

BEYOND THE “PROBLEM NOVEL”

A new wave of titles address the topic of bullying from a variety of angles

Now in its ninth year, National Bullying Awareness Month in October continues to draw attention from parents, educators, and the media, and, as a result, from publishers as well. The run-up to this year's antibullying campaign saw a number of book releases, including some that are fairly high profile.

In August, Knopf Books for Young Readers published 365 *Days of Wonder: Mr. Browne's Book of Precepts* by R.J. Palacio—a companion volume to her 2012 middle-grade novel, *Wonder*—which compiles quotes, song lyrics, and other words meant to encourage kindness. It debuted at #12 on *PW's* Children's Fiction list and has, to date, sold more than 35K copies, according to outlets tracked by Nielsen BookScan. *Wonder* has sold more than one million copies in hardcover, according to the publisher, and is scheduled to be released in paperback in January 2016.

Canadian poet Shane Koyczan's 2013 spoken-word performance of “To This Day,” an antibullying anthem, has garnered more than 14 million views on YouTube. In September, Annick Press published *To This Day: For the Bullied and Beautiful* (Sept.), illustrated by 30 artists from around the world. And on October 1, Penguin Young Readers Group kicked off the 50 States Against Bullying campaign, its largest author tour to date. Jay Asher, author of *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Razorbill, 2007), will visit at least one school in every state over the course of the academic year to discuss the consequences of bullying. His novel, which addresses teenage bullying and suicide, has more than 2.1 million copies in print in the U.S., according to the publisher.

When a publisher can mount a massive author tour for a seven-year-old book, clearly its subject has staying power. “There is a lot of smart research going on about bullying—a lot of solid advice is available, and a lot of good people are working to confront the problem,” says Andrew Berzanskis, an acquisitions editor at Lynne Rienner, who acquired *Confronting School Bullying: Kids, Culture, and the Making of a Social Problem* by Jeffrey Cohen and Robert Brooks (Nov.), a scholarly title for adults. But, Berzanskis adds, “We can't talk about solving the problem of bullying without also wrestling with [other]

issues”—everything from racism, sexism, and homophobia to the media and technology.

Elizabeth Beazizo, a teacher-librarian in Salem, Ore., agrees that addressing these subjects will help get at the some of the root causes of bullying. She says that over the course of her 15 years in the Salem-Keizer School District, she's seen a change in that direction among the books her students have been reading. “I think it's gone beyond the pedantic scenarios of the ‘problem novels’ and series we read in the ‘80s and ‘90s, where the plot of the book revolves around a character being bullied, to a more organic story where the characters are more fully fleshed out and dealing with their lives and choices,” she says. “We are also closer to having differences that have been targets for bullying, like being gay or of a particular ethnic group, become more a part of our social background.”

Identity Issues

Many children's book editors acknowledge that they don't set out to acquire books specifically about bullying. But, says Christian Trimmer, a senior editor at Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, the issue often surfaces naturally in the stories they acquire, many of which involve characters who are questioning their identities in some way.

As YA novels featuring gay and lesbian characters have become more mainstream in recent years, books with transgender characters, many of whom suffer painful consequences when they come out, are beginning to emerge. Trimmer attributes this shift to the public's growing awareness of the issue. “Much like gay and lesbian teen fiction from years past, the current selection of transgender books regularly details the anguish, fear, bullying, and/or violence associated with the coming-out process,” he says. “There's a lot of misunderstanding, confusion, and ignorance about what it means to be transgender. Reading books like [these] could [lead to a] deeper understanding of and heightened compassion for transgender people.” In September, S&S published *Rethinking Normal* by Katie Rain Hill and *Some Assembly Required* by Arin Andrews, companion memoirs describing the authors' struggles with transitioning during high school.

Double Exposure by Bridget Birdsall (Sky Pony, Oct.), another addition to the growing library of gender-identity books, was inspired by its author's lifelong struggles with social

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gender expectations. The novel centers on a 15-year-old, born with ambiguous genitalia, who was raised as a boy and mercilessly abused by his peers. After enduring a particularly vicious attack, he moves to Wisconsin with his mother and lives as a girl, with mixed results.

“My sense is that young readers have always been interested in books about characters who struggle with not fitting in,” notes Stephanie Lurie, associate publisher at Disney-Hyperion. “The difference now, perhaps, is that more adults are willing to discuss gender-identity issues.” Disney-Hyperion will publish first-time author Ami Polonsky's *Gracefully Grayson*, a novel about a 12-year-old who feels out of place in his body and is teased both at school and at home, in November.

Alternate Perspectives

Newly published titles like *Unfriended* by Rachel Vail (Viking, Sept.), *Where I Belong* by Mary Downing Hahn (Clarion, Sept.), *My Cousin's Keeper* (Candlewick, Sept.), and Scott Starkey's *How to Beat the Bully* series (S&S/Wiseman) focus on the daily traumas of kids who are bullied. Other books allow readers to step into the minds of witnesses to bullying and of those doing the taunting.

K.A. Holt's *Rhyme Schemer* (Chronicle, Oct.) tracks seventh-grader Kevin Jamison's shift from bully to bullied, which happens when his primary victim finds Jamison's journal and uses its contents against him. The novel in verse consists of a series of poems, some of which are “found” or appear to be pages ripped from books and overlaid with crossed-out words and doodles.

Backlash by Sarah Darer Littman (Scholastic, Mar. 2015) features a 15-year-old who tries to commit suicide after her crush humiliates her on Facebook. Told from different perspectives, including that of the ex-best friend, who plays a role in the harassment, the novel shows that situations are more nuanced than they may at first seem, and that bullies, too, have insecurities and regrets.

In *You Can't Sit with Us* (Thomas Nelson, Dec.), the second installment of Nancy Rue's *Mean Girl Makeover* trilogy, sixth-grader Ginger Hollingberry uses scripture to combat cyberbullying. The two other books in the series—*So Not Okay* (2013) and the forthcoming *Sorry I'm Not Sorry* (2015)—are told from the standpoints of the bystander and the bully. And the picture book *Red*, from Belgian artist Jan De Kinder (Eerdmans, Mar. 2015), shows what happens when a shy girl stands up for a blushing boy against a mean classmate on the playground.

Some educators say they are looking for more solution-oriented books, or for those that feature stories of teens and adults who have overcome intimidation and maltreatment to accomplish their goals. “I would like to see more titles about kids getting help dealing with the problem,” Beazizo says, “instead of assuming that they are victims.”

In the coming months, a number of books fit that bill. In the memoir *Taking Flight* (Knopf, Oct.), 18-year-old Michaela DePrince shares her experiences of being picked on as a child because of a pigment disorder. Coauthored with her adoptive mother, Elaine, the book chronicles her struggles to look beyond racism and ridicule in her journey from an orphanage in war-torn Sierra Leone to her adopted home in America, and from dancing for the Dutch National Ballet to becoming one of the *Daily Beast's* “125 Women of Impact” in 2013.

Emmanuel's Dream by Laurie Anne Thompson, illus. by Sean Qualls (Random/

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ANDREW BERZANSKIS, ACQUISITIONS EDITOR, LYNNE RIENNER