

Reading Horizons

Volume 51, Issue 1

2011

Article 7

APRIL/MAY 2011

Bullies in Recent Books for Children and Young Adults

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Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward

Abstract

Although some might consider bullying to be a 21st century problem, bullying seems to have been tolerated for decades, with adults often dismissing it through comments such as “Well, boys will be boys,” and “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you,” or even “Girls don’t fight each other. They wouldn’t want to mess up their clothing.” Early on, perennial middle and high school favorite author Judy Blume addressed the cruelty kids direct toward other kids in her book *Blubber* (1974) in which a fifth grader endures denigrating comments and nicknames after doing a report on whales. . . . Here are some of the most recent titles with bullies that might offer starting places for classroom conversations on this often life-changing issue:

Carlson, Nancy. (2010). *Henry and the Bully*
Cox, Judy. (2010). *Carmen Learns English*
Kimmelman, Leslie. (2011). *The Three Bully Goats*
Lester, Helen. (2011). *Wodney Wat’s Wobot*
Wishinsky, Frieda. (2011). *You’re Mean, Lily Jean!*
Cushman, Karen. (2010). *Alchemy and Meggy Swann*
Edgar, Elsbeth. (2011). *The Visconti House*
Flores-Galbis, Enrique. (2010). *90 Miles to Havana*
Gephart, Donna. (2010). *How to Survive Middle School*
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Howe, James. (2011). *Addie on the Inside*
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Yee, Lisa. (2011). *Warp Speed*
Cook, Eileen. (2010). *Getting revenge on Lauren Wood*
Hautman, Pete. (2010). *Blank Confession*
Littman, Sarah Darer. (2010). *Life, After*
Miracle, Lauren. (2011). *Shine*
Peters, Julie Ann. (2010). *By the Time You Read This, I’ll Be Dead*
Stratton, Allan. (2010). *Borderline*



Bullies in Recent Books for Children and Young Adults

Terrell A. Young, Ed.D. & Barbara A. Ward, Ph.D.

A fifteen-year-old Massachusetts girl whose family recently moved to the South Hadley area from Ireland hangs herself in 2010 after enduring weeks of bullying from classmates. An eighteen-year-old Rutgers student leaps from the George Washington Bridge in 2010. Two eleven-year-old boys take their own lives, one in Oklahoma in 2010 by shooting himself, the other in Massachusetts in 2009 by hanging. All four were apparently the victims of severe bullying; in the case of one eleven-year-old, his classmates heckled him constantly about their perceptions of his sexuality (Anti-Bullying Resources, 2011). Finally, the White House holds a Conference on Bullying Prevention in March, bringing much needed attention to the issue of bullying (White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, 2011).

Although some might consider bullying to be a 21st century problem, bullying seems to have been tolerated for decades, with adults often dismissing it through comments such as “Well, boys will be boys,” and “Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you,” or even “Girls don’t fight each other. They wouldn’t want to mess up their clothing.” Early on, perennial middle and high school favorite author Judy Blume addressed the cruelty kids direct toward other kids in her book *Blubber* (1974) in which a fifth grader endures denigrating comments and nicknames after doing a report on whales.

Bullying frequently starts with name calling or subtle shunning, often escalating to threatening, pushing, or shoving. While much bullying occurs in the classroom or on school grounds, bullies may repeatedly stalk their victims on their way to and from school, and might continue through ever-increasing cyber bullying. Researchers now acknowledge that females can be every bit as cruel as boys can (Wiseman, 2002) but their cruelty comes in different forms. In her *Queen Bees & Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* Wiseman (2002) describes many of the cruel ways girls ostracize or bully one another.

The statistics are daunting. A report released by the Center for Disease Control (CDC Releases 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results, 2010) shows that about one in five teens had been bullied at school in the last year. The

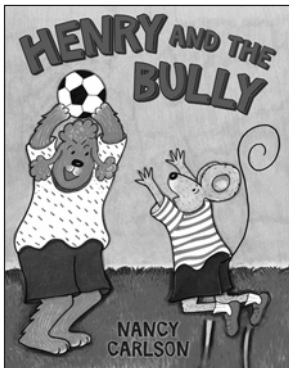
government's Find Youth Info web site (Find Youth Info, 2011) also reports some recent bullying statistics:

1. Bullying is most common among middle school children, where almost half of students may be bully victims.
2. Between 15 and 25 percent of students overall are frequent victims of bullying, and 15 to 20 percent of students often bully others.

