Voices From the Wreckage

Young Adult Voices in the #MeToo Movement

Edited by

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For Alexandria Blue,
My Riot Grrrl and my inspiration

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Lastly, thank you to Vernon Press, who has been immensely supportive of this project, always answering my endless questions. And most of all, thank you to the writers of these chapters to for your masterful ideas. You all rock!

Introduction: A Record of the Wreckage

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This collection of essays was inspired by the writing of Laurie Halse Anderson, and her groundbreaking work to bring young adult voices into the context of the #MeToo movement. Her book *Speak*, published in 1999, was one of the first Young Adult books to directly detail a high school girl's experience with rape. Twenty years later, Anderson's newest book *Shout*, written in verse, does what the title implies: the book shouts her experience in a much more blunt, graphic, and painfully honest way. Where *Speak* carefully uttered the main character's rape experience, it did so in a metaphoric, symbolic way. Early books on sexual assault were shrouded in metaphor; books skirted around the topic, but only those readers who had been through the trauma themselves could recognize and empathize with the narrative. *Shout* is one of the first mainstream Young Adult (YA) book to make it clear to every audience, survivors or not, that sexual assault is a necessary topic to discuss with a young adult audience. Anderson not only details her experience to reflect the pain of it, but further, she challenges the audience not just to listen, but to believe the story. *Shout* assures young women that they can tell their stories, and that they will be heard. This is a pivotal moment not only in Young Adult literature, but to the #MeToo movement as a whole.

This collection is not focused solely on Laurie Halse Anderson; however, given the context of her topics, these chapters arise from her pioneering the discussion about sexual identities and assault. Anderson set the parameters for other authors to deal with these topics for a young adult audience.

Speak as a Groundbreaking Text

At the time of its release, there were not any books like *Speak*. The book was published to critical acclaim, including being a National Book Award Finalist award and winning the Michael L. Printz award, and the book has been widely taught in high schools. *Speak* is very subtle in the way that it reveals to readers, at least three quarters of the way through the book that Melinda, the main character, was raped by a football player at an end of the school year party. The assault is presented in a very metaphorical, poetic way, so that readers may

even read over what happened to her. This subtlety, however, allowed teachers to bring the book into the classroom to have less confrontational discussions about sexual assault, and stereotypes related to rapists and those who have been assaulted. *Speak* existed well before any iteration of the Me Too movement, which is why is has been such a lauded text for so many years.

Twenty years later, Anderson published *Shout*, a novel in verse, as a louder follow-up to *Speak*, inspired by the voices of the #MeToo movement. The book is written in poetic form, and it is much more graphically detailed about the author's own experience with rape. Anderson writes,

> I was raped when I was 13 and it took me exactly 23 years. The person I told first was my therapist. ... I was kind of a mess and I recognized that I was not being a great mom to my children. It's funny how it's easier sometimes to get help in order so you can help somebody else. It took a couple of months of conversations with my therapist before I felt safe and secure enough with that relationship, and then my life changed the day I opened up and started to speak about what happened. (NPR.org, 2019)

With the release of *Shout,* Anderson was jettisoned into the spotlight as a spokesperson for young adults in the #MeToo movement, which she was not necessarily prepared for. In the twenty years previous, Anderson had alluded to the fact that *Speak* may have been based on personal experience, but she wanted readers to make the book more personal to their own experiences. She was speaking, but she wanted the readers to know that she could speak louder—she felt a responsibility to her audience. She intended for *Shout* to be more personal, more graphic, and more confrontational because it is deeply autobiographical. Anderson described *Speak* as 10% her experience, whereas *Shout* is 100%. In one interview she says, "Listening to students' questions made me realize that I had a responsibility to talk about my experience, and to model survivorship" (NPR.org, 2019). This notion of modeling survivorship is what amplified her own voice to speak up about the power of being heard through storytelling. She writes:

> [Survivors] don't have access to the words. ... That's why we turn to stories — to look for models of how to do things. And I didn't have a model of what it looked like to talk about ... what at the time felt so shameful and so hidden. ... It was easier to be silent. The thought of opening up to somebody about that was more terrifying than staying silent. (NPR.org, 2019)

The publication of *Speak* allowed other YA writers to broach sexual assault as an acceptable topic for a teen audience; many of those titles are explored in this collection. To borrow a term from Alison Tracy Hale, one of the authors in this book, these titles are the "literary offspring" of what Laurie Halse Anderson began. Anderson gives other writers, many of whom are featured in this collection, the courage to explore these topics.

