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The Young Adult Addiction Novel: A Modern Tragedy

By

Carrie Rosson Hicks

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

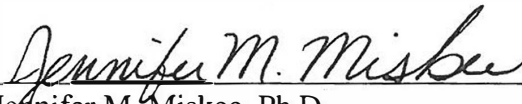
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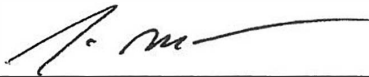
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Defining Tragedy and Introducing the Young Adult Addiction Novel as a form of Modern Tragedy

The tragedy genre has altered drastically throughout the ages, but as unrecognizable as some new forms of tragedy may seem from the texts Aristotle used for his fourth century BC observations, the fundamentals are still the same. These new brands of tragedy simply reflect the vastly different society in which modern readers live.

Originally, tragedies focused on royalty or political leaders and were often written in verse until the eighteenth century. The early Greek tragedies, such as Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, defined the genre, and those plays served as models for centuries to come. In Shakespeare's time, the trend took a turn away from the Greek examples and developed into revenge tragedy as seen in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew Malta* ("revenge tragedy"). Tragedy took on another form when the domestic tragedy emerged, also during Shakespeare's time through the mid-1750s with such works as *Tragedy of Mr. Arden of Feversham* and Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. This domestic tragedy, introducing an average protagonist and less than heroic exploits, experienced a "later revival seen in the American tragedies of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller" ("domestic tragedy"). The current state of drama, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, "normally

combines the socially inferior protagonist of domestic tragedy with the use of prose” (“tragedy”).

In *Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition*, Richard Keller Simon even goes as far as to argue that one form of modern tragedy is the tabloid. He claims:

The stories that surround us in our daily lives are very similar to the great stories of the past. If you watch television, go to the movies, read popular magazines, and look at advertisements you are exposed to many of the same kinds of stories as someone who studies the great books of Western Civilization.” (1)

Simon argues that we are exposed to stories of great tragedy through fragmented articles in supermarket tabloids and that this form of tragedy quenches the modern desire for instant satisfaction. Instead of reading hundreds of pages to find out the resolution, readers merely turn the page. Simon argues, “A tabloid newspaper such as *The National Enquirer* is a fragmented version of great dramatic tragedy—Euripides, Ibsen, or Strindberg made into celebrity gossip and sold at supermarket checkout counters” (1).

This thesis will examine not tabloids, but another manifestation of tragedy: the young adult addiction novel. The two texts under examination here, Ellen Hopkins’s *Crank* (2004) and Melvin Burgess’ *Smack* (1996), are also written in a fragmented style to keep interested modern readers who stereotypically have grown up playing video games and watching thirty minute sitcoms rather than reading novels. *Crank* is written in free verse, not as a tribute to the great poets of old, but as a way to add emphasis to words, while still being concise enough for sometimes jaded modern readers. Burgess’ constantly changing viewpoints keep even the most reluctant reader turning pages.

At first glance, these modern addiction novels may seem to have nothing in common with stories of Oedipus and Macbeth, but, “tragic effect usually depends on our awareness of admirable qualities—manifest or potential—in the protagonist, which are wasted terribly in the fated disaster” (“tragedy”). The recent crop of bleak addiction novels for teens in the last decade exemplifies this. In both of the novels examined here, the protagonists are young adults who have their whole lives ahead of them and end up trading in their futures for their addictions.

While the subject of tragedies has changed from royalty to ordinary people, the subject matter has changed from obedience to the gods to slavery to the gods of addiction. This shift is a reflection of the changes society has undergone. The reason that the young adult addiction novel has emerged as a modern tragedy is that drugs have become a modern vice that leads to the downfall of decent people everyday. Though this affliction affects people of all ages, teens are more susceptible since they are faced with peer pressure and may not fully understand the consequences of their actions. Literature reflects readers and the problems they face: “The sociology of literature perpetually questions the concepts on which it relies: ‘the writer,’ ‘the public,’ ‘genre,’ ‘literature’ are notions redefined by the context in which they occur (Latrobe 153). This is why the tragic character has transformed into a mode for young adults (a steadily growing field) and why the subject matter of drug addiction has become prominent. These novels are “a reflection and recorder” of society (155).

The protagonists of modern tragedy are vastly different than the royal figures of the ancient tragedies. Modern readers want to read about experiences they can identify with and protagonists they can relate to in a style that is easy to understand. Young Adult

literature in particular tends to be fast-paced and its protagonists are usually the same age as the intended audience, sharing similar experiences. As critics Belinda and Douglas Louie explain, “Preoccupation with self makes young adults uniquely receptive to literature. Their empathy with the actors draws them into the action, sharing dilemma in decision making and waiting to see the consequences” (53). In his study of Young Adult literature, *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, Michael Cart points out that “adolescents are the perfect solipsists in their inner-directed conviction that they are the center of the universe” (38). Additionally, literature has always reflected societal values and problems, and Young Adult literature should be no different. Though there was a time where adults tried to push their conventions onto teens through Young Adult literature, the latest trends are finally doing what literature has always done: reflect the real issues that the readers face; young adult books are no longer a forum for adults to tell teens what to think and feel.

These modern versions of tragedy resemble the classics not only through the downfall the protagonists experience, but also through the cause of this decline. As with the ancient Greek tragedies, these characters lose everything due to their tragic flaws. The protagonist of *Crank*, Kristina Snow, gives up her life as a responsible honor student to her more confident alter ego, whom she calls Bree. Where Kristina considered her life uneventful and felt unnoticed by her peers and her family, Bree attracts the attention of boys and the envy of girls. This quest for popularity and acceptance, her fatal flaw, leads her down a dark path to life with “the monster” as she calls crystal meth, the subject of her addiction.

Once she experiences life as self-assured Bree, her pride will not let her return to being simple, stable Kristina again. She thrives on the attention she receives as Bree, even if it means alienating people who truly care for her like her mother, step-father, siblings, and old friends. Though Bree ends up losing the trust of her family, raped by the lifeguard she was so excited to have attracted the attentions of, pregnant with the product of this rape, and having only one true friend left, she cannot let go of the drug that has caused the downward spiral. In the bleak ending of the novel, as Kristina is listening to her newborn son cry, she admits, “Happy Endings/ I’d like to give you one/But I’m not really sure/ how this story ends myself” (Hopkins 536). This teenager, who was bursting with potential at the beginning of the novel, still hears the call of crystal meth even after she has a child of her own.

Melvin Burgess’ two main characters similarly have much possibility in the beginning of *Smack*. Though Tar is running away to escape his abusive parents, he has dreams of becoming an artist. He is a kind fifteen-year-old who has never been in trouble and who has been taking care of his alcoholic mother. His girlfriend Gemma, who runs away soon after his departure and joins him, is an intelligent, spunky fourteen-year-old, though she is not as likeable of a character in the beginning of the novel, being self-absorbed and bratty. Gemma runs away for “a big, fat slice of life” and thinks of running away and later, experimenting with drugs, all as an adventure, even though she has caring, if overbearing, parents back at home (Burgess 76).

The youth of these characters makes their downfall tragic. Both characters could do so much with their lives, as readers are reminded again and again in the novel. Yet, after six months on the streets, both are hopelessly addicted to heroin. Tar, the once

innocent boy who earned his nickname from his hatred of cigarettes, (ironic considering he becomes an addict of a much more powerful vice) shares his junkie's philosophy, "That's the trouble with most people. They want to live forever...If you don't mind not reaching twenty there's no argument against heroin, is there?" (Burgess 217). Over time, Tar loses his ambition, his morals, even his personality to heroin. He does not even care to live to be an adult.

Gemma also soon finds that though she had thought this life without her parents would be exciting and liberating, she is now a slave to another power: heroin. This once lively young lady ends up numbing herself with heroin just to get through the days at her job as a prostitute in a massage parlor before she even turns sixteen. Tar's passivity and insecurities cause him to follow Gemma's thrill-seeking nature onto the path of addiction and both end up in anguish in the end.

Like *Crank, Smack* ends with little hope for the future. Gemma and Tar have a baby, conceived while both were on drugs and while Gemma was having sex with countless partners at the parlor. Gemma may be clean at the end of the novel, but she has left Tar and Tar has become what he originally ran away from. In a drunken stupor, reminiscent of his mother, he becomes physically abusive to Gemma, just as his father had done to him. The last words of the account are his: he is hoping that he can reconnect with Gemma and be a father to his baby Oona, but admits, "I've slipped a couple of times" (361). The reader can see that Tar has remained unchanged since throughout the last chapter he first states that he is clean, then talks about tricking the doctors into increasing his methadone prescription, and finally admits he does still use from time to time and lies about it to his current girlfriend and Gemma. He does not

appear to be that different than the drug dealer without a conscience that he became while on heroin. He is certainly not the open, honest child that he was in the beginning of *Smack*.

Interestingly, both of these novels are based on real-life tragedies. Ellen Hopkins' novel started as a means of catharsis, to help her with the feeling of guilt that gnaws at her over allowing this to happen to her own daughter. She fictionalized some aspects of the novel in order to write through the addict's eyes, and she has changed the names of the characters to allow her family some privacy, but the story is essentially about her own daughter. Melvin Burgess begins *Smack* explaining that his characters are based on real people and real events that he witnessed in the 1980s while living in Bristol. Though some of it is invention he claims, "it's all true, every word" (Burgess "Author's Note").

Contextualizing the Young Adult Addiction Novel

Just as the ancient Greek tragedies reflected the societal interests and concerns of their time— reverence to the gods, pride as a punishable crime— the modern tragedy mirrors today's societal problems. This is why it is only appropriate that one form of modern tragedy address the issue of addiction. Drugs and drug culture permeate today's society in movies like *Pineapple Express* (2008) and still worshipped pop culture "classics" like *Scarface* (1983), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Half Baked* (1998), and *Blow* (2001). Neither has television escaped the fascination with drug culture, airing both "reality" shows and fictional programs about drug use like *Celebrity Rehab*, *Intervention*, *Weeds*, and *Breaking Bad*. The most distressing place we see drug culture flourishing

though is out on the streets. Though this concern is by no means limited to young adults, young people are increasingly faced with the pressures and temptations of illegal drugs.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, in 2009, 46.7 percent of high school seniors have reportedly abused drugs at some point in their lifetime. Teenagers are faced with decisions that sometimes they have no background information for if their parents are scared to talk to them about the dangers of drugs or their schools may be too conservative. They may see drug use by celebrities or peers and not realize how detrimental even experimentation can be to their lives.

