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Examining the Depiction of Domestic Violence in Popular Adult Fiction: A Review of Six Novels

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Introduction

Popular culture is a powerful teacher about a variety of peace, conflict and justice-related issues. As such, it is a tool for peacebuilding education (Brantmeier, 2007). Scholars have long recognized the importance of using literature and music to critique war, to draw attention to inequalities, and alternately, to promote peace (Ahlkvist, 1999, 2001; Brkich, 2012; Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002; Franzak & Noll, 2006; Noddings, 2006; Wolk, 2009; Wright & Kowalczyk, 2000). As an alternative or augment to traditional text books, popular culture can help reach students who learn in different ways (Gardner, 2006), and can help to develop emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Students who are bored with typical texts and lectures may not only find popular culture more interesting, but they may also be able to learn more from it because they see its' relevance in their lives (Buckingham, 2014). Violence is ubiquitous and is not only reflected in popular culture but generated through it as well (Giroux, 2013). It is imperative, then, that peace educators help promote media literacy that examines various forms of popular culture through a critical lens (Buckingham, 2014).

One subject that has received a great deal of attention in both the field of peace and conflict studies as well as in film, television, music and other forms of popular culture is domestic violence. The U.S Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) defines domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (What is Domestic Violence, 2014). Domestic violence can take many forms, including physical abuse, emotional and verbal abuse, sexual assault, financial control, manipulation of children, isolation, and more (What is domestic violence, 2014).

Numerous studies have identified domestic violence as one of the most frequently occurring crimes across the globe. An estimated one-third of the world's women will endure an abusive relationship during their lifetimes, while in the United States, one in four women and one in seven men will be victims of domestic violence. Every nine seconds a woman is physically assaulted by an intimate partner, and some 1,300 people are killed each year by abusers. According to a study by the World Health Organization (WHO), women are at greater risk in the home than in any other location (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005). While males are also victims, most studies find that women are at greater risk, and that female victims of domestic violence generally experience more frequent and severe physical injuries more than do males (Foshee, 1996; Molidor & Tolman, 1998).

Studies have also reported an increase in popular culture coverage of domestic violence. McCall (2009) noted a 120 percent increase in the number of portrayals of domestic violence in prime-time television between 2004 and 2009, with a concomitant increase in the graphic nature of these depictions. Unfortunately, many of the storylines and depictions of abusive relationships are problematic in that they reinforce myths and misconceptions about victims and perpetrators, the forms abuse may take, how victims can obtain safety, and the short and long-term effects of domestic violence. Domestic violence is typically depicted in crime-related TV shows that provide narratives to help viewers understand, or in some cases, misunderstand, this social problem. Victims are often presented in such dramatic ways that viewers see them as dissimilar to themselves. It is posited that this increases people's propensity to blame victims (Best, 1999; Berns & Schweingruber, 2007). Likewise, films disseminate images and narratives about abuse. Rafter (2000) notes that popular movies often reinforce dangerous stereotypes about who commits crime, as well as about the best ways to respond to it. Britto, Hughes, Saltzman and Stroh (2007) explain that the typical formula for crime dramas--, an evil offender who commits a violent crime and a zealous police officer who does what it takes to apprehend the

perpetrator—“can create powerful ideological images of crime, the efficiency of the criminal justice system, and characteristics of offenders and victims” (p. 40). Feminist scholars have argued that the violence typical in pornographic films especially has created unrealistic expectations about what an intimate relationship should include (Dines, 2010).

Literature has the potential to more accurately depict healthy and unhealthy relationships than other forms of popular culture, as the length of a book allows for more nuanced discussion and character development. As such, fiction novels can be an important tool for teaching about domestic violence, not only in a formal, classroom manner but also informally to readers. Rybakova, Piotrowski, and Harper (2013) discuss the merits of using fiction to teach about social justice issues, noting that “literature allows us to see people as they truly are: complex, good, evil, and sometimes contradictory in their words and actions” (p. 39). Leavy (2012) noted the importance of fiction as a qualitative research source, describing it as offering a different view on social experiences and people’s real lives, an opportunity to address multiple meanings, and a source of deep reflection that is accessible to a wide array of audiences. Fiction taps into emotions in a way that other sources sometimes do not or cannot. Dunlop (2001) describes fiction novels as “exploratory, explanatory, hopeful, and generative” (p.12), while others express the importance of analyzing fiction as a form of public scholarship (Leavy, 2012). As Banks (2008) explains, fiction is not entirely “fictional,” given that it is written by real people, rooted in the human experience. Further, as Leavy (2012) explains, most novelists draw on social science data and immerse themselves in social science experiences--through interviews, observations, and other methods--in order to write stories that are at least somewhat plausible. Author Joyce Carol Oates, whose novels address many social issues including domestic violence and sexual assault, once told an interviewer that she sees herself as not just a writer but as a witness to history (Germaine, 1989, p. 137). McDaniel (2013) explains,

“fiction is a rich resource for examining beliefs about partner violence...the popularity of some fiction extends its reach considerably farther than that of policy, advocacy or even the law in its likelihood to influence social expectations, norms and values, and beliefs about what is or is not acceptable behavior ” (p. 18).

