



# Boy Toy

*Barry Lyga*

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*Josh Mendel has a secret. Unfortunately, everyone knows what it is.*

Five years ago, Josh's life changed. Drastically. And everyone in his school, his town—seems like the world—thinks they understand. But they don't—they can't. And now, about to graduate from high school, Josh is still trying to sort through the pieces. First there's Rachel, the girl he thought he'd lost years ago. She's back, and she's determined to be part of his life, whether he wants her there or not. Then there are college decisions to make, and the toughest baseball game of his life coming up, and a coach who won't stop pushing Josh all the way to the brink. And then there's Eve. Her return brings with it all the memories of Josh's past. It's time for Josh to face the truth about what happened.

If only he knew what the truth was...

## Boy Toy Details

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Author : Barry Lyga

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# From Reader Review *Boy Toy* for online ebook

## laaaaames says

Women, don't get jobs, your kids will get molested. Duh. Money-making and independence is for gentlemen!

Ahem. As far as readability goes, I soared through this book. Lyga's really good at that. Unfortunately, Lyga is also really good at misogyny. Just because the woman at the crux of your story (and I'd even argue that, as Rachel is significant too) was a molester, not every woman has to be terrible or the kind of male fantasy that doesn't really exist.

Speaking of Rachel, I wavered a lot on her presence in the book. The flashback plot was heartbreaking and made a lot of sense and really served the function well of uncovering that Josh was being abused. That said I have a really hard time buying that when your first sexual experience nearly ends up with getting raped that later on you'd be all OH I HOPE THAT GUY IS MY BOYFRIEND! I appreciated there was time spent with Rachel explaining why she did feel that way, but I still didn't buy it, and I thought it was rather irresponsible writing. Just what date rapists need to read: oh actually she DID want it!

That said, OK, at least Rachel was given agency and was able to articulate her feelings. Why did they have to feed into male fantasy though?

I guess I feel like most of what Lyga writes is male fantasy. Women are shrews, or sluts, or molesters, or sexpots, or everything you need in a girl including the ability to heal your emotional trauma. Girls don't exist for themselves, duh! They are for boys! For men! If they develop independent ideas and needs it's probably because they're cheating on you.

(read: 6)

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## Joe says

At the outset, any reader of *Boy Toy* should know that the content is disturbing. In the wake of the outbreak of child molestations involving female teachers and their male students, Barry Lyga set out to create a titillating and thought-provoking young adult novel about the ripped-from-the-headlines subject. He fails at the latter and only mildly succeeds with the former.

But the topic is never quite as disturbing as Lyga probably intended. The disturbing aspect of this book is how quickly it falls from grace.

Generally speaking, *Boy Toy* is competently written, and, for the first two hundred pages or so, somewhat enjoyable. Lyga ratchets up suspense by slowly revealing incidents that lead up to the molestation, casting a cunning sheen on Eve, the temptress/teacher. The pace of the seduction is brilliant, and when it finally culminates, it's gut-wrenching and panic-inducing. Sure, in those pages Josh, the victim, is a little bit annoying and too precocious, and a similar molestation (involving Josh and his childhood friend, Rachel) is slightly confusing, but the promise of a clear resolution allows the book to be a page-turner.

And then there's a post-sex sequence between Eve and Josh that's so eye-rollingly awful that the book can only plummet downhill from there.

"Our names. We both have biblical names... You're Joshua. Strong. My king. And me... I'm Eve. The first woman.' She snuggled close to me. *Your* first woman.'" (p. 214)

*Eve*. The seducer's name is *Eve*. And the undercurrent of subtle misogyny begins.

As a couple other reviewers have pointed out, Lyga's female characters are all exceptionally weak (or wicked) in the book. Jenna, Josh's mother, is hysterical and unlikable, either shrilly fighting with his father about her time away from home at her new job or pecking away at Josh for all his stubborn inadequacies. Couple this with the mercurial Rachel (who spends her time tempting Josh and ignoring the post-traumatic stress from which he clearly suffers) and Michelle, the buxom and bubbly girlfriend of Josh's buddy, Zik, and you've got a hotbed of She-Devils. If they aren't trying to get you in bed, they're busying themselves with being unfaithful.

Shockingly, the misogyny is secondary to the substandard character development of Josh. Despite being a social outcast, Josh is a hero on the baseball field and a veritable whiz kid. This combination should be compelling, but under Lyga's guidance it is forced and unbelievable. To prove Josh's genius, Lyga has the character perform mathematic computations - usually involving baseball statistics - in his head. We get no sense of *why* he does it, he just does. The number of chapters that feature an ERA, IPA, batting average, or slugging average piles up like mattresses on a pea, obscuring whatever meaning was intended. Does the reader even *care* that Josh can do this? No. We just have to read *another* paragraph of statistics that has nothing to do with the plot.

Furthermore, Josh suffers from "flickers", flashbacks to sexual proclivities involving Eve. These flickers occur mid-thought, interrupting the narrative, and allowing Josh to space-out so other characters can panic and ask him if he's okay. The flickers are so pervasive that they should land Josh in a psychiatric ward, but that would have made the book more interesting, so Lyga avoids it.

Josh is at his most excruciatingly annoying when he dissects the actions of others, as evidenced in this absurd sequence that takes place during the prom, where Josh analyzes the decorations:

"I resist the urge to correct the positions of the constellations relative to the big papier-mache moon." (p. 277)

What? *Really*? I'm supposed to care about this dude? He's petty! He treats people like shit (which is supposed to be a manifestation resulting from his molestation)! He is not a human! Maybe this was Lyga's (poorly executed) point: being molested strips you of your humanity. I have no doubt that it does, but the author is unable to communicate that cogently in his writing.

*Boy Toy* ultimately fails in its resolution. Pat and perfect, Josh faces down his demons and comes out on top, the world spreading its splendors before him - even though he's too robotic to make us care.

