#MeToo Books

Entry Points for Men's Understanding a Women's Movement

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In a fall 2018 essay on the *Los Angeles Review of Books* website, Libby Lenkinski addressed a conundrum. She asked: "How can it be that prominent men have serially sexually harassed and assaulted women for years—and men are only 'finding out' when the story breaks in the press, while women all nod knowingly and explain that we've known forever?"

Lenkinski answered her own query by arguing that such women's knowledge comes from gendered experiences and an associated tendency for women to accept stories based in other women's trauma as reliable—even when those accounts don't fit all the rules of traditional, formal judicial evidence-giving. Women can accept the truth drawn from victims' and survivors' personal tellings in part because they've likely had similar experiences themselves. Their own need for hyper-vigilance to protect themselves, Lenkinski posited, has honed their skill for noticing signs that they may be endangered—for "reading people" and "reading a room."

As a literature teacher, I can attest that this "reading" ability carries over into many women's sensitive and thoughtful responses to gendered codes in other women's writings about sexual harassment, assault, and rape culture. Women in my classes will almost inevitably

catch veiled references to a character's having been victimized. Many men will often respond, when such an interpretation is offered by a female colleague in class, that she is "reading too much into" the text, imposing something that isn't really there. This gender gap in the ways women and men students analyze narratives portraying what we now call #MeToo experiences—this gap is what I hope the books described below, read through a lens of empathy, can address.

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Connecting to Others' Experiences

How you approach #MeToo narratives is crucial; your goal should involve more than just processing the words on the page (or screen). Enter these texts with a goal of building empathy. Follow the stories' plots and the characters' interactions from a standpoint accepting that many longstanding norms of storytelling—guidelines shaping what's acceptable to say or not say directly—can lead women writers to hold back the worst details and, sometimes, to suppress the most direct evidence. If you've ever studied Susan Glaspell's 1916 one-act play "Trifles" (or the 1917 story version, "A Jury of Her Peers"), you should try to do the "reading" of indirect signs of gendered violence that the women in that narrative achieve: while the official male investigators fail to see how the husband in the story abused his wife to the point where she felt her only recourse was to kill him, the women on the scene notice all the tell-tale markers of womanly suffering.[1]

I'm asking you to learn to read these narratives, as a set, with an eye to discursive traits that scholar Lauren Berlant, in a 1988 essay for *Social Text*, dubbed "the female complaint." That is, doing your #MeToo textual analysis would mean stitching these narratives together to see how, as a group, they illustrate what Berlant said many women were looking for: a "space in which women might see, experience, live, and rebel against their oppression *en masse*, freed from the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze."[2] (Berlant was writing long before Twitter and other current platforms were available, of course.

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1 See my discussion of Glaspell's story in "Archiving Abuse Stories," Nov. 17, 2017, online at https://sarahruffingrobbins.com/2017/11/17/archiving-abuse-stories

2 Lauren Berlant, "The Female Complaint," *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn 1988), 238.

But if social media have opened up a "space" where women have easy access to story-sharing, it's hardly one "freed from the oppressors' forbidding or disapproving gaze.")

At the same time, I urge you to read these books as offering distinctly individual accounts of #MeToo experiences. When you give close attention to each book, on its own terms, you can recognize how Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality should always be part of our reading picture. We should take into account how a particular identity involves more than just gender, so one girl's or woman's encounter(s) with sexual harassment and assault might well be exacerbated by aspects of her social class identity that put her at greater risk, as when a waitress has to think hard about whether she should call out a customer's bad behavior.[3] Similarly, reading through an intersectional lens helps alert us to the race-related constraints involved in an historical case like Rosa Parks's 1944 NAACP-supported investigation of Recy Taylor's rape.[4]

These, then, are #MeToo books I'd like men to read today, using literature to tap into a history of sexual oppression and to identify, potentially, with its victims while recognizing the social norms for American masculinity enabling its perpetrators.