Much has been written about young adult literature and abusive relationships. For instance, studies have assessed the misconceptions and potentially dangerous stereotypes promoted in young adult novels like the *Twilight* series. In those four novels by Stephenie Meyer, Bannar (2010) found 172 examples of unhealthy relationship behavior. Critics contend that young adult

novels tend to feature abusive protagonists who are sexy and dangerous, and thus readers may find them likeable despite their behaviors (Bannar, 2010).

Yet there are other popular young adult novels that have been applauded for their depiction of abusive relationships. Several non-profit organizations that focus on dating violence recommend using young adult fiction to teach youth about healthy and unhealthy relationships. Break the Cycle provides curricula regarding use of several popular young adult fiction novels to teach about dating violence. Futures Without Violence has a website and curriculum devoted to Lessons from Literature. Many schools use Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* for this purpose. Malo-Juvera (2014) conducted an experiment examining the effect of classroom activities about *Speak* on middle school students. He found that both boys and girls who completed the unit were significantly less likely to accept rape myths.

It is somewhat surprising, then, that few studies focus on popular adult fiction and how it might be received by readers. Bonomi et al. (2013) conducted a content analysis of the *50 Shades of Grey* trilogy. They found that emotional abuse dominated the relationship between the main characters, Anastasia and Christian, and that it was this form of power and control that set the stage for stalking, isolation, intimidation, humiliation, and sexual violence. Further, they determined that Anastasia's reaction to Christian is consistent with those of battered women, who attempt to keep the peace, alter themselves to please their abusers, yearn for happier times, and ultimately feel trapped and disempowered. Finally, they found that sexual violence permeated all of the couple's 13 sexual encounters. Psychologist Susan Quilliam, in an interview with Rettner (2011), maintains that romance novels such as these can lead female readers to have unrealistic expectations for relationships.

It is through the telling of new stories and the use of new narratives that a deeper understanding of and improved responses to domestic violence will result, according to Stark (2007) and Polletta (2009). Stories can result in lasting attitudinal change on social issues, although the most compelling are not those that are too explicit but instead highlight the daily challenges of enduring an abusive relationship (Polletta, 2009; Slater, Rouner & Long, 2006). Since the 1980s, domestic violence storylines have essentially been told as tragedies, emphasizing Battered Woman's Syndrome and the most violent, often deadly, cases. Victims who appear too angry or aggressive don't work with this narrative, as women who fight back are only doing so, the story goes, because they are at their wits end. Other stories use a quest theme, which better illustrates victims' agency but over-emphasizes their efforts to escape. Polletta (2009) explains that

this can result in unreasonable expectations regarding victims and their ability to go to such great lengths to leave abusers. As a result, readers may judge or express less sympathy for victims who are unable, emotionally, physically or otherwise, to plot such escapades.

This paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature about popular culture and domestic abuse by providing a review of its depiction in six popular adult fiction novels. Novels were selected using a search on Goodreads for the terms “adult fiction and domestic violence.” Only those written since 2005 were included. Any novels that were more focused on young adults were excluded from the review. The books reviewed include: *Big Little Lies* (2014), *The Girl Who Played With Fire* (2009), *Secrets of Eden* (2010), *Hush Little Baby* (2013), *Into the Darkest Corner* (2013), and *The Girl on the Train* (2015). The paper describes the ways that the books accurately depict victims, abusers, the dynamics of abuse, its effects, and barriers to safety. It also discusses concerns with the depiction of domestic violence, noting where the books may miss important aspects of the dynamics of abuse or otherwise reinforce misconceptions about it. Connections to the literature on domestic violence are woven through the analysis of each selected novel and implications for readers are included in the conclusion.

Analysis of Selected Novels

Big Little Lies

Liane Moriarty’s (2014) *Big Little Lies* offers a nuanced perspective on domestic violence involving an affluent woman. One of the main characters, Celeste, is known for having it all—she is beautiful and rich and she and her husband, Perry, seem to make the perfect pair. Little does anyone know that behind closed doors, Perry has what Celeste at first calls a “temper problem.” Each time he slaps her he apologizes, and she, like so many victims, wants desperately to believe him. Perry always buys her expensive gifts afterwards, and Celeste has observed that once an “eruption” passes, the power shifts in their relationship, at least for a short time. As is the case with many victims, Celeste grapples with what she must be doing wrong to make this “perfect” man act violently toward her, and for the longest time she cannot dream of leaving him because she really doesn’t WANT to: she merely wants that portion of their relationship to end. She believes Perry is a good father, and she loves their good times. Perry is careful to ensure that the physical signs of his abuse are minimal and easily hidden or explained, even to Celeste’s closest friends.

Research shows that middle and upper class women like Celeste experience abuse, but it is difficult to gauge the true frequency given that they are far less likely to report it to police or seek help through domestic violence hotlines or shelters. In *Not To People Like Us*, therapist Susan Weitzman (2000) discusses

what she calls “upscale violence.” On her website, Weitzman (2008) described the following characteristics: A combined marital income of at least \$100,000 per year; Marital residence in a neighborhood ranked in the top 25 % of its statewide area, according to Census data; or in some cases, neighborhoods highly ranked according to commonly held reputation; A self-perception of being upper-middle class or upper class; and a minimum of a Bachelor's Degree. These women are often used to being successful and thus try to fix things. They may feel trapped by their own privilege and are often disbelieved by others.” Like *Big Little Lies*, studies have shown that coverage of white, upper class victims is more likely to depict them sympathetically, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more portrayed as deeply flawed and even at fault for the abuse (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Berns, 2004).