Ellen Hopkins and Melvin Burgess, intentional or not, have taken on the role of teacher for many youth. They are successful in reaching teens when sometimes even concerned loved ones are not because they are seen as objective and their books are renowned for not being “preachy.” Hopkins and Burgess are so successful because they are not judgmental; they truly try to understand their subjects. As reader Mick says of *Crank* on Ellen Hopkins’ website, “thank you for this book. It has helped my parents realize my troubles, and has helped me recognize the dangers of addiction” (ellenhopkins.com). He explains that he is an addict and that the book “has helped me more than you will ever know” (ellenhopkins.com).

Critics applaud both Hopkins and Burgess for their non-judgmental and realistic accounts of drug use. One review states:

Burgess chronicles drug addiction’s slow, irresistible initial stages, capturing with devastating precision each teenager’s combination of innocence, self-deceit, and bravado; the subsequent loss of personality and self-respect, the increasingly unsuccessful efforts to maintain a semblance of control. (*Kirkus*)

Similarly, critic Valerie Ott says of *Crank*, “Hopkins delivers a gritty, fast-paced read while effectively portraying the dangers of substance abuse without sounding pedantic or preachy” (Ott).

Prior to their books as reviewer Amanda says: “the dominating drug abuse read was *Go Ask Alice*” (revish.com). Amanda, as well as many modern readers believe, “Alice’s story felt contrived; a cautionary tale that was more preachy and wary than insightful” (revish.com). Alice’s story, though it was originally published in 1971 as an anonymous diary, was found to be a psychiatrist’s attempt to show teens the horrors of drug abuse. Modern readers find it tedious and over-the-top as much of it is repetitive and the diarist ends up in a mental institution and eventually dead, either from suicide or an overdose. *Alice* reads like a warning manual preaching this will happen to readers if they experiment with drugs. Though these events may actually happen to some, one important difference in *Go Ask Alice* and *Crank* and *Smack* is the “street cred” which reader Amanda credits Hopkins as having. Their stories ring true to readers because they are true; whereas *Alice* reads as what it is— a didactic warning that does not fully engage readers. Valerie Ott points out the similarities between *Crank* and *Alice* saying, “perhaps this more modern version will be more accessible to today’s teens” (Ott).

Though *Go Ask Alice* was revolutionary for the seventies because of its subject matter, it, and other “problem novels” as the genre is labeled, often fail to speak to modern audiences. As Michael Cart examines in his study, problem novels emerged out of a societal movement to educate teenagers through literature. Further he explains: “both the societal-and personal-problem categories spawned the spare of “problem” novels that would become such a fixture of the late sixties and the decade of the

seventies” (Cart 38). He admits, “In retrospect the period from 1967 to 1975 is remarkable for the boldness with which writers began to break new ground in terms of the subject matter they chose to address,” but he discusses the unfortunate consequence of innovative authors breaking new ground was other, less talented authors jumping on the bandwagon (64). Because of the popularity of this new frontier, dozens of “problem novels” emerged. These works were defined by “very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than in the telling. The topics—all adult oriented—sound like chapter titles from a textbook on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death” (64). Quality literature contains a storyline and engaging characters; it does not read like an afterschool special. Cart notes, “The powerful newness of these difficulties and the intoxicatingly sudden freedom to write about them caused some writers to forget the totality of the realistic novel’s mission: that it must portray not only real-life circumstances—call them problems, if you wish—but also real people living in real settings” (65). This influx of what became known as problem novels forgot that fundamental of good writing, which led the label “problem novel” to become almost a derogatory term. Though critics scorned these novels, teen readers were devouring them. Cart quotes Roger Sutton who explains teen readers would eat them up: “gobble them like peanuts, picking them up by the handful, one right after the other” (Cart 67).

Luckily, there have been a few exceptional writers that are writing great works for the Young Adult genre. Melvin Burgess and Ellen Hopkins are two such authors who are addressing important problems in their novels, but by no means simply resurrecting the crude problem novel formula. What makes their modern novels different from problem

novels, while they do address societal concerns, is that they are not one-dimensional. For instance, critic Deborah Stevenson praises *Smack*, “Burgess steers clear of *Go Ask Alice*-style contrivances” (Stevenson). *Crank* and *Smack* are also fulfilling a societal need for teens to have a forum where they can safely learn about drugs and their consequences outside of an un-engaging classroom or an out-of-touch teacher. They teach, like the didactic authors of the sixties and seventies; the difference between “single-issue problem novels” and modern drug addiction tragedies are that these tales are realistic and complex (Cart 64). Readers engage with them because they can identify with the multifaceted characters. They can see themselves or believe in the protagonist and the various issues the main characters are facing. These books are not just one-dimensional plots that lecture to readers not to do drugs. By vicariously experiencing the fall that Kristina, Gemma, and Tar did, readers do not want to repeat this in their real lives.

Relevance and Realism

As Cart points out, “the novel, if it is to have any hope of offering not only relevance but revelation to its readers, must keep pace with the ever-changing reality of their daily real-world lives” (Cart 65). These Young Adult addiction novels successfully reflect the changes of the times. That is why they are the modern tragedy. Kristina, Gemma, and Tar all exemplify what it is to be a contemporary teenager. Of the problem novels of the seventies, Egoff points out, “adolescents had been steadily assuming more and more of the attributes, perquisites, and problems of their elders. Like adults, teenagers now had money, cars, jobs, and also drugs, liquor, sex, and the assorted

difficulties arising therefrom” (Cart 65). Our own times have only added more difficulties, in addition to the age-old vices legally restricted to adults, now teens face sexting, cyber-bullying, and a number of problems many adults could not have even fathomed when they were teens.

Cart discusses the societal desire to teach teenagers as one of the reasons for the flood of problem novels. He quotes author Natalie Babbitt, “When our children come into their teens, we have a kind of last-chance-for-the-thruway feeling that now is the moment to drum away, because obviously their personalities are not formed and they are desperately in need of moral instruction” (Cart 65). This line of thinking has “tempted many otherwise good writers to confuse realistic fiction with problem-novel-tract or nonfiction-with-a-conscience” (65).

As Michael Cart explains, the principle difference in a realistic novel and the problem novel is that a realistic novel “grows out of the personal vision of the writer” (66). Whereas the problem novel “stems from the writer’s social conscience” or by a desire to sell cookie-cutter books modeled after other writer’s consciences, Hopkins and Burgess had personal motives, which they genuinely care about, for writing their books (66). What separates Hopkins and Burgess’ work is that they care about their subject matter, not sales numbers. Hopkins started *Crank* as a way to try to understand the monster that had shattered her family. Burgess had witnessed what the drug scene had done to people he knew, and he was shocked at the complete lack of reading material there was for teenagers from fourteen to eighteen. These two forces pushed him to create *Smack*.

In addition to the “realism” of the problem novel, there was an insurgence of “restricted realism,” as Jane Abramson calls it, in the seventies (Cart 69). The pendulum swung from bleak problem novels to “Books that set out to tackle painful experiences turn[ed] into weak testimonies to life’s essential goodness” (69). These novels were given unrealistic or tacked on happy endings in which characters realize the fault in their deviation from societal conventions and return to accepted behavior. Both of these types of books reaffirm conventional morality: the problem novel through its bleak forecast for anyone not adhering to society’s unwritten rules and the restricted realistic books warning teens to turn back to the light.

Micheal Cart traces this “realism” trend in YA literature and notes the same issues still present in the 1990s. He quotes young adult writer, Chris Lynch, who writes, “my plea is authenticity” (69). What Lynch is calling for is exactly what modern readers want: authentic, realistic characters with problems that are relevant to their lives. This authenticity that Lynch begs for is what engages readers and in that, readers may learn from experiences the characters deal with. Cart explains that the realistic novel is slowly “evolving into a richer and more rewarding kind of fiction (a process that is ongoing)” (71). This is where the works of Hopkins and Burgess come in. Burgess was answering a call in the nineties for realistic fiction for an older teen audience about problems they may actually face. Hopkins, in 2004, provided another realistic, bold novel. Unlike problem novels, their characters are relatable and real, and their plots are not single-track and one-dimensional. Readers follow their characters through their ups and downs, relate to their countless problems, and amidst all that, see the danger of drugs through a powerful account.

Neither novelist paints a happy ending for their characters. Both authors leave off with their characters still struggling with addiction, showing that not every story has a happy ending, especially not stories of addiction. This candid realism is exactly the direction in which the Young Adult genre, for older teens, should be going. No false note of hope as with the restricted realism novels, but a realistic reminder that once someone has given his or her life to drugs, it is not easy to walk away and start over, nor should the character have to die, like Alice, to escape. The truth is life will continue to be a battle, and these authors show that to their audiences; Cart would applaud them. He argues that although *Go Ask Alice* has been on several best of the best lists for Young Adult literature, it is Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) that is truly one of the greatest works of realistic Young Adult literature (77). Though in subject matter it may seem that *Crank* and *Smack* have more in common with *Go Ask Alice*, in reality Burgess and Hopkins follow more closely the path first trod by writer Robert Cormier. As Michael Cart comments, Cormier "had the courage to write a novel of thematic weight and substance that actually suggested that there might be no happy endings in young adult lives" (84). Cart asserts that *The Chocolate War* is "arguably the single most important title in the history of young adult literature to date" (84). Burgess and Hopkins's ambiguous endings do the same for their readers. It may be shocking for some to read that Kristina is still pining away for another dance with the monster as she sits outside listening to her newborn baby scream inside, or to read as Tar admits that after having a child, after Gemma leaving him, after rehab and jail, he still uses from time to time. Though those endings may be difficult for readers to accept, they are more realistic than a neatly tied up, forged happy ending of the restricted realistic novel or the message

of death to all who have stepped outside societal boundaries like the bleak problem novel. These novelists are teaching a valuable lesson to their readers by being real.

From a Genre in Trouble to a Means of Wisdom

Burgess and Hopkins's works are not only answering a need for a more rewarding type of literature for teens; their immensely popular novels are helping a genre that was once believed to be in trouble. Michael Cart discusses after the weakening sales of the problem novel, some critics and publishers wondered if it was the end of Young Adult literature. He actually goes as far as to say that many would agree it is still "a genre in turmoil" (141). When Burgess's work has been translated into twenty-eight languages and sold around the world, and Hopkins' book has been a *New York Times* bestseller, it is hard to believe this is a genre in trouble. Their modern tragedies are an answer to the "reality" that "Film, radio, first-person journalism, prying biographers, and above all, TV have saturated us with" (Cart 143). As Cart argues, this "reality" that is so popular in modern culture is actually in most cases quite far from any reality that a typical teenager faces. Watching people trying to survive in tropical climates and groups of people partying in various cities may be called "reality," but that is not the life that most teens are living. Although readers may not be battling drugs as protagonists in Young Adult addiction novels are, these novels do show readers that difficulties and dangers are a part of everyday life.