Further, despite the potential damage of cyber bullying, it is alarmingly common among adolescents and teens. According to cyber bullying statistics from the i-SAFE foundation (i-SAFE, 2009), more than half of adolescents and teens have been bullied online, and about the same number have engaged in cyber bullying.

Concerned with school bullying, former English teacher C. J. Bott has written two books that list books for children and young adults with bullying as their central theme. The first title, *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (2004) describes 44 fiction books for young readers and her second title, *More Bullies in More Books* (2009) contains 350 annotations. Bott repeatedly discusses that as is the case with many issues, bullying is a societal problem that can be addressed through literature. Interestingly, bullies in various forms appear in more books than might be expected. During the last months of 2010 and the first part of 2011, as we read fiction for children and adolescents, we kept a list of books that either featured bullies or in which bullying played a pivotal role. We were surprised to find that there were bullies in many of the books we read. Here are some of the most recent titles with bullies that might offer starting places for classroom conversations on this often life-changing issue.

Grades K-2



Carlson, Nancy. (2010). *Henry and the Bully*. Viking. 32 pages, \$15.99, ISBN: 978-0-670-01148-3.

Henry and the other first graders loved to play soccer at recess until a second grader named Sam kicked their ball over the fence. After recess, Henry told his teacher what had happened, and the teacher, Mr. McCarthy, agreed to “keep an eye on Sam and the second graders” (u.p.). The next day while Mr. McCarthy was rescuing a kindergartner, “Sam grabbed Henry’s tail just as he was about to score” (u.p.). It seemed that every time the teacher

was helping someone else the bullies would appear. Henry became “miserable and his tummy hurt” (u.p.) Is there any possible way to turn an enemy into a friend?

Cox, Judy. (2010). *Carmen Learns English*.

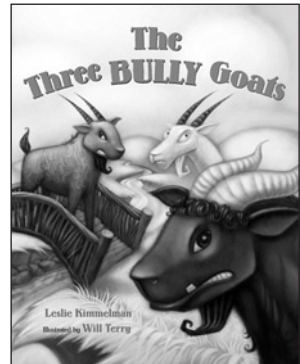
Holiday House. 32 pages, \$16.95, ISBN: 978-0-8234-2174-9.

After moving from Mexico, Carmen is afraid that her classmates will laugh at her as she tries to learn and speak English at school as everyone speaks so rapidly. Carmen cannot understand a thing until her teacher, Ms. Coski, begins to talk to her in “*muy terrible*” Spanish. This gives Carmen courage that her “*muy terrible*” English might be accepted. There are times when schoolyard bullies taunt her and say, “You gotta funny accent” (u.p.). Such taunting hurts her feelings and makes her wish she were back “in Mexico, where all the people speak Spanish and no one makes fun of me” (u.p.). Ultimately, Ms. Coski gives Carmen confidence when she asks her to teach her classmates how to speak Spanish.

Kimmelman, Leslie. (2011). *The Three Bully Goats*.

Illustrated by Will Terry. Albert Whitman & Company. 32 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-8075-7900-8.

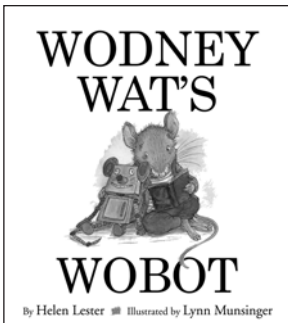
Kimmelman cleverly transforms the traditional “Three Billy Goats Gruff” into a new story that features Gruff, Ruff, and Tuff, the three bully goats. One day the goats realize that the meadow on the other side of the bridge is even grassier than their own. A small, kind ogre guards the bridge leading to the meadow so he can warn visitors to watch out for the wild flowers and baby animals. The goats, however, are not friendly to the little ogre. For instance, the smallest bully goat challenges him with “I’m Gruff, and I mean, I’m **really** gruff. And you, you’re just a powder puff. Now stop squawking, or I’ll butt you from here to Brazil” (u.p.). Yet, the friendly ogre and some baby animals find a way to teach the bullies a lesson they will not forget.



