

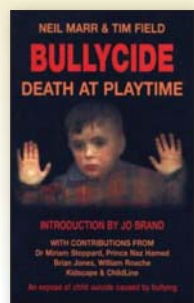
BULLIED TO DEATH

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JULIE ANNE PETERS AND JAY ASHER

► C. J. BOTT

BULLYING KILLS TOO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE. TO LOSE EVEN ONE TO THIS SOCIAL CRUELTY IS TOO MANY. VICTIMS DIE IN DIFFERENT WAYS. SOMETIMES THE HARASSERS TAKE THEIR ATTACKS TOO FAR, AND THEY COMMIT MURDER. OTHER TIMES, THE TARGETED TEEN GETS PUSHED INTO A VIOLENT REACTION, PERHAPS TAKING A GUN TO SCHOOL KNOWING THAT IN ANY INTERACTION HE WILL DIE.

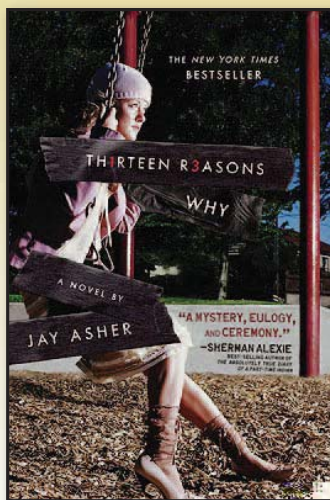
Then there are those targets who turn inward. They aren't angry as much as ashamed, and that shame tears down their identity. In some cases, the bullying intensifies and the target cannot bear it any longer—living hurts too much—and that youth chooses suicide to escape the pain and loneliness. Bullycide is a word coined by Neil Marr and Tim Field in their book **Bullycide: Death at Playtime—An Expose of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying**.



Authors who write for teens are exposing this tragedy in their work: Jay Asher in **Thirteen Reasons Why** and Julie Anne Peters in **By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead**. Each book tells the story of a high school girl who has been the target of bullying for too long.

Bott: Welcome Julie Anne Peters and Jay Asher! Would you each briefly introduce your book for our readers?

Asher: **Thirteen Reasons Why** begins when Clay finds a package addressed to him on his doorstep. Inside are several audiotapes, their sides labeled one through thirteen. When he presses play on the first tape, he hears the voice of Hannah Baker, his classmate and crush who recently committed suicide. Each side of each tape, she says, tells the story about a different person at school who influenced her decision. Each person who received the tapes was one of the reasons why [she killed herself]. In one tense night, Clay wanders through town, listening to Hannah's last words . . . unable to imagine what he could have possibly done.



Peters: Daelyn Rice is taunted at school on a daily basis about being overweight. She begs her parents to be homeschooled, but they don't see it as the solution to Daelyn's inability to deal with name-calling and teasing. As the harassment escalates, Daelyn's response begins to manifest in self-destructive behaviors, even attempts at suicide. Her parents move her from school to school and even send her to fat camp, but by the time Daelyn reaches middle school, she's already decided her only escape from the tormentors is to eliminate the source of the torment—herself.

Bott: Although Daelyn's life is filled with pain, she does have short respites. The idea that she signed up for chorus even though she couldn't speak made me smile and endeared her to me even more. How else did you lighten her load?

Peters: I threw everything I could think of at Daelyn. I gave her every reason to live—loving parents, trained professionals, medical science, God, a fresh start, a new friend, the possibility of romantic love. Then I left it up to her.

Bott: Jay, after I read **Thirteen Reasons Why**, I listened to the CD and found it haunting yet also comforting. Maybe because even though I knew Hannah was dead, her prerecorded voice was filled with an array of emotions. Somehow it made the book less sad. I feel guilty saying that.

Asher: I spent a lot of time coming up with ways to make this book a little less sad. So I'll take your concern as a compliment! Knowing

Hannah was dead made the book a little less sad. Since she is gone, there's nothing anyone can do to help her anymore, so it's just a matter of listening to her story.

In my research, I found this one fact that allowed Hannah to express that array of emotions you mentioned, although it's contrary to the stereotype of suicidal people being so depressed [that] they can barely get out of bed. Many people struggle with suicidal thoughts for a long time. When they come to the decision that they're going to do it, there's often a sense of peace that overcomes them. It was under that sense of calm that Hannah recorded her tapes.