Though heroin and methamphetamines are not something that are a daily reality for most teens, the characters' feelings and struggles are easily relatable to any reader,

especially teens who are feeling the same confusion, inadequacies, and turmoil that Burgess and Hopkin's protagonists experience. As Cart states, today's youth "are the most at-risk generation in our nation's history" (164). He discusses how teens are facing "about every conceivable societal and personal problem plaguing, taxing, and threatening the development and indeed, the very lives of today's adolescents" (164). This is why we need writers who educate readers without being condescending to them. Not writers who tell readers what to do and think, who scare or preach, but writers who, like Burgess and Hopkins, present a story and know that teen readers are competent enough to make intelligent choices when they are faced with tough decisions.

Cart asserts that:

We need more than just (nonfiction) information; we need... *wisdom*.

And for that we must have fiction—*young adult* fiction, that is, which is written for and about adolescents and the mind-boggling problems that now plague and perplex them. Not a formula-driven fiction that begins and ends only with the problem, though, but a new kind of problem novel that is as real as the headlines, yes; but enriched by the best means literature can offer—an expansive, fully realized setting; a memorably artful narrative voice; complex and fully realized characters; and unsparing honesty and candor in use of language and treatment of material—a young adult fiction, in short, that taken creative (and marketing) risks to present hard-edged issues of relevance so that it may offer its readers revelation and, ultimately, that elusive wisdom. (168)

Burgess and Hopkins have answered this call. Their sometimes shocking accounts of drug abuse force revelation on their readers. Without preaching, both authors get their point across and help readers gain that wisdom that Michael Cart speaks of. As one review stated, “more profoundly persuasive than a lecture is the turn to prostitution to finance their habits, Tar’s casual comment, ‘If you don’t mind not reaching twenty there’s no argument against heroin, is there?’ or a scene during which Lily nurses her baby while also probing her own chest for a vein to insert a needle” (“Smack” *Kirkus*). Hopkins is hailed for her “powerful and unsettling” story which provokes her readers to think about drug use (“Crank” *Kirkus*).

Flirtin’ with the Monster, a collection of essays weighing in on the success of Hopkins’ works, includes a Nevada judge’s essay of gratitude that someone is proactively attempting to alert people about the dangers of methamphetamine addiction. Judge John Tatro says, “Ellen Hopkins, by providing an insider’s view of addiction in *Crank* and *Glass*, is providing another form of education” (84). He applauds her for having “allowed her readers to see and understand the absolute horrors of methaphatamine from a user’s perspective—not just some adult lecturing in a classroom or from a judge’s bench” (84). He further praises her because now he has an insight into addicts’ lives who have come through his courtroom that he would have never otherwise had.

Judge Tatro discusses how influential Hopkins’ works are: “The far-reaching effects of Ellen’s books cannot be measured, but I have no doubt she has saved many young people from ever trying this insidious drug” (84). He addresses the fact that, “many people have the misconception that methamphetamine is a problem that only affects those in lower-income, uneducated, dysfunctional families. This is dead wrong” (82). He talks

about how in his career he has seen children of politicians, doctors, and lawyers on meth. In a nearby community, a college president with a doctorate degree “succumbed to meth” (82). *Crank* and *Smack* force readers who may not have thought about the dangers of drugs, to contemplate the consequences of drug use. Teen readers can make an informed decision if ever faced with pressures to experiment and can give support and understanding to others who may have made poor choices.

Burgess goes into detail about Tar’s first time experimenting with heroin and paints a horrifying portrait of drug use. He shows how quickly an ordinary teenager can become addicted. Like many teens who may be reading, Tar is dismayed when he is confronted with the drug for the first time. When he goes to see Gemma after she has been living with their friends Lily and Rob for a week on her own, they reveal their drug use and pressure him to participate. He says, “I was horrified...I was thinking, She’s a junkie, she’s a junkie, she’s a junkie” (Burgess 167). He is scared that the girl he loves is addicted to such an awful drug: ironic, given that he later becomes even more out-of-control than she does.

Like many teens, Tar has heard the cautionary tales, “You know those stories. You take on little sniff and that’s it, you’re hooked for life; you end up on the streets robbing old ladies and putting your hands down old men’s trousers for a few quid for the next fix” and that is almost exactly what ends up happening to these characters (167). The once innocent Tar ends up thieving from his friends, and the girls and Rob, by the end, have resorted to prostitution. Although he knows what could happen, he tries heroin despite his fears after a little peer pressure from Lily and Rob and seeing Gemma try it. He notes, “She looked...happy” (168).

Lily, Rob, and Gemma tell Tar, and themselves, that it is merely innocent fun: “A little heroin isn’t going to change you into one [a junkie]. You have to think like a junkie if you want to be a junkie” (168). Gemma persuades him to, “try it once. Try everything once. All that stuff you hear about one little hit and you’re a junkie for life is just stories, you know” (168-169). Many readers can relate to the internal conflict Tar experiences, as many have probably faced some sort of peer pressure in their lives. Tar remarks, “I looked at the foil and I thought, God, I don’t know what to do...” (169). With one more condescending prod from Lily, “Look, he’s actually going to miss the chance to feel better than anyone else in the world,” he tries it and that is the beginning of his descent into addiction (169). Ironically, he thinks, “What did I have to lose?” and readers follow him over the next 200 pages and see just how much he did have to lose (169).

Burgess provides insight into addiction as Tar says, “All the pain...It just floated away from me, I just floated away from it” (169-170). His addiction begins when he realizes, “I didn’t feel incredibly wonderful or anything, but it was gone. All the hurt” (170). For someone like Tar, who has been through so much, heroin provides the illusion of escape. As counselor Mary Bryan says, “the drug allows [users] to feel like they can leave the pressures of life behind” (Bryan 59). But as readers will soon see, instead of heroin casting away all his problems, all it does is open the door for even more problems, ones Tar could not have even imagined before heroin was introduced into his life.

After this first experimentation, Lily invites Tar to move in and he says, only minutes after first trying the drug, “I felt I was just beginning to learn how to live” (Burgess 170). Even though only moments before he had been horrified, Tar agrees to move in with the addicts. Readers can see just how true those first time addiction stories are. Burgess’s

intention may not have meant to step up to the podium and teach, yet this is exactly what he has done with Tar's first-time story. Readers, who may be confronted with drugs at some point in their adolescence, are forced to think about the consequences of what some may claim is innocent experimentation.

"Everyteens"

These two authors are successful in effectively warning readers of the dangers of addiction not only because they are so non-judgmental, but because their characters are so relatable. Kristina, Tar, and Gemma are all such realistic, complex characters that readers easily identify with them and their struggles. They are vastly different from the flat, stereotypical characters of problem novels. In fact, Kristina, Tar, and Gemma are so relatable that they serve as "Everyteen" characters. Like the Everyman character from which the term is coined, these characters are so well-rounded that most readers can find something of themselves in these characters. Though the Everyman character originated from the infamous fifteenth century morality play, *Everyman*, has come to mean an "ordinary or typical human being," and these characters represent the ordinary teenager in so many ways ("Everyman"). As Valerie Ott recognizes, "Teens will relate to Kristina's desire to experiment as well as her difficulty balancing conflicting feelings" (Ott).

Crank's Kristina Snow is a sympathetic character because she goes through many experiences that readers themselves have been through. She feels alienated, yet smothered by her family; she feels hormonal and unsure of herself, and she struggles with

finding her identity and her place in the world. She seeks the attention of boys, yet is not completely sure how to handle it. When she first meets Adam, the boy who, along with her father, introduces her to crystal meth, she says, “I didn’t have a clue how to kiss./ Didn’t really want him hands investigating the hills/ and valleys of my landscape,” but she ends up having a physical relationship by the end of her three week trip (Hopkins 46). Like many teens, she feels that “gentle clouds of monotony/ smother” (6). Any teen who has experienced the tedium of being a teenager can relate. She acknowledges insecurities that many teens suffer with. She describes herself as, “Near-sighted. Hormonal/ Three zits monthly./ Often confused./ Lusting for love” (23). In an essay in *Flirtin’ with the Monster*, Hopkins’ daughter who Kristina’s character is based on talks about how even after boys started noticing her, she still always felt like the ugly duckling. Hopkins’ audience witnesses Kristina’s first kiss and may remember when they, like Kristina, felt that “At that exact moment,/ every/ single/ thing/ about/ my/ life/ changed./ Forever”(77). Readers not only go on a journey with her not only because of drug use, they also experience the odyssey that is being a teenager.

As Kristina’s life spirals out of control, readers follow her through being raped, to a juvenile detention facility, and finally to her pregnancy. What separates *Crank* from the didactic problem novels is that Kristina is real, not only because she is based on Hopkins’ own daughter, but because readers can truly relate to her feelings and problems since her problems are simply variations of their own.

Kristina struggles with her desire for a relationship with her estranged father. Like many children of divorced families, Kristina struggles with feeling abandoned by her father. She refers to him as “part-time/ relatives and substitutes for love” and says, “I

needed a lot more” in regards to relationship, or lack thereof, with her father (Hopkins 17, 15). Feeling that she is missing something, she goes to visit even though, “I hadn’t seen Dad in eight years./ No calls. No cards. No presents” (10). She quickly realizes that the dream of running into the arms of her “daddy” and catching up on years of lost time was not going to materialize. The reality was “From daddy to dad/ in thirty seconds. We were/ strangers, after all” (21).

Her search for a connection from her father stems from the fact that she feels alone at home though she is surrounded by family. Her mother is busy with her career and new husband. Her older sister has her own life with little room for Kristina. She resents her little brother for stealing her place as the baby in the family. Like many middle children, Kristina feels like she has lost her role in the family. In her poem entitled “Alone” she says:

no mom	Marie, ever more distant,
	in her midlife quest for fame
no stepfather,	Scott, stern and heavy-handed
	with unattainable expectations
no big sister,	Leigh, caught up in a tempest of
	uncertain sexuality
no little brother,	Jake, spoiled and shameless

in his thievery of my niche (4).

Kristina's plight is something that most readers can relate to on some level. Thomas Hine, who examines teenagers in his book *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, explains, "teenagers often complain to interviewers that they have been abandoned by their parents, who are working hard, divorced, or disinterested in them" (25).

Throughout the novel, she alternates between feelings of being abandoned and smothered by her mother and jealousy toward her stepfather. On one hand she thinks, "I've been alone since my mom met Scott./ He sucked the nectar from her heart/ like a famished butterfly. No nurture,/ no nourishment left for Kristina" (13). Then again, she feels that "Parents ever-present shade, dimming my sparkle,/ kryptonite to quell my bid for superpower" (410). She wants attention from her brother and sister, but cannot bring herself to let them in. "Siblings, one too close and curious,/ the other much/ too far away to serve as confidant" (410) Even though readers may not have the same circumstances that Kristina does, her feelings are fairly universal.

