

Romancing the Stockholm Syndrome: Desensitizing Readers to Obsessive and Abusive Behavior in Contemporary Young Adult Literature

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Contemporary works of young adult (or “YA”) literature written and marketed primarily for adolescent girls often depend upon conventional narratives that feature the damsel in distress – that is, plots in which the young woman who needs to be saved from her surroundings, or even herself, by a young man. Such privileging of masculine power – even in contemporary and purportedly progressive narratives – reaffirms the conservative notion that men still hold the power in relationships, that men's mastery over their female partners is an appropriate expression of passion and attraction. But what happens when the characters in such texts – as well as their readers – confuse abuse for passion? Young women reading stories that portray controlling or over-protective men as paradigms of romance are, I propose, being desensitized to obsessive and abusive behavior. Forced captivity and stalking, along with other dangerous behaviors should not be mistaken for passionate love. Passive surrender to overheated, manipulative and aggressive suitors (the classic “bad boy” of these YA novels) means surrendering independent agency and defining desire and love in only reactive ways. This is not a positive model for female readers.

In this thesis, then, I will analyze three popular YA novels written primarily for female readers in order to study how the novels employ, and occasionally justify kidnapping and Stockholm Syndrome plots. I will briefly consider literature on the psychiatric condition of Stockholm Syndrome and its popular representation in fiction. I will also survey the cultural impact of novels with massive appeal worldwide to create a visual of just how many adolescents are coming in contact with and making personal connections with detrimental role models in literature.

In turn, I will conduct three interrelated case studies that analyze variations of this captivity narrative. The first series of novels I have chosen is titled, *The Breakaway* by Michelle Davidson Argyle, which describes a girl who decides to remain with the man who has taken her hostage rather than return to her abusive boyfriend and disinterested parents at home. Not only does this novel serve as a bad manipulation of romance, but its sequel – which ambivalently represents the tumultuous feelings experienced by the protagonist when her captor is released from parole – extends the Stockholm Syndrome model further by describing a love triangle between her prior captor and a new man.

My next case study will address the popular *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer, discussing how the series skims over obsessive behavior depicted in the romance between Bella and Edward. Although the series is popular especially among teenagers, the idiosyncrasies of the leading love interest, Edward Cullen, should give the reader pause. Through his controlling nature and stalking habits, he places Bella in the role of object rather than subject.

My final case study will address Lucy Christopher's *Stolen*, an epistolary novel whose protagonist-narrator is a girl who is abducted and taken to a different continent by

an admiring stranger. Although the main character ultimately finds herself caring for her captor, her inner monologue suggests her complex responses to her captivity, as she responds erratically with expressions of both hatred and fondness for her captor. Through her first-hand account, we see the slow development of a relationship between the captor and captive, perhaps drawing the reader into the same sympathy for the kidnapper. When she ultimately returns home to her family, she finds that although she is not physically confined, her mind is still reeling with the events of her past. Despite this struggle, she affirmatively knows that his actions were wrong and hurtful. Her story is, then, proving a successful example of being subjected to abuse but knowing the difference between right and wrong.

My thesis will be informed by prior scholarship detailing the serious nature of manipulating abusive tendencies for the purposes of romantic entertainment. For insight into Stockholm Syndrome and its effects on its victims, I will initially focus on two scholarly articles, “Stockholm Syndrome_: Psychiatric Diagnosis or Urban Myth?” and, “Understanding Stockholm Syndrome.” These texts will help us make sense of the reactions and thoughts of our protagonists as they find themselves in separate but comparable situations of abuse. To better understand the appeal of romantic fiction in general, I have relied on Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance*, which addresses why women gravitate towards certain types of narratives and how it influences their perception of reality.

In the selection of these popular YA texts, I believe I have created a representative selection of narratives of the kind under consideration, whether through scenarios of captivity or dominance relationships. My aim is to argue for the need for

authors and publishers alike to better understand their effects on the masses. Even though these books have been for entertainment, it must not be forgotten that literature may strongly influence the self-understanding of readers who connect on an intimate level with fictional characters.

