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High School Pressure

... in Current American Young Adult (YA) Fiction and in Real Life

American studies in the 21st century also means popular culture, which – to a large extent – is youth culture. Current American young adult (YA) literature can give us a very good overview of the concerns of both the young people represented in fiction and the adult writers of that fiction. School as an institution where young people spend most of their lives have always interested writers of juvenile literature. School novels of today, however, have a new quality: The young people portrayed are confronted with life-threatening dangers such as the pressures originating in the post-9/11 and post-Columbine society. Many American writers now take up political issues to make readers aware of the dangers resulting from a climate of mistrust and suspicion that has evolved after 9/11.

I hope that with this contribution I can give an overview of what the so-called realistic YA fiction writers are producing right now in their attempt to support young people in their identity struggles in politically hard times

Joyce Carol Oates' *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* Joyce Carol Oates, for example, one of the most well-known writers in the US, now is trying to raise young readers' consciousness and show in young adult fiction, a genre relatively new to her, what kind of climate a blown-up, out-of-proportion reaction to violent acts at American schools can create. In *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, she seems to warn her readers of the dangers of the new "witch hunt" climate in the present US society. *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl* (2002) deals with the effects of gossip and rumor leading to defamation of individuals and

censorship by the authorities, in a climate of witch hunt at a New York State high school 16-year-old junior Matt Donaghy, bright, funny, sometimes sarcastic, enthusiastic about drama and editor of the school paper, is charged with having threatened to blow up the school. After a premature suspension he is admitted back to the school, but he is not content with the school's prevailing wish to "forgive and forget". He wants to be entirely rehabilitated and starts to fight the lack of honesty and superficiality at school. As a consequence, he is ostracized and becomes utterly depressed, which leads him to a suicide attempt. At that point however, he finds Ursula, a similarly lonely friend at his school, who, in contrast to Matt, has intentionally chosen to be independent. She was a star basketball player, but she has chosen to quit playing basketball in order to find her own way, independent from friends, parents, cliques and the overall pressure of being popular. Ursula rescues Matt in his suicide attempt in the nature preserve where, from that time on, they take hikes together. Both feel like soul mates as if they had been friends forever. They feel utterly attracted but do not start a love relationship. They share beliefs, interests and attitudes and thus go on walks, to libraries and museums together, and they have endless "intellectually stimulating" talks.

From the beginning both have been self-confident, extraordinary characters but both become more adult throughout the story. And whether or not they really fall in love with each other remains open at the end. Here is a short overview of the large number of themes that Joyce Carol Oates treats in her novel.



| Themes | |
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| <p>High school peer pressure High school pressure in general</p> <p>High school security, weapons School violence; rumors</p> | <p>Competitive basketball (though many fewer spectators than in boys' games); competition starts in grade school (see Lisa, U's sister) and U's experiences in the swim and dive team; who drops out and who remains in is the talk of the town.</p> <p>Pressure for girls to be popular, feminine, pretty (ch.2), Personality Plus girls think they must spread "sweetness and light among the underprivileged" (151).</p> <p>Pressure for boys to be football players, popular, aggressive (25), use bad language, beat up other males, talk behind girls' backs</p> <p>Competition of getting into a prestigious university (dependence on counselors, grades, etc) Matt's mother went to PTA meetings and conferences with counselors, psychologists, teachers, coaches, who are all necessary to write letters of recommendation to get into colleges (38).</p> <p>Parents' expectations: U's father expects her to go to Harvard (21)</p> <p>Local parents' worry about school safety.</p> <p>Pressure to remain unobtrusive in conflict as parents' jobs might be in danger (62).</p> |
| <p>Sports; relationship among males</p> | <p>Sports play an important role in high school life; very competitive; active sport students are mostly popular, male more than female (whose games do not attract the same number of people).</p> <p>Football is at the top of the ranking list.</p> <p>Male football player therefore is the most popular; he can afford to be macho. U hates this behavior. U calls Trevor Cassidy's friends "jock buddies" (86). They are the ones who later beat up Matt, just because he is different and his family wants to sue the community. They call him a "fag" and her a "bull dyke" (190).</p> <p>Typical spoiled Westchester kids, used to attention having been jocks since middle school. Envied by many, not well liked, but popular (223).</p> |
| <p>Language</p> | <p>Kids have to be careful not to use swear words at home;</p> <p>Jocks use worst insult for other boys: "fag".</p> |

