

Reflecting on Jay Asher's *13 Reasons Why* and Sapphire's *Precious*

By Michael C. Reiff

I.

This week I sat in on a round table discussion of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*. The series is based on the 2007 Jay Asher book. The YA (Young Adult) novel is about a High School student named Hannah Baker who commits suicide, and sends audiotapes of her voice to the 13 individuals who impacted her the most – often negatively. The tapes explain why she ended her life. The novel's Netflix adaptation is visually polished and has been fairly critically acclaimed. But the series has also been the source of controversy. The series has been banned in school districts, the book has been recently pulled from library bookshelves, and a media debate has erupted on NPR, CNN – just about everywhere, really.

This week's forum was the second that has been held at Ithaca High School, where I work as an English teacher. I actually taught the novel in 2010 while working at a Buffalo Charter School, which I'll touch on below. But this week, I was more interested to see what the local community wanted to say, and do, in response to the controversial series. A couple main goals came out of this discussion, which I think are important.

Most of the participants in the forum – a collection of mental health advocates, social program volunteers and other community thinkers – were not employees at the High School, or part of the Central School district at large. They were in the High School cafeteria to discuss next steps in confronting not just the potential effects of the series in particular, but the larger trends in teen suicide, cyberbullying, and how students interact with intense modern media. They prioritized going directly to students and informing them on mental health resources in the

community – both inside and outside of schools. Though IHS already has highly conscientious, active and empathetic counselors, these community members saw an opportunity to build additional connections between the outside community and the inner halls of the public schools.

Additionally, many participants discussed the importance of student voices. I arrived as they had just finished a breakout session, brainstorming ways students could directly lead and engage each other in discussions, mentoring, and notification of concerns. This seemed to me the most salient point in this discussion. As I listened to the ideas on how to bring student voices into adult forums, and link student advocates to outreach groups, I thought – do we involve young people’s voices enough in these kinds of discussions, in general? Do we empower students to help each other? To lead each other?

Towards the end of the forum, one gentleman raised his hand. He pointed out that not too long ago, we were having forums in High School cafeterias like this one, to decide what to do about teen pregnancy. There were flashpoints in that debate, too. Discussions were had. Projects were started. And then, predictably, the debate faded away. I wondered, after a few months would the topics of teen suicide, or cyberbullying, also recede from our collective consciousness? Once the Netflix series and novel left the headlines, would we stay as actively engaged? If not, what would young adults be left with?

II.

One of Ithaca High School’s school psychologists is Shawn Goodman. I’m lucky to call him a friend. He’s gregarious, has an enviably natural way with students, and does his job well.

He’s also a Young Adult novelist himself. His works include the 2010 novel *Something Like Hope* about the U. S. juvenile detention system, and the 2016 novel *This Way Home* which

he co-wrote with Wes Moore. His 2015 novel *Kindness For Weakness* has been compared to *The Catcher In The Rye*, and is taught in our 10th Grade English classes at IHS.

Perhaps most importantly, he's the father of two teenage girls. One has seen the *13 Reasons Why* Netflix series. Shawn has met Jay Asher at writing events. I wanted to get his thoughts on this recent controversy from his multiple different perspectives. I also wanted to get a wider view on the impact of literature on young adults.

I asked him if he's been hearing the same kind of concerns from parents that you hear in the media, or in local discussions like the forum at IHS. Goodman noted that he's been "hearing a lot of fear on the part of adults." Particularly, Goodman has heard variations on the theme of "Why is everything so dark? Why do we have to keep rehashing" events and actions like those depicted in *13RW*. , Goodman said that, as a psychologist, he ,shares the concerns that vulnerable children may be unduly influenced by what they watch on T.V. or online. ." One specific concern is the possibility that an actively suicidal young individual might be influenced negatively. This makes sense, but would seem to indict a number of other literary texts as well – both print-based and visual – that contain similarly powerful and provocative content.