Bott: *I thought you both were very brave in writing these books. Julie, Daelyn's tortured past comes to readers through her reflections, but then you give them Daelyn at the end of her years of torment. We watch her prepare for suicide, determined that this time she will succeed. Jay, yours is a complete and structured examination of sexual harassment that builds from an irresponsible comment into a power capable of destroying a young girl's life. How did you come to write such books?*

Peters: In October 2006, I was preparing for a talk at an upcoming ALAN workshop, where you chaired a panel of authors addressing the issue of bullying in literature. A few months before, you'd sent me the presentation's title, "Don't Look and It Will Go Away: YA Books—A Key to Uncovering the Invisible Problem of Bullying."

For my part of the panel discussion, I planned to read letters from young readers who described the harassment they'd been subjected to at school and at home for coming out as gay. Bullying ranged from years of taunting and verbal abuse to physical assault to family disownment. Self-injury is high among gay youth, and suicide is mentioned so often in the letters I receive that it's agonizing to know gay youth feel that suicide is their only way out.

During that same time, I saw a special report on television about kids who'd been so severely bullied in school from kindergarten on that they'd either dropped out or were forced into homeschooling. Even if they had pleaded for help, they'd received little or no adult intervention to stop the abuse. The camera showed the hopelessness in their eyes. Several parents talked about their bullied kids who in the end committed suicide. Later, I'd learn the term for it: bullycide.

After that presentation, questions began to formulate in my brain. Why do some children survive harassment while others cannot? Are we born with an overarching sense of self-preservation? Are we given free will at birth? When and why and how do we begin to exercise free will in self-destructive ways? If a child is constantly bullied and teased with no relief in sight, how long does it take before she or he loses hope? How can we not know our children are hurting? This novel was a search for answers.

Asher: There are all sorts of unearned reputations you can get in high school. I decided to have Hannah's sexual reputation play a big part in her story, leading to even more harassment, because those were the [kinds of] rumors that affected every female I talked to while working on the book. If readers are lucky enough to have escaped those rumors, they've no doubt heard them swirling around their school hallways. It was important to me that readers recognize some of the things said about Hannah . . . and then have a chance to hear how much pain those rumors caused her.

One of the most frustrating things I've heard with regard to my book is when some people hold up things Hannah went through as things most girls go through, and yet those girls learned to deal with it. But like Julie asked, why do some children

YOUNG ADULT NOVELS WITH BULLYCIDES OR ATTEMPTED BULLYCIDES

Anderson, Laurie Halse. **Twisted**. Viking, 2007. 272p. \$16.99. 978-0-670-06101-3. \$9.99 Trade pb. 978-0-14-241184-1. VOYA April 2007. 5Q 5P S

Asher, Jay. **Thirteen Reasons Why**. Razorbill/Penguin, 2007. 320p. \$16.99. 978-1-59514-171-2. \$8.99 Trade pb. 978-1-59514-188-0. VOYA February 2008. 4Q 4P J S

Brugman, Alyssa. **Walking Naked**. Laurel Leaf/Random House, 2005, ©2003. 208p. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0-440-23832-4. VOYA April 2003. 5Q 4P J S

Flinn, Alex. **Breaking Point**. HarperCollins, 2003, ©2002. 256p. \$8.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-447371-2. VOYA June 2002. 4Q 4P J S

Goobie, Beth. **The Dream Where Losers Go**. Orca, 2006. 204p. \$8.95 Trade pb. 978-1-55143-455-1. VOYA October 2006. 4Q 4P S

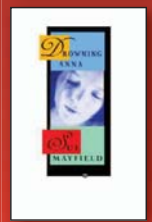
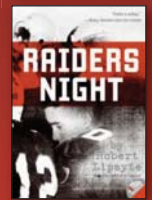
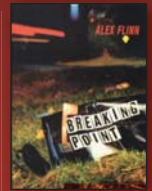
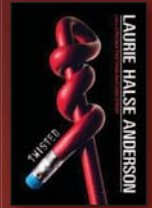
Koss, Amy Goldman. **Poison Ivy**. Roaring Brook/Macmillan, 2006. 192p. \$16.95. 978-1-59643-118-8. \$6.99 Trade pb. 978-0-312-38453-1. VOYA April 2006. 3Q 3P M J S