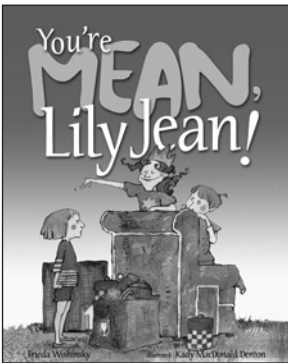
Lester, Helen. (2011). *Wodney Wat's Wobot*.

Illustrated by Lynn Munsinger. Houghton Mifflin. 32 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-5473-6756-9.

Camilla Capybara is back from the West. “And [she has] the hat and the top-of-the-line boots to prove it!” she bellows. She quickly reminds her frightened

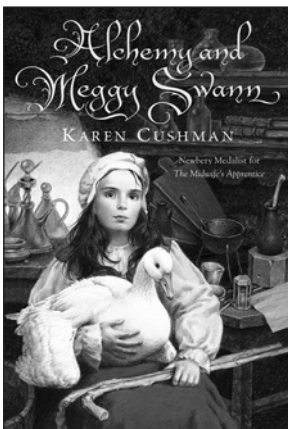


rodent classmates, “I’m still the World’s Meanest Rodent” (u.p.). Sadly, “the rattled rodents and twitching teacher had to live with Camilla and all her she-nigans” (u.p.). Yet, Camilla’s return is not the only surprise for Wodney and his friends. Wodney uses his birthday present, a tewiffic talking wobot, to find a way to handle the bigger, badder, and meaner Camilla Capybara.



Wishinsky, Frieda. (2011). *You’re Mean, Lily Jean!* Illustrated by Kady MacDonald Denton. Albert Whitman & Company. 32 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-8075-9476-6.

Carly loves playing with her older sister Sandy. “They played dragons and knights. They played explorers and pirates. They played mountain climbers and astronauts” (u.p.). Life was good before Lily Jean moved next door. Lily Jean didn’t want Carly to play with Sandy and her. When they played house, Lily Jean insisted that Carly be the baby. When they played cowgirls, Lily Jean demanded that Carly be a cow. When they played King and Queen, Lily Jean made Carly be the dog. Tired of being bossed around, Carly comes up with a plan. Will it be enough to change mean Lily Jean into a friend?



Grades 4-8

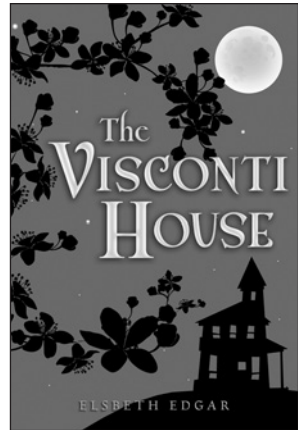
Cushman, Karen. (2010). *Alchemy and Meggy Swann*. Clarion Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 167 pages, \$16.00, ISBN: 978-0-547-23184-6.

Because she suffers from hip dysplasia, Meggy has crooked legs and waddles rather than walks. Although she is fair of face, she is not fair of gait, and the townspeople of London call her names, want to label her a witch, and blame her when things go wrong. Having left her country home to help her father, an alchemist in London, Meggy now lives with

a parent she had never even met before. He, in turn, has no idea what to do with her and calls her “Mistress” rather than her name. Set during the Elizabethan period, this story provides rich details that bring the time and its citizens to life while reminding readers that prejudice and bullying are often based on mere physical differences. While Meggy tries to assist her father, she must first counteract his involvement in a treasonous plot.

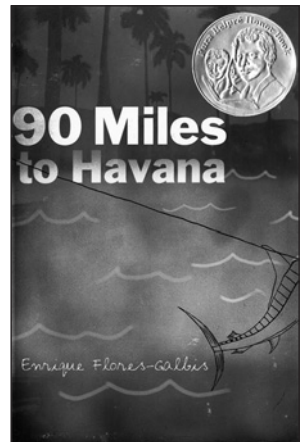
Edgar, Elsbeth. (2011). *The Visconti House*. Candlewick Press. 287 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-7636-5019-3.

Laura Horton, 14, has never really fit in with her classmates. She lives in a crumbling mansion on the top of a hill where her father quotes Longfellow, and her mother creates sculptures. When a new classmate, Leon Murphy, draws negative attention from her classmates, Laura must decide whether to befriend him or bow to peer pressure. Laura is drawn to Leon, a math whiz, as the two try to solve the mystery behind the house where she lives. As she connects strongly with Leon, Laura also wants acceptance from her classmates and she is torn, afraid to be seen with Leon because of what the others will say.