The Breakaway

There has always been a human interest in the depiction of traumatic experiences, drawing our attention to events that seem inconceivable in every day life. This is what individuals to read stories: to take them out of a comfortable realm to experience an untrodden territory as a form of escapism. Such stories entice readers with suspense, intrigue, and elicit intense emotions that are for most of us rarely felt outside of fiction. But what happens when elements of romance are incorporated into a traumatic experience? The depiction of such serious matters as kidnapping for a romantic scenario is not to be taken lightly. Even more difficult beyond this is writing a romantic captivity narrative geared toward young adult readers. Adolescents are in a period of maturing and are limited on insight into the ways and actions of intimate relationships. When they read an enthralling novel about sparks of romance felt between a captor and his captive, the overall message to the reader may be unclear. Abuse may be mistaken for passionate love, or obsession for care.

Consider the YA novel *The Breakaway*, by Michelle Davidson Argyle. The novel follows a young high school student named Naomi as she is kidnapped by jewel thieves during their escape when they accidentally strike her with their car and believe that she knows their identity. In an attempt to protect their identities, they take her to a different

state and force her to reside with them, threatening her with the hovering idea of death if she were to attempt an escape. For months she resides in a bedroom, often showering multiple times a day or sleeping just to pass the time. She eventually gains permission to enter other areas of the house: in the dining room where she eats dinner with her captors, or in the den where she plays billiards. Over time, she develops relationships with a few members of the group, seeming to forget that they are responsible for her entrapment. She begins to believe that most of them are actually decent people, not once questioning her changing attitude. After a year of captivity, the member with whom she has become closest releases her, returning her to the world from which she has been absent. Everything has changed for Naomi after being freed, but the person she has evolved into seems jaded and out of place in her former life.

The cover of the novel depicts a girl cowering in the corner of a room in the presence of a man with a gun in his hand, his shadow hovering over her on the wall above. This image of fright and intimidation coincides with the beginning pages of the novel, but this mood seems to quickly dissipate. There is one domineering figure of evident abuse, Eric, the leader of the group. He physically abuses Naomi whenever she disobeys him or talks back, grabbing her and slapping her hard enough to leave bruises. But the other members of the group are often depicted more positively, even as figures of comfort. The tone of the narrative seems to disregard the fact that all of these individuals are part of this plan of keeping her hostage; they are all equally guilty of the crime of holding her against her will. Missing from this novel is any inner struggle within Naomi when she forms these relationships with her captors. Not once does she question whether she should be feeling these positive emotions towards these criminals. She truly feels like

these individuals have just been caught in a sticky situation and begins to see them startlingly as family. Even at the end of the novel when the kidnappers are charged and incarcerated for the crime, she misses them and feels as if they do not deserve this fate and are simply misunderstood. This lack of inner conflict on the part of the primary character would seem to suggest that the actions of those who hurt us can be justified because those individuals provide what seems to be comfort or care. The girl we see fearing for her life on the cover grows over time to forget the forced circumstance that controls all of her actions. Especially as a character for a young adult novel, Naomi lacks any strength that might serve as an example for young women who may find themselves in a compromising situation. Instead, she is a weak figure that supports the age-old stereotype that women are feeble-minded, emotionally labile, and reactive.

The character of Naomi, although the main protagonist, lacks anything substantial in regards to personality and human action. She has no additive idiosyncrasies that make her interesting, relatable, or real. Perhaps this was a conscious effort on Argyle's part, who attempted to create an empty character in whose place the reader can easily place herself and experience her situation vicariously. This is the danger: an adolescent reader will fill in the blanks of the character with her own distinguishing features. This idea is supported by Radway in the book, *Reading the Romance* which discusses the ideology of female identity in romance literature. She observes, "Although it is true that romance reading evokes a process of identification whereby the reader responds to events lived through by the heroine, this is not the only level at which the reader reacts. The act of romance reading must first involve any reader in a complex process of the world construction through which the reader actively attribute sense to the words on a page. In

doing so, that reader adopts the text's language as her own and appears to gesture toward a world she in fact creates" (Radway 187). But the truth of the matter is, there is nothing endearing about Naomi that would make a reader want to be in her position. She is easily overcome by her captors, hardly putting up a fight or trying to get away from them, despite having multiple chances to escape. It is hard to find admiration for a character who wants to be controlled, as shown in the one escape attempt she did execute. In a moment of sudden energy, Naomi runs out of the house but is almost immediately caught by her most abusive captor who beats her. But instead of fighting back, she sees this episode as confirmation that she wants to stay with captors with whom she has formed bonds, especially the one she has fallen in love with. Without any struggle to improve her situation, she is in bondage not only by her captors, but by her own delusional mentality.