Goodman quickly shifted gears to a main motif in his own work, and his own writing. "We devalue the intelligence of teens," Goodman noted, adding that, "with my own daughters as well as the students I work with, the goal around media is to teach them to engage critically with it when needed . Goodman noted that the end goal isn't shielding students from texts like *13RW*, but to prepare them for it. "I want them to be able to think for themselves," Goodman noted, to better wrestle with this content independently. He noted that his daughter, for one, has read the novel and seen the show. She's fine with it. I've talked to a number of students informally, and gotten the same response.

As a writer, Goodman noted that the current debate over *13RW* sounds an all-too familiar note of censorship as well. “They’re still banning *To Kill A Mockingbird*,”ⁱ he noted, and continued by saying that “kids should be able to read what they want” as a way to better develop their own independence, something he works to foster in his own students. At a higher level, Goodman noted the cultural critique of M. T. Anderson, summarizing his thesis that, in our culture, we often see “teen intelligence as heresy, or taboo,” as opposed to viewing a young adult as an active thinker, and critical and discerning consumer of media on their own. Noting the heated rhetoric around the series and novel, Goodman sees this young adult intelligence as not only core to how they can wrestle with Asher’s text, but any difficult work. Goodman noted that with literature, “the moral experience belongs to the reader or viewer, no one else.” Perhaps it’s no surprise that, while Goodman has been hearing from parents on *13RW*, he hasn’t heard as much of a concern from students at IHSⁱⁱ. The series is simply one more work of literature, or one more moral document, that they are finding and responding to on their own, with or without guidance.

As a psychologist, Goodman is thinking about the series and the novel in a much wider context as well. The current debate, as hot as it may be, is crucial, because “in a weird way, through adults’ strong reactions, [*13 Reasons Why* has] acted as fertile ground for things that are rarely discussed.” In general, Goodman is concerned with what he sees as the elimination of physical spaces of social interaction for young adults, the digital spaces taking their place, and the psychological effects of these trends. He noted that while in his childhood young adults would gather around a set number of actual places – the park, the gas station, someone’s house – but now “teenagers have lost their physical spaces.” These spaces have been replaced by phones, email, social networking. “Out of necessity,” young adults have found new communities and

social spaces, combining platforms like Twitter with Youtube, with streaming services – like Netflix – to interact with one another. But they’ve lost the immediate, physical – “real” – interactions, and the benefits that come with them.

A digital space – as intimate as it may seem – is no replacement for true physical contact, especially for developing social individuals. Even when a young boy or girl is tweeting or Snapchatting with friends about how far they are into a *13RW* binge-session, they are still physically alone. And what if, as Ethan Kross, director of the Emotion and Self-Control Lab at the University of Michigan recently explained on NPR’s *On Point*, social network platforms like Facebook actually make users – teens *and* adults – unhappy to begin with? A compounding of loneliness and disassociation can occur.

At the end of the day, though, the debate over *13RW* is about students getting either a physical book in their hands, or watching the show. And while the show may continue to be controversial as it prepares to film its second season, Goodman strongly advocates for the book, especially within the larger context of YA literature. Goodman noted to me in a follow-up email that on that one hand, when an adult educator is thinking about YA novels, it’s important to separate our experience of the novel as adults from the ways our students may experience it. They’re often very different. Additionally, Goodman stressed the importance in the current debate of drawing a distinction between the Netflix series “*13 Reasons* in particular and YA books/TV in general.” At the end of the day, whether we are considering the impact of a specific text on young adults, or the larger issue of teenagers’ overall media diet, and how they digest works, “It’s great if adults like these books, too, but we shouldn’t forget that, if there is such a thing as YA literature, its true intended readership is first young adults.”

At the end of our discussion, Goodman expressed the concern that, “the worst part of

loneliness is when something horrible is happening and you have no one to share it with. No books or movies with characters who are struggling with the same problems.” Jay Asher’s novel has this thesis at its core. For Goodman, not only is “the antidote exposing students to all kinds of experiences,” but “the risk of not talking about [an emotional problem] or being able to approach it from a different perspective is much greater.” Indeed, this rule “existed before the world of Netflix.” So how can we help students interact more directly with texts, and each other, paired with the element of adult guidance the discussion group was advocating for? Can the classroom act as a launching pad for more structured viewing and interaction with difficult texts? What do students think?