Historicizing Rape in American Culture

For a sense of the long-standing history of young women's sexual victimage in American culture, read Susanna Rowson's slim 1791 novel, *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth*. Isn't it significant that one of the first American bestsellers depicts the seduction of a naïve young girl by a dashing British soldier, followed by her being duped into a journey across the Atlantic, her seemingly inevitable pregnancy, abandonment, and death? Students today, when reminded of didactic expectations for early novels, see why Rowson, writing near the dawn of the nineteenth century, had to pitch her book more as a warning blaming Charlotte for her downfall than as a precursor of Berlant's "female complaint" or today's righteous #MeToo indictments against seducers. But thousands of Rowson's original readers—and most of my women students today—have identified with Charlotte, viewing the novel's "truth" as a painful reminder of how easy it was, and is, for the kind of "cruel spoiler" referenced in Rowson's headnote, to assault youthful "virtue."

And who, in American history, has been less able to resist sexual assault than enslaved women? Newly organized Monticello historical displays and associated web-based re-visitings of the bond

3 Jillian Berman, "80 Percent of Female Restaurant Workers Say They've Been Harassed By Customers," *Huffington Post*, Oct. 8, 2014. Web.

4 Ryan Mattimore, "Before the Bus, Rosa Parks Was a Sexual Assault Investigator," History.com, Dec. 8, 2017. Web.

between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings have shifted away from former visions of her as a "concubine" to forceful reminders of her position as an enslaved woman without choice in the matter of their relationship. And, fortunately, we also have powerful written narratives critiquing the recurring pattern of masters' repeated assaults on female slaves. From the nineteenth century, we can study Harriet Jacobs's 1861 memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs understood that a too-direct portrayal of her master's attempts to claim her youthful body, and of the agony behind her decision to hide away in a tiny attic space to escape him, would alienate many of the white middle-class readers she sought to bring to an anti-slavery stance. So she painted restrained verbal pictures. But women readers in her day could read her coded language. And we, too, should learn to unpack the reticence behind Jacobs's veiled explanations; doing so helps us develop an attentive radar for picking up on silences and indirect communications from victims in our own time.

Twentieth-century narratives addressing sexual assault may have been more likely to name the act itself more explicitly than Jacobs could. Still, even when resisting lingering expectations for women's writing to avoid violent language at all costs, full-throated treatment of the aftermath to trauma has sometimes been difficult for women writers to convey. (Perhaps that's true, in part, because female victims of rape are so often re-victimized when their stories become known.) Joyce Carol Oates's searing 1996 *We Were the Mulvaneys,* set in the 1970s, is a worthy exception to this taboo, since one of its core themes is post-rape trauma.

The Mulvaneys' narrative is especially valuable for male readers (brothers, fathers, friends) to take up, since a key theme Oates explores is the idea that rape of a young girl can victimize her whole family. As the past-tense "were" of her title suggests, the entire Mulvaney clan loses its sense of itself, of its privileged place in society, when Marianne (the only daughter) is raped by a local boy whom the family would have previously identified as a friend. Using brother Judd as the primary viewpoint, Oates wrote a book that aches with pain stretching across multiple souls. And, coming to this vivid novel with knowledge of Marianne's suffering from the beginning (a plot point I'd argue should not be withheld), I've found that male readers can build empathy more easily through recognizing that the idyllic aspects of family life as seen in the early chapters are fragile indeed. We are all potential victims of rape culture. And moving from victim to survivor cannot be achieved alone.

For a comparative study that could highlight elements of the feminist intersectionality concept without having to engage in the sometimes-dense formal scholarship on that theme, I hope male readers will take on Louise Erdrich's 2012 *The Round House* as a follow-up to *We Were the Mulvaneys*. Like Oates's novel, Erdrich's

narrative explores how rape affects an entire family. Both books share a teenage male protagonist who deeply loves and suffers with the rape victim. In Erdrich's text, a National Book Award winner, the narrator is Joe, whose mother's brutal rape is complicated by having occurred in a specific space where legal jurisdiction is unclear. Symbolic of Native people's inability to seek their own path to justice through the American legal system, the convoluted jurisdictional map at issue also highlights how coming from a marginalized group can push the horrific experience of being raped into further suffering by entire communities.