Naomi's portrayal is not the only aspect of this story that is lacking substance. The relationship between she and her mother is lacking any sort of affection or even realistic components. Her mother has a powerful job as one of the top lawyers in her city, which the narrator immediately cites as the reason why Naomi's relationship with her mother is distant. The novel is organized so that every few chapters, we shift from Naomi's situation to her mother's, Argyle accomplishing this by writing in the third person. When we do arrive at Naomi's mother's point of view, she speaks distantly with everyone she comes in contact with, even when discussing the disappearance of her daughter. This disconnect with reality is excessively detached, as she evokes no emotion whatsoever at the name of her daughter or shows no sign of struggling with the fact of the kidnapping. It isn't until page eighty where she hears an old voicemail from Naomi that she shows more human quality. When she hears her daughter's recorded voice, the narrator reveals,

“She had never missed Naomi before, but now she did. It was a sharp ache in her stomach that wouldn’t go away. Maybe it was guilt, but she suspected more than that” (Argyle 80). It becomes increasingly clear as the story goes on that this disconnect between Naomi and her mother is one of the driving forces for Argyle to justify a cultivating relationship between Naomi and one of her captors. If Argyle can present an absent mother to the reader who hardly seems to care, then if Naomi finds someone who cares for her elsewhere, her feelings for her captors will be more easily accepted by the reader. What Argyle seems to neglect is that even if there is lacking evidence of love at home, it should not mean that a young girl is willing to look for love even in the most desperate of situations.

The other character that appears to push Naomi further into the arms of her captors is her boyfriend from home, Brad. Rather than being emotionally distant like Naomi’s mother, he is physically abusive; Naomi is no stranger to the harms of abuse. Because of her experience with such matters, she should, we may surmise, be more aware of instances that wave red flags when approached, but she in fact sees less that is wrong captivity the more time passes. Before Naomi had been kidnapped, her boyfriend had struck her – leaving a prominent bruise on her face – outraged that she wanted to attend a different college than him. This pattern of abuse had been consistent for the extensive period of time they had dated, although she curiously never questioned it. He has also forcefully instructed her that she should not speak to any other man after a friend of his had expressed interest in her. She also describes painful sexual relations with Brad which she had never protested, as she assumed the rough nature of his intimacy was what he enjoyed. These elements of her story suggest that she cannot recognize abuse until she

finds herself in another abusive situation that she is unaware is also hazardous, and ultimately never sees it as such throughout the novel. Naomi is misguided in her views of what romance should be and, because of this distorted view, fails to see abuse for what it is.

For the reader, the most important of Naomi's relationships is with Jesse. One of her youngest captors, Jesse is one of the jewel thieves who was among the participants of the burglary operation. Described as handsome with tousled, dark red hair and a kind freckled face, his actions toward Naomi are almost immediately disturbing. After she is settled in to her new surroundings under captivity, he does startling things such as express his attraction towards her, telling her she is beautiful, and crawling into her bed at night to hold her. Argyle is plainly making an attempt at creating a swoon-worthy figure amongst Naomi's destitute surroundings, creating an instance of finding love that makes her realize that her previous relationship with Brad was not love, rather just a figure of simulated security. In summation, Argyle appears to want to make Jesse into a character who changes Naomi's life for the better, showing her what true love is, and how it differs from any other relationship she has had before. Except there is one issue: Jesse is the reason she is in captivity in the first place. Despite his good looks, kindness, and intelligence, he is a figure of abuse that is glorified by the narrative. Even when he makes the decision to drop Naomi off in front of the police station to set her free, it is only after a year of incarceration. The apparently positive qualities given to his character create a romanticized scenario that portrays the kidnapping and captivity as a glamorized circumstance where male authority over a woman is romantic and subjection by a woman is acceptable, because it is supposedly all for love. Love does not emerge from being

conquered, as this story suggests without ambiguity. Domination should never be confused with love, and a controlling nature should never be seen as an indicator of romantic passion.