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| Gender | Although the story centers around Matt's action, the reader gains most insight into U's character. She rejects the female role that her mother wants to confine her in and chooses instead to be an aggressive, sportive young woman who plays excellent basketball and is interested in the arts (see U's character). Matt accepts her special "femininity" in the end. |
| Animals | Pumpkin is Matt's most loved companion. She proves very sensitive (196) and seems to understand more than humans. In troubled times, however, Matt rejects her company as he can't cope with her "positive optimism" (145). Pumpkin's abduction shows the cruelty of the "jocks", who know that Pumpkin is Matt's last and only companion (215ff.). In an email Matt personifies Pumpkin and thus identifies with her (243). |
| Community | Parents are afraid of another Columbine (43), therefore the principal seems to be very cautious and overreacts by calling the police. The school board openly supports the principal's action. The community is turned against the Donaghys as the lawsuit will cost taxpayers money. |
| Religious fundamentalism | Rev. Brewer's church 'Apostles of Jesus' (right-wing religious fanatics) preaches against sex education in schools, affirmative action, AIDS research funds, feminists, gays, ethnic minorities, and bans books from school library (114). |
| E.A. Poe's William Wilson: A Case of Mistaken Identity The Imp of the Perverse | William Wilson is the double of the narrator of the same-named short story by Poe, whose real name remains unknown. The narrator is an outstanding character (WW100), who is respected as such by his classmates, except for another student WW, who is very much like himself. WW becomes his own conscience. When the narrator finally becomes so superior to other students, WW betrays his tricks to the others and is expelled from Oxford University. The Imp of the Perverse is a short essay on Poe's favorite themes: madness, bad conscience, death. |

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| Rumor Political correctness Media Limitation of personal rights | <p>The rumor spreads quickly through personal misinterpretations, i.e. when people purposefully misunderstand Matt's jokes in the principal's office.</p> <p>Local TV is quick at reporting about potential bomb threat (44); Mideast bombing on another channel; media defame Matt's character (71). Details of the lawsuit of Matt's parents against the school board are leaked to the media.</p> <p>As a consequence most people are quick at relating Matt's character traits to the assumed attack (computer nut, 26, wild sense of humor 27)</p> <p>The media exaggerate.</p> <p>In spite of the persecution the term "censorship" is not used as it is politically incorrect (100). Only late-night comedies allow people to touch on taboo themes in a not politically correct way (44).</p> <p>Bill of Rights guarantees free speech (44)</p> |
| Censorship | <p>Matt, however, feels censored when / because his "comical letter of resignation" is rejected by the school paper for not being funny, respectively for being too sarcastic.</p> <p>As a consequence Matt resigns from "Rocky River Run" staff (99).</p> |
| Defamation | <p>Matt's parents initiate a \$ 50 million defamation suit against Rocky River School District.</p> |
| Witch hunt | <p>Matt's father sums the whole incident up in the term "witch hunt" and condemns the behavior of school officials, who should have protected Matt instead of handing him over to the police. They have not only hurt Matt but also destroyed his integrity (203).</p> |
| Littleton and other school shootings | <p>Reference on p. 72</p> |

Other YA novels dealing with high school violence.

Other current young adult (YA) literature written by well-known young adult writers, however not as famous as Joyce Carol Oates, also deals with high school violence.: Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* (2000), Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun* (2000), Francine Prose's *After* (2003), Helen Frost's *Keesha's House* (2003) and Nelson Blake's *The New Rules of High School* (2003). Although there are differences in style, genre, and theme, all of the described conflicts arise from real or felt pressure exercised by certain groups, cliques, the school administration or other authorities, who themselves feel the pressure of outside control.

Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl* deals with 16-year-old Susan who, having been home-schooled until she comes to Arizona Mica High School, shows her non-conformist ways wherever she goes in whatever she does. She dresses in long, wavy skirts, wears no make-up, plays the ukulele in the cafeteria, has a rat as a pet, which leads to people's initial admiration. But when she cheers for the opponents' team in a high school basketball game and has pity for the "underdogs", she is ostracized by the rest of school. After she and the narrator, who is telling the story 15 years later, become friends, he asks her to act more "normally", which she does. This, however, does not bring back the sympathies of the other students, which causes her decision to go back to her former ways.

By the end of the story the reader realizes that the girl acts more like a fairy than like a high school student. Her main impulse is based on pity and compassion with other humans. Her unreal life and *Petit Prince*-like behavior is enhanced by the name Stargirl, one of the many names she gave herself at various points in her life. Her disappearance from the school is as sudden as her appearance in it. The setting of Phoenix/Arizona serves more as a backdrop to her unusual behavior; the walks and bike rides the narrator and Stargirl undertake stress the symbolic value of

the setting: the desert is the place where natural beauty is appreciated and important questions are discussed, forming a contrast to the materialism of the general school population.

Todd Strasser's *Give a Boy a Gun* is a multi-voice fictional account of what might have led to a school shooting. In the center of the novel – clipped together by a former student of Middletown High and a journalist major – is the story of Gary and Brendan who destroy and ruin their lives after taking revenge on the hated "popular" students (mainly football playing "jocks") who rule the high school and the whole community. The stories, thoughts and ideas of more than twenty people, who at various points in their lives had something to do with the two protagonists, form a collage of persons, feelings, attitudes and events that might have led to the final shooting.

The first few parts of the novel prepare the reader for the story of the boys' final assault. These first chapters, in which parents, teachers, friends, hated students and jocks speak out and voice their own ideas through e-mails and suicide notes, mirror Gary's and Brendan's development from rather "normal" kids to sophomores being taunted by the "popular" students and becoming obsessed with guns and bombs. The idea of being outcasts and hated makes them carry out the plan of punishing the school and the community for making everybody the same. In their threat to punish the jocks and blow up the school, Gary, who seems to start floundering, is led to shoot himself. In contrast, Brendan, who is the more aggressive and destructive of the two, is overwhelmed and beaten up by the rest of the jocks, who want to kill him. At the last minute, they are stopped by a teacher, which saves Brendan's life, but the incident causes serious brain damage.

Francine Prose's *After* deals with the fictional impact that a high school shooting at Pleasant Valley High School has on another high school in a small town in Massachusetts, 50 miles away.

15-year-old Tom, one of the "smart jocks" of the school, the I-narrator of the novel, observes the escalation of security measures, which finally lead to the disappearance of students, who – not adapting to the new school rules – all end up in "turnaround" boot camps for young juvenile delinquents. One of them even dies in her attempt to escape from such a camp.

At first Tom notices all the changes from a distance, (he seems to need time to think and figure out what is behind it), but when one of his best friends and basketball teammates is expelled and sent to a boot camp and even his otherwise sensible mother welcomes this measure, he very gradually openly protests against the so-called security measures. The first step to an open protest, however, is taken by Becca, a very bright student in Tom's history class, who finally becomes his girlfriend. She puts the question of where people have disappeared in big letters on the school walls, which is a sign of utmost rebellion against the school. In everyday school assemblies students are pressured into denouncing the writer of these questions. Finally Becca tells Tom that she is the writer and she urgently asks him to join her to write one final question on the school walls. While they are applying the graffiti to the gym walls they are detected by the principal, who, however, does not arrest them on the spot, but decides to inform their parents through cell-phone messages.

Finally Tom's father and his girlfriend (throughout the novel Tom is suffering from his mother's death) understand the danger for the kids and the life of the community. They plot a scheme against the school's prosecution and flee from the area and take Tom's two remaining friends with them.