In addition to her familial issues, Kristina's experiences emotional upheaval in other aspects of her life. Kristina, like many teenagers, craves acceptance from her peers. This is one of the factors that eventually leads her down the path of destruction her life takes. Ellen Hopkins' daughter, who Kristina's character is based on, writes about her desire for acceptance, which her mom brilliantly captures, "I wanted to be accepted and embraced by the other kids more than anything in the world...I longed for the cruel little tyrants (the popular girls) to like me, but I had glasses and straight-As" ("Kristina" 166). In addition to popularity, Kristina wants to be noticed by the opposite sex and her alter ego, Bree, is just bold enough to attract that, though this attention-seeking behavior opens the

door for her rapist. In another essay in *Flirtin' with the Monster*, Kelly Foutz who the character Jake is based on, describes her sister giving her phone number to every boy who ever asked for it. Kelly realizes, "No amount of popularity or fun is worth losing your soul" (163). Hopkins' daughter that Kristina's character is based on admits "each flirtation built my confidence to new levels" ("Kristina" 167).

Kristina also feels pressure to remain the star student she has always been. "Alone,/ There is no perfect daughter,/ no gifted high-school junior,/ no Kristina Georgia Snow./ There is only Bree" (Hopkins 5). The "real" Kristina acknowledges, "I may have actually become valedictorian and gone on to college, instead she ends up in jail after seven years of addiction and having five children that she does not raise" ("Kristina" 166). As Hopkins puts it from her character's point of view, "I swerved/ off the high road,/ hard left to nowhere,/ recklessly indifferent to those/ coughing my dust" (Hopkins 2).

Hopkins's other daughter laments, "With the first snort, her bright future was gone" (Foutz 163). Although her family can see Kristina ruining her future, Kristina does not see this and believes that her alter ego allows her to be what she believes is "herself," or at least a rebellious version of herself that, in the beginning, helps her self-esteem. From a psychological standpoint, young adult writer Micol Ostow examines Bree and explains she represents Kristina's id. She represents Kristina's "dark, inaccessible side... impulse, instinct... everything we wish, but would probably be loathe to say out loud" (Ostow 112). Like the id function of the mind, Bree "demands immediate satisfaction" (112).

Unfortunately, this brazen alter ego leads Kristina to make dangerous choices. In the beginning, Kristina believes, "Bree was not an invention,/ not a stranger./ Bree was the essence of me" (Hopkins 243). After she gets involved in the drug scene, even her

friends alienate her, expecting her to continue to be the “good girl” she always had been. She feels as though she has no one to talk to; she says, “even good girls have secrets,/ ones even their best friends must guess” (8).

Readers can relate to these conflicting emotions in Kristina, even before drugs are introduced into the picture. Once she is introduced to the drug scene, she is faced with a new influx of dilemmas. She knows that drugs are dangerous even though, “In school I was never confronted/ with drugs, surely never thought them out” (66). When she first witnesses her dad’s bad habits she says, “Rent money, right up the nose” (67). Kristina was the voice of reason before being introduced to drugs herself. Her father and boyfriend, who bring her into this illicit world, make her life even more complicated. In the poem “Like an Idiot,” Kristina uses meth for the first time. She knows how unreasonable it is because she says, “there I was/ snorting crank/ With my dad,/ my boyfriend, and his other girlfriend./ Something majorly wrong with that picture” (102). Yet strangely, for perhaps the first time, Kristina feels accepted: “It was my turn. I’d been invited” (81).

The very night she is introduced to meth, Kristina almost gets raped by three men in an alley when she runs away from the uncomfortable situation she put herself in. In case that was not enough to scare her away from drugs, Adam’s other girlfriend, Lince, who he had been dating until he met Kristina, jumps from a balcony attempting suicide after her boyfriend leaves to follow Kristina home. This horrific chain of events should have sent Kristina running away from meth, but the habit seems to have already been formed after just that once. When she visits Lince in the hospital with Adam she thinks, “I needed/ my mommy./ And all that made me really/ really need/ a line” (147). Anyone

reading this can see how irrational she is and how quickly a meth addiction can be formed. Without preaching, Ellen Hopkins has shown readers the consequences of this monster if they ever come in contact with it. After reading about the decline of her model daughter, no rational reader would follow the same path in their own lives.

Crank continues to follow Kristina's fall. Only days after experimenting with drugs, Kristina continues making careless choices and flies home high on drugs. Counselor Mary Bryan analyzes Kristina's journey from a clinical point of view. She says that it is evident on this plane ride that, after only three weeks with her father, she is already an addict. Bryan says, "Barring forceful intervention, her downfall is already inevitable" (Bryan 65). When the once star pupil starts back at school, she admits: "High for two days, too much crank, no sleep, liquid diet. The first day of school was a nightmare" (315). As the school year progresses, matters only get worse. Kristina starts by lying to her mother, sneaking out, and eventually ends up in a juvenile detention facility and even becoming a drug dealer herself (327). In *Flirtin' with the Monster*, Hopkins's daughter who inspired Kristina's character, acknowledges, "at first it was a once-in-a-while pleasure, but it became an all-consuming passion before I even had time to wonder how I got lost in the grip of the monster" ("Kristina" 73). Readers of *Crank* can see how Kristina loses herself to meth.

Kristina realizes she is on a dangerous path, but can no longer help herself:

it occurred to me for one uneasy moment
that every move I had make lately might have
started a landslide.
What if I couldn't go back? What if I died in the crash?

Almost immediately, the monster soothed
me, confused me with a deeper question.
What is the ride was worth it?
I mean, who wants to trudge through life, doing
everything just right? Taking no chances means
wasting your dreams.
How can I explain the pure chilling rush of
waiting to do something so basically not right?
No fear. No guilt.
How can I explain purposely setting foot
on a path so blatantly treacherous? Was the
fun in the fall? (300-301)

Little does Kristina know that though she believes she is taking chances and not “wasting her dreams,” she is actually throwing away all chances she has of achieving her real dreams. She thinks that meth is opening doors for her, allowing her to live life, but she is giving up her life in exchange for an addiction. In her essay, the “real” Kristina says:

I put myself through the darkest drawn-out hell anyone could possibly imagine, and I dragged people with me who should never have had to experience pain inflicted by my hand...Meth poisoned more than my body. It poisoned my life...If I can prevent even one person from taking the same path I have then it all will have been worth it” or put at the end? (174).

Though *Crank* ends with Kristina still struggling with her addiction and having a newborn, *Flirtin'* reveals that her son, and the other children she had over the years as an addict, have difficulty paying attention and other behavioral issues. Her son, Hunter in *Crank*, writes about how he does not get to see his siblings because all five of them are raised by different family members. He talks about how his mom cannot find someone to love because of the choices she made as a teenager. It is these terrible choices that placed Kristina in the grasp of the monster and, in turn, ruin the lives of her friends, family, and even her children. Most readers will be able to relate to Kristina's poem "Choices." She says, "Life is full of/ choices/ We don't/ Always/ Make/ good ones./ It seems to/ Kristina/ you gotta/ be/ crazy/ to open your/ windows,/ invite the/ demons in./ Bree/ throws rocks/ at the feeble/ glass,/ laughs" (83). Burgess' characters Tar and Gemma could relate to Kristina's words; they make some terrible choices of their own.

Tar and Gemma are also dynamic, multi-faceted characters. Tar is an extremely sympathetic character in beginning, and Gemma ends up becoming a likeable character, even more so than Tar by the end of *Smack*. Like Kristina, Tar and Gemma are also "Everyteen" characters. Though not every teen has experienced all of the particular issues that Tar and Gemma have, they both deal with many of the same issues teenage readers will be familiar with such as feelings of inadequacy, sexual awakenings, and asserting their identity.

Although most teenagers do not come from abusive homes, the sad truth is that many do. All readers, not just fellow victims of abuse, can empathize with Tar. He is a charming kid who has dreams, aspirations, insecurities, and, at least in the beginning of the novel, a smile across his face most of the time. He dreams, "I want to be a painter or

a designer. I really think I'm good enough" (Burgess 26). Gemma explains Tar's motives for running away: "Tar had a reason, plenty of reasons. The latest were painted on his face, too" (Burgess 3). Though he starts off idealistic and begins a mural for Gemma when he first runs away, life on the streets and Gemma soon lead him to a life of drug abuse and addiction. His addiction causes him to forget his mural, leaving it unfinished and symbolizing his hopes and dreams that will never materialize.

As with many victims of emotional or physical abuse, Tar has conflicting emotions about his abuser, which makes it that much more difficult to leave his situation. Tar says, "People think my dad is worse because he beats me up, but Mum's worse really. He's easy; I just hate him...I guess I hate Mum too. The trouble with her is, I love her as well" (57). Many readers can empathize with Tar as he describes his mother "falling over and weeping and moaning and being sick" (57). At only fifteen he has to be the adult at home. Tar says, "Mum would be lolling about cursing and swearing, or passed out on the floor" (57). He has to witness his parents' violent fights and watch them break their own possessions. After reading about how this affected Tar, it is hard to believe that he turns into an addict himself. Seeing Tar struggle with these feelings could help teens who experience the same contradictory feelings.

Many readers, who may be in abusive situations themselves, and even those who are not, can sympathize with Tar's feelings of helplessness. In an attempt to help the situation, Tar starts taking on more of her responsibilities around the house, and this is what sends his father over the edge into abuse. His father feels that by doing her housework and grocery shopping, Tar is taking away his mother's self-respect. He takes

out the anger and bitterness that he feels about his wife and job on Tar. After the first beating, Tar has to spend a week out of school waiting for his bruises to fade.

The physical abuse from his father is not the only form of abuse Tar has to deal with, and not necessarily the worst. He feels that what his mother does to him is worse. He says, "I hate my mum worse than my dad, because my dad only scared me but my mom makes me feel dirty and useless. She undoes everything I want to do with myself" (64). He explains, "She always does it. She can make me do anything. She used to do it for fun sometimes, just to amuse herself" (64). He describes how she would manipulate him in front of Gemma when they were first introduced in order to show off. She flaunted the fact that she could control him and make him feel idiotic. Even after he has run away, she still tries to control him. She attempts to convince him to hitchhike home to do the housework and take the beatings from his father that he had now directs towards her. Instead of realizing how awful she treats him, he thinks, "She's a good mother really. Or she would be if she managed to get off the bottle" (63).