The most startling event in the novel between Naomi and Jesse is when they become caught up in a whirlwind of romantic feelings and sexual tension. In a moment that replicates the tone of a Harlequin romance novel, the narrative intones, “The solid look in his eyes intensified. He slid one bra strap down her shoulder, eyeing her hungrily. He reminded her of Brad in so many ways, it made her sick. When she stopped to think about why, she began to understand herself in ways that made her head swim. The truth was she wanted Jesse to force her” (Argyle 113). Essentially, what the narrator is expressing here is that Naomi wishes to be overpowered, “It was comfortable that way, familiar, just like Brad. It was the only way she knew how things worked, and as he pulled down her other bra strap she felt a small whimper of delight build in her throat. Jesse was the only solid thing she had been able to hold onto for months. She didn't want him to go away” (Argyle 113). In cases of Stockholm Syndrome, disorder and disarray of thoughts can create confusion for the sufferer when confronted with strong emotions, but what is startling here is that there is no confusion. Rather, she sees no fault in her submission to him, even thinking that Jesse will disappear if she doesn't surrender to him, despite his being one of her captors. That expresses her desire for him to force her into sexual intimacy is shocking, considering the demographic for which this book is written. Even if the character's reasoning were explained with nuance, her attitude reflects an unhealthy understanding of love relationships. A young woman should never feel how

Naomi does in this moment. Once again, aggression and control are incorrectly viewed as a romantic tactic.

Another indicator of the novel's worrying philosophy is the narrative's frequent allusions to Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*. Published in 1899, the novel served as one of the first feminist works of literature and a landmark for the feminist movement. Following Edna Pontellier as she struggles to live within the constraints forced on women in her era, the novel recounts her courage to make her own decisions and also act on her sexual desires, and the costs of this to her. The novel is given to Naomi by Jesse who evidently understands its importance in modern literature. Naomi reads it multiple times, but never seems to associate her actions with Edna's when these are in fact opposite to one another. Naomi refuses to even acknowledge how her surroundings are unhealthy for her. When she finally does make a decision, she chooses to be with Jesse and expresses her love for him, even though he is one of the main reasons she is being held captive in the first place. Edna is famously known for fighting against anything that restrains her, knowing it is her own right to choose her future freely. In contrast, *The Breakaway's* main character falls in love with someone who dominates her and never acknowledges that there is anything wrong with that. Fundamentally, she is presented with a scenario she goes along with rather than choosing her own path of contentment.

It becomes even more surprising when you learn there is a sequel to this novel. *Pieces*, a Breakaway novel by Michelle Davidson Argyle continues the tale of Naomi as she leaves home to attend college, still reeling from the events that happened in her past. But just when we think she has the slight chance of an ostensibly healthy experience, Jesse conveniently makes parole and brings drama into her life once again. He wants to

run away with her, though this time he does ask, rather than kidnap her. But as an added plot twist, Naomi meets Finn, a fellow college student who complicates her life even further. It comes as a surprise when she ultimately chooses Finn in the end, despite still feeling love for the former. Argyle ultimately has created a story where it is difficult to feel any sympathy for its characters as they are completely unaware of any wrongdoing that is occurring. Never once is Naomi self-aware of the truly awful nature of someone who would keep her captive for over a year and engage in sexual conduct during that period. The fact that she isn't even conflicted with reconnecting with Jesse until Finn comes in the picture seems to endorse the belief that a woman cannot venture forward in life unless she has a man to act as a role of protector and provide security for her. Radway explains this, saying, "...These women are participating in a collectively elaborated female fantasy that unfailingly ends at the precise moment when the heroine is gathered into the arms of the hero who declares his intention to protect her forever because of his desperate love and need for her... Thereafter, she is required to do nothing more than exist as the center of this paragon's attention" (Radway 97). Throughout the first and second book, Naomi is merely serving the interests of predatory men.

Twilight

One of the most influential instances of obsessive behavior seeming to serve the interest of romance is the hugely popular *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer. These four books follow the adventures of a human girl and her otherworldly relationships, and young adults (human) readers across the world have been captivated by the novels' love triangle between humans, vampires and werewolves. As we take in the story through the

eyes of the main character, Bella, the reader is presented with not only a supernatural story of good versus evil, but also what seems to be a tale of true love and its undying effort to prevail despite obstacles it may encounter. By starting a relationship with a vampire who is over a century old, the heroine gives herself up to a inhumanly beautiful man who thirsts for her blood, and his desire to kill her. The cover of the first novel portrays a set of hands holding forth a red apple, suggesting the forbidden fruit that tempted Adam and Eve into sin.