And those flickers? Gone in a snap. Because that's what happens when you decide you're no longer traumatized.

Ridiculous.

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## **Mercutio says**

Ugh, some parts were just so well done, they managed to pull off a sensitive narrative without overdoing it and going into torture-porn territory.

Unfortunately, this whole, "SUDDENLY MY GIRLFRIEND FIXED EVERYTHING AND I SLIPPED HER MY PORK SWORD LIKE NO TOMORROW JUST HOURS AFTER A PAINFUL CONFRONTATION WITH MY RAPIST" was completely, irredeemably stupid (as well as damaging).

I really, really freakin' hate the "love overcomes everything, even difficult psychological issues" crap. Rachel is a cruel person who doesn't even try to be understanding of Josh, or who tries and fails miserably and then gives up immediately. Then, like magic, her mystical cooter cures him of being a victim and having intimacy concerns.

So. realistic.

Wait, no, I was being sarcastic, it was garbage.

Also, don't forget that if you don't stay home and make your man a sandwich, your children WILL be abused, brutally. Damn women. Don't you know autonomy gets kids hurt?!

I really hope I'm not the only one picking up on gale-force misogyny here.

Which is a shame 'cause this book could have been so much more.

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## **Jackie "the Librarian" says**

[Josh was sexually abused by his history teacher, Evelyn Sherman, when he was twelve, for months. It's five years later, and he's still haunted by what happened, even though the teacher went to jail. He gets straight A's, does well playing baseball, but his personal life is nonexistent.

The only person he trusts is his best friend Zik, because Zik never asks about what happened. And that's good, beca

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## **Heather says**

### **Rating B+**

**Review** There was so much I liked about this book and only a little bit that I didn't like (but it's a pretty major thing).

What I did like: the seduction by the teacher (which, I believe, is actually called "grooming" when it comes to child molestation) scenes are done really tastefully and are told from Josh's POV and are so eye-opening. That sounds weird to say, and you might think, 'Why would you want to have your eyes opened to that?' And I guess the reason I found this book so fabulous is that every year I volunteer at a camp for kids who are in the CPS system because they've been abused (physically or sexually) or neglected. It's reality, but everyone

likes to pretend it doesn't happen. But I think books like this, that show how it can happen even in white middle-class America, and the effects it has on kids, can help open the discussion up so that we can start to really address the underlying issues and start to move toward solutions.

Lyga thanks a number of people at the back of the book in the acknowledgements section, but I didn't see anyone who gave him insights into the psychological profile of sexually abused kids. I don't know if he did a lot of reading, or how he did it, but Josh's confusion and misinterpretations and latent manifestations of the misplaced shame and guilt were so poignant. Very well done.

What I didn't like: The resolution of the student/teacher situation. Most notably I didn't like how it happened, or more specifically, where it happened. The situation was just so unbelievable. And everything else up to that point (up to page 392 of 410) was so believable and well done that it just left a sour taste at an otherwise exceptionally well written book.

This book isn't funny or exciting or even easy to read. But it's good and worth your time. Sure, most teens who might pick up this book are past the point where they might be prime targets for predators, but this book is fantastic reading material for parents of young children and tweens. I don't mean this to be all, "Lock up your children!" because it's more than that. It's about abuse and its effects (there are long-term effects to all forms of abuse) and it shows what life after abuse is like for the victim (and a small glimpse at the life of the predator).

I don't know that this is the best book I've ever read from a literary stand-point (okay, I *know* it isn't... the dialogue was really lacking in some parts), but the way the subject matter is handled earned this a good grade in my book.

**Recommendation** Anyone who doesn't want to have their head stuck in the sand.

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## Claire says

I disliked reading *Boy Toy* so much that I don't think I can rate its overall quality. I had to force myself to finish reading it, and then by the neatly-wrapped-up ending I didn't feel any less uncomfortable. So all thoughts below say more about my gut reaction than how good the book is.

Other reviews have already discussed the plot, so I'll leave that alone. Here are the things that I found hardest to deal with, and I think several of them may be related to Josh's narrative voice.

First, both the characters and the author seem to implicate Josh's mom as the cause of all of this: when she goes back to work instead of staying home until Josh is ready for college, Josh becomes a potential victim for Eve. Every story contains "if only"s, but this one really does come back to the mom's choice to work, and several of the characters repeat this idea over and over in case the reader forgets it. And then when everything is found out, the mom gets angry (sure) but doesn't ever develop into a three-dimensional character. Is it just that Josh isn't an omnipotent narrator and only sees limited parts of his mom's personality? Totally possible.

Along those same lines, is it Josh's narrative voice that lingers on the fantasy-like details of the sex/seduction scenes? It totally read like MILF-themed porn, and the narrator kept the darkness of Josh's later trauma out of the descriptions. It was hard to remember, in fact, that the experience was supposed to be traumatic at all.

This was clearly the author's informed choice -- to show that Josh really felt like he had agency, not like he was being molested, I guess -- but I wonder how many teen boys reading it will think "gosh, that really is inappropriate" and how many will jerk off? Maybe that's intentional too, to take them along for the ride... but I didn't like it. Along the same lines -- taking them along for the ride -- it's pretty sudden when Josh confronts Eve and she tells him that it was a calculated game for her, that she picked him out as a victim early on and was fucking with him all along (no pun intended). That explicit confession was a little surprising, as was the miraculous effect it had on Josh, who's then able to go and have beautiful, non-triggery sex with Rachel in the park that night. Does it really all resolve for him that quickly? I just had a hard time believing it.

Overall, I had a hard time with the representations of women in the book. The mom causes all the trouble by working in the first place. The hot teacher is actually an evil seductress (named Eve). The best friend's girlfriend is a gorgeous and sweet but vapid popular girl who's never had to worry about anything in her life because she has a great body. And the girl-next-door who becomes his girlfriend, the only female character the reader's encouraged to respect, is "just one of the guys". Again, maybe this is Josh's limited viewpoint and the reader is supposed to recognize it as such. I hope.