History of the Topic of Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature

Historically, the topic of sexual assault was taboo in Young Adult literature, which is surprising because teens are the group who are at most risk for being sexually assaulted. Rainn, The Rape Abuse Incest National Network website reports that:

- 1 in 9 girls and 1 in 53 boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult.
- 82% of all victims under 18 are female.
- Females ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault. (Rainn.org, 2021)

These statistics show that teens who are assaulted are vulnerable to dealing with future issues such as drug abuse, depression, and many who have experienced sexual assault at a young age experience years of PTSD, which often goes undiagnosed. Rainn reports that only 310 of every 1000 sexual assaults are actually reported to the police. In addition to not getting justice for the acts committed against them, young people have the added pressures of social media bullying, bullying in school, and these pressures add to the sense of not being believed if one does come forward (Rainn.org, 2021).

Of course, any discussion of sexuality in a book directed toward teens has always been considered controversial. The American Library Association reported that 92% of books on the "Most Banned and Challenged" booklist published in 2020 contained sexual content. According to ALA.org, "The sexually explicit category contains books that were banned due to committees or schools deeming the books to sexual for students. Some books were banned because of rape or other types of sexual misconduct while others were banned just because of the existence of sex related material" (ALA.org, 2013). Granted, this percentage does not mean that all of the books mentioned contain sexual assault. The "sexually explicit" category also refers to any content related to LGBTQ+ issues, such as coming out and/or coming into one's sexual identity. However, in the Top 10 list published each year that reflects to highest numbers of complaints by parents, *Speak* is still number four on the list "because it was

thought to contain a political viewpoint and it was claimed to be biased against male students, and for the novel's inclusion of rape and profanity" (Ala.org), and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is number nine on the list "because it was considered sexually explicit and depicts child sexual abuse" (Ala.org). Any mention of sexual acts (including kissing) or books that feature LGBTQ+ characters are still considered to be the most "dangerous" books for young adult readers. These booklists reveal the reticence to discuss sexual assault even in a theoretical, fictional setting.

Young adult fiction sets up a safe space for teens to realize that they're not alone. The whole notion of banning book for young adult readers is ironic: the books that create the safe space for young readers are often the ones that are deemed dangerous; therefore, these books are often kept out of classroom discussions by parents who are fearful of sexualized topics. So how do educators get readers to the safe space to discuss sensitive feelings if parents have that reactionary need to ban books? By banning these books, especially books related to LGBTQ+ characters, adults are actually silencing young adults who need that connection to tell their stories. If we ban texts, then how do we attempt to help young people tell their stories—how do we improve the soaring statistics of sexual assault crimes against teens? Young adult literature is an important connection between the young reader and adults and educators who can provide avenues toward healing and getting help. Fiction serves as a middle ground between not telling one's story, and saying something when one is ready; stories give the reader the sense of not being alone.

The Me Too Movement's Influence on YA Literature

The power of telling one's sexual assault story became the hallmark of the #MeToo movement. When actress Alyssa Milano Tweeted the hashtag #MeToo in 2017, thousands of men and women echoed the hashtag on every social media platform. This sudden rush of confessions and stories worried some parents, especially for teens who participated in the online #MeToo movement. Jaclyn Friedman author of *Yes Means Yes! Visions of a Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape* writes, "You don't owe anyone your story….Not sharing doesn't mean it didn't happen to you or it is less valid, or you are not part of standing up against violence" (WRAL.com, 2017). Using the MeToo hashtag on social media was a great release of anger and hurt for some users of the platforms, but it was also very public and posts were vulnerable to immediate public scrutiny.

Even in the context of the #MeToo movement and with authors like Laurie Halse Anderson speaking up and encouraging others to tell their own stories, some parents worry that, especially since it is presented as a well-used hashtag on social media, that young adults will be re-traumatized by seeing others

finding freedom in sharing their stories, if they still cannot. Sandee LaMotte, author of the article "For Some, #MeToo Sexual Assault Stories Trigger Trauma Not Empowerment", quoted one teen as saying, "I don't want my Facebook acquaintances to know my most personal experiences, and I don't want to see their stupid sad emoji reactions" (Cnn.com, 2017). This concern is valid, especially related to young people. When telling their personal assault stories on a social media post, anyone could react to and comment on it. As users of social media are all too well aware of, those responses could be from strangers who have no interest in the young adult's emotional well-being. The MeToo hashtag became so widely used, that Tarana Burke, who started the MeToo hashtag on MySpace over a decade ago, said in one interview:

> What we're trying to do is counter that narrative and say, "You don't have to tell your story publicly. You don't have to tell anybody what happened to you." You have to get it out — but it doesn't have to be at a poetry reading. It doesn't have to be on social media at all. It could be a trusted friend. It could be your journal. That's hard for survivors because people are always saying, "Tell your story." It's like a balancing act because I have to acknowledge that stories are important, and sometimes saying the words, "This happened to me" and "This is what he did" is cathartic to get out. I think there's enough evidence in this world of survival and recovery to show that repeating that doesn't help you, though. Reliving that doesn't help you. (NonprofitQuarterly.com, 2018)

Tarana Burke writes that "phase two" of the MeToo hashtag will include collecting stories of healing. She writes,

> We don't believe in collecting stories of people's trauma because I don't think the trauma should be curated. We believe in sharing peoples' stories of healing. When you start talking about what you've done to cope and how you have developed practices around healing, that's something that people need to see.
> I don't think there's anything wrong with the rage because it's a righteous rage. This is not people just angry to be angry. These are people who are hurt. One of the things I want to do at some point soon is to call for a healing. (WRAL.com, 2018)

Much of the healing to which Burke refers takes place in the very public forum of social media. Obviously, social media platforms can be volitile and caustic spaces, whereas a teen reading YA books is a much more intimate way to be introduced to new concepts, with room for personal, critical thinking about the content they are absorbing. There is also room for personal reflection when

reading a book—readers can put the book down and come back to it when they're ready. Social media is not so understanding.

The Use of Storytelling to Heal Trauma

Young adult books, in my mind, are the perfect media to create a safe space to tell stories of sexual assault—a compromise between social media storytelling, and not telling the story at all. Moving traumatic experiences into a fictional setting removes some of the rawness of assigning faces to young people on social media. There is no room for reaction or bullying; instead, the book becomes a personal connection between reader and character. The content is removed from being attached to any personal connection from the reader, unless he or she chooses to divulge any personal stories associated with the character. Teachers and parents can discuss the complexities of these characters, and the discussions of the book are located in the safe environment of a fictitious world.

While the MeToo movement has given many permission to tell their story, cancel culture, also a hallmark of the social media world, makes it incredibly difficult for a young person to open up about personal trauma; there is a pervasive fear in telling one's story that they will not be believed. On social media, there is also the reactive and dismissive need to "cancel" people who share stories, which can be devastating for the storyteller. Cancel culture can move young people closer to silence, rather than to speaking their truth.

Young adult books should serve as a personal conversation between the characters and the reader; the book can be a safe space for the reader to not only empathize with the characters, but to realize how their own stories intersect with the characters'. Each reader can then decide whether to enter into the process of telling his/her own story. Young adults need to understand that no one has a right to cancel a story—everyone should have a chosen platform to discuss (or not to discuss) their story. As Laurie Halse Anderson relates to young readers, not having a voice is exhausting. In her own life, she had to come to the point where she could tell her story, and of course, each person will go through their own personal path to telling his or her story, or not. Stories can be under the umbrella of survivorship instead of a fleeting post on Twitter; storytelling affirms individual identity, it makes the storyteller an authentic, personal voice, rather than a façade on social media.

The online article, "Trauma-Informed Storytelling", outlines the importance of storytelling for young people who have faced trauma. The article quotes Richard F. Mollica, author of the book *Healing Invisible Wounds*; he writes: "When violence leads to physical and mental injury, it also engenders a healing response One aspect of this is the trauma story, whose function is not only to

heal the survivor, but also to teach and guide the listener—and by extension, society—in healing and survival." In the case of YA literature, one would hope that the purpose of books that deal with sexual abuse is to heal the reader, or at least to let them know that they are not alone in their trauma and grief. The website *Trauma Informed Storytelling* stresses, "when listening to another person's story, you may catch glimpses of yourself….stories can create unity and inspire action, as when many individuals come together to find the strength to confront social problems" (nasmhpd.org, 2020, 70). The MeToo movement and the personal responses to this movement have engendered a feeling of hope for those who relate to the cause and to the stories that have evolved from speaking as a united group. Young people may not have the option to get help moving through their pain so that they can move on—they still need a guide. Stories and literature can be those guides. The hope that these stories inspire might just allow young readers to speak, and to be heard.

About This Book

This collection highlights fourteen authors who focus on how sexual assault and abuse is presented in literature to young adult audiences. First, authors Caitlin Metheny and Laura Beal explore novels that deal with using guilt as a means to coerce teens into having sex. Their chapter moves into the topic of rape and sexual assault using texts such as *What We Saw* by Aaron Hartzler, *The Music of What Happens* by Bill Konigsberg, and *Rani Patel in Full Effect* by Sonia Patel. Next, the chapter "The Unacknowledgment of Rape" by Carla Plieth sheds a much-needed light on an underrepresented voice in the MeToo movement, the young male voice. This chapter suggests that, too often, boys are seen as the aggressors of sexual violence, and she acknowledges the importance of recognizing boys' abuse by other males. Plieth posits that boys need to be part of the narrative, and be given ways to articulate that they, too, have been victims and survivors.