In the case of a world-wide publishing and media phenomenon such as the *Twilight* series, the cultural impact of the Stockholm Syndrome device is particularly noticeable. *Twilight* has shattered book sales and box office records across the world. As of November 2009, the series has sold approximately 85 million copies and has been translated into 37 languages, spending 235 weeks on the New York Times bestseller's list (Click 3). Over 300 English language fan sites revolve around the series and has been credited to revitalizing the vampire genre (Click 4). Fascination with the novel and its characters has overflowed into the media universe of celebrities, leaving fans of an overzealous nature to closely follow the lives of the actors who portray their favorite characters, following their off-screen romances and lifestyles. The books have even prompted the rise in the popularity of baby names Bella, Jacob, Edward, and Renesmee.

The novels' main female protagonist, Bella Swan, is described as a timid girl with somewhat angelic features, including pale skin, slender frame, long brown hair and pink full lips. Her meek behavior would usually leave her isolated and somewhat withdrawn from her surroundings due to her antisocial nature, but in the book she seems to have become incredibly popular without uttering a word. Because she is a new arrival to the

town of Forks, Washington, she attracts attention from the male population immediately, acting as a shiny new toy to serve as a subject for objectification. But not only does she catch the eye of every individual with a Y chromosome, she also attracts the attention of the undead Edward, who because of his unusual appearance and old-fashioned mannerisms provokes her interest. Edward's supernatural nature though also serves as a perfect catalyst to Bella's inclination to play the damsel in distress figure. Multiple times she finds herself in precarious situations that are ultimately remedied by Edward, creating a high degree of codependency not just towards him, but also the werewolf Jacob. Meyer has claimed that Bella is a respectable character for young women since she is in charge of her own decisions and outcomes, but in reality the opposite appears to be true, as Bella constantly emotes how Edward has an uncontrollable pull over her. This pull leads her to making decisions that are purely for the sake of her relationship and not for herself.

Because of all of these factors, Bella should be considered a modern day girl with distorted attitudes due to outside male influences. Edward Cullen has become one of the most admired fictional characters of this generation. With his devastating good looks and his old-fashioned manners, he is a paradigm of a gallant, sophisticated man that is purportedly absent from the modern world. When chivalry is often presumed dead, females readers turn to this fictitious vampire to find what they desire in a relationship.

But Edward also has dangerous flaws masked by his flawless facade. Edward accelerates Bella's anti-feminist role of the damsel in distress through his desire to be wherever she is, even if she is not aware of his presence. He attributes this unvarying close proximity to his protective nature, but in essence it is a heightened form of obsession. In a metaphor for their relationship, Edward says, "And so the lion fell in love

with the lamb..." (Twilight 274). He is assuming the role of the empowering, controlling figure, which is shown in his controlling nature. When his immortal sister, Alice experiences premonitions regarding Bella, rather than consulting Bella on the matter, he conceals it from her. He takes the reins since he believes he knows what is best for her and attempts to alleviate situations before involving her in them. But Bella is perfectly capable of making her own decisions, and as an individual has the right to know details of matters pertaining to her. Not only is Edward in control of information, he is also at times in control of her actions. In one instance, Bella climbs into her truck to visit her friend Jacob, only to find that Edward has removed the cables from the car battery. He says, "You know it's out of the question for you to be around a werewolf unprotected, Bella. And it would break the treaty if any of us cross over onto their land. Do you want us to start a war?" (Eclipse 28). Not only does he leave her with no options, he follows up his enforced rule with a line that sounds a lot like a guilt trip, meant to quiet any resistance she may have to his will. He continues by saying, "I don't know how to phrase this properly. It's going to sound cruel, I suppose. But I've come too close to losing you in the past. I know what it feels like to think I have. I am not going to tolerate anything dangerous... Please make a conscious effort to keep yourself safe. I'll do everything I can, but I would appreciate a little help" (Eclipse 33). Under the mask of a caring statement, he emphasizes how he will not permit her to do anything that he decides is unsafe. In addition to this, he also slips a condescending message to her that she is not capable of deciding what is best for her in the matter of her safety. He concludes, "Do you really have any idea how important you are to me? Any concept at all of how much I love you?" (Eclipse 34). Here, he attempts to justify all of his manipulative actions in the

name of love, but in principle he is doing all of this because of his personal dispositions.

