer the female speaker’s challenging question, “What are you sorry for, Keir?” (p. 1). Readers must fill in the gaps.

Similar interpretive work occurs at junctures where Keir sees, but is unwilling to fully examine, his own moral choices. Midway through the novel, he recounts a senior prank in which he and the football team destroy a pair of old statues. The following day, he returns to the scene of vandalism and recalls being “mortified, trying to pull together the two planets, the one where we were just guys, just having fun saying good-bye to ourselves” and “this putrid stinking planet here where everything was nothing because some animals [in reality, Keir and his friends] brought everything down to nothing” (p. 47). A similar moment occurs when he recollects once forcing soccer players to drink at a party, but he quickly displaces the act onto a phantom other. Readers thus grow to recognize Keir as an unreliable narrator; furthermore, they identify the reversed pattern of his thinking by which he disassociates himself from personal responsibility and blames others for his actions.

Such textual fissures also give insight to readers pondering Keir’s criminal culpability. The rape scene is portrayed in flashback, with arguments between Keir and Gigi punctuating the main narrative. Using his characteristic rhetoric, Keir violates Gigi’s space, body, and autonomy while denying his own responsibility. However, his victim’s adamant insistence on her non-consent ultimately denies Keir the ability to

articulate the assault on his terms; Lynch dramatizes this process through play on the words “know” and “no.”

Having utilized his football privilege to obtain a key to a cottage, Keir lures his childhood friend into it on false pretenses, assaulting her as she sleeps. His narration displays his typical entitlement when he misperceives Gigi’s moan in her sleep “as the same lonely sound my own heart was making” (p. 160). After this supposedly mutual and magical event, Gigi struggles and even tries to escape out the window. Physically restraining Gigi, Keir reinterprets the action as one of care, noting, “I have her wrapped up snugly, her arms pinned to her sides, my nose right in her ear, smelling her skin, her hair” (p. 85, emphasis added). Yet Gigi’s greatest weapon proves to be her voice, which clearly and consistently uses the words *rape* and *rapist*—words to which Keir reacts with hysterical aversion.

After unsuccessfully attempting to evade responsibility by blaming Gigi’s boyfriend, Keir then rewrites the assault as consensual, saying, “Okay there was sex, we had sex, all right?” (p. 139). He insists he could never perpetrate a rape, saying “especially not to you. You *know* that. You *knew* that. Just *know* it again. Please. Please? *Know* me again” (p. 140, emphasis added). Gigi challenges what Keir *knows* with her *no*. “I said *no*,” she responds, rebutting again, “I said *no*” and “I said *no*. *That* is what matters” (p. 140). Keir’s *known*—that is, his self-construction as a prototypical “good guy”—is undone by Gigi’s *no*. Her final verbal rejection, “good guys aren’t rapists,” destroys his spirit; Keir’s dawning sense of guilt points to an ethical resolution, and possible incarceration, as he faces a “cinder-block wall” and waits “for whoever is going to come for me” (pp. 163–165).

Lynch has created a powerful portrait of one offender’s psychology. Readers can continue their journey with Keir in Chris Lynch’s newly published sequel, *Irreversible* (2016), which depicts the legal and emotional fallout of Keir’s actions. Interestingly, Lewis and Durand (2014), who critique the overall portrayal of sexuality in YA as punitive, warn that the novel “invites young readers to consider that even they could be sexual monsters who may not yet be aware of the fact” and “could be used as a metaphor for fear” (p. 47).¹⁶ While this would indeed be problematic, overall I do not read *Inexcusable* as a disciplining text. Author

Chris Lynch has written that “Keir is allowed to see himself as a loveable rogue rather than a genuine threat to society. And, I fear this is not an uncommon situation” (Henneman, 2005). Particularly in his play on *know/no*, Lynch makes clear how Keir is a product of his society and how sexual violence is a devastating consequence borne of cultures that encourage some men to believe themselves entitled to women’s bodies and wills.

Conclusion

“What *am* I responsible for, really?” wonders *Every Last Promise*’s Kayla, neatly encapsulating the bystander’s dilemma (p.

126). Since the days of Kitty Genovese’s murder, bystanders have struggled with this very question. The internal monologue of self-questioning running through most YA bystander novels enables young audiences to make connections to their own lives and identify what *they* would do if confronted by similar scenarios. Furthermore, bystander novels offer a range of applied intervention models. The characters’ varied responses—Kurt’s physical brawl, Kate’s sleuthing for evidence, and Danny and Jonas’s third-party reports, for instance—provide models of the many different social and legal choices adolescents can make upon learning of peer sexual violence.

