

Questions and Answers Regarding the Recent Challenges to *All American Boys*, *Forged by Fire*, and *Darkness Before Dawn*

What are *All American Boys*, *Forged by Fire*, and *Darkness Before Dawn* about?

All three books have in common the themes of courage, bravery, standing up for what's right at great personal cost, and finding one's identity and self. However, over and over again, rape, pedophilia, and profanity have been mentioned as 'themes' of these books. None of these topics are themes -- or even what the books are about. To better understand the books, it is important that accurate information about the content of the books be shared. Therefore, a summary of each book follows below.

Forged by Fire tells the story of Gerald Nickelby and his half-sister, Angel. The book opens when Gerald is three years old and living with his mother, Monique, who abuses and neglects Gerald. Monique leaves Gerald at home one night, and he accidentally sets their apartment on fire with Monique's lighter. Following this incident, Monique is sent to jail, and Gerald goes to live with his Aunt Queen. When Gerald turns nine, Monique comes to visit Gerald and Aunt Queen and brings her husband, Jordan Sparks, and Jordan's half-sister, Angel. Aunt Queen dies of a heart attack, and Gerald goes to live with Monique, Jordan, and Angel. Jordan physically abuses Monique and Gerald. The text infers that he also molests Angel. He is sent to prison and after his release, he claims to be a changed man but is not. The incidents of molestation are not described in graphic detail and at no point does the novel suggest that neglect, physical abuse, or molestation is acceptable behavior. The novel does delve into how difficult it is for children who are victims of neglect, abuse, and sexual abuse to break the cycle of abuse and overcome trauma.

Darkness Before Dawn tells the story of Keisha Montgomery, an eighteen year old high school student, her peers, and a twenty-three year old track coach, Jonathan Hathaway. Jonathan showers Keisha with attention and compliments and eventually persuades Keisha to join him for a date. The date ends up being in Jonathan's home, and when Keisha refuses to have sexual intercourse with Jonathan, he threatens her with a knife. Keisha is able to fight off Jonathan and get out of his home before any sexually assault occurs. With the support of her peers and parents, Keisha is able to overcome the traumatic incident, graduate high school, and attend college. The book does not endorse or encourage sexual assault or suggest that it is acceptable.

All American Boys is told from the perspective a white student and a black student. The white student, Quinn, is a basketball star and a member of a Gold Star Family. Quinn was mentored by a white policeman, Paul Galluzzo, after his father was killed in action. The black student, Rashad, is a JROTC cadet, artist, and the son of a former police officer. The novel begins with Rashad being falsely accused of a crime by a convenience store clerk and getting brutally assaulted by Paul Galluzzo. While Rashad deals with a broken nose, fractured ribs, and emotional anguish following the assault, Quinn, who witnessed

the assault and saw a different side of Paul, contends with peer and family pressure to support Paul without question and what he believes is morally right. During the book, students attend a party hosted by Paul's teenage cousin, Jill, where there is underage drinking. Underage drinking is not endorsed in the novel, and Quinn's mother even delivers a lesson in this area, "You talk about wanting to be somebody, you talk about basketball, you talk about making your family proud, but then you act like this. What do you think people are going to think of you now? . . . It's about how the world looks at you and when they do, who do you want them to see? What kind of person do you want to be?"

How long have these books been utilized in the school system?

Forged by Fire and *Darkness Before Dawn* were respectively published in 1997 and 2001. *Forged by Fire* has been part of the middle school Battle of the Books for a number of years and was most recently included in the competition during the 2013-2014 school year. Both *Forged by Fire* and *Darkness Before Dawn* have been taught for a number of years in some Pitt County Schools' middle and high school classes without incident. These books were first challenged in 2021.

All American Boys was published in 2015 and was first assigned as class reading in Pitt County Schools during the 2021-2022 school year. Ultimately, the initial assignment of this book was withdrawn, and the book has never been taught in a class in our district. Only one class set of the book is available.