Helen Frost's *Keesha's House* is another multi-voice novel, written in poetry. It weaves together the stories of seven teenagers trying to overcome their individual difficulties. Not the high school, but Keesha's house, a house that offers shelter to all of them after running away from home, is the main setting that combines the young people's lives. High school however, forms the background of the lives of the students, who are 16 -18 years of age. They have a variety of problems: Stephie and Jason are lovers. When Stephie becomes pregnant, not only Jason's personal life, but his career as a promising basketball player is in danger. Keesha has lost her mother and moved out away from her abusive father, but left her 14-year-old brother Tobias with him. When Tobias gets involved in dealing drugs, he is killed. Dontay has problems in his foster family, runs away, but finally decides to go back "home" after some sobering experience at Keesha's house. Carmen is arrested on a DUI (driving under the influence) charge and is released from jail with the help of a caring judge. She manages to get rid of her alcohol addiction. Harris is thrown out of his parents' house when he tells his father that he is gay.

The other voices are the ones of (grand-) parents, teachers, principals, coaches, judges, case workers, who have some connection to the teenagers. From the number of voices coming from school one can infer that school does play an important role in these teenagers' lives.

Nelson Blake's *The New Rules of High School* is about Tom, a 17-year-old, straight-A student with high hopes of going to a prestigious eastern college. He breaks up with his girlfriend without really knowing why. Although he loves her, he thinks he does not have much in common with her and seems bored. As the relationship has always been very precious to him, he never had sex with her because he wanted to wait. He also seems to want a more intellectual friend, who strives to get into one of the

big schools, not just the University of Oregon, that Cindy is headed for.

However after breaking up with Cindy, Tom ends up having sex with a much older girl, a girl he does not love. She hangs out in a downtown disco each night and is not interested in going to college. In his senior year, however, he seems to give up all his former intellectual principles and to give in to his peers' expectations: to lose his virginity, drive a car, get drunk and stoned, and publish a "popular" series of gossip articles in the school's newspaper, which is named "The new rules of high school". After having wrecked his car and broken his nose twice, he seems to have learned his lesson without further punishments. He is admitted to Yale.

Literature and real life These novels written specifically for young adult readers portray a picture of present high schools in the United States. They show the concerns of YA writers, who as visiting authors and as parents, want to help students come to terms with the manifold new rules, including the post 9/11 and post/Columbine security measures. They want to warn and help them to stand up for their own and other people's rights. They want to remind them to remain independent in their thoughts and actions. The authors see the problems and do not want to remain silent in the new wave of conformity that is running not only through the schools.

In the following passage, I will focus on the four themes: sports, gender and sex, academic achievement, and public security, all of which play an important role in the selected novels. Some of the analyzed fiction is confirmed by statements of real students in an extensive series I found in 2002 in the Eugene Register Guard, the daily newspaper of Eugene/Oregon, a university town of about 100,000 inhabitants. In this series high school students are given space to write about their own concerns. In this section they specifically report about the pressures they are confronted with.

Sports What the novels all have in common is that team sport players (generally known as "jocks"), who have a high reputation and certain liberties in the school have an enormous, out-of-proportion impact on the rest of the school population.

The power of sports (football and basketball) in its enormous immensity is shown in all the novels. Although in *Stargirl* basketball is not the center of the conflict, Stargirl herself, being very popular at her new school in the beginning – in spite of her nonconformist ways – brings forth the anger of the basketball players, cheerleaders and fans of her school, when she decides to cheer not only for her own team, but also for the opponents' teams.

Only Stargirl sticks out in her own fairy-like way: she fights the school spirit that manifests itself mainly in school basketball games by cheering on not only her school's players, but also the opponents. This makes her an outcast; at first she was an outsider who was much liked, but now she is an outcast who is shunned and ostracized by everybody. Although the protagonist of *Big Mouth and Ugly Girl*, Ursula Riggs ("Ugly girl" as she calls herself), is a star basketball player herself, she decides she wants to become independent and not play basketball anymore because firstly, she is blamed for losing an important game by missing a free throw, secondly, she feels a great personal distance between herself and the other players and thirdly, because she wants to liberate herself from as many societal constraints as possible to become a free and independent human being. After this decision she is shunned by her coach and her teammates. Later, when she has matured and proved her free thinking to herself and others, and she has learned that she needs basketball for her own well-being, she decides to join the team again.