Jacob Black is Bella's other male love interest. Having grown up on a close-knit Indian reservation that emphasizes the importance of familial tradition and folklore, his background is the perfect foundation for the mythical werewolf he becomes in the series. Younger but compelling, Jacob serves as another powerful male character within the series who, not surprisingly, also finds himself romantically interested in Bella. Although another alpha figure within the novel, Jacob is different from Edward, in that he has an awareness that Bella has free will that, as an individual, she is permitted to utilize. Edward assumes he knows what is right at all times for Bella, leaving her with few options or sometimes none. Jacob, on the other hand, may want Bella to choose a certain resolution but knows that ultimately it is her own decision as an individual to choose what she believes is best for herself. While Jacob does give free rein for Bella's feelings, he does also serve as another crutch for her. Specifically in *New Moon*, Bella is left heartbroken after Edward ends their relationship – yet another decision Edward assumes is right for Bella without consulting her – leaving her emotionally damaged and unable to cope. To fill this void, she employs Jacob as the replacement male figure to numb the pain of her recent breakup. Although Bella is incredibly depressed about the matter, she cements her damsel in distress role, incapable of supporting herself or moving forward on her own. Jacob serves as an emotional crutch who prevents Bella from standing on her own, as referenced in a quote where Bella says, “I waited for the memory to hit – to open the gaping hole. But, as it so often did, Jacob's presence kept me whole” (*New Moon* 214). Jacob's presence is implied to be necessary in order for Bella to keep herself together. Without a man present, she is fundamentally destitute.

A startling detail of the series is the act of imprinting that occurs within the group of werewolves. Throughout the series, their existence has been defined by very mythical terms to coincide with characteristics of Native American beliefs as all of the werewolves are part of the Quileute tribe in the Pacific Northwest. Through oral tradition, their customs and beliefs have been passed down through generations to properly inform them of their past and ancestry. But an uneasiness emerges when imprinting is introduced, which none of the characters exude negativity towards as they should. Imprinting is an involuntary connection one makes with another human after the initial contact, and is seen as the way a shape-shifter finds his or her soul-mate. Jacob explains the phenomenon, stating, "It's not like love at first sight, really. It's more like... gravity moves. When you see her, suddenly it's not the earth holding you here anymore. She does. And nothing matters more than her. And you would do anything for her, be anything for her... You become whatever she needs you to be, whether that's a protector, or a lover, or a friend, or a brother" (Eclipse 176). The latter part of his explanation is key to understanding the problematic concept of love that Meyer's novels communicate. Imprinting can involve a person of any age, as when Jacob imprints on Bella's child immediately after birth in *Breaking Dawn*. Because of this process, this child will be constantly under the watchful eye of Jacob. She may learn to love him back in time, but she is left with no future decisions of her own because of his presence. What is most disturbing about the situation though is that Jacob will presumably be there for all stages of life, and as noted in the latter part of the quote, a sexual relationship will most likely occur between Jacob and the child when she is of age. Meyer has, perhaps without knowing it, created a scenario of child grooming, where an adult forms a trusting

relationship with a child with a future intent of having sexual relations with her or him. Not only has Meyer created yet another scenario where women are absolved of decisions, she has painted a distressing relationship that may be considered highly abusive.

Meyer has reported that idea for the series came to her one night as she slept, dreaming of a forbidden relationship between a human and a vampire who sparkles in sunlight. Unable to shake her dream, she decided to write down everything she remembered, then elaborated and created a story around it. Not only does this story reflect the basic elements of the dream, it also reflects her religious beliefs and attitudes regarding romance and dating. Bella Swan is a character illustrated admittedly after the author's personal appearance and experience. Meyer reports that when she changed schools midway through high school, she suddenly had the attention of many male suitors based on her new girl appeal. In the case of an author creating a character modeled on herself, we may wonder how much Stephenie Meyer is living vicariously through her creation. If this is the case, the author herself must be held responsible for fantasies of a powerful male and passive, subjugated female. The risk here is that this unhealthy model of female-male relations and romance will be projected in such a way that naïve young readers may identify with its structure and outcome.

Stolen – Lucy Christopher

Throughout my research within YA literature, I have found it surprisingly difficult to find novels that tread around captivity narratives with sensitivity rather than exploit them for intentions of entertainment. There also seems to be a fine line between what is perceived as affection versus obsession. One novel, Lucy Christopher's *Stolen*

seems to effectively balance the two, describing an enthralling story of kidnapping and Stockholm Syndrome, but also pointing out the confusions that can blur the line between love and obsession. Presenting a realistic kidnapping narrative, the novel also manages to tell an incredibly interesting story without resorting to sensationalism. The deep analysis of the complex relationship between captor and captive makes it a stunning review of just how bewitching an abusive relationship can be within and how it becomes all the more difficult when the victim begins to understand what seems to be a good-hearted nature of her captor.