When could students encounter these books in school?

Professional reviewers, including Common Sense Media, the New York Times, Kirkus Reviews, School Library Journal, and Publisher's Weekly have suggested that the book is appropriate for middle school aged students, while Scholastic has recommended that the book be read by 11th and 12th grade students. In Pitt County Schools, *All American Boys* can only be assigned as class reading for high school students. The book has never been assigned to high school students, and the district's only class set of the book was purchased for Ayden Middle School this school year and was not used. The book is available for check out in some middle and high school media centers, and following the controversy over the book, the Superintendent has prohibited purchasing additional copies of *All American Boys* for school media centers and as class sets.

Forged by Fire was part of the 2013-2014 Battle of the Books for Middle School Students. Professional reviewers, including Kirkus Reviews and Publisher's Weekly have suggested that the book is appropriate for middle school aged students, while Scholastic has recommended that the book be read by high school students. In Pitt County Schools, *Forged by Fire* may be assigned as classroom reading in middle school or high school, and the book is available in middle and high school media centers for check out. As noted below, parents who object to the text as assigned reading may request an alternate assignment for their child.

The only professional review for *Darkness Before Dawn* was by Kirkus reviews, and it suggested that the book is appropriate for students ages 12 and older. In Pitt County Schools, *Darkness Before Dawn* may be assigned as classroom reading in middle school or high school, and the book is available in middle and high school media centers for check out. As noted below, parents who object to the text as assigned reading may request an alternate assignment for their child.

How do these books approach the topics of profanity, underage drinking, pedophilia, and rape?

Profanity concerns in *All American Boys* - The authors' choice to utilize profanity in this book is a reflection of the authentic voice they perceive some teenagers to use in certain settings. While the teenage characters in *All American Boys* do use profanity, Rashad's father addresses his use of foul language by telling him to watch his mouth, and Rashad discusses his mother's preference not to use profanity, stating that she almost never curses. To see more about one of the authors, Jason Reynolds, discussing his intentions when writing, please [view this video](#).

Underage Drinking concerns in *Forged by Fire*, *Darkness Before Dawn*, and *All American Boys* - In *Forged by Fire*, a few of the teen characters decide to drink beer after their basketball games. After one game, two of the characters are in a drunk driving accident, and one of them is killed. The book portrays the negative effects of both drinking and drug abuse. Not only is underage drinking met with life or death consequences, Jordan, the father of Gerald and Angel, also dies while inebriated. Gerald and Angel's mother is imprisoned for actions related to drug abuse.

In *Darkness Before Dawn*, the characters must deal with the aftermath of losing their friend to a drunk driving accident, including the overwhelming guilt of the teenage driver who dies by suicide. Underage drinking in both *Forged by Fire* and *Darkness Before Dawn* is presented as an action that can result in death and is in no way endorsed as an appropriate behavior. Drinking alcohol is not celebrated in this book as seen in the severe consequences of this action.

As mentioned in the summary, Quinn's mother in *All American Boys* addresses the topic of underage drinking with Quinn, asking him to reflect on his behavior and ask himself what kind of person he wants to be.

Pedophilia concerns in *Forged by Fire* - The word *pedophilia* is not used in *Forged by Fire*. There is implied molestation when Jordan tells Angel to lift her shirt so he can see her chicken pox rash and in a separate situation where he tells her he wants female companionship and carries her to the bedroom. The book also describes Angel's discomfort when Jordan is present. At no time is there any graphic description of molestation, and the book does not suggest in any way that this behavior is appropriate or something to be endorsed or supported.

Sexual Assault concerns in *Darkness Before Dawn* - Attempted sexual assault occurs in chapter 16, pages 158-169 of *Darkness Before Dawn*. Jonathan, the twenty-three year old coach, invites Keisha, the eighteen year old high school senior, to his apartment for dinner. After dinner,

they begin to kiss, but Keisha becomes uncomfortable and tells him to stop. Jonathan locks his apartment door and pulls out a knife. Keisha gains control of the knife, cuts Jonathan, and escapes from the apartment. Later in the book a former classmate of Keisha's tells Keisha that Jonathan raped her. At no time are there graphic depictions of sexual assault.