Flores-Galbis, Enrique. (2010). *90 Miles to Havana*. Roaring Brook. 292 pages, \$17.99, ISBN: 978-1-59643-168-3.

Operation Pedro Pan involved 14,000 children leaving Cuba without their parents in 1961 due to the revolution that put Fidel Castro in power. Parents feared their children would be “re-educated” in Communist camps so they sent them to the US to live in refugee camps until they could be reunited as a family. *90 Miles to Havana* is the story of three brothers and their experiences in one of the camps near Miami. Julian and his brothers Alquilino and Eduardo are shocked to find bullies running rampant in the camp. Eventually Alquilino and Eduardo are moved to an orphanage in Colorado. Julian runs away after he humiliates the camp bully but rejoins Tomás on a dangerous mission to rescue 14 people from Cuba.



Gephart, Donna. (2010). *How to Survive Middle School*.
Delacorte Press. 248 pages, \$15.99, ISBN: 978-0-385-73793-7.

When David Greenberg starts middle school, things fall apart. A silly argument prompts his former best friend Elliott to ally himself with an older bully who mounts a daily assault on David. While life at school continues to worsen, David inexplicably receives lots of attention online for some amusing videos he posts of his hamster Hammy and his sister Lindsey with the Daily Acne Forecast. Middle school is not easy when your best friend has deserted you and is telling all your secrets to your enemy. This book is filled with many humorous moments, but the feelings of isolation David experiences are very real.

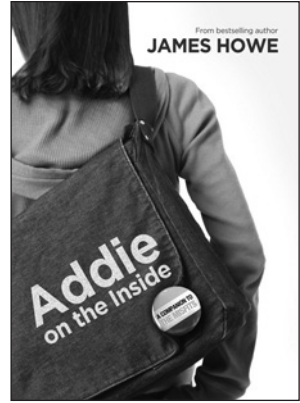


Ignatow, Julie. (2011). *The Popularity Papers: The Long-Distance Dispatch between Lydia Goldblatt & Julie Graham-Chang*.
Amulet Books/Abrams. 208 pages, \$15.95,
ISBN: 978-0-8109-9724-0.

Fresh from studying how the popular kids behave, best friends Julie and Lydia are ready to take junior high by storm. But Lydia's unexpected move with her family to London for six months leaves Julie lonely and confused. While Lydia encounters language challenges with British slang, school uniforms, and cliques that ignore her, Julie finds herself befriended by the exclusive Bichons, an eighth grade group that rules the school halls. Thrilled at first to have popular friends, Julie becomes increasingly uncomfortable as the group, led by Della Dawn, pokes fun at her former friends as well as tries to change Julie's appearance. When she realizes that they also shoplift, she vows to stand up for herself. Clearly, Della's interest in Julie is related to her friendship with blue-eyed skateboarder Jonathan. But Julie can't see that at first. Lydia, meanwhile, is thrilled at the inroads to popularity Julie is making, but takes another path overseas, founding the Outcasts, a group of unique youngsters ignored or teased by the popular set in her school. The author favors different fonts, pen colors, artistic styles and writing styles in this graphic novel that amplifies the voices of two very different, but determined girls. This title is the follow-up to last year's introduction to the two girls.

Howe, James. (2011). *Addie on the Inside*.
Atheneum/Simon & Schuster. 224 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-1-4169-1384-9.

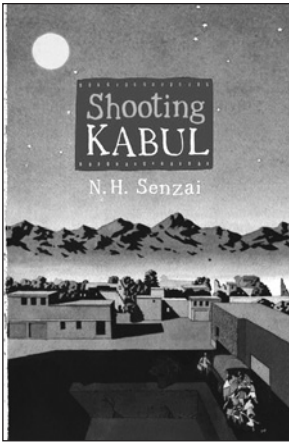
Addie on the Inside is a companion book to *The Misfits* (Howe, 2001) and *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005). Everyone in middle school seems to have a label for Addie; the name-calling does not stop. They label her for what and who they see on the outside, but none of the girls in her school have a clue about how she feels on the inside. She is willing to stick up for her friends and for what she believes and Addie is not afraid to show her intelligence and her vocabulary. Howe takes us into Addie's mind in this riveting novel in verse.



