

A.S. King and C. J. Bott Talk about Bullying

A young adult author and an expert on bullying discuss bullying in schools and what can be done about it.

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S. King is the author of the highly acclaimed *Everybody Sees the Ants* (which has been named to the Young Adult Library Services Association's 2012 Top Ten Fiction for Young Adults list) and the Edgar Award–nominated, Michael L. Printz Honor Book *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*, described as “deeply suspenseful and profoundly human” by *Publishers Weekly* and picked as one of *Kirkus Reviews'* Best Books for Teens 2010. For more information about A.S. King, please see <http://www.as-king.com>. C. J. Bott, ALAN president, works as a consultant on issues of bullying and harassment and focuses on using children's and teen literature to start the discussion about bullying before an event occurs. Her two books *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* and *More Bullies in More Books* and her website (<http://www.bulliesinbooks.com>) provide hundreds of contemporary titles dealing with these themes for all grade levels. For more information about C. J. Bott please go to <http://www.bulliesinbooks.com>.

C. J. Bott: This is what I have learned about bullying from my history, decades of teaching, personal research, and simple observation.

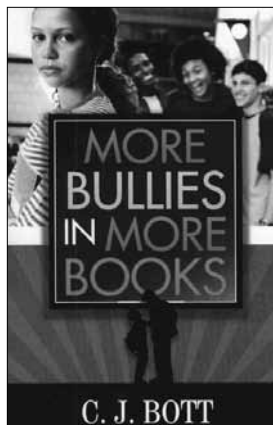
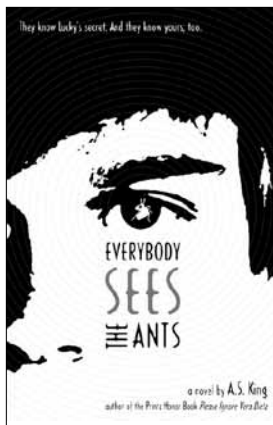
- Bullying starts early, as early as preschool and grows in intensity and cruelty throughout adulthood.
- Bullying always starts with words—name-calling. The first word used to hurt another is

stupid—usually learned when kids are three, four, or five years old.

- That word and its effect change as do the target and the bully. In middle grades the word becomes *dork*, *loser*, *hater*, and with high school comes hate speech, *nigger*, *faggot*, *bitch*, and all the other slurs used to degrade people, their culture, or their abilities. All are words that ignore an individual's self-definition.

Here is the definition of bullying I use after years of research:

1. any action or behavior that is intended to harm or disturb, or cause the individual or group targeted to feel harmed, disturbed, or embarrassed;
2. any action or behavior that occurs repeatedly over time; it can't just happen once on one specific day;
3. any behavior that takes advantage of an imbalance of power between the harasser and the target—based on size, age, ability, language, social status, socioeconomic



circumstance, intelligence, athletic ability, appearance, wardrobe, gender identity, gender expression or lifestyle, sexual identity, culture, religion, race, or heritage, just to name a few of the many qualities used as an excuse to discriminate against another.

The short version: bullying is any *repeated* behavior that is *intended to harm* a targeted individual who has *less power* than the perpetrator. Please notice there is not a reference to age in this definition of bullying: it can happen at any age. Bullying is alive and well in the adult world.

A.S. King: This definition, when I first heard it—especially the inclusion of bullying in adulthood—was something that hit home when I first saw C. J. Bott on a panel at the ALAN Workshop in 2009. After that panel, I approached C. J. because her clear and earnest intention to educate people about bullying as a serious threat to our youth and our society made me so emotional that I’d cried. I’d been an adult literacy teacher abroad for ten years and had seen the effects of mid-20th-century teacher-bullying, corporal punishment, and school-supported abuse in my adult students. I had also just finished writing a book in which the main character is relentlessly bullied, and I might have been a bit worried about the intensity of the subject matter. What C. J. did for me that day, on that panel, and later when we met, made me think: *I don’t care if the subject matter is intense. It’s also important. Important wins.*