Celeste also naively, but again, like so many victims, believes that her twin boys have no idea about the abuse. She believes that Perry is a good father to the boys. The final straw, however, is when Celeste learns that one of the twins, Max, has been bullying girls at the school. Another boy, the son of newcomer Jane, has been taking the blame for the bullying, and many of the mothers at the school have ostracized Jane and encouraged their kids not to play with her son, Ziggy. Celeste realizes that the boys have indeed seen at least some of the abuse, and Max is replicating what his father does. It all comes to an end when a scandalous secret about Perry’s past is revealed and Celeste publicly outs him as an abuser.

Research is clear that, like Celeste’s boys, children see and hear most of what is happening in abusive relationships, although it is often difficult for them to make sense of it. Estimates vary as to how many children are victimized by or who witness violence in their homes each year, but the numbers are in the multiple millions (Grossman & DeGaetano, 2014). Child witnesses or victims often blame themselves, and suffer from a host of emotional and other challenges. They may be angry at the abuser but also at the victim for staying in the relationship. Groves (2002) explains that domestic violence is the most toxic type of violence children are exposed to, as it teaches them that threats and force are acceptable tools for getting what one wants.

Studies of childhood trauma have found that it is very similar to that of adults, and that children can also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder as well as nightmares, insomnia, and gastrointestinal problems (Riger, Raja & Camacho, 2002). Child victims and witnesses feel that their world is unpredictable, dangerous, and hostile, and many take on a constant watchfulness for bad things, a type of hypervigilance that can affect their neurochemical stress responses (Groves, 2002). One of the biggest concerns is that children who are exposed to

violence in the home learn and begin to imitate that behavior, as did Max. Boys who witness their mothers being abused are 700 times more likely to become perpetrators of violence than boys who never observed domestic violence in their homes (Walker, 2009).

As is often the case, Perry's abuse escalates until the injuries are much more pronounced, and Celeste finally starts to accept that she might be a victim of domestic violence. She eventually sees a counselor in a town some distance away, lest anyone see her. It is clear that when she walks in she is grappling with feeling simultaneously superior to the other victims (and even the counselors) while also feeling guilty because she feels that way. This rings true to the literature on upper class victims, who often take longer or never seek help because they feel that they will be judged extra harshly due to their social status. As is typical, the thought that she plans to leave escalates the abuse, and Perry beats Celeste way worse than he ever had. Even still, Celeste is wracked with guilt, as Perry apologizes and takes care of her.

The Girl Who Played With Fire

The second in Stieg Larsson's trilogy, *The Girl Who Played With Fire*, follows protagonists Lisbeth Salander and Mikael Blomkvist as they seek to expose a sex trafficking ring involving Sweden and several Eastern European countries. The two met in the first book, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, when Blomkvist hired Salander to do some research for him. In the process, the two unravel a major mystery, Salander saves Blomkvist's life, and they begin an odd, sometimes on, sometimes off, relationship. In the second book, Blomkvist and his magazine *Millenium* are set to publish a major story that will expose a huge sex trafficking ring that runs between Eastern Europe and Sweden and that involves influential members of Sweden's police, government, and business owners. Before they can run the story the two investigators who worked on it are murdered.

Simultaneously, readers learn that Salander's state-appointed guardian, Nils Erik Bjurman, who sexually assaulted her in the first book, has been stewing with hatred for Salander since she tattooed his body with the words "I am a sadistic pig, a pervert and a rapist" after videotaping the assault. She has been using the tape as blackmail to ensure that Bjurman will file reports that keep others from investigating how she is doing and her whereabouts. Bjurman wants revenge, and hires a group of thugs to kill Salander. In the process of trying to figure out what he is doing and how the many pieces are connected, Salander steals his gun and it is found, with her fingerprints on it, at the murder site. Not long after, Bjurman is murdered by the very thugs he hired to kill Salander, and a massive manhunt ensues to find her and charge her with the murders.

Blomkvist and others doubt she is guilty, and as the story shifts between her perspective and that of other key players in the novel, readers learn that the head of the trafficking ring is actually her father, Alexander Zalachenko, known as Zala, and the thug who does his bidding is her half-brother, Ronald Neidermann, who has a genetic condition that makes him virtually immune from pain. Zala was a high-ranking member of the Soviet military and defected to Sweden, where for years its secret police, Sapov, has protected him. It is also revealed that Salander was institutionalized and placed under the care of the state because she tried to kill her father when she was twelve. Zala was horribly abusive to her mother, Agneta, and Lisbeth and her twin, Camilla, heard and saw most of it. While Camilla always took her father's side, Lisbeth tried to defend her mother and, knowing he would kill Agneta at some point, lit his car on fire. Zala ended up seriously injured and, through his influence with the Swedish government, convinced psychologists to declare her legally incompetent. The book concludes with Salander, helped by Blomkvist, apprehending Zala and Neidermann and calling emergency services.