Stolen begins with the narrator, Gemma, explaining how she is writing to her captor about her experience in captivity. While in an airport on her way to a vacation destination, Gemma meets a young man who unknowingly drugs her and, through a methodical and premeditated scenario, manages to take her to the rural terrain of Australia. Surrounded by barren surroundings in a country she knows nothing of, she fights her captor and manages multiple escape attempts, but all of her efforts are unsuccessful. Lacking hope, she begins to unwillingly bond with her youthful captor and starts to feel affection for him despite her simultaneous hatred for him. By way of the novel's epistolary structure, we are exposed to an intimate glimpse of the protagonist as she battles with not only her kidnapper, but also herself, even as she develops an attachment to him. We thus have access to her inner monologue, and an effective pathway to feel every emotion and struggle alongside her. The evidence of a strongly written novel includes our feeling for the character as if we knew her, and in this case, falling into her inner conflict. We may wonder if we have developed a form of Stockholm Syndrome as well. Most of the narrative follows two main characters, the captor and the

captive; and as we delve into their lives and minds, it becomes increasingly easy to understand the connection Gemma feels with her captor.

Gemma Toombs is an unusually strong individual, even at the young age of sixteen. She provides audience with powers of perception that are very keen and mature, which may have been developed during her years of increased independence due to her parents' demanding jobs. She has a very strong conscience, knowing clearly the difference between right from wrong, which makes it all the more difficult when she is captured by Ty. The letter she writes to him that is the focus of the novel is heart-wrenching as she remembers very distinctly every moment she spent with her captor in the middle of a monolithic expanse of sand and wilderness. Unlike the protagonist of *The Breakaway*, Gemma has the strength and determination to make multiple attempts to escape, even when she starts to develop feelings for her captor; she is aware that what she is feeling is horribly wrong. Each attempt at freedom ends with Ty saving her from the wilderness in which she becomes lost. She even initially attempts to slit her wrists in order to avoid whatever fate her captor has planned for her, but she is saved then as well. Due to the isolation of her location, she starts to bond with Ty as he is the only one within miles to speak with. The escalation of their affections toward each other increases when they discover a camel in the desert that they claim as theirs. On the matter of her developing bond, Gemma explains plainly, "The people we care for aren't always the ones we should" (Christopher 290). But what becomes the complexity of the novel is whether the feelings she is developing towards Ty are feelings of love or merely an attachment she has gained due to her isolation.

Tyler “Ty” MacFarlane is the male figure of authority in this novel. He has orchestrated the abduction of Gemma to a detailed degree. The fact that he thinks he can give her a foundation for a new life with him is unsettling, as he truly believes what he is doing will be best for her. But the author's style and method are able to elicit a surprising sense of sympathy. Not only do we see inside of Gemma's mind and her struggle, but we also hear of past events Ty had experienced that led him to this point. He is not doing any of this out of ill will; he truly believes he is doing something for the good of both of them. From his childhood where he ran away from his father to live alone in the outback, to when he was captured and sent to England with his mother and indulged in drugs and alcohol, we begin to understand his unbalanced psyche and through that understand his actions and emotions. Ty feels more than infatuation towards Gemma. It is evident that he truly feels an ardent love for her, and that makes the story all the more tragic. He wanted to bring her to the land that he knew and loved and thought she would be happy there, as he was as a child, away from their halfhearted parents. The book does an impressive job at describing the character in a way that creates the picture of Ty that Gemma sees. As the plot progresses, we slowly begin to transition from fear to affection towards him, something that is startling but also brilliant in the sense that the reader gets a taste of how she or he would feel in this situation. As Gemma says, “It's hard to hate someone once you understand them” (Christopher 279). The good arises even in the most dire of situations when she is bitten by a venomous snake and Ty must make the decision whether to attempt to tend the wound himself or seek help. Even though he knows he will be arrested and charged for his crime, he goes for help.