The book I had just written was *Everybody Sees the Ants* (Little, 2011) about Lucky Linderman, a bullied kid who escapes into his dreams of rescuing Granddad Harry, his missing POW grandfather. Lucky Linderman and *Everybody Sees the Ants* came from many different places. The first ideas came from reading a lot about the Vietnam War in the last two decades and learning about the missing soldiers who never returned and their families who are still searching for them. So often, these families were bullied into being quiet or signing papers that lied about their loved ones’ very existence and were pushed into feeling like they shouldn’t be angry or upset by how little others were helping. Once I started writing about Lucky’s situation with his bully, Nader McMillan, the connection between these two people—Lucky and Granddad Harry—became really obvious. It made me ask: *What is torture? Who can say one type of torture is better than another? Why don’t we see bullying for what it is? Why do we blow it off?*

Lucky’s parents are not good at dealing with Lucky’s struggles. His father disappears into his job when he can and tells his wife to ignore her instincts to stick up for Lucky, so she conforms. To Lucky, they are a squid and a turtle—a woman addicted to doing laps in the community swimming pool so as to avoid her maternal instincts, and a father who retracts at the first sign of confrontation. After a ham-fisted attempt at impressing his bully with his ninth-grade social studies project, in which he asks, “If you were going to commit suicide, what method would you choose?” he is sent to the principal, and eventually further along to the school psychologists and other experts, who deem him “seriously at risk.”

In my experiences with bullying, the administrators were particularly lax and I knew I never had a chance at getting help from them. When I was a college student, they made things much worse for me when I was clearly a victim of severe bullying. I firmly believe that when emotional torture is happening to kids, the adults in charge should be fair, open-minded, and should not stop until they find resolution for the victim. I can’t see why that’s so hard to ask from any administration, because they are the *grown-ups* and should be there to protect *the children*.

CJB: Actually, most administrators and school staff are very good at not dealing with bullying, often through apathy or disbelief. Or by wanting to protect their institution’s image. Or by not knowing what to do. All of these actions/non-actions allow the bullying to continue, which encourages the belief that the adults support the bullying. If they didn’t, wouldn’t they do something about it? Not acting directly encourages bullying.

ASK: I sometimes wonder if it’s that condescending, eye-rolling reaction to teenagers that stops adults from getting involved at the middle school/high school level. Many adults shrug bullying off as if it were something kids will outgrow. It gets minimized a lot. People say the target was just “picked on” or “teased,” and while there is a line between the bullying that you just defined, C. J., and someone telling you that your hair looks ugly only one time, there is something fundamentally wrong with the motive behind either instance.

When it was happening to me, in school and in college and even later in life, it felt like I deserved what I was getting. I got that impression

from what people in authority had said to me. I was too opinionated, too athletic, not girly enough, too smart, whatever, so I believed I deserved what I got. Almost every time something bad happened to a kid in my school, it seemed completely acceptable to blame it on the picked-on kid. We do it in society all the time. It's called "blaming the victim" and the only way we can do that is if we're coming from a judgmental, elevated place. When something bad has happened to someone, why on earth

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would we want to point the finger at him or her? I think as a society we do it to let ourselves off the hook—because we either don't want to help the victim or we don't know *how*.

Bullying isn't just some kid in the schoolyard who kicks dirt at you. It comes throughout life—work, school, home, inside relationships and friendships and families. It can even come from within. The damage sticks—especially if anyone suggests that you brought it on yourself and that it will simply vanish one day, the way a scab dries up and falls off.

CJB: Everyone in a bullying incident—the bully, the target, and particularly the bystander—carries away bruises, scabs, or scars, but the bullying incidents in my life I regret the most are the times I did nothing. Working in schools, students and even adults often ask, "What if someone deserves to be bullied? They practically ask to be bullied!" That is not an uncommon misperception even with adults. Yes, there are things that make a person an easy target, but no one deserves to be harassed.

Research on bullying and harassment has been going on for decades, and many things that used to be considered facts about bullying are now called myths:

- Bullying is not just part of growing up.
- No one deserves to be bullied, and no one should blame the target for the bully's offensive behavior.
- Being bullied does not make a person stronger. How a person deals with the harassment because of the help that is asked for and is received can make that individual stronger. There are many ways we grow stronger; surviving is one of them.