Lipsyte, Robert. **Raiders Night**. HarperCollins, 2006. 256p. \$15.99. 978-0-06-059946-1. PLB \$16.89. 978-0-06-059947-8. \$6.99 Trade pb. 978-0-06-059948-5. VOYA April 2006. 4Q 3P J S

Mayfield, Sue. **Drowning Anna**. Hyperion/DBG, 2004, ©2002. 256p. \$5.99 Trade pb. 978-0-7868-0957-8. VOYA February 2003. 3Q 4P J S

Peters, Julie Anne. **By the Time You Read This, I'll Be Dead**. Hyperion/DBG, 2010. 211p. \$16.99. 978-1-4231-1618-9. VOYA December 2009. 4Q 3P S

Tullson, Diane. **Lockdown**. Orca Soundings, 2008. 103p. \$16.95. 978-1-55143-918-1. \$9.95 Trade pb. 978-1-55143-916-7.



survive harassment while others can't? No one knows for sure, but wouldn't it be better to talk about these things and try to stop them than simply shrug them off as a part of growing up? That attitude scares the heck out of me.

Bott: *It is interesting to me that you both chose female main characters. Both are harassed about their bodies, Daelyn for being overweight, Hannah for having "the best ass." How did these attributes make them easy targets?*

Asher: My early understanding of the issue came from a female relative who attempted suicide, which probably influenced me. I did question whether or not the character should be male, but because most teens who attempt suicide are female, I thought it was appropriate to discuss the issues through her.

The first "reason" Hannah gives for her downward spiral is a rumor that pinned her with an undeserved reputation. She speaks a lot about that one rumor growing in a snowball effect, and she can't shake it. She feels getting voted "best ass" started that reputation. Public objectification gave some boys one more excuse to treat her like a thing.

Peters: It wasn't a deliberate decision, for me, to choose a female protagonist. This story began and ended with Daelyn Rice. Body image is what girls are frequently bullied about, or feel the most self-conscious about, so Daelyn's hypersensitivity to her weight seemed a perfect fit for a book about bullycide.

It's interesting to note how Jay correctly states that more girls attempt suicide; however, according to the statistics I read, more boys actually complete the act. Bullycide doesn't discriminate.

NONFICTION RESOURCES

Bullycide in America: Moms Speak Out About the Bullying/Suicide Connection. Compiled by Brenda High. JBS Publishing, 2007. 252p. \$20 Trade pb. 978-1-59029-069-9. Available for order at <http://bullycide.org>. Encouraged by Brenda High, seven mothers who lost children to bullycide tell their children's stories—the terrorizing bullies, their frustration with the schools and police, their feeling powerlessness in not being able to protect their children, and the devastation of their children's sudden unexpected bullycide. Each mother gives her child a voice here, purging the sadness, anger, and helplessness and enabling them to discover a healing power and a mission to make sure no other parents ever have to face such a loss.



Marr, Neil, and Tim Field. **Bullycide: Death at Playtime—An Exposé of Child Suicide Caused by Bullying.** Success Unlimited, 2001. 303p. \$23.84. 978-0-95291-212-5.

In 2001, Marr and Field coined the word bullycide to mean the act of killing oneself to escape bullying. Their book begins with Steven Shepherd, an eleven-year-old who has been identified as Britain's first reported bullycide in 1967. Britain's youngest recorded victim of bullycide in 2000 was eight-year-old Marie Bentham, who hanged herself with her jump rope tied to the bedroom doorknob. By the time their book was published, Marr and Field accounted for "a minimum bullycide toll of five to seven hundred lives lost since Steven Shepherd." Their research reveals "that each year in the UK at least sixteen children commit bullycide and around eighty children attempt bullycide." There is no way to know the number of children worldwide who contemplate committing bullycide. Marr and Field also introduce readers to some of the preventive programs now active in Britain, from training for school staffs to an attempt to heighten the awareness of all coroners to signs of bullycide.