Although most of the novel is devoted to the plot, the abuse of Agneta and Salander (as a child witness to Zala's abuse and at the hands of Bjurman and the other representatives of the state) is a significant factor in that it explains her motivations and, in all likelihood, a significant part of Salander's personality (Hitchens, 2009). The book even opens with the description of what readers learn Salander calls "All that evil." When she found her mother unconscious on the kitchen floor after all the prior incidents, she lit him and his car on fire.

Salander's response to her childhood trauma is atypical. Data shows that girls are more likely to internalize the trauma, resulting in higher levels of depression and an increased likelihood for disordered eating and self-mutilation. It is more common for boys to act out aggressively, as Salander does (Groves, 2002).

As Blomkvist and her previous, good-hearted advocate Holger Palmgren, try to find Salander and convince the authorities she is not responsible, Palmgren shares what she had told him about her childhood. He explains to Blomkvist the abuse of Agneta that Lisbeth and Camilla witnessed. Despite the fact that Agneta was hospitalized multiple times, no social welfare agencies ever took Lisbeth and Camilla, which readers learn is due to Zala's influence with high-ranking members of the police and government.

Salander does have supporters. The fact that her supporters are generally males is interesting and potentially problematic, given that many victims, and especially female child victims, distrust males (Groves, 2002). Salander does have a girlfriend, Miriam Wu, who provides her with affection and believes in her, but

Blomkvist definitely takes up more of the story time. The limited support, however, is indeed consistent with the literature. Friends often blame the victim, family members often live in denial, and even therapists and service agencies may ask what the victim did to provoke the abusers (Nicarthy, 2004).

Salander is, unlike many of the other victims in these novels, out for revenge against those who assailed her and her mother. Most victims prefer to get far away from their abusers, sometimes taking great length to do so. Even child victims rarely seek revenge against the assailing parent (Groves, 2002). The degree to which she seeks revenge on Bjurman and Zala is graphic and disturbing, and even victims who kill their abusers in self-defense tend not to torture them as Salander does. This is more Hollywood than reality, which loves its revenge plots, especially those involving female avengers (Heller-Nicholas, 2011; Projansky, 2001). While Salander's actions help her and perhaps prevent some future victimization at the hands of Zala and his thugs, they do nothing to challenge the dominance of males in this culture or the corruption that allowed the abuse and trafficking to continue.

Yet the fact that Salander sees no other way to hold Zala accountable than her own efforts is not surprising, either. Chemaly (2012) explains about the books, "Every permutation of gender-based violence accurately and graphically featured in that trilogy thrives in the real world justice systems that fail women." This lack of official response is, unfortunately, not atypical (Finley, 2016).

Hush Little Baby

Suzanne Redfearn's novel tells the story of Jillian and Gordon, who with their two children appear to have the perfect family. Yet for nine years Gordon abused Jillian, who went to great lengths to hide the injuries. She knew that if she ever left Gordon he would do whatever it took to destroy her and to ensure she never saw her children again. Gordon is a police officer and Jillian has learned that he will stop at nothing to maintain control.

That Gordon is a police officer is important, given that law enforcement officers are over-represented as abusers. According to the National Center For Women and Policing, some 40 percent of police officer families experience domestic violence, compared to ten percent of the general population (Police Family Violence Fact Sheet, 2013). This, of course, presents all manner of unique difficulties for victims seeking to escape abuse, as the abusers have access to weapons, know the location of shelters and other services for victims, and know how to avoid sanction, all of which are depicted in the novel. Like Gordon, who faces no repercussions until the end for his behavior, studies have shown that police-perpetrators face light, if any, sanctions, and many police agencies do not

have specific policies when faced with an officer-involved incident of domestic violence (Police Family Violence Fact Sheet, 2013).

Gordon routinely disparages Jillian and sexually assaults her. One particularly brutal outburst occurred when Gordon found a box of the morning-after pill Jillian had hidden. Gordon wants more children, and Jillian knows that is a terrible idea. The morning after the assault, they continue to put on the façade of happiness for the children. She struggles to understand the attack, which came after months of calm. Jillian explains how she copes, noting that for several weeks after an attack she will dote on Gordon in an attempt to prevent another one.

Jillian's feelings of shame are typical of victims, who feel guilty for staying but also for leaving abusers. Women who are psychologically abused often feel as though there is something wrong with them, first for choosing the partner who abuses them and also because their abuser typically tells them it is their fault. Similarly, "Crazy-making" ...involves making the victim feel as though she is imagining things. Abusers are often adept at identify particular traits that their victim is pleased with and using those against her" (NiCarthy, 2004, p. 277).

The sexual abuse Jillian endures is not atypical, either, nor is the reproductive coercion. An estimated 45 percent of women who are victims of physical forms of domestic violence also endure sexual assault by their abusers (Vagianos, 2015). Miller, Decker, McCauley, Tancredi, Levenson, Waldman, Schoenwald, Silverman (2010) found that 35 percent of victims who had experienced sexual abuse also experienced reproductive coercion. Twenty percent reported coerced pregnancy, and one in seven reported birth control sabotage. Forty percent of those women experienced at least one unintended pregnancy. Gordon's ownership of weapons legitimately increases Jillian's fears, as women are eight times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner when there are firearms in the home (Vagianos, 2015).