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## Scarlet says

Review from Way Too Hot Books

***"I was molested. When I was twelve.  
And everyone in the world knew it except for me."***

I am left speechless.

This story is real and unforgettable. It isn't a story about the forbidden teacher/student love that many fantasize about, this story is the realism behind what actually goes into the waters of female teacher to male student molestation, down the path of pedophilia.

Writing is so realistic that sometimes I had a feeling that I was in the room with Mrs. Sherman and Josh.

This is the story of seduction and the life afterwards told by Josh Mendel, the victim who takes full responsibility for what an adult did to him when he was twelve years old.

As a 12 year old boy he, like the every other boy in his class, had a crush on his history teacher, Mrs Evelyn Sherman a.k.a. Eve. Soon, he was sucked into a very adult and inappropriate relationship with her. The truth emerges when Josh attends a birthday party for one of his friends, Rachel, and a game of spin the bottle gets out of hand...

Five years later, he's a high school graduate without ever having a normal, healthy relationship, especially not one with a girl his own age. He is angry and hostile, and he fights his own inner feelings about Eve, even while battling a growing attraction with a Rachel, his old friend who revealed his affair long time ago...

Although he's some kind of sport and math genius, Josh is traumatized and he feels permanently damaged. His family is dysfunctional and he gets these flickers from the past all the time:

***"-there, yes, **THERE**-"***

*-God oh God oh God-  
-stop teasing me, you naughty...oh God yesss-"*

*"Lying there, I've figured out what the flickers are. They're my punishment. It's no coincidence that they started that day that I stood in Eve's bedroom, taking my first step toward her, toward my sin, my downfall. The flickers are my past, constantly reignited, hammering at me from below and beneath and behind."*

Was it an excellent book? Unquestionably. Why I gave it 4 (4,5) stars? Because it was too much baseball stuff in it.

My favorite quote:

*"See, forgiveness doesn't happen all at once. It's not an event- it's a process. Forgiveness happens while you're asleep, while you're dreaming, while you're in line at the coffee shop, while you're showering, eating, farting, jerking off. It happens in the back of your mind, and then one day you realize that you don't hate the person anymore, that your anger has gone away somewhere. And you understand. You've forgiven them. You don't know how or why. It sneaked up on you. It happened in the small spaces between thoughts and in the seconds between ideas and blinks. That's where forgiveness happens. Because anger and hatred, when left unfed, bleed away like air from a punctured tire, over time and days and years.  
Forgiveness is stealth.  
At least, that's what I hope."*

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**Nina says**

I am horrendously lazy.

I did intend to rewrite this review by typing it out on my laptop, but... meh. Scanning is so much faster. If you're interested, my thoughts are here. Good luck deciphering them. (Although I do like to think I have a pretty neat handwriting.) If you can't properly see what I've written, just save and zoom.

The mistakes - there must be some, though I can't be fucked to check - are there because I wrote this while watching HP#7 pt. I.

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**Rebecca McNutt says**

*Boy Toy* is probably the best of Barry Lyga's work I've ever read, but it's very overdramatic and hardly plausible for most of the book.



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## Stacia (the 2010 club) says

*I was molested. When I was twelve. And everyone else in the world knew it except for me.*

\*minor spoiler details ahead\*

One little phrase - one big revelation. How different could Josh's life had been, had he realized this sooner?

*No one ever said, "He was wrong, Josh. You're not a little fucking perv."*

*Boy Toy* was a study in the aftereffects of abuse. Written in both present tense, as well as in flashbacks, we see one young man's life fall apart before our eyes over a period of five years.

This isn't the first book I've read about student/teacher affairs, but this one stood out to me more than any other. I felt like a helpless observer on the sidelines, watching as Josh at age 12, young and innocent, was seduced by a woman in a position of authority. I was saddened as Josh struggled to understand himself, and couldn't seem to figure out how to fit back into a normal world when he was no longer normal.

The fallout of the "incident" took its toll on many other people in Josh's life. Family, friends, teammates. No one was immune. The person who was hit the hardest was Josh's close friend (and potential "could have been" girlfriend) when he behaved in a horrific manner toward her. You learn early on the book what *probably* happened, but no details were given. As the story starts to catch up to the present through a series of flashbacks, we're hurled back in time to the night when this young boy did the unthinkable. It pained me to read about it. Not because he hurt another person, but because he was so wronged and confused, that he had no comprehension of what was normal behavior anymore.

If any book fit the definition of *bittersweet*, it would be this one. So much of this story could have been avoided, had someone, *anyone* made Josh believe that what happened was *not his fault*. The tragedy of seeing the waste of years was bitter. The triumph of seeing a hurt child grow into a functioning man was sweet.

Even though there was a very big portion of *Boy Toy* that did focus on the sexual awakenings of the main character and how he was seduced by a person of authority, I don't feel like the book was written in such a way that was merely for shock value. Had the story ended sooner than it did, this might have been the case. I found myself grateful that the author took his time in showing how long it took Josh to move on to a place where he could *begin* to heal. After five years, we were just getting to the point where he was able to *start* the process.

Altogether, these passages might not make much sense, but they were ones that I felt worthy of marking. If you can understand what is going on, great. If not, that's okay too. These were just little snippets of the book that captured some of the mood.