In contrast to *Big Mouth*, the protagonists of *Give a Boy a Gun* Gary and Brendan are not into sports and fall victim to the strict hierarchy that puts football players at the top of the high school's and community's unwritten ranking sys-

tem. They become criminals because they take revenge on the school, the community and mainly on the jocks, whose power and predominance can be felt everywhere. It is the football players who get away with actions others are punished for. Being late for class is a misdemeanor everybody has to make up for, but not the football players: they have special rights that the whole school acknowledges (42). Deirdre Bunson, one of the many voices of the novel, justifies the injustice and inequality similar to what usually is said about entrepreneurs. She says that the football players are the ones who promote school spirit on the one hand and on the other hand they have to take the blame for the loss of games. So they deserve special treatment. "The fans aren't the ones who give our school its pride. It's the players. They're the ones that give Middletown a sense of accomplishment." (45)

But it's the football players, too, who victimize other schoolmates, one of them Brendan, who does not accept their special role in the school and fights the unwritten rules. When the jocks taunt him, Brendan's hatred builds up so much that he wishes to torment or even kill them. Gary slowly "catches" up with Brendan's hatred and they obtain guns and build bombs.

On the other hand, there is also the voice of a "good" football player, African American Dustin Williams, who is independent enough to not participate in the others' taunting, who is a good student, and who criticizes the "jocks" for mocking the kids who are awarded for their achievements on the debate team, but who have problems with their body posture and muscular strength. He has also insider information on how hard the football training is to keep up to the standards and survive on the field (87). He is the one, who later during Brendan's and Gary's murder threat and their acts of cruelty, manages to free himself so that he can overwhelm Brendan to prevent an even bigger disaster. But he is also the one who cannot stop the other jocks from beating Brendan almost to death. In the end he

is at an Ivy League eastern college that has offered him a scholarship. It is where all "the liberal gun control people live" (176). He reflects on how he got into such a prestigious college: "I got good grades and boards, but I know kids like me, who had better grades and boards and didn't go into one of those schools. Know why I got in? Because I made second-team all-state linebacker. One of those Ivy League teams back east needed a linebacker. Kind of ironic, huh?" (176)

In *Keesha's House*, sports play only a minor, yet important role. 10th graders Stephie and Keesha met on the track team in middle school. Stephie admires Keesha's pace and determination. Her ability at crossing the hurdles prompts her thoughts about the hurdles that have to be taken in life. These thoughts trigger her reflection on what really matters. It is not sports and academic performances, but the person behind it (60). (This thought plays an important role in Brendan's and Gary's thinking too.)

For Jason, a high school senior, his academic career, involving a college scholarship, depends on his basketball performance. His coach is very disappointed when Jason becomes too entangled in his relationship with Stephie, when she is pregnant and later starts to doubt their love. Now he plays really badly, which is an utmost disappointment to his coach:

"Jason hasn't told me much about himself but there is a rumor going around the team about his girlfriend. When I heard it, I felt sick. You coach for twenty years, you dream about a kid like this, an athlete born for greatness. Varsity his freshman year, state all-star two years in a row. More natural talent than I have ever seen here at Marshall High. And he knows how to work for what he wants. He could go anywhere – free ride, recruiters calling every day.

Now what? He is not one to shirk responsibility. He seems to care about this girl. But you should see him play.” (37)

Stephie has lost her baby, but she shows Jason the transitory home where she and the other characters have found a shelter before she goes back home. Jason is not impressed, but acknowledges that the run-away students have found a place where they can be free. For him, however, freedom means something else:

“... We all want freedom. The form it takes for me is leaving home to go to college, paying my way with basketball, all my expenses, all four years. ...” (104)

Academic Achievement In most novels academic achievement is closely related to sports. Both sports and good grades make people move up into college. Athletes are observed in their high school games by specific college recruiters and offered scholarships. Big stars can choose from several offers, but others are glad to be offered a scholarship at all. This again is closely related to the expectations of parents, whose financial burden for their kids’ college education is decreased by scholarships. Dustin (*Give a Boy a Gun*) gets into a football team in an Ivy League school in the east, which means that not only his football performance must be very good, but also his academic grades.

Other students who are not into sports have other choices – in academic achievement, in debating clubs, in drama, in music etc. – but nothing is as certain as a sports scholarship. The average kids in *Keesha’s House* mainly try to finish high school and not drop out. Katie works hard to be able to finish high school and support herself at the same time when she decides to move away from her abusive stepfather and her mother. Harris is persuaded to remain at school and not quit before gradu-

ating in spite of the school cliques’ bullying.