As the story continues, readers learn that Jillian's son Drew is doing poorly in school and has been in minor troubles, all of which she has hidden from Gordon because he is already overly pushy with Drew. That their son is showing signs of trauma at school is consistent with data on children's exposure to domestic violence. Children and adolescents may be distracted and unfocused at school, may become disruptive, or have other difficulties related to their lack of concentration. They are more likely to be suspended or expelled. Some drop out of school or begin using illicit substances (Groves, 2002). After he again attacks her, Jillian realizes that she must leave Gordon and must do so with the kids. She confides in a colleague that she needs a divorce but at that point does not explain

her reasons. As with Celeste in *Big Little Lies*, the discussion of children is important, as it shows readers that abuse affects them even when parents believe it does not.

Although not always, Gordon is often drunk when he beats Jillian. She, like many victims, spends a lot of time blaming alcohol for his behavior. His police friends have covered for him and helped ensure he didn't get a DUI. This is realistic, as alcohol and other drugs are highly correlated with abuse, both by abusers and victims. Brookoff and colleagues (1997) found that 83 percent of assailants had consumed alcohol on the day of an assault, and 45 percent of victims reported that their abuser consumed alcohol to the point of intoxication on a daily basis in the year prior to the assault. Fals-Stewart (2003) found that men in batterer's intervention programs were eight times as likely to assault their partners on days they had been drinking. Between 25 percent and 50 percent of the women receiving services for domestic violence have substance abuse problems (Sullivan et al., 2012). Advocates do caution, however, against the conclusion that drug or alcohol use causes domestic violence. While the correlations are significant, the relationship is definitely not causal. The ways that Jillian discusses this make it clear that Gordon's abuse is worse when he drinks, but that it does not cause his violence.

Jillian also found out that Gordon had bankrupted the family. Financial abuse is very common and serves as yet another means of making it near-impossible for victims to escape. Abusers sabotage victims' employment, control access to funds, credit cards and other finances, ruin victims' credit, and otherwise make them dependent (Jeltsen, 2014).

In assessing why she has endured abuse for nine years, Jillian lists "Pride, obstinancy, vanity, arrogance" (p. 68). When Jillian rationally tells him she wants a divorce, Gordon cuts off her access to bank funds and locks her out of the house, inviting to stay with him the woman with whom he has been having an affair. Eventually Jillian does tell her colleague everything, and as she describes the abuse it becomes clear that it will be difficult to prove, given that she has no hospital records and no one saw the bruises. After she files for divorce, Gordon drums up bogus allegations in his claim for sole custody of the children, yet another tool for controlling Jillian.

Jillian confides in Jeffrey, a man with whom she has had an affair and loves deeply. Gordon finds out and kills him. No one believes Gordon is the perpetrator but Jillian knows and she takes the kids and flees, with no plan other than to get away. As she knew he would, Gordon eventually finds them. Jillian is arrested for taking the kids against court order, although both her mom and dad support her and she learns that a neighbor, Michelle, had also been abused. Jillian

knows that the only thing she knows is keeping her from being killed is the fact that she is pregnant, although she is unsure whether the baby is Gordon's or Jeffrey's. Gordon has been suspended from work because he beat Claudia, the woman living with him, and despite his horrific behavior, demands that Jillian go back to work so she can support him. If she does not, he threatens that she will never see the kids again.

Things appear to swing in Jillian's favor when during the custody hearing Gordon is revealed as a liar, and the judge orders that Gordon is denied custody of the kids. Jillian is issued a restraining order prohibiting him from further contact with any of them. Gordon makes good on his promise, however, grabbing the kids and fleeing so that no one can find him. Jillian knows, though, that he won't leave her completely until the baby is born, and when he comes to attack her she kills him.

That Gordon is so determined to find them is also consistent with research about abuse. Many abusers go to great lengths to track down victims who have fled. The risk to victims is often worse when they are leaving their abusers. Some 75 percent of domestic violence homicides occur as the victim is attempting to leave, or the abuser perceives his or her actions as a sign of ending the relationship (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). A woman is seventy times more likely to be murdered by an abuser in the first few weeks of leaving than at any other time in the relationship (Vagianos, 2015).

Secrets of Eden

Chris Bohjalian's (2010) novel describes what appears to be the murder-suicide of Alice Hayward and her abusive husband, Gordon. It is told from several characters' perspectives, including Alice's pastor and former lover, Stephen Drew, Heather Laurent, a novelist whose father killed her mother in a murder-suicide, a prosecutor, Catherine Benincasa, and Alice's daughter, Katie. As the story unfolds, it is clear that while Gordon was indeed horribly abusive and he did murder his wife, he did not kill himself. Readers eventually learn that it was Katie who killed her father after finding her mother dead. Stephen Drew helped cover it up, and in the course of doing so was blamed for the murder although never found guilty. The story also revolves around issues of faith, given Stephen Drew's role as a pastor and the novelist, Heather Laurent's, work on angels.