Are these topics relevant to what our students are experiencing?

Sexual abuse - According to RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), the largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States, one in nine girls and one in fifty-three boys under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse or assault at the hands of an adult. According to RAINN, 34% of victims are under age 12. [RAINN Statistics](#)

Drug & Alcohol Abuse - Based on data from the combined 2009 to 2014 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, about 1 in 8 children (8.7 million) aged 17 or younger lived in households with at least one parent who had a past year substance use disorder (SUD). SUDs are characterized by recurrent use of alcohol or other drugs (or both) that results in significant impairment. [SAMHSA Statistics](#)

Surveys of youth in the United States indicate that by 12th grade about two-thirds of students report trying alcohol and about half of all high students report that they have used marijuana. Further studies show that people between the ages of 12 and 20 consume about one-tenth of all alcohol consumed in the United States. [CDC Statistics](#)

Profanity - Scholar Timothy Jay claims that adolescents' use of swearing has increased over the past 10 years, with the average youth using approximately 90 swear words per day (Glover, 2008). As children advance through adolescence their desire for independence and separation from parental authority grows. Adolescents often engage in "adult" behaviors (e.g., substance use, sexual experimentation, swearing, etc.) as a means by which they might express their emerging independence or passage into adulthood. Overall most novels (88% of our sample [comprised of YA books on the NYT best-seller list]) contained at least one use of profanity. [Link to Article](#)

What is the purpose of realistic fiction?

All American Boys, *Forged by Fire*, and *Darkness Before Dawn* fall into the genre of realistic fiction. Realistic fiction mirrors life as some people experience it, dealing with complex problems, challenges, and situations. Characters in realistic fiction and the language they use should reflect the setting of the story as well as realistic representations of the characters' culture, class, identities, and experiences. Authors use tools such as authentic voice and word choice to capture realistic situations and conversations. Realistic fiction does not dictate specific moral beliefs, encourage readers to adopt the views of any character, or dictate that they use the language of a particular character. Instead, it prompts readers to draw their own conclusions after considering the events of the text by applying their own moral and ethical judgments. The intent of realistic

fiction is to provide mirrors and windows for readers, allowing readers to see themselves reflected in text as well as learn about others who are different from themselves.

How do teachers select works for class reading assignments?

Teachers select reading assignments that enable them to teach the standards set by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. They do so in conjunction with other teachers in the grade level professional learning communities. There are many considerations when selecting a text, some of which include reader interest, the standard based task, and text complexity. Principal input is part of the text selection process. Ultimately, school staff put significant effort into selecting texts to assign to students.

After texts are selected, teachers are proactive in informing parents about the assigned texts. They send a syllabus home with students within the first few days of school. As the semester progresses, teachers may send additional letters home to parents to describe the text that will be read, to show the connection to the standards that will be taught, to encourage communication with parents who may have questions about the text selection or may want an alternate assignment for their child. The Pitt County Board of Education is working on a change to policy that will require teachers to send letters home prior to the start of each class novel set.

How easy is it to request an alternate assignment?

The District has always been flexible and responsive to parents who request an alternate assignment for their child. Students who are given an alternate assignment receive comparable academic assignments aligned to the standards with direct instructional support.

The Pitt County Board of Education also provides an orderly and thorough process through which parents may request reconsideration of instructional and media center materials at their child's school. This process is outlined in Board Policy 3210 and provides for a level of review first with the school's media advisory committee, then with the District's media and technology advisory committee, and finally with the Board. At the school level, media and technology advisory committees are often the same as the school's School Improvement Team, which includes not only staff but parents representative of different grade levels.