



"Something Awful Is Happening to Me"

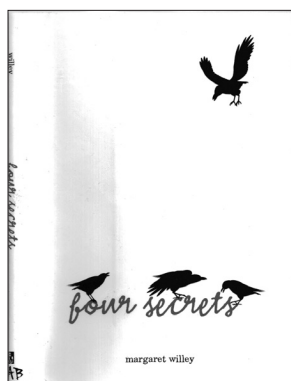
The Seeds for a Novel about Bullying

The writing and the publication of my most recent young adult novel, *Four Secrets*, required an immersion into the social problem of bullying today and also a journey backward to a few notable books about peer cruelty from earlier decades. One rediscovered treasure was a novel in my own library—*The Goats*, by Brock Cole, which happily has been recently reissued, and which has lost none of its punch or its pathos since its original publication in 1987.

Cole is a terrific writer, and his narrative, written long before the current spate of books about bullies and bullying culture, begins with a gripping opening chapter—an incident of extreme cruelty amongst unsupervised youngsters, a subsequent heroic odyssey, and a realistic yet hopeful final chapter. Cole himself says of Howie and Laura at the book's conclusion: "They've decided to rejoin the world." The two survivors are aware, as the reader is aware, that the world they rejoin is a different world, less innocent, and lacking in all guarantees of protection from further persecution. But they have become stronger, and they have each other,

something they did not have before their ordeal began.

The protagonists in *The Goats* endure bullying with a capital B. No mere episode of teasing here, nothing mundane or forgettable. The novel opens at a summer camp, a place of special torment for some unlucky children. Cole's bullies have actually stolen Howie and Laura's clothing and left the children stranded naked on a small island (a scenario that resulted in some unfortunate book banning when *The Goats* was first published). Their nakedness is the perfect metaphor for the state they find themselves in: twin creatures, reborn into the wilderness, vulnerable as babies.



In *Four Secrets*, the trio of young teenagers also have their clothes taken from them, but in a very different context—they exchange them for prison sweats and scuffs—the uniforms of juvenile detention, where their futile efforts to protect Renata from relentless bullying at school have led them. Nathaniel describes himself as "stripped of my ancestry and banished from my village." He calls juvenile detention "The Place of Contrition," and worries constantly about the well-being of his two fellow prisoners, Renata and Kate, who are being kept in a different part of the detention center "in absolute confinement . . . far from everything that is familiar." It is a different kind of exile than being cast naked into the wilderness, but it is equally clarifying. In both cases, the children must spend time in isolation before they can "rejoin the world."

Greta Shield, the persistent social worker and co-narrator of *Four Secrets*, struggles to decipher the detention journals of her three detainees. She recognizes an essential integrity in their refusal to reveal the details of their crime to

her. They are intensely loyal to one another and they do not believe that any social worker can rescue them from what will happen next—a severe sentence and more detention. Likewise, Cole’s victims are convinced that none of the adults in their lives can rescue them, including their well-intentioned parents. This is a common, albeit unfortunate belief of many bullied teenagers—that no adult can improve the situation.¹ It is why Howie and Laura decide never to return to camp, the scene of their shaming. Their journey from the forest and back to civilization gradually transforms them. They work as a team. They forge an ironclad connection that no mere bully, no blind adult, can ever wrest from them. This is the same truth that the social worker uncovers in the pages of the journals of Renata, Kate, and Nathaniel—a fierce connectedness among the injured teenagers. She realizes that the loyalty they share is stronger than their fear of what will become of them. It is bigger than the misery of their incarceration. Reading and taking notes in her office at the JDC, she is moved to tears at the realization.

Rereading *The Goats* moved me to similar tears. Brock Cole celebrates the same qualities I chose to celebrate in *Four Secrets*—adolescent courage and loyalty—as well as the heartfelt belief that bullied teenagers can protect and heal one another. *The Goats* had taken hold of me, found a quiet corner in my brain, and stayed alive there until I had written six picturebooks and another novel, and was finally ready to write *Four Secrets*.

My earliest introduction to bullying scenarios in literature came

from three classic novels that I read in my own adolescence; two were assigned reading in my English classes—*Lord of the Flies* and *A Separate Peace*—and one I came to on my own, *Catcher in the Rye*. These books were all published in the 1960s and all written by men. Each establishes the problem of bullying as a boy-problem, particularly boys in groups, and even more particularly boys in groups without adult supervision. Of the three, *Catcher in the Rye* spoke most deeply to my (already) intense fascination with coming-of-age as a time of lost innocence and emotional confusion, but each book reinforced a belief that the darkest cruelties of school were created by boys and aimed at other boys. Boys, apparently, could more easily lose the trappings of civilization and become the victims of murderous rivalries, savage confrontations, and suicidal acts. I remember reading them with a feeling of relief that I was not a boy, especially a boy in a prep school.