The story opens from Stephen's perspective, revealing that he has tremendous guilt that he and others in the congregation knew that Alice was suffering and didn't do enough to prevent the atrocity. Stephen reveals that he had

an affair with Alice, noting that he knew she was emotionally damaged and that he may have taken advantage of her. Early on, Bohjalian notes that murder-suicides are rare in Vermont, where the book is set, and that abusers usually go to jail for their assaults or for murders but do not kill themselves. He also says that frequently abusers turn themselves in, a fact not supported by data. In reality, few abusers are convicted and they rarely admit guilt. Additionally, domestic violence murder-suicides are actually quite common across the U.S. More than one-third of female homicide victims in the U.S. are killed by intimate partners (Rosenberg, 2015). Unlike this story, many times the murders do not occur behind closed doors but rather in public places, and sometimes they result in additional fatalities. For instance, between 2011 and 2015, 17 women in six different beauty parlors were murdered by abusers (Rosenberg, 2015).

Readers learn through Stephen's reflections that George Hayward was emotionally abusive and controlling in many ways that are typical of abusers. Stephen recalls Alice telling him how George would ask her questions, and whatever answer she gave was going to get her into trouble. Yet, like most abusers, George is generally liked in the community, with many even considering Alice lucky to have the handsome and charming entrepreneur as a husband. Similarly, people have difficulty believing when celebrities are accused of abuse because their public personas are different than their private ones (Patterson & Sears, 2011).

Katie's reflections are typical of children and teens who witness abuse. She describes her mom's cagey answers to various questions, noting how her mom always kept secrets. When Alice allowed George to return to their home and the two attempted to reconcile, Katie observed that her mother didn't seem happy but instead was resigned to the idea. Katie also recalls that when George injured Alice's arm the night she demanded he leave, he didn't want her to go to the hospital because he was worried about his reputation. Further, Katie knows that Alice blames the abuse on George's drinking but she believes otherwise, observing that there were times when he was abusive while entirely sober. These discussions are consistent with the data on child witnesses and the role of alcohol that was described earlier in the paper.

This book presents the important component of faith, as many victims do turn to spiritual leaders for guidance about their abuse. Although Alice was not really seeking that type of help from Stephen, his failure to assist her in any meaningful way is also consistent with research that shows how frequently faith leaders still give inappropriate and dangerous counsel to victims (Fortune & Enger, 2006).

Into the Darkest Corner

Elizabeth Hayne's novel follows Catherine/Cathy before and after her boyfriend, Lee, goes to prison for attacking her. It documents the way abuse can change victims emotionally, showing how Cathy went from fun-loving, life-of-the-party to withdrawn and suffering from panic attacks and OCD as a result of Lee's horrifying verbal, physical and sexual assaults. Readers learn that she is right to be wary, as Lee has killed a woman before and, upon his release from prison, comes after Cathy. Cathy has a difficult time getting out of her flat to go to work or anywhere else, as she feels compelled to routinely check the locks and make sure everything is secure. She rarely goes out with co-workers, and readers learn that her best friends all took Lee's side when she revealed that he was abusing her. Her friend Sylvia even lied during the trial, claiming that Cathy's injuries were the result of self-harm, which likely resulted in Lee's relatively short sentence and in Cathy being institutionalized briefly. As a result, Cathy distrusts everyone, and for a long time resists the advances of her kind neighbor, Stuart, although he perseveres and the two end up in a happy relationship. A psychologist, Stuart is eminently patient and gets Cathy in touch with counselors who really help her.

Readers also learn that it is Cathy's compulsions that save her and Stuart. Her detailed observations of the security of her flat are what make her realize that someone has been inside, changing minor things, like Lee used to do when they were together as a way of messing with her mind. Again, no one believes her at first.

Like all abusers, Lee justifies his behavior and argues any problem is Cathy's fault. When he first begins engaging in rougher sex than she wants, for example, and Cathy tells him he hurt her, Lee responds that all women like it "rough." He calls her names, and, like most abusers, his behavior escalates over time. He starts assaulting her first in places where the marks aren't visible, then eventually hurts her in ways that are so obvious she has to miss work for a week. Cathy tries to leave but ends up succumbing to Lee's apologies.

Cathy tries to flee and makes elaborate plans, but Lee catches her. Making matters worse is the fact that Lee, like Gordon in *Hush Little Baby*, is a police officer. His abuse goes to a new level after her attempt to leave. Lee forces her to perform oral sex after beating her, cuts her skin in multiple places with a knife, urinates on her, and eventually locks her in her home.

Richards and Restivo (2015) note that sexual violence in intimate partner relationships has been linked to many physical and mental problems that can require extensive and long-term healing. Studies indicate that domestic violence victims whose abuser rapes them typically suffer from greater physical injury than

do women who were only physically abused (McFarlane et al., 2005). Common effects include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), bladder infections, vaginal and anal tearing, pelvic pain, urinary tract infections, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, and sexual dysfunction (Richards & Restivo, 2015). Further, that Cathy had to miss work due to the injuries Lee inflicted is not at all surprising. Women lose 8,000,000 days of paid work annually, the equivalent of 32,000 full time jobs, due to domestic violence (Vagianos, 2014).