*"You're Joshua. Strong. My king. And me..."*

*"I'm Eve. The first woman." She snuggled close to me. "Your first woman."  
I forgave her.*

*I should tell her that it's not her. That it's not her fault, that she's beautiful and warm and sexy and that any man with a brain and a working cock would be an idiot not to yearn for her, not to worship every last inch of her. That I'm damaged, broken, a bizarre temporal conjoined twin - half of me stuck here, the other half still living five years ago, connected by flickers like electric sparks in old horror movie laboratories.*

*"I swear to God, Rache. I swear it has nothing to do with you."*

*"It's her, isn't it?" Her voice low and sad in the dark.*

*"No. Not her." My voice catches. "Me. It's just what I am."*

*"Didn't anyone ever tell you?" she yells, her frustration exploding from her. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it wasn't your fault?"*

*"This feeling I have for you...I've never had it before. And I've never had a name for it. Because the name was being used - misused, misappropriated - by something else."*

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## **Spider the Doof Warrior says**

This book is disturbing. It's about a teacher who seduces a 12 year old boy and of course he blames himself and suffers from the aftermath of this which is UNFAIR.

I wanted to send Margo from Marrow to this book. The thing is, if it's a woman molesting a younger boy, a lot of people don't think it's as big a deal, but hurting a child is wrong. Children need trustworthy adults to guide them and help them so for this complete TWUNT to do this to this kid...

And the parents were rather stupid for not going, isn't it odd that she's hanging out with our son so much? Which is depressing because kids do need adult mentors and teachers to help them but when stuff like this happens teachers want to keep their distance and there's mistrust and misrule.

It's awful for everyone. You see how the abuse affects his life and his relationships in a horrible way. Worst of all, child molesters do not get as strict a sentence as people with a bit of drugs do. How warped is that? Hurt and rape a child and you get 5 years. Get caught with reefer and you get 20? WTF?!

And, how the hell could her husband get back with this woman? I would NEVER get back with a child molester, let alone beat up the child she molested! How did this kid not KNOW that he's 12! She's frigging 24! She needs to leave this boy alone! ARG!

OK I'm not seeing how Barry Lyga is misogynist because the mother goes to work or because the molester is female and I liked Rachel and how she was refreshingly bold about being interested in Josh instead of being a wilted flower like so many female characters in books these days.

Am I missing something?

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## **Abby Johnson says**

This book was disturbing and super compelling. I seriously could not put it down. The story starts when Josh is 18. He's messed up. No, I mean really messed up. When he was 12, his history teacher sexually abused him. And what's worse? Her detailed confession made its way on to the internet and Josh is sure that all of his classmates and teachers know exactly what he did with her. And what's WORSE? Mrs. Sherman is getting out of jail. Early. Right now.

Because of the abuse, Josh made a mistake with one of his friends. Rachel liked him, but he didn't know how to deal with it and an innocent game of Seven Minutes in Heaven (well, somewhat innocent anyway) ended disastrously. Rachel hasn't spoken to him in 5 years. Math, baseball, and his best friend Zik (who has never, ever asked him about what happened with Mrs. Sherman) are the things that get him through the day. Then Josh accidentally runs into Rachel one night and they start talking again. Josh begins to tell her his story. The whole story. The story he never told anyone except the police.

It's a roller coaster of emotions and even though Josh's story was truly disturbing, I couldn't put it down. I had to get to the end so I could see if he survived, if he could overcome what happened to him. This book is not for everyone. Graphic sexual situations between a teacher and her student will be hard to take for some. But it's a very powerful story. I was rooting for Josh the whole way through.

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## **Krista says**

### **Speak vs. Boy Toy: Sexual Assault Narratives in YA Literature**

At the heart of young adult literature is the balance to present stories that both cater to a teen's desire for escapist fantasy and tangible realism. However, as research in the field has focused on in recent years, literature targeted at young adults has become increasingly more serious in subject and tone. Choosing to forego the cliché "happy-go-lucky" nature of fluff that discusses dating, parties, and other mis-adventures as normal, positive experiences of adolescence, more recent titles which can be found topping award winning lists like ALA's Michael L. Printz committee and B.B.Y.A. are instead tackling topics which may be deemed as controversial and taboo in nature. In the midst of such topics, like death, bullying, and family violence, one topic that has seemed to receive less critical attention than the rest are the issues of rape and sexual abuse.

Two works, however, published in the past decade that deal with these subjects head on, but with uniquely different characters and perspectives, are *Speak* and *Boy Toy*. Laurie Halse Anderson's 1999 debut novel, *Speak*, chronicles the ups and downs of 14 year old Melinda Sordino's freshman year of high school following an ill-fated underage drinking party she attended the summer before. While she is left frightened and confused after an encounter with the most popular boy at school who takes advantage of the situation to rape her, Melinda makes a silent, desperate call to the local 911-dispatch which leads police to "bust" the party. Scarred by the incident and unable to tell anyone her story – even her parents – Melinda is forced to endure the loss of friends and her sense of self as she works through the process of coming to terms with the episode. *Speak* was a 2000 Printz Honor book. More recently, Barry Lyga, author of debut novel *The Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*, pens an intense, alternative account of victimization and sexual assault with 2007's *Boy Toy*. Lyga attempts to unveil the complex realities surrounding 18 year old Joshua Mendel's attempt to come to terms with the public fallout after it was discovered that he was being molested

by his middle school history teacher when he was only 12 years old. *Boy Toy* was a 2007 Cybils Young Adult Novel Winner and an ALA 2008 Best Book for Young Adults (B.B.Y.A.).