How can I be all that?
It's too many things to be.
How can I be all that and
still be true to the real me
while everyone is saying:

This
is
who
you
are. (p. 53)

Those who have read Howe's earlier books will welcome the opportunity to reconnect with Bobby, Joe, Addie, and Skeezie, possibly drawing inspiration from Addie's example.



Senzai, N. H. 2010. *Shooting Kabul*.
Simon & Schuster. 262 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-1-4424-0194-5.

As conditions worsen in Afghanistan, eleven-year-old Fadi and his family flee their home. Through a series of mistakes, Fadi's little sister Mariam is left behind. Although the family settles in San Francisco, the destruction of the Twin Towers prompts much prejudice toward Fadi as well as bullying from some of his schoolmates. Fadi is reluctant to tell anyone about the bullying, and unrealistically focuses on winning a photography contest in order to win a trip back home. When the bullies destroy his camera, he almost loses all hope, but finds a sympathetic spirit in another classmate.

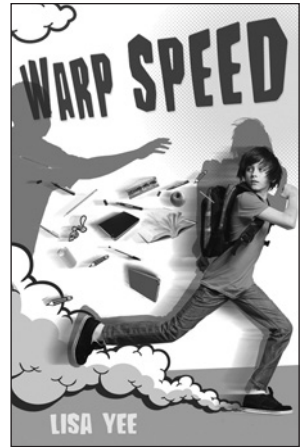


Shulman, Mark. 2010. *Scrawl*.
Roaring Book Press. 234 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-1-59643-417-2.

Eighth grader Tod Munn is a bully who terrorizes his classmates, making them give up their lunches and money in exchange for his protection. But is he really the bully and loser his teachers and classmates seem to think he is? After sneaking into the school, Tod is forced to serve his detention with Mrs. Woodrow, the school guidance counselor, while his cohorts pick up trash in the school yard in lieu of harsher punishment. During the next two months, Tod writes about his life at the insistence of the guidance counselor, revealing that there are reasons for his actions, and what appears to be the truth may indeed hide the real truth. His journal describes an especially challenging home life and missteps by others that lead to his own bitterness. Spanning October to December in his life, Tod's story reveals the intricate layers to one human being, and leaves readers hoping for the best for Tod.

Yee, Lisa. (2011). *Warp Speed*.
Arthur A. Levine. 320 pages, \$16.99,
ISBN: 978-0545122764.

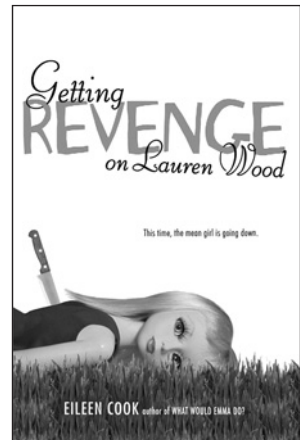
Life isn't too great for seventh grader Marley Sandelski. He manages to fly under the radar, barely noticed by those around him. But one day, class bully Digger Ronster notices him and chooses Marley as his personal punching bag. Suddenly he is all too visible. He spends his afternoons running from Digger and his friends, all intent on bullying Marley, and dreaming of his childhood days spent sharing comic books with Stanford Wong, the school basketball star who now barely notices him. The school track coach pays positive attention to Marley, and encourages him to join the track team. The book is filled with humor and pathos and depicts perfectly the fear that bullies instill in the hearts of others. When Marley finally stops running and faces his tormentor, he is in for a surprise.



Grades 9-12

Cook, Eileen. (2010). *Getting revenge on Lauren Wood*.
Simon Pulse/Simon & Schuster. 264, \$15.99,
ISBN: 978-1-4169-7433-8.

At the end of eighth grade, Lauren Wood betrays her best friend Helen Worthington and makes it seem that Helen caused others to be punished for a senior prank. Helen's treatment from her classmates is so horrid that she moves to a new school. A few years later, she returns to live with her grandmother assuming the name Claire Dantes. In the meantime, Lauren has risen to her rightful place as the school Queen Bee with a cast of loyal followers. But Helen (Claire) has changed her outer appearance, and seems exotic to her classmates and her objective is to take everything that matters from her former best friend. As her



plan for revenge falls into place, Helen (Claire) discovers that the plan is working all too well, wreaking havoc on her own life and changing her in unexpected ways. Will she squander a chance at romance and the possibility of real friendship because of her single-minded determination to bring down Lauren? Revenge may be a dish best served neither hot nor cold.