Readers follow Tar's downward spiral and watch as he goes from an optimistic boy who gets excited over finding pages from art books that had been thrown out to a deceitful drug dealer. He had been so passionate about art that he warmed the hearts of his roommates. After seeing an expensive, gigantic collection of artwork in a bookstore window, he says that owning it "must be like owning the sky" (199). He starts out so disarming that the people who encounter him when he first runs away love him. Skolly, the first to befriend Tar as a runaway, and Richard and Vonny who take Tar in, all accept him and adore him from the moment they meet, but by the end of Burgess' work he is not

a good person; he lies, does drugs even after two stays in rehabilitation centers and jail, and deals drugs to children.

Though he is in a very different situation than the home Kristina comes from, he still is looking for love. And, like Kristina, Tar exemplifies the typical teenager in ways other than being at odds with his family. Like Kristina, and many teens, he is unsure of himself. He considers himself lucky when he meets Gemma—a girl who will give him the time of day. He does not feel like he is good enough for her because he lacks self-worth.

Gemma, though self-centered, is also a very relatable character for many readers. She exemplifies teenage boredom: “Gemma was the most bored person she knew. Sitting in class sometimes she felt dizzy with it, that she’d pop or faint or something if it didn’t stop. She felt she’d do anything just to have a life” (Burgess 2). In his study of the American teen, author Thomas Hine addresses this feeling of boredom that many teenagers feel. He explains, “Teenagers are losing their license for irresponsibility while, at the same time, they continue to be denied a role in their society” (Hine 8).

In his book, Hine discusses how society “tend[s] to view teenagers as more or less of a leisure class, even though it’s clearly not true” (24). He explains that by not allowing them to find meaningful work, we are denying them a consequential place in the culture in which they live. He argues that “society makes young people’s lives difficult” (3). One of the factors that essentially pushes Gemma out of her parents’ door and into the streets is when her father calls her boss and has her dismissed from her part-time job. She says, “The humiliation was unbelievable” (Burgess 15). Though she saw this as a

trivial job, it was one of the only things she found excitement and independence in. Her father takes her place away in society.

Just as adults have contradictory feelings towards teens, sometimes expecting them to be adults and other times to be children, teens feel the same way about adults. Gemma does not get along with her parents; like Kristina, she feels they are overbearing and do not understand her. Gemma believes:

My parents are incompetent. They haven't got a clue. They think being a parent is like being an engineer or something—you do this, you do that, and this is the result you get at the other end. Someone ought to give parents lessons before they allow them to breed (Burgess 7).

Though Gemma claims to have “soul-deep rage burning for [her] loving parents,” (16) she still tries to reach out to them. After an argument with her father, she storms upstairs and plays a song about a dad and daughter at odds, but says, “I played that over and over and over but I expect it was lost on my dad. He never listens to the lyrics” (10). Gemma lets on that her rage might not be as soul-deep as she claims. She complains, “They used to love me when I was a kid but they hardly knew me anymore and there was no way I could make them understand” (74). Gemma’s desire to have a familial connection, while at the same time rebelling against her parents, typifies teenage behavior. Hine asserts that young people crave contact with their families (Hine 282). Gemma wants a relationship with her parents, but she wants it on her terms.

Just as Kristina says she traded “in the tried-and-true/For a test drive of the dark side,” other than the constant conflict with her parents, Gemma mainly leaves home to get a “slice of life,” as she calls it (Hopkins 253, Burgess 210). After she runs away to

join Tar, a man named Richard who has befriended Tar, takes them in. His girlfriend Vonny is less than thrilled to take in a bratty fourteen-year-old runaway. Vonny instantly recognizes that Gemma is going to be trouble. She says, “poor old Tar didn’t stand a chance in hell to find out what sort of person he was, of course, and he was the one who really needed to” (Burgess 118). Vonny says of Gemma, “She didn’t have problems, not real ones” and says Gemma obviously needed a mother (118). Vonny even believes that Tar should not be on the streets, but she realizes that the abusive situation he ran away from was not safe.

Vonny provides a sensible voice of reason for readers; a view that many readers may share. As an adult, Vonny realizes that these kids should be at home going to school and proms, being normal teenagers. Teen readers may not be accustomed to siding with an adult in Young Adult literature, but Vonny does provide a rational viewpoint. She recognizes that Gemma’s parents were making her life hard, but that it was just that. She was not in danger or being abused like Tar. Vonny admits, “her parents were obviously making life unnecessarily hard for her” (122). After witnessing Gemma whine, “I can’t do anything” and seeing her have several tantrums, Vonny says, “It really made me sympathize with her parents. If it wasn’t what she wanted, her, now then and tomorrow, it was unbearable” (122). Vonny helps readers see that Gemma’s motives for running away are not sound, though this teenage angst, this desire for rebellion, is one of the factors that makes Gemma an “Everyteen.” Through Vonny’s words, readers may gain insight on their own feelings and realize that anger towards parents is not reason to run away. Through this insight, Burgess may be preventing others from following in Gemma’s dangerous footsteps.

Gemma runs away for freedom to get away from her parents' rules and restrictions, but she soon realizes there are rules everywhere. Even while living with the anarchists, Richard and Vonny, there are still rules to follow. Gemma complains, "I was beginning to get a bit irritated with the list of things we weren't allowed to do" (85). Richard and Vonny serve as surrogate parents to Tar and Gemma, supporting them monetarily, looking after them, and making sure they have food and shelter. Instead of being appreciative, Gemma grumbles, "I hadn't run away from home in order to find a new set" (103). Gemma fights against the notion that "If you were fourteen you *belonged* to someone" (102). She even rebels against Tar on her first night in a club. She feels that he is holding her back just by being around, and she almost goes home with another guy that she admits looks scary. She said of his group of friends, "They were really nasty punk, you'd think they'd slit your throat" (116). She is willing to put herself in a dangerous situation in order to have an adventure. She tells Tar, "You're not my bloody mother either" (115). Gemma feels that she has to rebel against anyone who she perceives is threatening her absolute freedom.

Gemma and Tar also experience other common teenage feelings that readers can relate to, such as feelings about sex and romance. At first, Gemma is uncomfortable with the idea of having sex with Tar because she does not love him. She is uncomfortable when he tells her he loves her; she feels like she cannot say it back without being dishonest. Readers join them for their first awkward sexual encounter and find it hard to believe that Gemma, who is a fairly innocent fourteen-year-old in the beginning of Burgess' work, ends up being a prostitute. She endears readers when she talks about this

possible first love, “I really did love him in that moment, more than anyone, more than myself, even though tomorrow it might be all over” (90).

Another struggle that teenage readers can relate to is Gemma’s quest to find out who she is and establish her identity. Typically, the teenage years are a time for young people to find out who they are. Thomas Hine discusses this identity search common in teens: “Young people are caught in a paradox. They drive themselves to extremes to create space in which to be themselves” (281).

Kristina and Gemma both exemplify this need to find themselves that so many teenagers feel at some point. Though they think that they have found themselves once they are introduced to drugs, in reality, all they have found is a different set of rules. Now their lives are ruled by their addiction, not parents. Rob, the friend who introduces Gemma to heroin, notes, “Gems was feeling a bit tied down...she wanted to take the place by storm” (Burgess 147). Tar, too, had noticed Gemma’s need for excitement. When Gemma first leaves to live with Rob and Lily, Tar consoles himself saying, “She just wants to fly,” making excuses for her actions (161). Vonny, always the voice of reason, tells him, “She has to walk before she can run, let alone fly,” but he thinks to himself, “But I want to fly, too” (161). Both Gemma and Tar want to find their place in society and are struggling to find their identities. Rob may think that introducing her to a life of drugs is freeing her from social constraints, but all he is doing is giving her a life sentence.

Like Gemma, Kristina feels the need to find herself. Kristina creates Bree as a way of being herself, and Gemma reinvents herself through punk fashion and the alternative lifestyle that people in Bristol live. She lives off Richard and Vonny’s money

and spends her stash stolen from her parents on nose piercings, black clothes, and black lipstick. She thinks the, “punk look suited me” (107). She explains she had thought of herself as homely until she was twelve, now she feels like she is really coming into her own through this punk look. Vonny comments, “After she got herself punkified she thought she’d found The Only Way to Be... she got right in it up to her eyeballs” (120). Vonny notes that Gemma was excited to get more piercings and says “I can never go home now!” (120). Gemma’s new look is her way of declaring her independence.

Her reincarnation is not just limited to a new wardrobe of ripped fishnets and black leather: the music is part of her new identity too. This is something many readers can relate to. In every generation, music speaks to youth. Interestingly, music is one aspect of teens and parents that Hine investigates in his book. He notes that “because adults assume that they cannot understand teenagers’ music or humor, most simply don’t pay any attention” (Hine 47). Gemma describes her infatuation with the noise and vibrancy of the loud, crude club music. She describes it as screaming and violent. She says, “they were just so obscene and rude and wonderful. The music was like being beaten up, only it didn’t hurt” (Burgess 111). She is thrilled to find an outlet that allows her to be “herself.” Burgess seems to truly understand the age-old connection teenagers feel to music.

When Gemma meets Lily for the first time, dancing around the room, almost naked and on drugs, she says, “Did you ever see someone and think straightaway, I want to be that person? I want to look like her and think like her and have the same effect as she does...” (132-33). Gemma is so used to living by her parents rules and having appropriate manners that she admires this girl that seems free and who appears to know

who she is and does not care whether people approve of her. She thinks, “I wanted to be myself as much as she was herself” (133). Gemma calls her “the magic girl” and thinks she does not follow any rules, but readers soon see how tied down Lily is, not by parents, teachers, or employers, but by heroin (136).

As time goes on, though they believe they are finding themselves, they actually begin to lose more and more control over their lives. Eventually, Gemma and Tar’s lives are completely dictated by heroin. Tar, who Skolly had once said, “had never broken the law in his life, you could tell by just looking at him,” ends up dealing drugs to kids younger than him, in and out of jail, and in the end, an abuser like his father (42). Tar discusses the powerful hold heroin has over him:

I’m really looking forward to being clean again. It’s this weird thing with smack. First off it makes you feel so good. But after a bit, after you body gets used to it, it stops working like that. You start needing it just to stay normal... You get like some old woman who has to take her pills in the morning in order to get through the day (233).

Though he wants to stop using and get his life back, he cannot. He and Gemma have given up their lives for heroin instead of gaining the freedom they pursued. Gemma completely buys into drug culture and the idea of being free and does not realize she is giving up more than just her time like people with ordinary jobs; she is potentially giving up her very existence. Gemma notes that Tar stopped working on the mural he began when he first ran away, and when he takes breaks from heroin he begins working on it again. He loses his inspiration and motivation with drug use. They do not realize that

they are losing themselves in their addiction: their personalities, their dreams, and their ambition.