Bystander fiction is an important resource for educators and concerned adults seeking to engage adolescents in discussions about sexual assault, and the genre seems poised only to grow. On a practical level, these literary worlds can supplement the formal bystander education training that continues to permeate college and high school curricula. “Not being able to say no isn’t the same as saying yes,” *What We Saw*’s Kate points out, in a novel that could easily complement classroom discussions of alcohol

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and sexual consent (p. 297). Similarly, when Keir's football teammates congratulate his tackle with "Way to bang him," and "Mowed him," *Inexcusable* opens a dialogue about the sexualization of athletic violence and its relationship to off-field behavior (p. 19). Most important, the bystander genre directly empowers young people to change their societies. The characters believe victims, reject peer arguments that clothing and drinking invalidate consent, critique the attitude of sexual entitlement surrounding elite athletics, and report, or otherwise stop, rapists.

Swagger's Carl has referred to his books as windows for young readers "to peek ahead in their lives and perhaps be a little prepared for what might be coming" (McMahon, 1998, p. 60). Unfortunately, most adolescents will encounter sexual violence in their future, whether first hand or via the experiences of someone close to them. Furthermore, as American culture increasingly adapts the "it's on us" model of communal response to sexual violence, teenagers will be expected to display intervention skills. Bystander novels respond to our times, providing moral education, applied suggestions for intervention, and analysis of how rape culture continues to police men's and women's social roles. These sensitive accounts affirm that adolescents' decisions to intervene can contribute to a more equitable world. As *Every Last Promise's* Kayla concludes, "I choose to own my actions" to bring about "the promise that I will be able to love and live without fear one day" (p. 266).

Endnotes

1. See also Lizzie Skurnick's *Shelf-Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stopped Reading* (2009) for insightful essays about Peck's and Scoppettone's novels.
2. Teen Librarian Toolbox (Jensen, 2015) developed #SVYA lit over the course of 2015; this site includes author videos, YA book lists and reviews, academic articles on sexual violence, a Tumblr, and much more. Victor Malo-Juvera's research (2012) examined the use of *Speak* in a five-week instructional unit in a middle school. His findings after administering pre- and post-reading assessments include an overall reduction of rape myths among participating students.
3. Bystander education displaced risk-reduction theory, which taught "women strategies for reducing the likelihood of being victimized" but was generally considered ineffective in the long term (Coker et al., 2011, p. 778). Furthermore, risk-reduction models often failed to engage men as allies and rarely addressed the issue of male sexual victimization.
4. See also Harding (2015) for an updated discussion of the dominant discourses of rape culture.
5. Positive findings seem to correlate in particular with in-depth training (as opposed to short sessions) and to at least some same-gender discussion space. See also Coker et al. (2011) and NotAlone's "Bystander-Focused Prevention of Sexual Violence" (2014) for more on evaluation of the approach's effectiveness. Interest in bystander intervention has also increased since the Department of Education's 2011 "Dear Colleague" letter to colleges and universities, which demanded improved processes and services to handle sexual assault complaints. See Winerip (2014) for more on the impact of the letter.
6. Some of the novels also demonstrate the emotional and physical costs to players themselves within a bruising hyper-masculine culture. See *Leverage* (Cohen, 2011), *Swagger* (Deuker, 2013), and *A Step toward Falling* (McGovern, 2015).
7. See Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald (1995), as well as Davis and Parker (1998).
8. In *The Macho Paradox* (2006), Jackson Katz discusses how MVP, his well-known bystander program, was founded on the premise that attracting "high-status high school and college male student athletes" to serve as allies, publicly decrying "rape, battering, teen-relationship violence and sexual harassment," can "make it more socially acceptable for less popular men to speak out" (p. 124).
9. The classic account of this case remains Bernard Lefkowitz's *Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb* (1997).
10. For instance, when Emily realizes that Belinda has been kept, illegally, from after-school activity participation, she contacts legal aid and is able to restore access for special education students. The novel contains an ongoing discussion between characters of the "best way to help." While Emily is well meaning, she is critiqued both for the overly general nature of the "Youth Action Committee" and for her tendency to get swept away in large gestures (for instance, she momentarily believes she can find ways to employ all individuals with disabilities).
11. See also Katz, Heisterkamp, and Fleming (2011) for more on the double meaning of the word *bystander*.
12. See the federal government publication "National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey" (2014) for more on men's experiences.
13. See also Andrews (2003) for an important and moving first-person account of a boy's sexual assault.
14. Kurt's inarticulate nature stems from shame about his stutter. "I hate the sound of my voice, hate hearing my tongue botch everything," he reflects at one point. "I sound stupid" (p. 300).
15. In fact, Danny does accomplish this in a partial re-staging of this scene. When the three offenders menace and beat Kurt in an empty gym, Danny refuses to abandon him. "We've got to help him," he tells a reluctant classmate

(p. 366). Danny is able to appeal to an intervening adult in the after-school melee.

16. See also Trites's *Disturbing the Universe* (2000) on the disciplining of adolescent sexuality in YA.

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