III.

I’m going to pause here and re-emphasize what Goodman noted in our discussions – Jay Asher’s novel is different from the Netflix series. Why is *13 Reasons Why* only now become a national story? Why is Asher’s novel only now being pulled from library shelves?

The central conceit of both texts is the same. But there is, of course, something very different about seeing a story, versus reading it. Even before taking into consideration Goodman’s ideas on the moral experience of reading a work of literature, having the story shown on a screen as opposed to composed in a reader’s mind can result in very different interpretations of a work. Different experiences. It could be argued that the Netflix show, with its high production values, may make the material too approachable, too easily consumable. Its visual style resembles the CW’s glossy teen drama *Riverdale* more than something like HBO’s *The Wire*, a gritty series of novelistic scope and hyper-realistic, relevant, and mature content.

And that brings me to my final point on this aside – how does one actually teach a 13-

episode series, let alone a multi-season show? There's no doubt that since *The Wire*, television channels like HBO, AMC and others have released novelistic programming, let alone television series based on novels which replicate the structure and form of the source material. But, again, how do you teach it? I'm going to shelve that specific question for now, and consider the same type of content – mature, real-world, potentially unsettling – and consider it within a format that is more teachable: the novel.ⁱⁱⁱ

IV.

But first, what do *students* think about this kind of text – in visual or printed form? Do High School students even *want* to analyze and wrestle with intense and possibly troubling texts in the classroom? And do they want guidance on this kind of text, or do they want to be left to their own devices? I put together an informal poll of my students across all of the classes I teach, and aggregated some data. The findings are interesting, and line up well with Goodman's observations.

I began by asking the students if they felt IHS needs to provide more literature that deals with difficult topics, like teen suicide, cyberbullying, drug abuse, and sexual assault. 92% responded in the affirmative, with 47% giving an unqualified “yes” to this question, an additional 28% supporting these kinds of works on an optional basis, and an additional 16% agreeing, though dependent on the teacher. Perhaps more importantly than simply providing the text itself, I asked if students felt that teacher should provide more instruction on how to deal with texts that “trigger” or provoke a negative response within the reader / viewer. Again, 90% of the students agreed with this idea, though a full 40% qualified that it depended on the grade-level. Additionally, I asked if students felt that they needed more access to counseling services,

specifically on matters pertaining to media – both literary and social. 71% of students felt that there was room for more instruction on this, with 29% feeling as though there are enough resources already. Clearly, at least at IHS, there is a desire to wrestle with challenging works, and to have the proper guidance and tools to do it with maturity and care. But what about at the individual level?

Beyond the classroom, I asked if the students felt that literature – in the form of novels, films, series, and beyond – could have a *potentially* negative psychological impact on students. 95% said yes. 30% believed this without qualification, while 47% believed it depended on the hypothetical student, and an additional 18% felt the text itself was the deciding factor. However, when asked if they, themselves, have been negatively affected by media, a plurality of students said no. 45% believed they hadn't been negatively affected by media, and a further 28% believed a text had once, but the effects had not lingered.

There seems to be a bit of discrepancy here, but only slightly. Empathetic students believe or assume that texts can have negative impacts on their peers, even if they haven't been negatively affected themselves. Combined with the above data, however, students also are expressing the desire to wrestle with these texts within a controlled and guided environment. Indeed, when students were given a chance to share thoughts anonymously, this trend was evident as well.