- Bullies do not always have a troubled home life or a poor self-image. Elitist bullies have strong self-concepts encouraged by privileged life circumstances—intelligence, beauty, wealth, or athletic ability.
- Ignoring the bully does not work!
- Seeing someone bullied and walking away thinking "It's not my business" is simply wrong. (Beane)

Being bullied can take over a person's life. That individual lives in fear and rarely escapes from that fear. Escaping the bullying becomes the focus of his or her life. Most students who are bullied try to become invisible to avoid the harassment. They learn where to walk in the school only using hallways that are usually empty, where to sit in a classroom, how to dress to draw the least attention, when to avoid eye contact, and how to always be silent. For Lucky Linderman, it was all he could think about.

Sometimes people who are bullied cannot stay strong enough to survive—the bullying consumes them. Daily life is overwhelming, unrelenting, and burdensome as they believe that they are causing too much trouble for friends and family. The only way to end this torment and stop the guilt of letting down those few who care is to commit bullycide. The word *bullycide* quietly and painfully came into our language in 2001 when two British researchers, Neil Marr and Tim Field, published *Bullycide: Death at Playtime—An Exposé of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying*. In their book, Marr and Field reported Britain's first bullycide was eleven-year-old Steven Shepherd in 1967. The youngest bullycide in Britain was eight-year-old Marie Bentham; she hanged herself with her jump rope from her bedroom doorknob. No one has done this type of research in the United States.

ASK: I can't believe no one has done a study on bullycide in the United States yet. That boggles my mind, C. J. And yet it doesn't. Our main objective in media seems to be to ignore intense things. There is an unspoken rule that intense societal issues are dangerous to discuss in polite or professional circles, which I find shortsighted because discussing these things could actually promote action and lead to people caring.

People who care are harder to find these days. Whether it's volunteering in one's own community or working to help other people, a lot of individuals feel their lives are too busy or feel helpless to

make a difference. In Lucky Linderman's life, it's a feeling of helplessness that overtakes his closest would-be allies. His father tells Lucky's mom, "Don't complain to the principal. It'll only get him beat up worse." His mother obeys until one day when Lucky gets beat up and she snaps and buys tickets to Arizona so she and Lucky can get away from the pain and the torture for a while to figure out what to do.

In Arizona, Lucky meets Ginny Clemens, a kindness ninja as he sees her, and by simply reaching out and asking him if he wants to go somewhere with her, she draws a new picture for Lucky. It's a picture that teaches him what real friends look like (as opposed to his friend back home who never helps). She says, "Friends act like friends."

Sometimes, readers don't understand that writers learn a lot from their own characters. I write without any outline, so as characters talk in my head, I guess they're talking to me, too—not just some faceless audience. And Ginny Clemens wanted me to know: *Friends act like friends*. I'd always been a person who accepted when others treated me poorly. My other cheek is well-worn. As I wrote Lucky's and Ginny's stories, I realized that throughout my life, I'd been too focused on being nice, but I often hadn't received the same kindness in return. After writing about Lucky and Ginny, I decided to change in the same way I wanted Lucky to change. I would accept kindness from others, and nothing less. I've never been prouder to wrap this message in a book. It's timeless. It's a question everyone should ask themselves a few times a year. *How are people treating me?*

CJB: I grew up learning to accept others, not tolerate—but accept. I notice when people who “have”—looks, money, cool clothes, smarts, athletic abilities—do not accept others who have less. These possessions are noticed by everyone in a school. As a teacher, my primary goal was to create a comfort zone for my students where everyone showed respect and felt respected. As an English teacher I was lucky: I could use books as tools to talk about characters facing the same problems as my students. We didn't have to talk about a particular event or person in our school; we could talk about the harassment of characters at a safe objective distance:

- How a character felt when bullied or harassed
- How characters felt when watching someone get bullied

- How being different should not subject a character to bullying
- How being privileged does not give a character the right to hurt others
- How a character can be a bully and anybody can be the target; sometimes it is simply a matter of time and place
- How characters with the most problems are those who stay silent, whether targets, the bullies, or the witnesses, because doing nothing *supports the bullying*
- How bruises and scars from bullying can last forever and not only for characters

I also learned that as a teacher I had a responsibility to act. If I saw or heard harassment going on and did nothing, then everyone there would think I supported the harassment. Wouldn't a teacher do something if the behavior was wrong? The excuse that I didn't know what to do is no longer good enough.