The protagonist in *The New Rules of High School* is headed for a “big” college. In his junior year he works hard in his Advanced Placement classes. He was made the Honor Scholar of the year before. As a “good boy” he writes his applications with his mother and even lets himself be persuaded to write an essay on his deaf uncle instead of writing about firefighting, which he would like to do. Part of his “messing up” his life at the end of the novel is that subconsciously he protests his parents’ idea of academic achievement. Having been “good” all his life, he just wants to be like the majority of students, longing to be different from his parents and to fit into the “popular” crowd.

The importance of school performance in making it into a good college is confirmed by Andrea Compton, who states in the above mentioned article: “academic pressure comes from all around: parents, teachers, peers, and, especially, ourselves. Grades can make or break someone’s future. If I don’t get good grades, I don’t get into a good college. If I don’t get into a good college, I don’t have a good career ...” (1-2E)

Gender Roles, Party and Sex Ursula (*Big Mouth*) obviously does not fit in, nor does she want to fit into the roles her parents have provided for her. Most of all she renounces her mother’s idea that she be a dainty, flexible, adaptable female. It becomes very obvious that her mother prefers Ursula’s sister who is pretty and delicate, a ballet dancer.

When Ursula realizes how much her body has changed and developed strength in puberty, she is determined to not even try to fit into the stereotype of a feminine girl: at that point she calls herself Ugly Girl. She not only has a strong, tall, big-boned body, but also fiery, aggressive moods. In her protest she deliberately decides to be an “outsider” at the school and to fulfill neither her

mother's, nor society's wishes for her to become a "pretty woman". In one of her New York museum visits she finds a book by Germaine Greer about women artists, which confirms and supports her: Greer summons women to find their own independence and not to try to fit into role stereotypes.

As an increasingly independent female she rejects the expectations of her mother, who has been admonishing her since fourth grade to socialize more, which seems to mean: to date boys.

In the above mentioned Register Guard article the high school student Rebecca Sanchez states that there is an enormous pressure to date from a very early age:

"Since I can remember, society has been telling me that high school is the time when I should be dating and finding that one person to settle down with for the duration of my high school years. Even the institution itself promotes the girlfriend-boyfriend relationship. How stressful do you think life becomes the month before a school dance? How many teen-agers go to sleep and have nightmares of staying home on prom night?"

Male student Quail Dawning, 12th grade, remembers: "In teen-age life, it often seems like nearly everything revolves around sex. It's a status symbol for some people ... If you have sex with the right people in order to move yourself higher on the social ladder, you know how to do things right. In some circles you are not fully accepted if you don't have a degree of sexual experience. Sometimes sex can become a mark of scandal: it becomes gossip fodder quickly ..."

This seems to be confirmed by *Big Mouth*. In chapter 31 Ursula openly defies her mother's expectations and wishes. She mainly detests her mother's dependence on other people's opinions.

Most of the novel *New Rules* deals with the sexual coming of age of an intelligent, ambitious student. Breaking up with his longtime girlfriend (with whom he never had

sex as they had agreed to wait for the right time) leaves Max with a void that is filled with lots of parties, where he appears single and therefore seems to be a target for girls' sexual advances. In his initial innocence he fights the "cheap girls". Parties are the talk of the school; the following day boys and girls alike gossip about who is dating whom and who broke up with whom.

When Max tries to get together with his old girlfriend again and she admits having had sex with a generally hated rich kid from the school, he is so disappointed and angry that he in return has sex with a girl he does not even like. He actually says that every student his age is expected to have lost his virginity long ago, and so he feels it is time for him, as much as it was time for him to get his driving license and drive a car (although it is much more convenient and cheaper to go by bus. This is Portland/Oregon!). Being invited and going to the teenagers' parties where spin the bottle games are played as an incentive for further sexual encounters seems like a test of one's popularity, something everyone is striving for. Being popular obviously means to give in to pressures and feel good about it. The effects on Max are even felt in "his" school paper: Max now admits articles written by Lydia who spreads most of the cheap gossip and makes the most openly sexual advances. In spite of his initial refusal to get closer to her, Max finally is on friendly terms with her: she appears as a kind of "Dear Abby" advisor whom Max consults in times of trouble. Whereas Matt and Ursula (*Big Mouth*) even at the end still fight the "new rules of high school", Max complies with them and feels good about it.