Cathy describes how difficult the trial was, noting that it was in some ways worse than the actual abuse. This is a realistic depiction in that many victims feel similarly about their experience in court. Many victims don't even call police because they fear retaliation and doubt that they will be believed. Even fewer go all the way through with a prosecution.

Deep into the story, Cathy sees Sylvia, who reaches out to her. It turns out Sylvia was in a relationship with Lee, had been since before the trial. She learns that Sylvia, too, is being abused by Lee and fears for her safety. Cathy contacts Sam Hollands about her concerns. Shortly after, Lee shows up in her flat, and attacks Stuart. He is upset because Cathy lost their baby after his last attack and he didn't know she was pregnant. The book ends with a letter Lee wrote to Cathy, claiming that he loves her and won't rest until they can be together.

Lee's stalking of Cathy is common, with 81 percent of victims who have been physically assaulted also experiencing stalking by their abusers (Vagianos, 2015). Cathy does have a powerful ally in Sam Hollands, a victim advocate assigned to her case. She does take Cathy seriously and encourages her to call whenever she needs anything.

The Girl on the Train

Paula Hawkins' novel is a thriller about a woman who has gone missing and another who thinks she may know something about it. The protagonist, Rachel, is an unemployed drunk who watches a couple out the train window every day. She notices the woman, Megan, kissing another man, then Megan goes missing. No one wants to believe that Rachel might have anything useful to say because, readers learn, she has been a mess since learning that her husband, Tom, had an affair with a woman whom he subsequently married. The couple has an infant daughter, something Megan could never provide her husband. In fact, Rachel has had a hard time leaving them alone, and her constant calls and visits to their home even make her a suspect at one point. Tom claims he cheated on Rachel because she had been drinking and was verbally and occasionally abusive to him. As the story unfolds, however, readers learn that it was Tom who was the

abuser, and he took advantage of Rachel's weak emotional state and drinking to make her feel crazy. It turns out that Megan had been having an affair with her psychiatrist, but before that, she had one with Tom when she worked as a nanny in his home. When he found out she was pregnant, Tom killed Megan.

Through hazy recollections, Rachel shares moments of Tom telling her how she supposedly behaved. She came to believe him, since she was typically too drunk to remember clearly. She saw Tom the night of the murder, but she was drunk and presumed that he was with his wife, Anna. Rachel can't really recall what happened that night, but she believes Tom, as she always does, when he tells her some story about what happened to her, even though there's a glimmer of memory that it might have happened differently than he is describing. She blames herself for Tom having left her, telling people that it was her fault because her drinking made him stop loving her.

Later, she tells a therapist about an experience when she believes she attacked Tom with a golf club. At least that's the story Tom tells, but readers learn later it was actually Tom who attacked Rachel. She recalls that she woke up the next morning and Tom would not talk to her. This disclosure helps Rachel remember an odd emotion from the incident: terror. She recalls another time he told her she attacked him but it was Rachel who woke up with blood on her pillow, a headache, and the inside of her mouth hurting. In essence, she has relinquished her voice to Tom so that he controlled the narrative of their relationship.

As the story continues, Anna starts to realize that Tom might not be so perfect, but she still distrusts Rachel. She learns that he has been lying to her and manipulating her. Rachel tries to warn her, but Anna is in denial that Tom could be as brutal as he is. When Rachel confronts him in front of Anna, accusing him of killing Megan, he resorts to the same techniques of discrediting her because she is a drunk. Rachel ends up killing Tom in self-defense.

Discussion

These novels accurately depict many aspects of domestic violence. First, they show the many forms of control employed by abusers, including verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and manipulation of children. Second, they showcase victims of different social classes, depicting both affluent women and those with little financial stability. Third, they avoid the pitfall of most popular culture in that victims are not all portrayed as purely loveable but instead are flawed yet still believable. Even Rachel, a drunk, ends up being depicted as believable. Fourth, the novels also nicely illustrate the effects of witnessing abuse on children, including the ways abuse impacts both little children and teens and its

effects on their behavior with others as well as in school. Fifth, the selected books show the many barriers victims face in trying to leave abusers, such as financial dependence, lack of support, and abusers who are committed to tracking them down. Sixth, two of the selected novels highlight the unique difficulties for victims whose abusers are law enforcement officers. Seven, the fact that only one of the victims, Cathy, is ever involved in a trial of her abuser is also realistic, as is the fact that it was someone else, not Cathy, who actually contacted the police. Data show that only 25 percent of physical assaults are reported to law enforcement (Vagianos, 2015).

There are a few things that were missing from these depictions, however. First, although it is not always clear the racial or ethnic background of characters, the context in which these stories are presented seems to suggest that all the victims are Caucasian. This stands in stark contrast to the statistics that make it clear that women of color are at far greater risk for victimization (Domestic violence by race and ethnicity, 2016; Sugarman, 2013). In some Native American communities, women are killed by intimate partners at rates ten times the national average. Yet few cases are reported to police, and when they are, few result in arrest, prosecution, and conviction (Chemaly, 2012). Research also shows that immigrants are at greater risk than are non-immigrants, a fact that received no attention in these books (The facts on immigrant women and domestic violence, n.d).