At Tar's addiction progresses, Richard tries to get Tar away from the temptations of drugs. He warns, "It'll kill you. It is killing you. You're really boring these days" (216). Ironically, Tar talks about how he used to call his mom because he cared about her, but he says, "She's lost her whole personality to that poison [alcohol] and she thinks it makes her look cool" and he thinks of his mom, "You have to help yourself... Can't you see that, Mum?" (225). He does not realize, this is exactly what Richard is trying to tell him. Like Tar, Gemma can see this in others, but not in herself. She echoes his sentiments, but not about his mother. She realizes that he is losing his personality:

Tar scares me, too. He's got so cynical. You know Tar, he was always so delighted by things. He used to get so emotional about, I dunno—me, a flower, the stars out at night, it was all wonderful for him. These days he doesn't care anymore. I don't understand him these days. I don't feel that I've changed, except I feel so rotten a lot of the time. (233)

Burgess illustrates how far in denial Tar and Gemma are.

One of the reasons that Tar and Gemma cannot see that they are giving up their lives is that, like Kristina did when she was first introduced to the drug scene, they finally feel like they have found a place where they belong. When Tar and Gemma first move in with Rob and Lily, Gemma gushes about how their lifestyle is a constant party. She does not even care if they have food: they have constant companionship with friends dropping by all the time, coming and going as they please. The best part for her is the sense that she is part of an inner circle. She remarks that they have lots of acquaintances, "But at

the centre of everything it's me and Tar and Lily and Rob" (178). The once insecure Tar says, "We were all in love with one another. We were in love with ourselves," but sadly, what they do not realize is that they really are just in love with heroin (196). Tar mistakenly believes that heroin has made him stronger. Ironically, heroin makes Gemma more content in her relationship with Tar, while he finds the confidence to not need her. When Lily tells Gemma, "You gotta look after him, he's yours, can't you see that?" she agrees, "Yeah. He's mine. We got each other. I'm his," however, prior to experimenting with heroin, she was ready to leave him behind (179).

Like Gemma, Tar feels like he has found his place, but that feeling makes him more independent. At one point he reflects on almost losing Gemma after she first runs away. After meeting Lily and Rob, she immediately wants to move in with them and contemplates leaving Tar behind, feeling that he was holding her back. He says of Gemma taking him back, "I was just so happy. I really felt like I'd arrived, I belonged" (196). This boy, who had been alienated and mistreated at home, finally thinks he has found a caring family, but does not realize how dangerous the bond that holds them is. Not only does he feel stronger because he believes he has finally found his place, he feels like he is no longer dependant upon Gemma. He says, "I still love her, but it's different now. I don't need her anymore, you know" (196). What Tar does not realize is that he may not need Gemma, but now he needs heroin: it has taken her place as his crutch. The heroin makes Tar feel strong: "I'm in control now. It was the first time I felt I had my life in my own hands" (197). The readers can see how out-of-control Tar actually is. As he is claiming to be stronger than ever, he also admits that as a dealer, drugs are always around, and he always does them. He goes on to admit that he and Rob burglarized a

liquor store. Tar is so addicted; he does not even realize how reckless his actions have become.

Although Burgess' characters pride themselves on breaking away from the grip of authority, Gemma and Tar both still need authority figures. Gemma still craves authority's approval and has the desire to tell her parents how much money she makes, but knows that they would realize what she was doing if she ever told them. She wants to impress them, but also still fears their opinion. When Vonny comes with Richard to check on them, Gemma tells her that they have started to use needles. They had previously prided themselves on not using needles, thinking that was proof they were not junkies, fueling their weak argument that they could take it or leave it, but now she admits having fallen deeper into the grasp of the drug. It is almost as if Gemma is subconsciously reaching out for help by confessing this to Vonny, but she thinks she is just enjoying getting a rise out of this parental figure.

Tar actually goes as far as to say when he is arrested, "Thank God that's over...No more decisions, no more failures, no more promises and lies. No more heroin" (273). He is glad to give up his power to an authority figure and let someone else make tough decisions for him when he does not have the strength to do it himself. He can not get off heroin himself but wants to and knows he needs to. He says he will lose everything including Gemma, "And I was pleased about it...What a relief" (273).

While in the detoxification center, Tar realizes how much he had been missing out on:

I felt I was looking at something for the first time in three years. I thought, all that time the smack has been between me and the world around me, like a fat cushion you can't see through or hear through or

touch through. It's like three years that never were. Like I put myself in a mental hospital and I've been heavily sedated for all that time. (272)

All this time they thought they were living this fulfilling life, in actuality they had less control over their lives than they ever had. They were merely fooling themselves into thinking they were happy and strong.

Unfortunately for Tar, handing over control to the authorities was not that simple, as he says, "then the bastards let me go" (273). Once released, he was doomed because he did not have the strength to do get off drugs on his own. His addiction is stronger than his willpower. Readers can recognize the paradox: Gemma, Tar, Rob, Lily all thought they were in control of their lives when they took the power from their parents and ran away. All they did was give their control to the drugs, and then Tar actually wanted to give his freewill away to the authorities.

Burgess reaches his audience through this sad scenario and several appalling scenes that would scare most readers away from trying heroin. One such incident is when Gemma is contemplating going back to a normal life. She casually remarks, "Did I tell you Lily turned blue the other day?" (235). She admits she was scared as she describes the needle stuck in Lily's arm and explains that Lily laughed about it, saying, "Live fast, die young" (237). This has become their motto, though they do not truly believe it. Gemma explains her horror at realizing that Lily's baby was inside of her when her heart stopped beating.

Though most readers would hope that would be a wake-up call to both Lily and Gemma, is not. Even after Lily's son Sonny is born, she does not change. Another of the shocking scenes Burgess portrays that would steer any reader from a life of drugs comes

once Sonny is born and Lily is still using. Tar describes how she, “injects into the veins between her breasts. I’ve seen her sitting with the baby on the breast poking about to find a vein” (275). The final straw for Gemma is when Lily almost gets killed by a customer as she is using her own home as a brothel. The man beats Rob up and chokes Lily, all while the baby is downstairs on the floor screaming. Lily escapes and runs to Gemma, and as Gemma is holding the baby and trying to let Lily recover and get some sleep, Lily wakes up and has a crazed look in her eyes when she sees that Gemma is holding her child. Gemma realizes that Lily is scared to let anyone else hold the baby and fears that they will take Sonny away once they see that she is an unfit mother. Gemma realized, “I felt guilty as hell because now she’d said it it was obvious that she thought [the baby] should be taken off her” (316).

Reading these horrifying scenes leads readers to question something Burgess himself brings up. When Lily first found out she was pregnant, Sally tries to convince her to have an abortion. She implies that the baby would be better off than being born a junkie. This angers Lily because it makes her question whether she would be better off dead since she is a junkie. After readers see Lily lose her baby she loves so much and her inability to stop using even after it nearly kills her and her child more than once, readers may question: is Lily better off dead? Would Sonny be better off never having been born since he is born into such a hopeless existence? He is born an addict in a dangerous lifestyle, with a mother that is out-of-control.

Unhappy Endings

Unlike the problem novels and restricted realism novels of the past when events tended to take an uplifting turn in the end and the characters return to societal conventions, *Crank* and *Smack* both end on a depressing note with the characters still outsiders in their own society. As critic Claire Rosser says of *Crank*, “We aren’t used to YA novels that end in such despair, but we have to face the truth that many addicts do not recover” (Rosser). This is exactly what makes these young adult addiction novels the modern tragedy. These characters, who had their whole lives ahead of them, fall due to their own vices and weaknesses. The resolutions to these modern day tragedies display no false note of happiness, but show readers the desolate future that lies ahead for drug users. *Crank* ends with the ironically titled poem, “Happy Endings” where Kristina laments, “Being a mother is hard./ A lot harder than I imagined” (Hopkins 536). She knows that her drug use has affected her child, “he cries a lot and he doesn’t really sleep like a/ newborn should. No lectures,/ okay?” (536). She notices how patient her mother is with the baby and wishes she could be more maternal, but says, “I’m only 17. I feel like life is passing/ me by as I stand here on the deck,/ listening to him fuss inside” (536). She says that the only thing that could make her laugh again is meth. Kristina’s feeling is not unfounded, “Addicts most commonly relapse within six months, because their brains are producing abnormally low levels of dopamine and they cannot experience pleasure without the drug (Bryan 68). As Judge John Tatro explains, “When you eat your favorite food, 150 dopamine units are released. When you have sex, 200 dopamine units are released. But when you use methamphetamine, 1050 dopamine units are released” (Tatro

74). Even the smile of her newborn child cannot make Kristina happy because of the abuse she has put her body and mind through. The future is bleak for Kristina and her baby because her addictions will always plague her. As counselor Mary Bryan says, “An addict cannot back up and start over as if they never drank or used drugs before” (Bryan 58).

Like Kristina, there is no happy ending for Tar, Gemma, Rob, and Lily. Tar is still lying and using, though he claims to be clean. A chapter in the end from his father’s perspective reveals that he actually became violent with Gemma, despite growing up with abusive parents and managing to escape their abuse. Gemma realizes that she did not experience the big slice of life she thought she had run away for. Instead, as her mom points out, she has missed, “growing up, going to school, exams, boyfriends in the living room, parties” (Burgess 325). What had attracted her to the city life at first was being able to meet people, go out, and have new experiences, but she ended up getting addicted to heroin and missing out on much of her teens. She sold her body for money to feed her addiction, lived a life confined to their house with just her other addict friends, and was emotionally numb for years. Instead of living this adventurous life she imagines, she misses out on three and a half years of her life.

Tar reveals that Rob sold sex to men in public restrooms prior to Gemma calling the police on the house, and explains that Rob is sent to a detoxification facility then to jail for eighteen months after being arrested. Lily, whose philosophy once was, “once you break away and get out of the brainwashing, you can liberate your children and your grandchildren and all the generations to come,” has sentenced her child to a much more dire sentence than having to have a nine-to-five job and a mortgage (180). Her actions

result in him being a drug addict from the day he is born, without a chance to make his own decisions and mistakes. Lily does get to keep her child, and they are sent to a detoxification center, then to a halfway house in the end of the novel.

Tar gets the final word in the last chapter. He reminds readers that he will always struggle with this affliction, even though that part of his life is over, those friends are long gone, and his relationship with Gemma has crumbled. He explains, “It was a love story. Me, Gemma, and junk. I thought it was going to last forever...I liked being in love. It’s like giving part of yourself away. Love is forever! Yeah, well, I don’t believe that anymore...Being an addict...now *that* lasts forever” (356).