Of the students that left direct, personal and anonymous comments, 7 out of 10 said they had interacted with mature or intense content on their own, not at school. An additional respondent said they had gotten this media from a friend. The lack of academic parameters seems to be a crucial element here. Additionally, one student wrote that, concerning reading and wrestling with intense media in the classroom, “with topics like racism and suicide, discussion

can effect people negatively or positively. However, these different reactions should not dissuade the discussion. Discussion is the only way to get to the bottom of issues in society.” This insight connects to what Goodman talked to me about earlier, and also echoes what the round table was advocating for earlier this month – students discussing with students the intense issues at hand, with adult guidance and support.

A different student made another astute comment reflecting on the importance of not only *when* a young adult interacts with a challenging text, but also *how*. The student reflected that independently finding and reading a particularly intense piece of media may not have been the best way to approach it. This student wrote that, had they been given academic guidance beforehand, “I might have interpreted it in a healthier way than I did at the time.” It’s not necessarily the text itself, whether it be *13 Reasons Why* the book, the series, or something else that is at issue. It’s the way in which a student interacts with it, and digests it, in the long run. It makes sense that students are searching out and finding these texts on their own. Much of it is marketed to their age group, and those on social media are quickly clued into a new and popular, if troubling, text and go to it. But once they’ve read it, once they’ve seen it, then what? Do they always know how to handle its content, its implications?

From the polling here, the informal discussions I’ve held with other students, and from my previous five years of teaching at Ithaca High School, I’ve found that students want to engage with this kind of text. But they also want additional support. In the past five years I’ve tried to implement this worldview in my own classroom. I’ve worked to integrate learning structures that help students analyze and contextualize works of literature, including their social, and psychological impacts and meaning, from teaching Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* to Seniors, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between The World and Me* and Ken Burns’ *The Central Park Five* to Juniors

and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to Sophomores. But one specific instance stands out as the most prescient to this discussion. I taught Sapphire's novel *Precious* to Juniors at a Charter School in Buffalo, New York, in 2010. It was one of the most instructive moments of my early career.

V .

I did teach *13 Reasons Why* in the Fall of 2010. It was my first year at a Buffalo Charter school, and my helpful colleagues pointed me towards the novel. I didn't do a great job of it. Treating it as "just another" YA novel with a particularly lurid hook, (I obviously didn't know Goodman at this point), I perfunctorily went through the motions, guiding students through the basics: plot, character, conflict, plot, plot, plot. I didn't initially delve into some of the deeper issues at hand in the novel, nor did I really inquire as to what the students' personal reactions were to the novel. That was a mistake.

But a couple things came out of teaching the book that struck me, and shaped my perceptions of what I should be focusing on as a teacher. A lot of students expressed a wish that we had delved in deeper into the book. Considered the issues. Even though the context of the book (white, middle class, suburban) is different from what most of my students were experiencing daily (African American, working class / working poor, urban) they wanted to explore and wrestle with the issues in the book. They saw them as transcending race, economic status, class. They saw these issues as both universal and personal.

As a summative assessment, I had the students complete group research projects. The students were especially engaged with the motifs of bullying (to some degree cyber bullying), issues around teenage sex, and, of course, teenage suicide and suicide prevention. After a

somewhat rocky first quarter, this was the best week of the year so far – students actively engaged in, and guiding each other and their own learning, into difficult and, as many told me, all-too relevant issues.

I decided to refocus my energies after that project. Soon after Jay Asher’s *13 Reasons Why*, we read Daniel Woodrell’s neo-Western *Winter’s Bone* and it was a fairly successful experience. The novel depicts rural poverty in the Ozark Mountains, methamphetamine production, and a desperate teenage heroine who has to take care of her younger siblings after her father goes missing, and jeopardizes the home she lives in. Though the particular setting of the rural Midwest was vastly different from inner city Buffalo, the books motifs, including the burden of responsibility at an early age, communal distress and familial guilt, activated students intellectually and academically. But as spare, elegant and engaging as the novel was, it wasn’t quite enough. At this Charter School I had carte blanche to teach what I wanted, which I appreciated. So on the final book of the year, I took a bit of a risk.