The grown-ups are not doing their part. Having an anti-harassment policy in some policy book in an administrator's office does not change the environment of the school. Many states have laws that require each school system to have an anti-bullying program in place, but most states do not have any leverage to enforce their own laws. Besides, the only people who can change an environment are the people who live in it.

Once, I was working with a seventh-grade class at the middle school in my town. Groups of four or five students had read different teen novels containing bullying issues. In our discussion I asked the students to count the bullies in their grade and just give me a total. Then I asked them to count the students they thought were being bullied. Then we calculated that there were 10 to 15 bullies and 10 to 15 targets, which totaled to 20% to 30% of their grade population. I said, "That leaves 70–80% of that class watching, just observing." From the back of the room, one girl spoke up. "No, there are more." I asked her to explain. "There are all those adults who do nothing, the hall monitors, the teachers, cafeteria people, counselors, the

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administrators. They do nothing too.” Students notice when adults are silent.

ASK: I like to say that changing the world is a team sport. It takes all of us to drop the cynical, I-am-better-than-you act and start caring about each other again. The thing I ask people of all ages to do is to start with who they surround themselves with—those are the people who define you. Friendships are tricky. And deciding that you don’t want to be friends with a person anymore is trickier. In Lucky’s life, he had one friend, Danny. But Danny was also the bully’s friend and did everything he could to please the bully. This is one problem I have experienced in my life over and over again, and in writing *Everybody Sees the Ants*, I’d finally answered a very important question for myself. *Isn’t it better to not have a Danny in your life than to have a Danny in your life?* Don’t we all deserve better? This is what I wish for every human being, because when we realize we deserve better, we are less likely to tear other people down and more likely to build them up by being positive. While surrounded by good people who treat us with respect, we are more likely to help those people in need of our help. We are less likely to shrug off bullying. We are, in effect, making ourselves proactive members of a *community*, and by demanding respect for everyone around us, we *can* change the world.

CJB: A.S. and I brainstormed things each of us, young people and grown-ups, can do when we witness a bullying event.

1. Do not support the bully by being an audience, by laughing or being silent!

2. Connect with the target. Talk with that person, help him or her pick up the books that have just been knocked out of his or her arms, walk the target to his or her next class.
3. Activate your friends to accept this individual.
4. Involve some adult you trust—teacher, counselor, coach, hall security. You may be the only one holding them accountable for their non-actions.
5. Monitor yourself. It is too easy to laugh when someone makes a joke about another, too easy to tell a racist joke or use the phrase “that’s so gay.”

When you read *Everybody Sees the Ants* or any other bully book, or look around the school’s cafeteria, hallways, or locker rooms, or hear about the next bullycide on the news, you will probably wonder how bullying could go on for so many years. Is it because the witnesses and bystanders do not speak up? Could it be that simple? Are you willing to end the silence? 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The ReadWriteThink.org podcast series Text Messages has a recent episode titled “Books about Bullying” where insights on bullying are shared by bullying expert C. J. Bott. The author shares a variety of fiction and nonfiction books for teens that explore the problem of bullying. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/books-about-bullying-30778.html>

Tune in to Episode 43 to hear about the seeds behind A. S. King’s newest novel, *Everybody Sees the Ants*. You’ll discuss how several of the novel’s key elements came about during the author’s writing process, how *The Vagina Monologues* connects thematically to elements of the text focused on bullying and torture, and how satire helped her to make a key point about Lucky Linderman’s process of coming to terms with the adult world. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/conversation-with-king-30815.html>