Harris (*Keesha's House*) is thrown out of the house by his father after Harris admits to being gay. He is disappointed with his parents because neither of them has backbone enough to stand up for him when they see that he is not the kid they want him to be (cf. 97).

Parties and sex roles are related to each other. The school parties (Homecoming, Prom etc.) are for the students

who fit in. In the old days a boy used to ask a girl out to a dance. It might be the other way round now, but it is a heterosexual dance. Harris would like to dance openly with the boy he loves. But of course, that is out of the question. He is shunned and made fun of at school and plays with the idea of quitting school altogether before moving up to his senior year. But Katie advises him: "*If you're about to quit, The Jerks will think they won.*" (108)

Brendan and Gary (*Give a Boy a Gun*) both are no popular kids. They hate the popular kids' parties but have parties of their own in a circle of friends who are all outsiders. Gary and Brendan wait especially for a dance night to take the popular crowd hostage and to threaten to blow up the school. Brendan makes sure that the girl he likes will not be at the dance before they move on. However they are surprised that Allison is at the dance, and it is she who finally exerts her influence on them (they do not want to kill their friend) and persuades them to relent.

Public Security Ursula in *Big Mouth* defies the stereotypic female role, the school sports pressure and the pressure put onto the whole school to distance themselves from the "terrorist" Matt. Consequently, Matt has to fight the superficiality of the school and the rules set by the authorities, which his schoolmates too easily comply with. The school too readily reacts to a rumor spread by a right-winged pastor, whose origin no one seems to care about. It is more the power of the system that makes Matt its enemy: a system that is filled with the idea of belonging to the mainstream, to people in charge and people with power.

Even after his rehabilitation Matt fights the willingness of people to follow the rules of the authority. This is one reason why he and his family pursue the lawsuit, which would openly and publicly declare that the school was wrong and he was right. The fact that they finally drop the lawsuit seems to be a concession to the mainstream; the Donaghy family wants to keep in touch with everyday

life and the community. This does not appear too convincing; however, what does seem convincing is the decision of both Ursula and Matt to stay away from shallow parties, where everybody is judged according to their looks and their wealth. Instead of going to parties, they decide to keep going to the theatre. Maybe the fact that Matt is writing his own plays, which he started before he became a suspect, and the fact that they slowly start to get closer to each other, is a sign of their growing self-confidence, independence and maturity.

After narrates what happens after a high school shooting. The novel seems to be meant as a warning against over-reaction of the school to school shootings. In *After* one by one the rights of the high school students are taken away on the pretense of keeping students' safe:

- metal detectors are installed,
- a dress code is introduced,
- the color red is forbidden
- bags and lockers are searched,
- cell phones are forbidden,
- books and cds are banned (among them *The Catcher in the Rye* and hip hop),
- the urine of team players is tested,
- students are asked to report on other students' behavior,
- teachers and students are suspended
- students are sent to juvenile correction camps
- more and more assemblies are announced and carried out
- curfews are imposed
- while all these measures are taken, parents are inundated with emails trying to make them part of the scheme.

Whereas some of Prose's measures are fictional and a product of her futuristic narrative, others can be confirmed just by visiting public schools in real life. Some examples from

my own school visits: Metal detectors can be found easily at larger inner city schools, dress codes exist in almost every school, certain books are banned from libraries in many schools, security is omnipresent, visitors are not allowed into schools without a security check, visitors have to carry visitor's passes, international exchanges are dying.

Some of the authors' intentions, to my mind, seem good, some appear too obvious, and thus for many readers too didactic; therefore it seems understandable that many young readers nowadays turn to fantasy books like *Harry Potter*, or the more complex *Artemis Fowl* and *Lord of the Rings*, stories set in an unreal world, in which they find relief from the pressures of real life even though some, such as *Harry Potter*, are set in schools.

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