The current furor over *13 Reasons Why* echoes somewhat the previous furor over Sapphire’s *Precious*. Both books are frank in their depiction of intense and serious issues facing teenagers, especially teenage girls. Sapphire’s novel contains explicit references and descriptions to mental, physical and sexual abuse of Clarieece “Precious” Jones. This abuse is carried out by her father, and her mother. Precious becomes pregnant with her father’s child. Twice. It’s told in frank, often horrific language, as the vignettes are depicted from Precious’ point of view, through a personal narrative she is writing in school.

The 2009 film adaptation launched not only star Gabourey Sidibe’s career for her depiction of Precious, but also fostered a debate about the newly-relevant source material. Again, like with Asher’s novel, Sapphire’s *Push* had laid dormant, at least in mainstream pop culture.

Now in the spotlight, the question of how and when to teach *Push* became an issue. Concurrent to my experience in Buffalo, the book was challenged at the Board of Education in Ithaca, due to its content. But in Buffalo, once again, a five minute conversation with my principal was all I needed to teach the book. I had some ideas on what to explore in the book – its linguistic structure is particularly unique – but I was wondering if its content would be too intense, too unsettling, to graphic. Perhaps, even, too real. In the end, these elements were its greatest asset.

For one, there was silence. Still young in my teaching career, I hadn't exactly mastered classroom management (Suffice it to say, Buffalo was a shock to the system, in a good way.) After months of managing, appeasing, and wrestling with active classrooms, with *Push* in their hands, I heard a somewhat unfamiliar sound – nothing. At one point I even took a quick video on my phone to show my fiancé.

But why was I amazed? Sapphire's novel speaks a truth that is raw and precise and prescient. The novel's power transcends the particulars of its plot, but is also deeply rooted in *Push*'s particular context as well. It has a gravitational pull on the reader's mind. It depicts the constant frustrations that come with poor schools, poor living conditions and poor expectations from instructors, parents and local governments. Sapphire's book vividly depicts the indignities of invasive welfare officers, disaffected teachers, and a modern American culture that ignores the ignorable.

We dug in deep on the literary analysis, of course. That's my bread and butter. Students did well. They got it. But whenever I'd open up the dialogue to something broader – in writing or in discussion – students were eager to share. And listen. The cramped spaces Precious lives in, or the aimless life path she initially finds herself on, or her deep and profound struggles with language, provoked personal, vivid and often cathartic responses. After the units were over, I

didn't have any problem getting back my copies of *13 Reasons Why*, *Winter's Bone* or, you may be surprised, *Macbeth*. But *Push* I had to hunt down. This was a text that helped them read and write, yes, but also wrestle with and externalize issues they or their friends or their family were going through. It seemed to help.

And I'd note this too. Going into the novel, I didn't want Sapphire's work to just be a grim mirror for my students. Though I was personally foreign to the specifics on the novel, I could see a remarkably unique linguistic structure within the text that I thought I could leverage towards something good, perhaps even hopeful. Like Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury*, *Push* is told through distinctively different voices – but in Precious' case, the voices are all her own. Each chapter shows a subtle improvement in her writing ability. Each chapter shows, on the page, her personal growth, her personal evolution. In the plot of the novel, much of this growth is due to a new educational opportunity Precious acquires through an alternative GED program. The program's unconventional teacher – “Ms. Blue Rain” – focuses her instructions around the creation of personal narrative. The book *Push*, itself, is that narrative. This inexorable growth in language, in self-expression, is tied up in the hopeful and, again, cathartic nature of the novel. Out of deepest darkness can come something good, something transformational. It just takes a bit of help, a bit of guidance. It takes an opportunity to express, and share, one's voice, and maybe have it reflected back.

VI.

There are, of course, a number of big differences between *13 Reasons Why* and *Push*. One is a YA novel, the other a novel geared towards an adult audience. Asher's novel was turned into an accessible and well-produced Netflix series, which will get a second season. *Push*

adapted into a searing Oscar-nominated film, *Precious*, finite in scope and compressed into a work of cinematic bravery. Though both texts deal with the traumas experienced by teenage girls, their specific circumstances and trials are very different.