The role of a form of psychological disorder much like Stockholm Syndrome in both *The Breakaway* and *Stolen* would appear to serve the plot development as well as create a way for the reader to form a connection with the main character and her choices. A stark difference between the two novels, however, is how they shape the reader's understanding of what has happened in each case. While *The Breakaway* addresses the mental condition briefly and trivially, *Stolen* addresses the matter earnestly with a degree of reasoning that could also be applied to abusive situations in reality. In the conclusion of Christopher's novel, Gemma has been flown to the hospital to save her from the snakebite where she sees Ty for the last time. With his absence comes a void that she is not used to, believing that these strong feelings and desire for his presence constitute love. The doctors and her mother tell her otherwise, informing her that she is suffering from Stockholm Syndrome. Back home with her parents after her extended stay in Australia, the audience is still left wondering whether she is suffering from the mental delusion or if she truly loves Ty. This open-ended conclusion to the novel makes the situation that more realistic as her muddled state of mind is the same the reader feels after revisiting this journey with her. In some of her final words to Ty, Gemma explains to him, "What you did to me wasn't this brilliant thing, like you think it was. You took me away from everything – my parents, my friends, my life. You took me to the sand and the heat, the dirt and isolation. And you expected me to love you. And that's the hardest bit. Because I did, or at least, I loved something out there. But I hated you too. I can't forget that" (Christopher 297). This blunt statement to Ty summarizes the inconsistency of her thoughts and understanding of her experience. The book ends with Gemma observing that she is preparing to see Ty in trial for her kidnapping, the first time since she has been

admitted to the hospital. She expresses that she doesn't know how she'll feel, that she does miss him, but what she does know is that what he did was wrong. She appears to be – Christopher seems to be – reassuring the audience that although she has been swayed by his passion and his actions, the reader must stand with her against him despite how difficult it may be.

Conclusion

A common thread of these novels together is the theme of absent parents. This raises an obvious question: why do the authors gravitate towards this plot element? The female protagonists of these novels are all deficient in supportive relationship structures, often leaving them to rely wholly on themselves to make decisions without outside support. They appear unprepared to deal with a new figure in their lives, who suddenly shows what seems to be powerful affection for them. Individuals want affection, and sometimes are unaware of this desire until they feel this connection with someone new. Perhaps, because of this seemingly perpetual lack of prior tenderness, the protagonists are more susceptible to connecting with someone with authority over them because that is what has been missing in their lives before. Their need for externally imposed structure is met by the love interests who provide care and also control. By providing both of these elements to female protagonists, the male captors encourage the formation of an attachment and dependency, establishing the foundation for an illness like Stockholm Syndrome. But in order for this development to be realized, the relationship between the protagonists and the parents must be discussed to establish the background of the main character. The neglect of any relationship structure within Argyle's *The Breakaway* hurt

Naomi's character from being properly developed, the absence of any background resulting in an underwhelming character who seemingly accepts love easily from multiple abusive situations without contest. The use of parental figures in *Twilight* is evidently used solely for the intent of making Bella appear to be mature beyond her age, as she makes the decision to leave her mother and her new romantic relationship to give them space, and to provide meals for her policeman father. Christopher's *Stolen* on the other hand delves into the absence of parental support in Gemma's life, detailing an insight that even Ty uses against her, that her parents are there physically but not in any other role. This emotional factor on Gemma's part contributes to the back-and-forth in her inner monologue, creating an incredibly keen perception on the matters of absent parents and their role in romantic developments.

The real question that is left is, what drives the fascination for captivity narratives, or narratives in which the heroine is left overwhelmed by a man? Radway observes, "In reading about a woman who manages to find her identity through the care of a nurturant protector and sexual partner, readers might well be teaching themselves to believe in the worth of such a route to fulfillment and encouraging the hope that such a route might yet open up for them as it once did for the heroin" (Radway 187). She is referring to the fact that a woman's sexual identity is often left unrealized until a man claims his right over her, because if a woman were to explore her erotic desires she would immediately be seen as immoral. This recurring trope of male authority over females then presents an opportunity for a woman to imagine a world where she is not held accountable for her sexuality. The girls in *The Breakaway* and the *Twilight* series in turn take on passive roles where they are dominated by male characters. These men assist the women in touching

on erotic agency – but not freely chosen agency – so the females are not shamed for embracing their sexual side. This is a symptom of social pathology in a culture that denies independent sexual agency in women. As a result, it has become more acceptable for a woman to be controlled and dominated by a man rather than for her to experience her emotional and erotic life at her own will. A visible change needs to occur where women are admired for their independence and free agency rather than their submissive romances with men who take control over them. This message significantly needs a voice in young adult literature to help propel a generation of young women forward into more independent-chosen, self-realizing models of love and bonding.

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