

Education Week

School Shootings Find a Dark Niche in Young Adult Fiction



By **Mark Walsh**

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When a student **opened fire at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla.**, killing 17 people and wounding 17 others on Feb. 14, Michigan high school student Lilia Martinez reacted as the rest of the nation did—with fear and horror.

Martinez, then a high school freshman in Morenci, Mich., 100 miles southwest of Detroit, quickly turned to something that has helped her cope with the era when mass school shootings seem like they could happen anywhere—she started reading a young adult novel about a mass school shooting.

"I guess it's because they make me more aware of what could happen if I were in a situation like that," the Morenci High School student said in an interview. "I've always thought that knowledge is power and that if I read enough of these, the better off I would be."

Martinez, 15, estimates that of the 28 books she read over the last school year, both for pleasure and schoolwork, as many as 20 of them had themes of school violence.

That she has so many to choose from is a reflection of the fact that since the 1999 attack that killed 13 (plus the two gunmen) at Columbine High School in Colorado, young adult novels addressing mass school shootings have practically become their own sub-genre of teen fiction.



"These books are giving kids a voice, to some extent," said Sally Kruger, who writes a blog about young adult books and retired this summer after 40 years of teaching middle school and high school English, finishing at Morenci High, where she taught Martinez.

Referring to the 240 students at the high school, Kruger said, "Do they just dismiss this idea, and think this will never happen in our little town? No, they're afraid."

'A Feeling of Uncertainty'

The works of young adult fiction are **part of a larger body of literature, movies, TV shows, and other popular entertainment that has addressed mass school shootings.**

But while many works aimed at a mass audience are being consumed by teenagers, young adult fiction is geared specifically to them. And there has been a steady stream of such books about school shooters.

"The biggest way to get a high school-age student to get off their phone and read a book is to find something that really relates to them," said Jessica North, who taught English for eight years at Gloucester High School in Gloucester, Va., before becoming the school librarian there last year.

After the Parkland shooting, North said more students at her school checked out young adult titles such as *Give a Boy a Gun*, a 2002 book by Todd Strasser; *Hate List*, a 2009 work

by Jennifer Brown; and *Shooter*, a 2004 title by Walter Dean Myers. (There's also a 2017 young adult work titled *Shooter*, by Caroline Pignat.)

"There's a feeling of uncertainty they have, like maybe they could know the person who could commit such an act," North said. "They want to relate and know that their feelings are authentic."

A Comfort

That view was echoed by Kruger, the recently retired teacher whose blog about young adult literature is called [Reading Junky's Reading Roost](#).

While her fellow English teachers tended to assign the high school literature classics, Kruger said she had permission for many years to teach with young adult fiction, whether it was teen vampire and werewolf stories, or edgier works about school shooters or police brutality.

"You can use these books to look for metaphors and similes, and teach all the literary techniques," added Kruger, who is a part-time instructor teaching children's and adolescent literature at Siena Heights University in Adrian, Mich.

Martinez, the rising sophomore, said her parents expressed some concern about her embrace of the sub-genre. But the student was quick to point out that she also reads other types of books, including mysteries, and has other high school interests, such as band.

Martinez said that at times last school year she would walk around Kruger's classroom and make book recommendations to her classmates, which tended to be books about school shootings.

Among the titles Martinez found comforting were *Give a Boy a Gun*, and *Mercy Rule*, by Tom Leveen, published just days after the Parkland shooting; and *This Is Where It Ends*, a 2016 book by Marieke Nijkamp.

Nijkamp's book, about 54 harrowing minutes as a shooting unfolds at an Alabama high school told from four perspectives, is all the more remarkable because it was written by an author who was born, raised, and lives in the Netherlands and who admits to being a little freaked out when she visits U.S. schools.

"To walk into a school and see stickers on the doors to say this is a 'gun-free zone' was quite confrontational in a way that I didn't fully anticipate," Nijkamp said in an interview.

She wrote *This Is Where It Ends*, which was on The New York Times best sellers list for 72 weeks, to gain a better understanding of heinous acts such as mass school shootings.

"I come from a country that has pretty much had no school shootings," Nijkamp said.

A fictional account "is the perfect way to get close to the experience of what it would be like to be in this location that feels like a relatively safe space and then turns into a battleground," she said.

Nijkamp embraces the young adult fiction category.

"Teenage readers are not an easy audience," she said. "They are relentlessly curious and interested in their place in the world, and not necessarily as cynical as other readers, which is a joy in itself for the author."

Young adult novels about mass school shootings "are part of the Zeitgeist," for now, she said. "Hopefully, at some point, they will just be works of fiction."

For Martinez, such fiction is just a piece of her literary diet.

"But if another [school shooter] book came out that drew my interest, I would probably read it," Martinez said.

In fact, as the school year came to an end in June, she put one more book about a school shooter on her summer to-read list: a 2015 collaboration by 17 young adult authors and edited by Shaun David Hutchinson titled *Violent Ends*.