Hautman, Pete. (2010). *Blank Confession*. Simon & Schuster. 170 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-1-4169-1327-6.

A newcomer to the local high school shows up at the police precinct and confesses to murder. As he unfolds the story of his brief acquaintance with bully and drug dealer Jon Brande, Shayne Blank describes several incidents in which Jon harassed his friend Mikey and others. For instance, he left Mikey literally holding the bag when he heard rumors that the school will be searched for drugs. After Mikey throws away the illegal substances, Jon demands that he compensate him for his lost products. When Mikey is unable to do so, Jon mounts a campaign of harassment, ratcheting up Mikey's anxiety level. But there is much more to Shayne and his story, as Detective Rawls finds. In fact, there is much more to the detective than meets the eye. Hautman adds to the suspense by alternating the points of view from which the story is told.



Littman, Sarah Darer. (2010). *Life, After*. Scholastic. 281 pages, \$17.99, ISBN: 978-0-545-15144-3.

To avoid the economic and political turmoil in Argentina, teen Dani Bensimon and her family move to a New York suburb where she must deal with the challenges of learning a new language and culture and fend off bullies in the form of a clique of privileged girls who point out that her wardrobe once belonged to one of them. Dani is more resilient than she might seem, coping with heartache and family turmoil as she tries to adjust. She also comes to the rescue of Jon, another teen who is unlike the others, and is often bullied because of his own differences.

Myracle, Lauren. (2011). *Shine*. Amulet/Abrams. 384 pages, \$16.95, ISBN: 978-0-8109-8417-2.

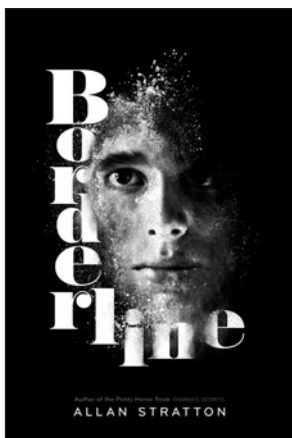
The town of Black Creek, North Carolina holds many secrets, one of which is who is responsible for beating up Cat's former best friend Patrick. As he lies in a coma, Cat investigates the hate crime. Although the local law enforcement officials are sure the crime was committed by someone passing through the area, Cat disagrees. She visits all Patrick's local haunts and interviews his friends. During the investigation, Cat unearths secrets about her friends, and discovers truths about herself and her own strength. As the result of her descent into the seamy underbelly of the place she calls home, she realizes that she needs to let her own light shine if she ever plans to help anyone else. The effects of meth and on keeping secrets so long that they start to steal away one's soul are clearly described in this ultimately hopeful novel.



Peters, Julie Ann. (2010). *By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead*. Hyperion. 200 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-142311618-9.

Fifteen-year-old Daelyn Rice has been plotting her own demise since she was ten, but this time she plans to get things right. Having tried and failed to kill herself several times, she logs on to a website that caters to suicides and begins the countdown to her own death. But despite her determination, Daelyn finds herself drawn to Emily, a fellow chorus member, and to Santana, whose remission from Hodgkins seems to be coming to an end. To prepare herself for the end of her life, Daelyn records her memories of the cruelty of classmates who teased her unmercifully because of her weight. Daelyn's pain is palpable, and as the stories of mistreatment and bullying mount, it is easy to understand why she has decided to give up on life. Still, there may be a glimmer of possibility for Daelyn.





Stratton, Allan. (2010). *Borderline*. HarperTeen. 298 pages, \$16.99, ISBN: 978-0-06-145111-9.

Sami Sabiri attends a private school where he is the only Muslim student. Bully Eddy Harrison whose father paid for the new football scoreboard has it in for him, following Sami and taunting him with racist epithets such as “sand monkey.” As the harassment escalates, Sami runs away. Amid all this school drama, things fall apart at home too. Inexplicably, Sami’s father is arrested and charged with terrorism and since he works in a government lab with sensitive items, it is possible that he is guilty. Desperate to know the truth Sami enlists two friends to travel to Toronto with him. What he learns there is not what he expects, but it helps him find the strength to face his own demons and stand up for himself. Ultimately, Sami realizes that saying “yes” when he means “no” is not okay, and that real friends will accept him as he is.

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