I first learned of the trend among girls to bully and shame each other 10 years ago, when my husband and I co-taught a course on Adolescent Culture at Grand Valley State University. We found in our research a plethora of books about the bullying culture among middle and high school girls. Writers like Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabees* (2002), and Rachel Simmons, co-founder of the Girls Leadership Institute and author of *Odd Girl Out* (2002), explored the more invisible, yet sometimes even more diabolical, ways that girls hurt each other. A 21st-century girl can find herself vilified and cast out in a matter of

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hours, thanks to the immediacy and obsequiousness of Facebook and Twitter. Katie briefly describes this special hell in the opening chapter of *Four Secrets*—she calls it “getting stung” and says, “Everybody does their part—and presto. You are gone, Journal. You are just gone.” It’s a kind of death by overexposure, and modern teenagers, especially girls, live in fear of it.

Leora Tanenbaum contributed to the wave of information about peer cruelty with her study of gender bullying, bearing the attention-getting title *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*. Using oral histories of girls and women who had been labeled “sluts” during their high school days, the book explores the cultural myths and social paranoia that can lead to an indelible “bad reputation” for female adolescents, often merely because they are early developers. The book confronts the word “slut” itself—that most feared of pejoratives hurled at girls in middle school and high school. Tanenbaum asks the reader to remember his or her own history with the word, and in doing so, to reconsider the plight of whichever unfortunate girl carried the label in

our high school memories.

Slut! does much to dispel the myth that girls who are so labeled are promiscuous, or even sexually active. The book also highlights the ways that a girl's size and shape can too easily make her a target for unwanted attention, something Renata has experienced to her great distress when we meet her in *Four Secrets*. Her time of persecution is not because she is overly developed for her age, but because she is small and androgynous. Her tormentors tell her that they know she is a boy. "Is there something wrong with me?" she asks her best friend Katie tearfully, feeling that she must somehow be responsible for what is happening. Self-blame is an unfortunate result of such bullying. Author Tanenbaum describes a similar phase of self-blame after being labeled a slut while a freshman in high school. "I started to suspect that maybe there really was something wrong with me," she writes. "Maybe I really was garbage." Tanenbaum remembered what hearing the label over and over did to her developing identity; years later, it led to a tone of urgency in her groundbreaking study. This book was another seed.

As the culture of bullying became more pervasive, and as the cultural awareness of bullying as a social problem increased, so too did serious and compelling novels about adolescent cruelty. And the special gifts of a novel about bullying go far beyond increasing awareness. Only in a realistic novel can a teenager explore the humanity and the vulnerability of both the bullied child and the bully. Only in such a novel can a reader find a sense of blessed *aftermath*, a time beyond

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the brutal present. And only in novels are the labels and stereotypes of high school deconstructed.²

Last fall, *Publishers Weekly* published an article titled "A Call to Action," which recommended new books about bullying and reiterated a claim often made by librarians and educators—one that I heartily agree with—that nothing is more helpful to a bullied girl or boy than a good novel about enduring and surviving a painful episode. From classic novels like Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* to exemplary novels of the past decade like Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, to R. J. Palacio's recent masterpiece *Wonder*, the gift of an evocative, well-crafted story can reinforce a fragile identity under siege. It can also inspire children who are not victims of bullying to intervene, and thus bring hope to a situation wherein the witnesses feel helpless and afraid to speak out.

Perhaps my most crucial seed and the deepest insight into what bullying does to a child's sense of self came from an episode in my own family, during which my daughter was treated at her high

school in much the same way that my character Renata is treated at her middle school—targeted by older boys and mocked for her size and appearance (my daughter at 16 was very small, dark-haired, and boyish). The bullies were athletes (an unfortunate pattern) and nearly twice her size; they were led by a boy with a reputation for bullying. The torment, and it was torment, lasted for several weeks, the same boys every day, the same place in the school hallway, the same remarks and noises, mocking her appearance. That hallway of her high school became a gauntlet she faced for nearly a month before she told me about it.