The Reception of These Novels

Crank and *Smack* are both overwhelmingly popular, but controversial novels. Readers love them, both novels have won awards, and many critics applaud the authors, but there are some who condemn the novels for their divisive subject matter. On his website, Burgess addresses his censors. He writes that even though *Smack* was met with “howls of protest...there was also a great deal of positive reaction” (melvinburgess.net). One critic says, “When it was published in 1996, it created a storm of protest” but notes that it “is an absolute must read for any teenager and an essential eye-opener to any parent of a teenager” (lovereadings4kids.co.uk). Almost fifteen years after publication, his novel is still widely read, has been adapted for TV and stage, and won the Carnegie Medal for Children’s literature and the Guardian Children’s fiction prize, two prestigious children’s book awards.

His website highlights headlines from when he won the Carnegie Medal for Children's Literature, illuminating just how monumental his novel was when it was published. A headline from the *Independent* reads, "Children's fiction took a controversial leap into adult realism yesterday when a novel about two teenagers' descent into a life of prostitution and heroin addiction won the country's leading children's book prize" (melvinburgess.net). This newspaper recognized the vast difference between Burgess' work and what was being published for teens prior to *Smack*. *Smack* was breaking new ground. Another headline from the *Times Educational Supplement* reads, "The Carnegie Medal judges have left the comfort zone behind this year in awarding one of the most prestigious prizes in children's literature to the book that have the panel the most sleepless nights" (melvinburgess.net).

The judges were not alone in their praise of Burgess's work. Many critics also recognized the singularity of *Smack*. Critic Paula Rohrlick applauds *Smack* because it, "delivers a powerful anti-drug message" (Rohrlick). A *Booklist* review describes *Smack* as

a provocative, unrelenting story of teen heroin addiction...Burgess neither romanticizes nor preaches the dangers of heroin use, but he clearly shows both the allure of the drug and the often inevitable addiction it creates...an honest, unpatronizing, unvarnished account of teen life on the skids.
(Carton).

Carton also praises *Smack* for "characters [that] remain distinct and refreshingly complex," which is precisely what makes this a "ground-breaking young adult novel" as the *Cooperative Children's Book Center* calls it (Carton). The CCBC also compliments

Burgess' "amazingly non-judgmental tone on the part of the author" (Carton). These complex characters and this tone is what separates Burgess and Hopkins from their predecessors who attempted to take on the same subject matter, but who failed to create the groundbreaking work that these two writers accomplished. Burgess delivers a story that is thought-provoking; he tells a story with engrossing characters, unlike problem novels of the past. This is what makes *Smack* "as compellingly real as it is tragic" (*Kirkus*). Critic Heidi Hauser Green recognizes the universal themes that readers will relate to as she describes *Smack* as a "compelling novel of addiction, love, adolescence and—perhaps most of all—survival" (Green).

Burgess realizes that there are people who will want to censor his work, and there will be critics, but he says, "Despite all the controversy, I have personally received only good reports about the book. I've had any number of letters sent to me from readers, and there has not been one bad one" (melvinburgess.net). Reader Dina, on the website "teentoday," gushes that *Smack* "was one of the best books I've read" (teentoday.co.uk). Another reader explains that, "Many of the things teen witness today are included and it's something a lot of people can relate to. Strongly recommended" (teentoday.co.uk). One reader credits Burgess and his work with helping her find her way. She says she decided to go to school for psychology and works at a center helping addicts because of the insight she gained from reading this book. She thanks Burgess, "I'm so grateful you wrote the book which changed my life" (melvinburgess.net). Leah, another teen, offers praise: "*Smack* was one of those books that made me miss dinner and not get any of my homework done. It was as addicting as the drug it describes" (goodreads.com). Not all readers that commend Burgess book are teens. Noting the impact this novel can have on

teens, one teacher writes, “*Smack* has become a book I will definitely use in my classroom (teentoday.co.uk).

Hopkins’ *Crank* also has its critics, but overall, it has been very well-received by fans and critics alike. Like *Smack*, *Crank* has won awards such as the Society of School Librarians International Book Awards, the Gateway Readers Award, and the Green Mountain Book Award, among others. *Crank* is on several Best Books lists and State and Provincial Reading Lists (“Crank”).

Critics and fellow writers hail *Crank*. As fellow Young Adult writer Nikki Burnham notes, “Ellen Hopkins’ books are known for their gritty realism” (Burnham 18). A *Kirkus* review describes *Crank* as, “powerful and unsettling” and calls Hopkins’ verse “hypnotic” (“Crank” *Kirkus*) *Crank*’s publisher, Simon and Schuster states: “*Crank*, released in 2004 and quickly became a word-of-mouth sensation, garnering praise from teens and critics alike (www.simonandschuster.com). Not only do critics think that the work is entertaining, many have praised the educational value of *Crank*. As a review in *Publisher’s Weekly* comments, “readers will be amazed at how quickly they work their way through this thick book and by how much they learn about crystal meth and the toll it takes on both addicts and their families” (ellenhopkins.com). One characteristic many praise Hopkins for is that she, “speaks for the voiceless, revealing their tragedies” (Clark 95).

Like *Smack*, *Crank* also has a devoted fan base. Reader mjones raves:

Crank by Ellen Hopkins is phenomenal! The raw subject matter and intensity throughout the story are pageturners. The issues of rape, substance abuse, alcohol, and language would fit any older audience at

least 14 years and older. This book would be great if anyone's life has been affected by these issues... When reading the story the words become vivid images and it's as if you know the characters. Please pick it up and read this brilliantly written story you won't be disappointed!!"

(amazon.com)

Reader Nicole says, "I personally loved this book, and it was one that I rarely put down, and every minute that I wasn't reading it, I was thinking about what would happen next" (amazon.com). Fellow Young Adult writer, Susan Hart Lindquist, discusses Hopkins's success. She writes, "Recently, Ellen was referred to as 'one of the bestselling (if not the bestselling) living poets in the country'" (Lindquist 28). She talks about how unusual Hopkins's success is considering "The heroine is far from heroic, the endings are not happy, the format is unusual, and often the vocabulary can be challenging" (28-29). Lindquist applauds how incredible it is that kids are not only buying these books, but "quoting, memorizing, reciting, acting, rereading, and falling in love—not only with the books and their "heroine" Kristina, but often with Ellen herself" (29). This demonstrates how powerful Hopkins' words are considering they are written in poetic form, which most teens tend to typically stay away from.

Hopkins discusses her fans in *Flirtin' with the Monster*:

Every day brings scores of e-mails and other messages. Many simply tell me how wonderful my books are. Others thank me for teaching them to enjoy reading, perhaps for the first time ever. A good number thank me for giving them that all-important understanding of the issues I write about. (Hopkins 8)

She goes on to write about many fans asking her for help with their own addictions and problems because “you seem like someone who will listen when no one else will...” and she responds, “I do listen” (8). This gives testament to the fact that she truly cares about her readers.

Hopkins discusses her typical fan base. She says that her “core readership is American teens, ages fourteen to eighteen” but explains that is steadily growing (11). She says she has “heard from readers as young as eleven, and as old as seventy-five” (11). She says her readers have shared her books with their parents and grandparents: “Soldiers have carried them to Iraq, and sailors have taken them 300 feet below the Atlantic” (11). She says she is amazed that her books have found their way all around the world: “How incredible to know my words have touched so many lives” (11). She talks about her books’ success, “my books have been given top honors by readers, librarians, teachers, and booksellers” (11).

Though *Crank* and *Smack* were both incredibly well-received by fans and critics alike, the recent movement of bleak young adult books has drawn scrutiny. As critic Chris Crowe notes many critics of Young Adult literature argue that

YA books are bad because

1. They aren’t the Classics.
2. They corrupt the young. (Crowe 146)

He discusses that many believe that these gritty novels are a plot to lure older readers back to reading the genre, but as he argues, getting older teens to read is not a “problem”: older teens *should* read. Crowe advocates the use of good YA books to help reluctant readers, though some, like Kathleen Parker, whom he quotes, condemn, “the latest fad of

shelving literary classics in favor of contemporary, more fun-to-read books” (Crowe 147). Crowe does not promote shelving the classics, but believes that YA novels are useful in engaging reluctant readers and helping bridge the classics.

Crowe agrees there is a trend of bleak novels. He explains:

These books...feature stark themes, complex plot lines, and ambiguous resolution are edging out the happy endings and conventional morals of the old-style teen “problem” novels which would obsess over something like divorce, or an accidental pregnancy, for 120 pages (Crowe 148).

However, he explains that these books are merely a sign of the times. The 1960s problem novels became popular because people realized children cannot be sheltered, which explains the didactic problem novels that ensued. In this new trend of novels, writers realize they do not have to preach to teen audiences; young adult readers can think for themselves. They may be presented with grim material, but writers that share in this philosophy believe that modern readers are capable of not only handling this subject matter, but gaining wisdom and insight from it.

That respect for their readers is what sets both Ellen Hopkins and Melvin Burgess apart from many other writers. Both authors respect their teen readers in a society that often downplays teen problems and denounces teenagers. As Thomas Hine remarks, “teen-bashing is such a popular bipartisan activity” these days (Hine 4). A teenager is seen as “a not quite competent person, beset by stress and hormones,” but these stereotypes “rest on data and assertions that have not withstood scientific scrutiny” (4). These two authors realize society’s misconceptions about teenagers and the need this age group has for reading texts that treat them like people who have both important problems,

but also the ability to deal with them. Hopkins and Burgess both realize that, as Hine puts it, “being a teenager today is no paradise” and that their problems are as real, and dangerous, as any age group’s issues (8). They realize the need for their readers to have a place to turn to that provide information without a lecture, and more importantly their readers’ ability to take that information and make decisions.

One reason that Hopkins is so successful is due to the fact that she started writing *Crank* not as a way to make a fortune or a name for herself as an author, but to help her understand her own daughter’s addiction. She was not attempting to force readers to engage in bibliotherapy, the practice of reading in order to help understand and/or resolve conflicts. Though she does make her story relevant to readers, which is one of the fundamentals of bibliotherapy. In *Flirtin’ with the Monster*, she explains, “I didn’t start the book with strangers in mind. I started it for me, to gain some understanding and answers to my questions” (“Introduction” 5).

As *Young People with Problems: A Guide to Bibliotherapy* states, “written words have influenced the decision, attitudes, and behaviors of mankind since the beginning of recorded history” (Pardeck 1). Once Hopkins realized that her story could help others, she chose to share her story, realizing

these issues touch lives every day, including the lives of children and teens.

It’s important to write about them honestly because only then can we gain insight into not only the victims, but also the perpetrators. Without that understanding, we can’t hope to change things for the better. (“Introduction”

7)

She knew when she began writing that it was not an uncommon problem, “and will continue to be until we can educate our youth honestly about drugs, and how they affect not only the user, but also everyone who loves him or her, not to mention society in general” (“Introduction” 2).