The authors' use of first person narration places character development at the forefront of each novel and is the key to each work's success as stories that strive for realism over a didactic agenda, which could easily be achieved when dealing with such serious and controversial subject matter. Both in *Speak* and *Boy Toy*, the narrative – presented more like a stream of conscious narrative with dialog blended in occasionally – is a vehicle for the protagonist true feelings and recollection of the damaging event. In both novels, the narrative is key to counteracting the stereotypes as suggested by the respective titles. *Speak* conveys both Melinda's silence, which stifles her once bright and outgoing personality, and her struggle to "speak" and tell her story, despite people's assumptions that she is an "outcast" (Anderson 4) by choice, or that she is feigning ignorance for attention. In Melinda's own words, "It is easier to not say anything...Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (Anderson 9). On the other hand, everyone in Joshua's high school and small town knew of his abuse due to the public nature of the trial which ensued and as Lyga's witty title (*Boy Toy*) suggests, the power of the narrative lies in Josh's need to prove both the rumors and his own paranoia and insecurities about his reputation, like sexual promiscuity and masculine bravado, wrong. Unlike Melinda's rape, which society views as the more "traditional" male-on-female violence, Josh's experiences play to a pop culture fantasy of adolescent fulfillment which skews not only public perception, but also his own sense of involvement in the incident. What is unique about Lyga's approach to the story is Joshua's overwhelming sense of guilt and desire to protect his aggressor through nearly the greater extent to the book: "...I allowed it all to happen. I encouraged it all to happen. And I am damned for that. Eternally shattered, trapped in a world that is neither earth nor afterlife. I'm surrounded and penetrated by the ghosts of my own culpability" (Lyga 380-381).

The most striking differences between the two novels are the details of the rape as told, or suggested, by the protagonists, as well as the level of acceptance or treatment from one's own peers as "felt" by each main character thereafter. Though each novel employs the use of flashbacks and dream scenarios to convey the nature of the incident, as well as the survivor's emotions connected the event, the actual details of the abuse are far more graphic in Lyga's *Boy Toy*. Unfortunately for Josh, his initial desire for his teacher, which was shared by all of the boys in his class, complicates how he perceives the situation. Unlike how the plot unfolds in *Speak*, Lyga dedicates whole chapters (which are untitled, simply marked by numbers, unlike the chapters in the character's present life) to examining each haunting detail of the abuse, both the events which led up to and the later unraveling. One analysis of this difference could be argued that Josh's character, now more mature at 18, has the benefit of language and distance to be able to at least say what happened to him, even if he not emotionally able to understand or accept it. On the other hand, though Melinda is relatively the same age as Josh when her abuse takes place, the story told in its entirety in the immediate months following the attack reflects both her lack of physical and psychological development, in comparison, and therefore her lack of empowerment. Unlike Joshua, Melinda does not yet have the appropriate language or methods with which to even "speak" her story, let alone find an appropriate coping mechanism.

The main differences between the novels, however, do raise some serious questions about perspective readers' reactions, and the context in which these reactions are made, being our society's shared cultural knowledge. First, are the scenarios, and consequently, the main characters (whom should be spoken of with the more empowered term of "survivor", instead of the more debilitating term of "victim") simply too unique to be compared? Is there something to be said for the differences in age between survivor and perpetrator; is there more anxiety (or on the flip side, passivity) when the rape occurs between "kids" or people closer in age, like in *Speak*, or is there more taboo and silence surrounding those involved when the age disparity is greater, as is the case in *Boy Toy*? Essentially, these questions evoke our society's understanding – or lack thereof – surrounding the facts as they pertain to rape. Regardless of gender or age, acquaintance rape –

where the perpetrator is known to the victim – occurs more frequently, in sharp contrast to society's assumptions about "stranger danger" or "real" rape. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), "almost 2/3 of rapes were committed by someone known to the victim [and] 38% or rapists are a friend or acquaintance" ([www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)). Therefore, a more appropriate question may be to ask if a reader's reactions are swayed based on the gender of the survivor. As a reader, though it may be painful to hear, is it normal for Melinda to lose her best friends and to be the butt of an endless rumor mill where she is referred to as "asshole" (Anderson 28) and "one strange bitch" (Anderson 194) because she is seen as a girl who "wanted it" (Anderson 193)? Is it unrealistic that Josh has the security of a best friend who stays by his side, never asking questions, as well as is able to later recover from his social stigma to win the title of "Prom Prince" as the senior dance?

Overall, *Speak* and *Boy Toy* are two invaluable works of modern YA literature whose overt themes of sexual abuse and isolation only really begin to tackle even more difficult issues that may dramatically affect one's worldview. Almost more importantly are the secondary themes of the search for self and one's sense of belonging; these works portray how an event that lasts what may seem like an instant has long-lasting and far-reaching consequences that are not easily resolved and involve a lot of gray issues that neither our society's legal or cultural mores have caught up to. As a reviewer for the New York Times posted in a recent article about *Boy Toy* (but whose comments are also applicable to *Speak*), "Boy Toy is an unsettling read, but that's exactly what it ought to be". Unfortunately, the truth is not always comfortable, but with statistics that prove how pervasive the nature of sexual abuse, teens need to hear the voice of other young adults – fictional or not – to both educate those unaware of abuse and to empower those unaware of their ability to speak up and discover a life and self after trauma.

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#### Wendy Darling says

This was a hard book to rate, because it was fascinating to read and was very well-written and structured, and yet it's not a book that I really *enjoyed*. Even though I like the fact that the author writes very frankly and convincingly puts us into a teenage boy's head (he also does a great job of showing the grooming process as well as Josh's reaction to Eve), some of the flashbacks (and a few too many flickers) bordered a bit too much on the gratuitous side for my taste.

The truth is that sexual predators are often successful because what they do feels good. And new. And exciting. But when it comes to 12 year old boys being molested, I'm uncomfortable with this amount of time devoted to the titillating aspects of this scenario. While the story does have quite a bit about the aftermath

and Josh's other life and future, a little more time spent on the emotional trauma--other than how it affects his romantic relationships--would have made for a more satisfying experience, at least for me. The way women are portrayed is also fairly one-dimensional and a bit disturbing.

Still, the author deserves props for handling a tricky subject in a way that's both well-structured, well-researched, and keeps you absolutely riveted to the page.

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## **Beth says**

I told myself I wouldn't start blabbing off about books I read pre-2011 while I still had VERY IMPORTANT READING and SCHOOLWORK to get done, but Mello's review (which I would link to if I knew how) inflamed a lot of my old feelings about this book.