Marr and Field conclude saying, "Each bullycide is an unpalatable fact that a child has died as a result of the deliberate actions of another in an environment where the responsible adults have failed to provide a mechanism for reporting, intervening, and dealing with physical and psychological violence."

Bott: *How did you prepare yourself to write these books?*

Peters: I searched the Internet for everything I could find about suicide methods, first of all. I was shocked by how easy it is to find step-by-step instructions on how to kill yourself. Beyond that, I found bully boards and other online communities where members talk about how they intend to channel their rage. Eventually internalized rage, or bullycide, came up, and I focused on it exclusively—the how, what, and why. By the end of the book, I'd collected a crate full of research notes.

Asher: Rarely do suicidal thoughts come out of the blue because of one incident. For many people, it's a gradual loss of hope. Up until they make the decision to end their lives, most people want to live. But sometimes the downward slide is so long, they can't imagine a life without harassment or whatever else is causing their pain. I consciously did very little research to prepare for the book other than speaking with my relative who attempted suicide. I wanted Hannah's emotions to lead the story, rather than shape the story to fit any statistics I came across. After I finished the first draft, I did a lot of book and online research. Thankfully I discovered that Hannah did follow a very common emotional arc of a suicidal person, and I added some additional elements to highlight certain signs of a suicidal person.

Bott: *What was the hardest part to write?*

Asher: Near the end, Hannah gives up on herself. She gives in to her reputation because that's easier than fighting anymore. The closer I got to writing that scene, the more nervous I became.

It was an important scene, but I didn't want to write it. I kept hoping that somehow Hannah would pull through. It was very painful to allow her to give up.

Peters: Two parts: the helplessness of Daelyn's parents to know how to help their damaged daughter, and the ending.

Bott: *Have you known anyone who committed suicide because of bullying? If you have, did that influence you?*

Peters: I have known people, young and old, who have committed suicide, but they didn't confide their deepest feelings to me. What influenced me most to write this book was being on a panel with you, C. J., and hearing you speak so passionately against bullying. People hear the word so often they almost become immune to it, to the impact on a young person's self-esteem throughout her or his entire life. If we are lucky, we wake up one day and say, "I get it. I finally get it."

Asher: While figuring out Hannah's reasons, I spoke to several girls about their high school experiences. Every one of them discussed the difficult emotions stemming from hearing rumors spread about them. Personally I never thought of rumors as an aspect of bullying until I wrote this book, but they definitely are.

Bott: *Given the subject, I would expect there to be attacks made on your books. Jay, has your book had any threats of censorship? Julie, because your book will be released until 2010, have you or your publisher prepared for this possibility?*

Asher: Attacks pop up occasionally, and I do understand why people are uncomfortable with the subject matter. But that's exactly why books like mine and Julie's are so important. Our society does a horrible job of discussing things that are uncomfortable. But if we sweep those issues under the rug, someone dealing with those emotions won't know where to turn for help. Or they'll be afraid to ask for help. Usually censors are simply afraid of what they "think" teens will get out of the book. Their thought process, of course, never leads them to find out what teens are actually getting out of the book. I've had many teens tell me they wouldn't be alive had they not read my book. Thank God no one stepped between them and Hannah's story.

Peters: I've learned over the years that you don't know what kinds of letters you're going to receive about your books. You may brace for an onslaught that never happens and end up regretting all the life energy you wasted worrying, so I'm taking a "wait and see" approach.

Bott: *Can we conclude with the voices of those who have written to each of you?*

Peters: Here are excerpts from two that broke my heart:

"I've had a pretty rough time coming out . . . I reached out for help and advice from an adult when I started getting beaten up pretty badly. She was my teacher. I guess she didn't want to deal with my messed up situation. The next time I got beat up I was hospitalized with a broken arm, broken nose, and severe concussion. I told my mom. We filed a restraining order against two of the guys. They came back. Raped me. And now they're both in juvie. To put it bluntly—it's too hard to still write about."—Kat

"Is it possible for someone to be loveless? I think that's what I am, seeing that no one talks to me. I don't blame them. I'm tall, not the thinnest, and I'm odd with my big eyes (I'm cursed). I know it's kind of weird for you to answer this, but I just wonder so much."—Stacie



BULLY PREVENTION RESOURCES

- Be Web Aware.** <http://www.bewebaware.ca>. (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- Boys Town National Hotline.** 1 (800) 448-3000. <http://www.boystown.org/aboutus/hotline/pages/CrisisHotline.asp>. (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- Help Me Now! (Kids Help Phone).** 1 (800) 668-6868. <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/home.asp> (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- i-Safe.** <http://www.isafe.org> (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center.** 1 (866) SAFEYOUTH. 1 (866) 723-3968. <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/bullying.asp> (Accessed October 7, 2009).

SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCES

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP).** 1 (888) 333-AFSP. 1 (888) 333-2377. <http://www.afsp.org>. (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- National Suicide Hotline.** 1 (800) SUICIDE. 1 (800) 784-2433.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.** 1 (800) 273-TALK. (800) 273-8255.
- Suicide Awareness Voices of Education.** <http://www.save.org> (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- Suicide Hotlines.** <http://suicidehotlines.com>. (Accessed October 7, 2009).
- Suicide and Mental Health Association International.** <http://www.suicideandmentalhealthassociationinternational.org>. (Accessed October 7, 2009).



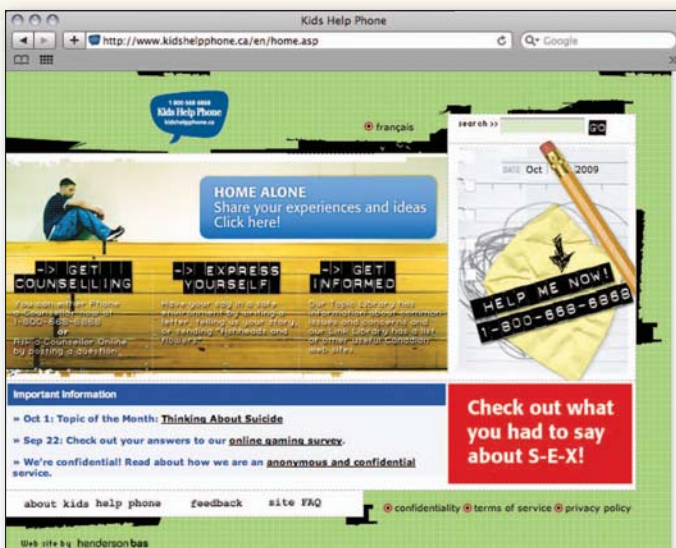
Asher: Yes, here are several.

*"The truth is that this book has saved my life. This past October, I was in a pretty bad place. I swallowed about eighty Tylenol according to the doctors. But somehow, I survived and am perfectly healthy. When I was laying there, I kept thinking what I would do next. I came up with a couple of different ways I could have ended it, no chance to be saved. But then I started reading **Thirteen Reasons Why**. It gave me the hope I needed to get where I am today. I can honestly credit the fact that I am still alive to you and your amazing novel. Thank you so much. For everything."*

"For the past couple years I have actually been struggling with the thought of suicide, and everything you mentioned and portrayed were so accurate; the rumors, the boys, the drama, everything. And it makes me feel so much better knowing that someone understands. I just wanted to let you know that your book gave me hope. It made me realize that no matter how much you think no one is there, they might be the person you least expect. And I want to thank you for helping make a difference in my life."

I've also heard from people who say the book made them reach out to people in trouble.

"[Your book] made me pick up the phone and call a girl who I knew for a fact was well on her way to meet your character Hannah's fate and made her talk everything out with me. I skipped dinner and talked to her [for] four hours and I wouldn't let it go until she told me everything. So thank you for putting down a story that involves something that happens all the time, people not helping each other and letting things slide. Thank you for giving me the drive to help someone else." ■



Retired after thirty years of teaching high school, C. J. Bott is now an educational consultant dealing with issues of bullying and harassment. She has written two books, *The Bully in the Book and in the Classroom* (Scarecrow, 2004/VOYA December 2004) and *More Bullies in More Books* (Scarecrow, 2009/VOYA August 2009), in which she promotes using literature in K–12 schools to discuss the problems of bullying and harassment as a prevention program. Visit her Web site at <http://www.bulliesinbooks.com>.