Erdrich addressed this crucial theme herself in a *New York Times* interview about the book, noting that Joe's desire to seek revenge for his mother reflected the author's aim of addressing "jurisdictional issues on American Indian reservations." Erdrich explained: "Wrong or right, for many families this is the only option when justice is unobtainable. I wanted the reader to understand what taking on that burden is like.... Native people are ... by no means gun-toting vigilantes. Being forced into this corner is obviously an agonizing decision." By choosing Joe as the reader's viewpoint, Erdrich's novel offers an especially vital one for men seeking to understand the complexities of #MeToo, including factors that heighten its impact on marginalized communities.

From Bestselling Novel to Memoir

An author-focused study can provide another worthwhile pathway for studying #MeToo through literature. And, in our own time, no author has staked a stronger claim as a literary voice resisting rape culture than Laurie Halse Anderson. With millions of copies sold, the broad appeal of Anderson's 1999 Young Adult novel *Speak* has become a story in its own right. Like Oates's book, Anderson's emphasizes post-rape trauma more than the act itself, as protagonist Melinda is ostracized into silence from which she only gradually emerges as the narrative works its way across four marking periods in the high school year. A male reader coming to this text, so beloved by girl and women readers, should cultivate an appreciation of its first-person narrator's irony and social critique, like that female readers are regularly urged to marshal when encountering Mark Twain's Huck Finn and his witty diagnoses of society's failings. But the real energy of this novel comes from being let into Melinda's head—her feelings about herself and her damaged place in the world—far more deeply than we ever are allowed to go with Huck. More than any of the other books above, *Speak* enables a reader (female or male) to immerse in the experience of having been assaulted—and the traumatic aftermath. If such a reading could ever be termed an "opportunity," *Speak* presents its case by calling out to young readers in their own familiar language and through the daily adolescent challenges they can all recognize.

I've been both encouraged and discouraged by the continued high readership for *Speak*. Encouraged to track how many victims have followed Melinda's story toward becoming survivors themselves. Discouraged to think of how the book's still drawing so many new readers means that rape culture isn't going away. Yet, Anderson's 2019 memoir, *Shout*, has given me new hope. And I suspect that, even more than *Speak*, it has the potential to resonate with young male readers, given its affirmation of agency. *Shout* certainly trumpets a #MeToo affiliation. But that affiliation comes into the memoir in nuanced, if determined, ways.

Anderson weaves multiple narrative threads together. One revisits her own personal history of growing up in a family on the edge of poverty, with parents who loved her but struggled through their own challenges so much that they couldn't recognize her symptoms of post-rape trauma. Another strand opens up about her own rape and its aftermath, so that, reading this account in dialogue with *Speak*, we re-appreciate the artistry of that prior narrative's creating a storyline both similar to and different from her own case. *Shout's* recounting of multiple stages of grief, anger, disillusionment, fear, and self-questioning is riveting—and ultimately encouraging, as Anderson eventually works her way from community college to scholarship-supported study at Georgetown University, to tenuous but determined professional roles, to authorship. Tapping into the familiar genre of rags-to-riches individual growth, Anderson takes readers along through her "bootstraps" trajectory to where she is today, a remarkably successful author with virtually countless fans. But, in this case, that "American dream" trajectory includes navigating a nightmare: an honest and thought-provoking portrayal of herself as a rape victim who becomes a self-empowered survivor and advocate for others. Indeed, I suspect that, for many readers, the most compelling thread of *Shout* will be its examination of Anderson's post-*Speak* work to push audiences toward activism opposing rape culture. Her portrayals of herself engaging large audiences of school kids, for instance, movingly convey her increasing awareness of boy victims' suffering as well as her frustrated efforts to convince reluctant adult administrators to allow for open dialogue. She shows herself growing in knowledge and agency in ways I'd urge both male and female readers to draw upon as a model.

Looking Ahead

Taken all together, ranging from Rowson's novel from the early U.S. Republic to Erdrich's twenty-first-century text, these books demonstrate how sexual assault has always been a painful part of our national landscape. Nonetheless, through the power of their storytelling, they ask that we confront the challenge of rape culture,

that we each find some entry point for allying ourselves with #MeToo's most ambitious goals. In that vein, there's a letter at the front of Laurie Halse Anderson's new verse memoir, from Kendra Levin, associate editorial director for the book's publisher. "The moment to speak has passed," she declares. "Now it's time to SHOUT—and your voice matters." What better way to find that voice than through reading books like these revisited here? A

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