Focusing on the Netflix culture that has been so important during the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr. Aneta Stępień and Dr. Máire Ní Mhórdha explore young adult voices in film, with shows like *Normal People* and *Sex Education*, shows that focus specifically on adolescent sexuality. These shows do not just focus on the concepts of sexual assault; instead, many of the YA characters find their own agencies to assert their sexuality, releasing those feelings from a space of shame, to empowerment. In the following chapter, Alison Tracy Hale explores novels that followed the book *Speak*, as she notes the changes in social attitudes of rape culture, and survivorship. She stresses telling one's story, opening the door for a myriad of responses to sexual assault, and the ability to speak up about the topic.

Rachel McShane explores a very unique and underrepresented voice in young adult literature: Native American women. Specifically, McShane focuses on the ways that white culture fabricates the idea of a Native American princess, warping imagery presented in Native American dancing, an idea exploited by Disney movies. McShane discusses how these voices are shown negatively, as in Disney's *Peter Pan*, but then moves forward to show how YA writers like Cynthia Leitich Smith represent the Native voice in a more positive light. Author Zöe McLaughlin uses the *Girls of Paper and Fire Trilogy* by Natasha Ngan, a series centered in Malaysia, to discuss the trauma that young girls experience in Malaysian culture. She details how each girl chooses to accept it or to speak out against assault, thus showing that the girls have autonomy in choosing how to respond to trauma. This chapter focuses on yet another underrepresented voice, the Southeast Asian feminine voice, and in representing these voices, the authors empower them.

Also, rooted in the concepts presented in *Speak*, Cody Parish explores how animal imagery and silence work in the novel to show the progression of the main character Melinda's process of finding her voice after she is sexually assaulted. Parish shows how these symbols contribute to Melinda finding her voice. In the next chapter, Luca Sarti uses the novel *Needlework*, by Irish author Deirdre Sullivan, a book that features the main character Ces, who is being sexually abused by her father. Sarti explores how the novel uses the art of tattooing and fairy tale elements as a way for the young narrator to reclaim her body and her strength.

The next author, Tatiana Konrad, explores another very popular genre/form in current YA literature, the graphic novel. Konrad uses the graphic novels *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* by Hubert and Marie Caillou and *Honor Girl: A Graphic Memoir* by Maggie Thrash. She writes about probably the most up-and-coming voice in Young Adult literature, the LGBTQIA+ character. This chapter shows how these graphic novels subvert the "usual" stereotype of the tragic gay or lesbian character, where the only way out of their pain is more trauma; instead, these graphic novels can be used to teach YA audiences about tolerance and diversity in a positive way.

Author Michelle Wise uses the graphic memoir, another form that is finding traction in YA literature. Wise's chapter focuses on two graphic memoirs: *Honor Girl* by Maggie Thrush and *Spinning* by Tillie Walden, both of which are told from a female protagonist, and each young woman's journey to establish her lesbian identity. Wise asserts that the addition of graphic representations will enable even further opportunities for young readers to connect with this audience.

Next, author Jeri Ewert discusses the importance of LGBTQ+ characters in YA literature, focusing on a diverse range of literature, from the realistic *Simon vs.*

the Homo Sapiens Agenda to more fantasy based novels, like *These Witches Don't Burn*. She focuses on the power of telling "true stories" to normalize discussing topics of sexuality in an enlightening and empowering way. And finally, Angel Pridgen wraps up the collection with her chapter entitled "Beaten Bodies," which focuses on using bibliotherapy as a way to help young people heal from sexual trauma. She argues that using YA books in the classroom is a powerful way to build discussions and dialogue to help not only survivors of sexual abuse, but to educate students on these topics using the library as a safe space.

The central theme of this collection is that telling one's story can be part of the healing process. Not having a voice is exhausting—taking back your voice/narrative is empowering. *That* is the point of the #MeToo movement. Even as I write this, my eleven year old daughter just spoke up in school against a bully who was making comments about her body—sexual comments concerning topics that were probably not fully understood by an elementary student. She had listened to enough of his comments, and she came forward to her school librarian to tell her story. I asked her how she felt when she got home from school that day, and she said, "I feel proud of myself!" And this is what I would hope for all young people who have experienced sexual harassment, assault, and trauma: that they can tell their stories, and then feel proud for doing so. To me, pride in one's own narrative is the power of what the MeToo movement has started and will continue.

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PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

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