The key problem was this:

What do you do with a book whose central point you agree with 100% in principle, but whose execution you wholly disagree with?

Such was my problem with *Boy Toy*.

At its core, I thought *Boy Toy* and I were about to embark on the kind of tense, awful, brilliant, searing, eye-opening reads that I often associate with Gail Giles and *Lolita*. Its' central principle revolves around a gender flip of the stereotypical pervy male teacher takes advantage of a young troubled girl and they embark on a destructive and traumatic sexual relationship, which is rape in all but the fact that it features emotional force.

Which is just the kind of book I want to read. Complex male narrator! Complex moral situation! Warped society that manages to be both misogynistic and misandric! (is that last one a word I made up?) Childhood trauma, but finally, from a male perspective! I'm so sick of the mentality of YA literature that girls are solely victims who need to be rescued by male love interests! Honestly, I'm just about ready to name Barry Lyga as one of my favourite authors already, before I've even started the book.

But I started the book. And the problems started almost immediately.

But let's keep to the biggies. Note: I read this book a long, long time ago, and I'm writing this review mainly to condense my lingering feelings on it. That means that I might be off on some details. Feel free to correct me.

Mello's review (which I really wish I could link to) criticises Josh's flickers for being faux-sexy. Now, maybe I'm giving Lyga too much credit on this point, but as I was reading, I assumed that this was deliberate, to show the traumatic sexualisation that Josh had been put through as a result of Eve's abuse. I assumed that the creepy discomfort was deliberate, to challenge the reader's own views on consent and rape and what both of them 'look' like. Another common problem I read about is the lack of Josh's apparent confusion in the flickers; we can talk about how well Lyga carried this off, but I felt that this lack of confusion was deliberate, to show that when a victim has been manipulated and groomed, s/he often will do it 'willingly', and it is still rape.

HOWEVER.

My huge problem with Boy Toy, the thing that sticks in my head years after reading? Rachel. God, how I hated her character. Hatred made worse by the fact that I could see what Lyga was trying to do: create a love interest that challenged our views of female sexuality, of the Youth of Today and how quickly they grow up and have sexual feelings. All admirable things - things that, if carried off right, would have been brilliant. But it was so poorly executed that it made me cringe. The problem is the lack of development that Rachel gets - instead of her sexuality seeming part of her character, it was probably the one trait that we hear about from Rachel's own mouth: the rest of the traits are just told to us by Josh, in a weak and stilted way.

I had a knee-jerk reaction to Rachel being Josh's love interest at all. That reaction was NONONONONONONO OH GOD WHY. Because, with both of their mutual history, it just seemed so wrong to me. I'm not very rigid in my views, and I could have been persuaded. I wasn't. Lyga never gave me a good answer to my problems with Josh and Rachel. To me, for Josh's next ('first?') true sexual relationship, it would have to be with someone who wasn't quite so entwined with his history, who wouldn't serve as a living reminder of his experiences. Josh and Rachel were clouded by the memories of his repeated grooming and sexual assault by a teacher and her memories of his borderline sexual assault on her! How could they possibly have ever had a healthy relationship? Pffft, no. I mean, even taking out Rachel's stereotypical expected reactions, would it not have been tagged to a whole heap of fear/blame/guilt/nasty memories for Josh?

That's not to say that I wanted Rachel to have a stereotypical reaction. No. What I hated was that it took place within a sexual/romantic relationship. I could have welcomed an alternative plotline where Rachel and Josh developed a platonic borderline-friendship/understanding and she told him that what happened during Seven Minutes of Heaven wasn't necessarily the kind of life-ending trauma Josh had built it up to be in his mind. But, in the context of their romantic relationship, it just seemed to me like she was saying, "I know you borderline sexually assaulted me in a closet when we were twelve, but, hey, I would have let you grope me anyway so it's not a big deal." Also, the violence of the scene jarred with their whole relationship - HE RIPPED HER UNDERWEAR OFF AND COULD HAVE RAPED HER IF SHE HADN'T GOT THE HELL OUT OF THE CLOSET! I'm sorry, is that the kind of thing that screams "it just makes me even more hot for you"? Sure, if it had happened when they were older, you could say that Rachel had dusted herself off since the incident and decided, well, he was obviously hugely traumatised by what happened to him and he wasn't exactly thinking clearly. But they were twelve! Twelve-year-olds are not exactly known for emotional maturity. Furthermore, I have a hard time believing that, even six years later, Rachel would be willing to start a relationship with Josh.

Still, all of this might have found a way to work if Rachel had been a character rather than a succession of mentioned but not actually shown personality traits designed to show Josh the beauty of love and sex again. Made even worse by the fact that Josh and Zik, his best friend, are actually pretty well drawn characters. I say 'pretty' because character arcs are clearly not Lyga's strong point, nor is emotional writing -- Josh often told us that he had problems with x and y, but I didn't feel the kind of blazing emotional connection to him. For instance, although Eve telling him 'it wasn't his fault' is obviously supposed to be his big breakthrough moment, I couldn't really feel it, as I hadn't really felt his guilt before. I didn't have the problems with the portrayal of Josh's mother as some reviewers did, but I could definitely see the problem with Zik's girlfriend, Michelle. All they ever did was make out and occasionally I think she might have winked. Fairly realistic for a teen couple, you could argue, but since they'd been together since the two of them were twelve and so had gone through some pretty heavy stuff together -- the closet incident, Josh's revelations, Eve's trial, and especially Zik dealing with years of not being able to so much as allude to Eve to Josh without fear that Josh would cut him out -- you would have thought the least they could do was talk.

Blah. Sorry. Just had to get my feelings out.