The scene in *Four Secrets* where Renata explains to her best friend Katie that "something awful is happening to me" is taken directly from an unforgettable spring afternoon during which my daughter finally broke down and told me what that "something" was, after weeks of trying to manage it on her own. I can still hear her plaintive questions; they are burned into my brain:

"Is there something wrong with me, Mom?"

"Am I just really ugly and you never told me?"

"Why do they keep doing it? Why won't they stop?"

In *Four Secrets*, Katie asks Renata why she did not tell her sooner. I remember asking my daughter the same question and she told me, as Renata tell Katie, that she was hoping the bullying would stop on its own if she didn't respond, didn't defend herself. My daughter endured weeks of bullying mutely, despite being a girl who had always been able to speak

her mind freely and with gusto. The mother in me listened to my daughter describing her experiences through her tears; I listened and ached and watched those tears streak down her cheeks and onto the blouse she was wearing (bright yellow, I can still see it). I saw that my daughter had changed. And so I was also changed. And because I am a writer, a novel about an incident of bullying began to grow in my imagination. Slowly, as do all my novels, but persistently. *Four Secrets* contains many twists and turns that are purely fiction, but I brought the aforementioned dialogue from that terrible afternoon, intact, to an early chapter.

My daughter had many of the qualities that help children to survive bullying with minimal scarring—she was an innately hopeful child, she believed that people cared about her, she trusted many adults in her life. She quickly regained her sense of self after that terrible month. But in my opinion, the most crucial resource, the one that helped her the most, and the one resource that so many bullied children do not have, was the safe haven of strong friendship. Chloe had a circle of loyal peers, girls and boys, who, once they realized what was happening to her, came to her rescue, confronted the boys who were making her life miserable, and took a stand with her in the hallway of her school. These were kids I already knew and loved, and witnessing them closing ranks around my daughter was a beautiful thing to see. A beautiful thing, coming on the heels of a terrible thing. I wanted my novel to depict a brutal bullying incident, but also to celebrate the power of friendship

in the same way that Cole's novel celebrated it, long before I had seen it with my own eyes.

When I talk about *Four Secrets* to students in their schools, there is almost without exception a moment before I leave the school wherein a teenager approaches me in a manner that indicates approaching me is not an easy task. I intuit a young person who is pushing him or herself. I recognize that I am being sought out by a child who is shy. I hear that I am being spoken to by a girl or boy who is not socially comfortable or chatty. I see a student who is making eye contact with me with great effort. And I often suspect that the student has lived through, or is perhaps currently living through, a time of persecution at the school in which we find ourselves together for the morning.

This young person, usually a boy, thanks me for writing the book. Little else is said. And I always thank the student for taking the trouble to come forth in this way. It is a deeply precious moment, and it reinforces a belief I have held for the 30 years that I have been writing YA novels—that books sustain children who have difficult social lives, who must face the hallways and cafeterias of their schools alone, who do not have ready-made protectors, like Renata has, or soul mates as Howie and Laura have in each other.

Being bullied can seem like a living nightmare, but there is opportunity for redemption and growth. Seeds are planted. Awareness is deepened. Compassion grows. Reconnection becomes possible. Books about bullying are another way to “rejoin the world” after dark days.

Notes

1. In both novels, the children come to the realization that there are adults that can be trusted with the truth. It is an important part of each story's resolution.
2. In contrast, Hollywood movies about the adolescent experience have been woefully inadequate at exploring the reality and the very real cost of bullying. If anything, teen comedies made in the USA for teen viewers have increased the perception that labels are normal and amusing, and that high school is a high-risk social game with clear winners and losers. I became more aware of this pattern in Hollywood films about teen life while teaching the course on Adolescent Culture. We watched many foreign films about growing up and discovered that in other countries, the process of leaving childhood is portrayed with great dignity and complexity, including the area of adolescent sexual identity. Films like *Wild Reeds* and *36 Fillette* (France), *Gregory's Girl* (Scotland), and *My Life as a Dog* (Sweden) are good examples.

Margaret Willey is the author of nine novels for young adults, most recently Four Secrets (Carolrhoda Lab, 2012), for which she has received many ALA Awards and Recommendations. She is also the author of the award-winning Clever Beatrice picturebook series and many essays, reviews, and stories. Her next Carolrhoda novel is scheduled for Fall 2014. She lives in Grand Haven, Michigan, and was awarded the Gwen Frostic Award from the Michigan Reading Association, an award for contributing to literacy in her state. Visit her website at www.margaretwilley.com.