While Hopkins’ motivations might seem like those of the doctor who wrote *Go Ask Alice*, the difference is the keyword that Ellen Hopkins uses: honesty. In an interview with Barnes and Noble, Hopkins said she writes “with honesty, from a place of deep respect for my readers” (Lindquist 32). She chose to write her story as fiction because she was not in her daughter’s shoes, but she knows what witnessed during her daughter’s downward spiral. Hopkins does not try to say that her story is 100 percent autobiographical, and in that, her fiction is more realistic. As Cinda Williams Chima writes in “Reality-Based Memoir vs. Non-Fiction,” “fiction may be the best way to tell the truth” (130). Chima notes that choosing to tell her story as fiction, “enabled Hopkins to speak to her audience—teenagers (Chima 135). This has allowed her to reach out to the audience she wanted to. The text would not have spoken to teenagers had she written it as a middle-aged parent, not would have helped the readers it has, had it been directed at an adult audience.

Hopkins felt she had been, “figuratively slapped in the face by her daughter ‘Kristina’— and her decision to flirt with the monster drug methamphetamine, or crystal meth,” and realized that she could help other’s not only in her place, but people like her daughter (“Introduction” 1). In an untitled poem in *Flirtin’ with the Monster*, Hopkins writes, “For whom does she write,/ this poet...Not for awards...this poet, like all poets,/ writes true to herself” (Hopkins 26). Hopkins wrote *Crank* because she needed to, and

realized her story could help others, not as some “of last-chance-for-the-thruway feeling that now is the moment to drum away, because obviously [teenagers’s] personalities are not formed and they are desperately in need of moral instruction,” which as Michael Cart explains, is the ideology of many writers of the problem novels that do not ring true (Cart 65). As Young Adult writer Susan Hart Lindquist says, “I don’t believe [Hopkins] was ever on a mission to preach or teach a behavioral lesson to young readers” (Lindquist 39). She argues that by Kristina being an ordinary girl, Hopkins “was able to address the real horror of addiction—that it can happen to *anyone*” (40). She asserts to those who compare Hopkins work to problem novels with a mission, “if Ellen was on any mission, it was fundamentally a mission to connect with her readers” (39-40).

Her ideology is not the only reason she is so successful; her characters are relatable because they are so realistically complex. Hopkins believes that “Good. Bad. Something in between. Every human being carries some combination of these inside” (Hopkins 109). Hopkins realizes that just because people may make mistakes, they are not horrible people. Because of this belief, she is able to create a complex, realistic character in Kristina that readers can identify with. Kristina is a good person, who makes terrible choices and who acts without thinking of the consequences. Hopkins does not try to make her daughter’s character into a hero, nor a villain, she just illustrates that people can be a little of both, which is why so many readers relate to Kristina and her struggles. This non-judgmental tone reflects the philosophy that:

Hard decisions sometimes become easier when we’ve convinced ourselves that they are out of our hands...Addiction is a fierce, painful grip, monstrous indeed. But despite the conflicting forces of peer and family

pressure, school, and the other stresses that face today's teen, the choice to shake hands with the monster—any monster—is always, in the end, entirely our own. (Ostow 117)

She does not try to make excuses for Kristina; she shows readers that Kristina makes the decisions that cause her life to spiral out of control. Without being judgmental or preachy, she guides readers to realize the mistakes her daughter made, and she prevents many from making the same ones.

Burgess also credits his success to his realism. On his website he writes, "I think that one of the main reasons for the book's success is the fact that it is painted very much from life" (melvinburgess.net). Burgess explains that his success is due to his "open, honest, and upfront [approach] about drugs and drug culture is seen as empowering" (melvinburgess.net). He asserts that *Smack* is about "encouraging people to think for themselves, rather than encouraging them to take drugs, as its critics still sometimes try to make out" or a simplistic just say no attitude (melvinburgess.net). As critic Heidi Hauser Green notes, Burgess's "Characters are in large part, drawn from the author's encounters; they can be horrifying, but are all too accurate" ("Smack"). Burgess explains:

Tar and Gemma, Lily and Rob, come across as real people because they are based on real people, and their story rings true because it *is* true. All the events in the second half of the book are real. They didn't always happen in that particular way, but they did happen. I had nothing to invent.

(melvinburgess.net)

He does admit in a reply to a reader, "I changed a lot to make it a story"

(melvinburgess.net). Hopkins and Burgess both subscribe to Pablo Picasso's philosophy

that, “Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth” (melvinburgess.com). Their art has caused millions to realize the danger of drugs.

Burgess and Hopkins both educate by presenting a story and letting teens read it and make up their own minds about drug use. Both have faced censorship and criticism about their subject matter, but how else are teens to learn what can happen if they fall victim to drugs if they are ever faced with pressure to experiment? As fellow Young Adult writer Nikki Burham explains, an author’s responsibility is not to the librarians, critics, and misguided parents that call for censorship, “an author’s primary responsibility is to the reader” (Burham 16).

Burham asserts, “I believe that attempting to limit teens’ reading to ‘good role models’ is the wrong way to go about educating teens about the world in which we all live” (16). Teen readers would not be able to identify with flawless characters; therefore, they would not join the protagonists for the “ride” as Burham calls it. Burham explains, “The author’s job is to give a book’s intended readers an engrossing story about believable—and therefore imperfect—characters. When that happens, I believe that any other responsibility an author may have to protect teens from the dangers of her world falls into place” (16). These writers come from a school of thought that respects young adult readers, that does not feel like literature is a forum to train young adults, like many of the didactic writers of the sixties and seventies believed.

Burham explains that “By the teen years, life has become more complex, and the stories teens read should reflect that reality” (17). As critics Kathy Latrobe and Judy Drury assert, “The important issues that young adults face everyday—identity, gender, role expectations, and family—are often found in novels whose realism provides an

accessible way for discussion..." (Louie 154). Even for the teens who may not be discussing these books, reading about other teens with similar issues can affirm that their problems are legitimate. These books are empowering because kids will not make those mistakes and in a situation when they are faced with decisions, they have thought about the consequences because of the book and can make an informed decision. When readers can see how outrageous Kristina's choices are and how quickly she falls victim to addiction, "right there, readers make the decision never to try meth, because they've seen what it did to Kristina, someone who, in many ways, is like them or someone they know" (Burham 21).

To the critics who accuse Burgess and Hopkins of glamorizing drug use, Burham answers, Hopkins shows "readers how irrational and overwhelming addiction to meth can be" (21). Burgess has also asserted that anyone believing he is glamorizing drug use has obviously not actually read *Smack*. He explains:

I've come to the conclusion that in actual fact, the numbers of people who seriously think that young people 14 and up can't handle this sort of material are actually an odd minority holding an extreme opinion hardly shared by the rest of society...*Junk* [the British title of the book] was simply very long overdue...Looking back, I'm amazed to realize that it was just about the first book to deal with the subject of drug culture for people at high school in a straightforward way (melvinburgess.net).

Neither author is advocating drug use or making it look acceptable, much less alluring to readers.

On his website, Burgess discusses how “*Junk* was a real experiment” for him (melvinburgess.net). He discusses how he felt that there were not many books out there for older teens before he wrote *Smack*. He explains that there are books for babies, children, younger teens, and adults, but there was not a lot out there for teens over fourteen. In fact, in his examination of Young Adult literature over the last 50 years, Michael Cart also noted that “books for older readers are ‘nonexistent’ in bookstores” (Cart 162). Burgess wrote *Smack* for this age group, a book whose characters a teen could actually relate to. As he says on his website:

There are so few books published that are truly for young adults. If you are aged sixteen or seventeen and you want to read fiction that talks about your life—your recreation, your sex life, your feelings and emotions—you’re either stuck with stuff about twenty-somethings, or you’re reading soft stuff that seems to be written for younger readers or you’re reading some polite, carefully edited stuff that doesn’t dare talk about reality.

Maybe that was why *Junk* made such an impact (melvinburgess.net).

With *Smack*, Burgess created a work that genuinely engages older teens.

Burgess was not wrong in his feeling that there were no books addressing the real lives of today’s teens. Michael Cart discusses how that in 1990, “George Nicholson, then head of Bantam Doubleday Dell said that chains will not buy anything with ‘anything difficult in it’ so most YA books avoid controversial themes” (Cart 150). This is truly a disservice to teen readers and to Young Adult literature. The genre cannot break away from the stereotypical problem novel if publishers are scared to print anything more complex. Not only is this hindering young adult readers as there is nothing interesting for

them to read, but this could ultimately affect the publishing business itself. Adults making the decisions about what teens should read and not providing material relevant and interesting to them steers teens away from reading. Consumers will not be lifelong readers if, during one of the most impressionable times of their lives, they are not being encouraged to read.

Cart notes how in 1994, editor Linda Zuckerman said, “I think young adult literature is dying” (Cart 161). Cart discusses how Richard Jackson, an editor at Orchard Books, said Young Adult literature stops at fourteen. Cart asserts, “fifteen to-eighteen-year-old readers have become the endangered species because publishers are not publishing for them” (151). Burgess noted this problem, and answered with *Smack*, which he credits as his most successful book. Luckily, he was not alone and other writers sharing his ideology have dared to push the boundaries like Ellen Hopkins. Fifteen years after Zuckerman’s dire forecast, there may be more of an older teen readership than there has been in the past. Fortunately, Burgess and Hopkins broke the tradition of the problem novel because so many of their fans credit their books for having a positive influence on their lives. As Cinda Williams Chima notes, “Readers share in [character’s] self-discovery because some experiences are universal” (Chima 132). Readers can share in the lessons the characters learn if they identify with them.

Melvin Burgess and Ellen Hopkins have captured fans and critics alike with their modern tragedies. Though they steer away from the YA trend of the past to end on a happy note, critic Chris Crowe put it, “Bleak stories are nothing new; just take a close look at *Oedipus Rex*, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*” (148). These modern young adult addiction novels are following in the literary footsteps of some of the

greatest works of literature of all time. Their protagonists experience a downfall, and though the characters may not see a happy ending, the books are not without a positive outcome. These books reflect a major problem in our society, and through these engaging novels, Burgess and Hopkins reach audiences, preventing many people to fall victim to drugs like Burgess and Hopkins' friends and family did. As critic Roberta Seelinger Trites points out, "helping adolescents access literature can change the world for the better" (152). According to the accounts of their fans, Burgess and Hopkins appear to have done just that. The modern young adult addiction tragedy should not only be accepted as a viable addition to the literary cannon, it has the power to change lives.

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