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## Fred says

I was surprised at what a great read this is. Honestly I was a bit sceptical, I don't like YA written by guys, as a general rule. Too jock-y, too jokey, too hearty, too hokey. They don't usually have an emotional component that resonates with me. But this one completely had a powerful and intense impact on me. Also it's from 2007, and I've been trying to keep up with new stuff, but this felt fresh and new, even though student/teacher affair stories are hardly even news anymore. Remember Mary Kay LeTourneau? That was unheard of then, now, it seems like there's a new story every week. But this humanizes and makes those stories much more relatable, when you see the impact it has on one real-feeling boy, and the girl who cares for him. Btw, what a lucky guy he is to have a Rachel to stick with him. She is one awesome YA girl, that's for sure. There are so many literary and artistic elements to this novel, too: chaos theory and the quest for order, paradise/innocence lost, video games as a metaphor and motif. It's really well done, in a way that makes it believable and painfully real. It almost makes me want to read *I Hunt Killers*, by the author, but that one sounds really grim. If anything could persuade me to take a chance, though, this would be it!

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## Rebekah says

I related to this book far more than I'd like.

Baby spoilers to follow.

The best part of the book was undoubtedly this:

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“Why, Eve?” My voice trembles. I try to force it steady, but I can’t. My cheeks are wet and I wonder where the hell those tears came from. “Why, Eve? Why did you do it? Why?”

She’s crying too, great wracking sobs that shake her entire body and send streams down her face.

“Why, Eve? Goddamn it, I’ve been waiting forever to know. Why did you do it? Why did you let me seduce you?”

And time goes still.

For a little while.

My question hangs in the air between us, floats like some gossamer, luminescent cloud, drifting over the coffee table, obscuring and illuminating all at once.

I sniff and wipe my cheeks with the palm of my hand. Eve’s choking sobs stop with a single snuffle as she jerks upright and stares at me. “What?”

And now I can’t stop the waterworks no matter how hard I try. The tears just explode out of me. “Why?” I practically scream it. “I ruined your marriage. I ruined your life!”

“I don’t--- I don’t understand, Josh. That’s not---”

And I tell her. About watching her as she slept, about those first steps taken towards her. About the wedding photo. About staring at her toes, her cleavage, her legs, her hips. About devouring her with my eyes a thousand times and a thousand ways. Everything I never told her before. Everything that was so critical, so



important.

"You used to drink," I tell her. "Every day, we'd come to the apartment and you would drink and I took advantage of you..."

...here's your answer, Dr. Kennedy--- here it is: me. I'm angry at me. But you had the question wrong--- it's not what Eve did to me, it's what I did to her.

"Is that what you thought?" she whispers, still a few paces away. "Is that what you've been... Have you been carrying that around all these years? Oh, God, Josh, I'm so sorry..."

Hug me! I want to scream at her. Come hold me, goddamn it! It's the only time I ever felt safe. The only time I ever felt loved, and even though it destroyed you, I want it again--- I need it again now more than I need anything else in the world.

"Josh, how could you think... You were a child! You were twelve years old! How can you possibly... Oh. Oh, my God."

"All these years you thought... you thought that it was your... your idea. Your fault. Oh, God."

"...was all my fault," she's saying as I blink back into the present. "I'm so sorry. I was wrong. I abused you. I'm so sorry. It wasn't your fault at all. It was all mine."

And I can only manage to say, "It was?"

"Didn't anyone ever tell you?" she yells, her frustration exploding from her. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it wasn't your fault?"

I'm almost afraid to answer. But I have to. In a voice small and weak. "I didn't believe them."

"Oh, God," she moans, and puts her forehead on my knee and bawls like a newborn baby.

"Then... then when?" I whisper.

She doesn't hear me. She keeps crying, shaking.

"Eve." Louder. "Eve, when?"

She lifts her head up and sits back on her heels. Her face is red, her eyes puffy and distorted and bloodshot.

"When?" she asks.

"When did you decide? How far along did things get before you decided you were going to have sex with me, Eve?"

There's a thousand years before her answer:

"The day we met, Josh. The first time I laid eyes on you."

The first time...? In class? In history class?

"There was no grad school project," she says. She won't look me in the eyes now--- she looks down at her lap, where her hands are entwined. "I made it up--- I made the whole thing up so I would have an excuse to bring you to my apartment and keep you there."

Oh, my God. What? She... Oh, God.

"I gave you wine. I treated you like an adult so that..." She sobs. "So that you would like me and want to stay..."

No. It's impossible. She didn't... She couldn't have...

I look back at her. Kneeling on the floor in front of the chair, her back to me. Shaking. She doesn't look over at me. I look at her and I feel...

I don't know.

I go outside. I force myself to close the door behind me.

Oh my God. Oh. My. God.

I was molested. When I was twelve. And everyone in the world knew it except for me.

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## Sita says

HOLY FUCK!! This book was disturbing, beautiful, awesome, amazing. I stayed up until 4 in the morning reading this. And I had to catch a plane at 8. But god it was worth it!

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## John Egbert says

This was probably one of the most disgusting books I've ever read. Keep in mind, I like Barry Lyga. The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl was really awesome. Goth Girl Rising wasn't my cup of tea, but I figured that bad weighed the good and all was well, still. But this? Just disgusting.

Not really in a bad way, either. Well, actually, yes, in a bad way. Okay, you're probably saying "Jesus Lady, you're reading a book about child molestation and you want bubblegum and flowers?", but that isn't what I mean. I know a topic like this is bound to be unsettling. I mean, it's disgusting in the way that Barry played it out.

The scenes are written as seduction scenes...never once does Josh feel fear or shock...okay he feels a lot of shock, but the "OH WOW! My smexy teach loves me!" shock, and not the "OH WOW! My smexy twenty year old teach is telling me she loves me and...wait...what just happened? I'm only twelve, am I really ready for sex? Why is she pushing this on me? What am I doing?" sort of shock. It's really disgusting how voyeuristic and fetishy these scenes were.