Perhaps the most important difference, however, are the types of action being depicted in each work, and *who* is taking the action. In *Push*, the list of painful and reprehensible acts is long, but are all done *to* Precious. In Asher's novel, there is also a long list of troubling and unpleasant actions taken against Hannah Baker. But the one act the novel is most known for – suicide – is committed by the protagonist, the character we have the most sympathy for, and connection to. This is an important distinction, and one that needs to be considered carefully when thinking about the novel.

And, as a final caveat, I'm not, at this point, advocating for teaching the Netflix show. Asher's novel, on the other hand, is well-written, engaging, and mildly innovative in terms of text presentation. I would argue that Sapphire's *Push* is remarkable. But it's another text that has to be handled with care, decisive thought, and clear communication with students, other educators, and parents.

But that's the point. When a student finds a book like *13 Reasons Why*, or *Push*, or something else, the best case scenario is they will read it with all of the maturity and insight that they have. But, to repeat what one student told me this month, if a challenging novel is handled maturely and with context, insight and guidance in the Classroom, "I might have interpreted it in a healthier way than I did at the time."

Students are finding these books. They are finding them because they are popular, and they are finding them because their friends are talking about them, and usually, they are good books too. They will continue to read them, with or without guidance from their teachers. They

will likely read them *especially* if a school bans them. But students will also read these books because these books reach them personally, shake them, inform them, perhaps even trouble them at some deep level.

Macbeth has its place in English curriculum. Indeed, it deals with many of the same issues of guilt, greed, selfishness and evil that *Push* does as well. But the specific contexts and settings of these works matter too, and have to be dealt with differently. Maybe *13 Reasons Why* isn't right for your school, or mine, or our students at this point. Or maybe it is. The reality is that there are many books and films that present real-world issues in a mature and accessible and, importantly, findable way, including Jay Asher's and Sapphire's work. Working through some of those texts with students, and giving them the intellectual tools and contextual frameworks to interact in a deeper and more active way, seems just as pressing a concern as properly contextualizing the classics.

In *Push*, Sapphire writes that "Depression is anger turned inward," and as Shawn Goodman noted, "the worst part of loneliness is when something horrible is happening and you have no one to share it with." This negative feedback loop – a feeling of neglect, of anger, turned inward, downward, unseen and unremarked upon – is at the heart of *13 Reasons Why*, *Push*, even *Macbeth*. Some students, at times, may feel this. Works of literature can affect us, and sometimes in a negative way. But they can also help us understand ourselves a bit better. They can act as introspective tools, especially when we have the right instruction manual.

Macbeth laments that life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but it as Precious describes in *Push*, it doesn't have to be. Reflecting in her narrative, Precious writes, "Twenty- six letters in all. Them letters make up words. Them words

everything.” Indeed, they are. And as our media landscape becomes more complex, more readily-accessible, and more in need of mediation and guidance, we have to remember that at root, all of our controversial texts of the day are simply made up of twenty-six letter combinations. They can be understood, and wrestled with, and guided through.

Let’s get to work.

ⁱ Not just *To Kill A Mockingbird*, but Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as well – last December the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the Virginia Accomack County School Board is considering banning both works due to parental concerns over the N-word.

ⁱⁱ Indeed, as we talked in my classroom, a couple of students on their lunch break inched closer and closer to my desk, listening in. Towards the end, they began to interject their own thoughts on the show, mostly in support of wrestling with it, not shunning it. I have more data coming up here.

ⁱⁱⁱ That being said, I can imagine a time in which, through leveraging technology inside the classroom and in the student’s homes, you could teach long-form visual storytelling. It seems as though a work like Ezra Edelman’s brilliant 8-hour documentary *O. J.: Made In America* can act as a bridging text between a conventional film – even a long one like Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* – and something even longer, like David Simon’s *The Wire*, or Mark Cousins’ series-length documentary *The Story Of Film*.