Second, lesbian women are at greater risk for experiencing an abusive relationship, with some 50 percent reporting domestic violence during their lifetime (Vagianos, 2014). Yet none of these popular novels featured a lesbian couple. While Salanger was in a female-female relationship, it was generally a healthy one.

Third, while data does show women are more frequently the victims of domestic violence, one in seven men also experience abusive intimate partner relationships (Vagianos, 2015). No male victims were depicted in these novels.

Fourth, these novels tend to depict victims who are struggling in silence. While that is indeed realistic, as many never tell family, friends, or others about their abuse, it might result in readers believing it is on victims alone to escape abusers. Only one, Cathy, has a victim advocate who supports her. For readers who may be experiencing abuse, this could reduce the likelihood that they would reach out to supporters or to law enforcement or shelters that could offer assistance. For readers who are not victims, it may reinforce a type of victim-blaming whereby the ownership for ending the abuse falls on the victim. Berns (2004), Kettrey and Emery (2010), and others have noted that typical coverage of domestic violence focuses on individual responsibility, rather than on collective

change. Yet victims have long reported that their calls to police and service agencies go unanswered and thus they sometimes feel compelled to act alone. One study of female inmates in a California prison found that 93 percent who were incarcerated for killing their significant other had endured abuse from that individual, and 97 percent of those women reported that they wounded or killed their partner while trying to defend themselves or their children. Another study in New York found that 67 of the women who were imprisoned for killing someone had been abused by that individual (Law, 2014). Law (2014) interviewed several domestic violence survivors who were imprisoned for defending themselves. Each woman reported that she had defended herself only after repeatedly trying to seeking help. Child welfare investigators do not always do their jobs well, either, such as in the case of Florida, where 477 children in just six years died in homes the Department of Children and Families (DCF) had investigated and found to be safe. Most of these cases involved domestic violence (Innocents Lost, n.d.). Even service-providers have been critiqued for their lack of attention to class, race, and cultural differences, and because of their hierarchical nature that is individual, not collective, focused (Finley, 2016; Projansky, 2001).

Fifth, the fact that only one of the women was murdered despite all the signs of very serious escalation is potentially problematic. Clearly domestic violence homicides are not desirable, but by over-representing victims' ability to evade the most committed abusers, these novels run the risk of minimizing the red flags of lethality posed by the abusers. This is true of Hollywood as well, which loves films like *Enough* and *Sleeping With the Enemy*, in which victims prove more clever than their abusers and willing to face potentially lethal abuse head on (Finley, 2016). Although revenge films like *The Girl Who Played with Fire* suggest that the action is empowering, Rebecca Stringer (2011) notes "that the lone female vigilante is actually anti-feminist due to the focus on individualism over community." Further, Stringer argues "lone vigilantism is the very opposite of the actual strategies advocated in feminist anti-violence efforts, which have primarily assumed the form of collective political struggle" (in Stache, 2013, p. 93).

Sixth, none of the novels really sought to explain the behavior of the abusers. This is not necessarily atypical, as popular culture rarely offers detailed explanation for the actions of criminals, and when it does it tends to over-emphasize characters who are "born evil" or who are mentally ill (Rafter, 2001; Rafter & Brown, 2011). Yet by failing to in any way discuss what might be the causal factors for abuse, the sole attention remains on the victim in a potentially objectifying fashion.

In sum, while there are some possible limitations or concerns with the way these novels present domestic violence, there is also much that is accurate. Educators in peace and conflict studies may find it useful to utilize narratives like these as a means of teaching about domestic violence. Students can relate more easily to the characters than to statistics presented in a text of lecture, which can not only increase their learning but also enhance their empathy for victims and interest in remedying the problem of domestic violence. Thoughtful and critical discussion can help students understand the ways that the depictions of abuse are consistent with reality as well as when they are not. Most readers of novels like those selected for this analysis will not be involved in a classroom discussion, however. Book clubs in communities, hosted by libraries or other institutions, could also analyze these novels as tools for understanding domestic violence.

Given the extent of domestic violence in the U.S, it is likely that some victims will read these novels. These novels may be helpful to victims in identifying the many ways their abuser is controlling them. They may also help victims understand the effect of witnessing abuse on their children. Of potential concern, however, is the fact that these novels make it seem as though there are few supports for victims and that it is solely their own responsibility to leave the abuser. Particularly problematic is the implication that self-defense or revenge against abusers is recommended, as such behaviors can place victims at tremendous risk. Further research is recommended to assess how victims interpret novels like these, as well as other depictions of abuse in popular culture.

It is possible that reading these books might educate readers who are not victims, but it might also misinform them about particular facets of abuse. It would be useful for authors of novels like these to include debriefing segments or discussion guides so that non-readers can not only understand the accurate and inaccurate depictions but also learn where they can get more information and obtain assistance, if needed. Peace and conflict studies educators and students could provide this type of resource online and via review tools on websites such as Goodreads and Amazon. This would be helpful in numerous ways, including as a way of showing that academics' knowledge is relevant and has community utility, rather than being solely for the academy (Buckingham, 2014).

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