Josh has flashes. Flashes are were, in the middle of a page, we get something like this,

-(insert disturbing line  
(insert VERY disturbing line)-

which is going to occur, I get that. After all, Josh is tramitized and all. But the WAY we get these scenes and HOW he reacts make me furious. It's like, we're hardly taking this seriously. Most of the action we get in flashbacks between him and Eve is supposed to be sexy, not horrifying. Personally, a twenty something getting it on with her twelve year old student is NOT a turn on for me. It shouldn't really be one for anyone, but if it is maybe you should seek help. That's why I really did not appreciate the over sexualizing of those scenes.

I get it, Josh is a twelve year old boy, and, apparently, twelve year old boys are always thinking about that. But that doesn't warrant what I just mentioned at all.

Also? Barry Lyga is a questionably misogynistic. All of his women are (to quote someone) "Wish Fulfillment of Male Fantasies" (WFMF for short). Michelle is just "hot". She's shown being literally obsessed with sex. Her and Zik are not particularly quiet about which base they get to, she's always wearing revealing clothes and either winking or smirking at someone who looks at her.

Rachel is just "cute". She's flat chested, wears jeans and baseball caps, has freckles, spits, curses, plays baseball, and is Josh's intended love interest.

Eve is "bad sexy". Well, I don't really need to describe her. She's type-A hot teacher, with added on child

molestation.

Other than that? Well, we have his mother, but she's only in a subplot which I will state later. But other than her? No, we have no other major female character. We just have those three. Good sexy, cute, and bad sexy. They aren't real characters I really don't know anything about them. It's annoying. REALLY annoying.

Barry Lyga's not a woman-hater, but he just doesn't like building up his female characters very much. Short of Goth Girl from Fanboy and Gothgirl, I haven't read any female characters of his I've liked, and I even started to dislike Goth Girl after reading a whole novel from her POV.

Moving on, we have the incident with Rachel. It wasn't his fault, sure. He shouldn't trash himself so much over it, sure. But he did rip off her underwear, and he did plan on going that far with her like "Eve taught him". It really disgusted me that not only did Rachel say she "would have gone that far if [he'd] gone about it differently", but also that she had been wanting to date him directly afterwards! I don't know about you, [you the reader, yes, but not directly "you"], but I would not be running after a guy after having my underwear ripped off in a closet, when it was only Seven Minutes in heaven. You do not have sex in that game, you kiss, if I am not mistaken.

My point? Josh was out of line, and he should not have been encouraged and even pushed forward to that behavior even if Eve was messing around with him. He needs to know that that is NOT okay. Granted, he did know during the events of the book, but still -- I doubt anybody in Rachel's position would act the way she did, which leads back to the WFMF.

Moving on (again), we have the baseball terminology. Now I know it's a book about baseball, but Barry Lyga assumes anyone that picks it up will be a baseball fan. More than half of everything that came out of that kid's mouth about baseball went right up over my head. I know nothing about baseball. The average person will probably know a little more than me, but certainly not even half as much as what Josh was talking about. I was so confused, I was confused about how much I was confused. It was pathetic and sad. If you're going to make something like a sport a main focus of your work, you need to explain what you're talking about, I mean at least enough so someone can know something about what's going on. That's just common courtesy.

Lastly, the thing that probably pissed me off the most about this whole goshdarned book, Josh's mother's subplot.

Josh's mother is an idiot. I mean, she leaves Josh with Eve TIME AND TIME AND TIME again, hours at a time, week after week after month after month without so much as questioning what the hell she wants so badly with a twelve year old boy all of the goddamned time, and this goes on for months for chrissakes. She does all of this because she wants to keep a job she apparently wants. She is an idiot, I repeat. But still, quote time:

*"I love her, Mom." I said it quietly, with all the seriousness I could muster. It was the biggest, most important thing I'd ever said in my entire life.*

*And mom laughed.*

*It wasn't an amused laugh. It wasn't the sort of laugh you'd hear at the movies or in front of the TV or during a family reunion. It was harsh, hard-edged, more a snort than actual laughter.*

*"Don't be stupid," she said with contempt. That contempt shocked me -- my mom had been angry at me in the past, but never hateful. "You're a child. You don't know what it means to be in love."*

Considering he is talking about being in love with Eve, you can really, honestly see her perspective here. She is saying that he is a child. She is saying that he can't know what it means to be in love, especially considering that he's claiming to love a woman that manipulated him into thinking he was in love with her. But later, guess what we find out?

Oh yeah, she was really full of shit and cheating on Josh's dad the whole time, so not only is her opinion considered invalid by Josh, although he really DIDN'T love Eve, but we're also supposed to consider her a two faced bitch. I don't think so.

Another point about his mother? Why can't she have a job AND take care of her kid? Of course, she needs to leave all that working and stuff to her MAHN, and she needs to stop worrying about actually having a job. She needs to be home and just do the laundry and make dinner. I don't appreciate that. I don't appreciate that at all.

I think that the whole situation with Eve was wrapped up and even played out horribly. It was frankly, revolting to me. He never really did get that he wasn't in love with Eve. He just got that it wasn't his fault, which is okay and all, but for the love of God can't we have it both ways?

Considering that my novel (does not focus on, but) does feature such manipulation (but not in THAT way, and for petes sake we are NOT getting such indepth and mortifying descriptions, and Jesus it is NOT SUPPOSED TO BE SEXY!) it is good that I read this book -- if not to learn to write like it, to take an example for what is good and not good and to help me. Also, since this is one of the only books of it's subject matter around, I'm grateful it was written, but I wish it was less...well, everything I mentioned above.

I hope I'm not being too judgmental or bias, but that's how I felt.

(Also, did it have to be so...descriptive? I'm sure we could have lost at least half of the Eve/Josh Sexytime scenes. That was truly horrifying.)

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## **Ellen Hopkins says**

The voice of the protagonist is spot-on!

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