A First Opinion: A Book that Realistically Describes Teen Life


Lucy Stanovick
East Stroudsburg University, East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

Fifteen-year-old Tom Henderson has dubbed himself King Dork, the quintessential disaffected youth of the twenty-first century. Bullied and teased since grade school, he has numbed himself to the “typical high school tortures” of name-calling, pushing, tripping, spitballs, and silent disregard. Were it not for Sam Hellerman, equally low on the social ladder, Tom would have no one. He and Hellerman spend all their time naming and renaming their “band,” writing out entire song lists for imaginary albums, and creating elaborate logos and album covers.

With an exactness and bittersweet humor, Tom narrates a cynical commentary on the inane culture that surrounds him, including the inept English teacher; the testosterone-stoked gym teacher; the creepy assistant principal; his mother’s afternoon high balls and tranquilizers; his over zealous wanna-be hippie stepfather; and the fact that he still talks to his father, even though he’s dead.

But when Hellerman starts hanging out with the theater kids, things start to happen: Tom finds himself in a steamy make-out scene with a mysterious girl he becomes obsessed with finding; and he stumbles upon clues to his father’s death, which lead him down a path of revealing old dark secrets involving his assistant principal. All comes to a head at a battle of the bands competition, when he and Hellerman unexpectedly unleash a radical rock out that leaves the auditorium electrified and the boys marginal heroes.

Young adult novels are coming of age stories, often defined by a loss of innocence, an experience that shatters the illusion of perfection. *King Dork* works in the reverse, which strikes me as very realistic. Today, media and technology have fast-forwarded kids’ social growth to the point that elementary girls wear make-up and heels and teens settle disputes with guns. Gone for many is idealism and optimism as they are surrounded by war, corruption, divorce, and greed. Cynicism and isolation become coping skills.

Thus Tom’s coming of age is his move from isolating cynicism to optimism. At the end of the novel, questions are left unresolved: Was the steamy make-out scene rigged by Hellerman? Was his father’s death an accident or murder? Did Principal Teone try to have Tom killed? Tom’s response could have been to mistrust Hellerman and feel cheated, to feel cheated by his father’s death, to seethe with hatred for his principal and the thugs.
who put him in the hospital, but he does not. He shrugs and concludes that regardless, he got to kiss a girl, and that was fun. He is done questioning and searching. He wants to feel good.

I found the novel very realistic, especially when it came to sex scenes, which were blunt and graphic. I can’t see this as assigned reading, but for any teacher or librarian who knows kids who feel isolated and out of place in high school, King Dork could be a hero. Perhaps through him, they can find a way to reconnect.
A Second Reaction: A Realistic and Very Popular Book for Teen Readers


Laura Whitcombe
McCUTCHeON Senior High School, Lafayette, Indiana

Imagine a book that inspires you to stand up and act out scenes at lunch to your co-workers! Imagine a book that you mark pages to read to specific people in your life: your husband, your friends, your students, your siblings. Imagine loaning this book to a friend only to catch her reading out loud the same scenes you just shared. This book is *King Dork* by Frank Portman. I have an uncontrollable need to share this book with everyone. Well, everyone who loves books, music, teenagers, and teachers. And those who hate to read, are annoyed by their parent’s music, annoyed by their kid’s music, find teenagers disturbing, and know teachers to be full of hot air.

Passionate readers will be drawn in by the first sentence of the introduction to *King Dork*: “It all started with a book” (1). Those who have a favorite book they reread, with characters they identify with, even love, will empathize with the main character, Tom. His entire survival may depend on an examination of his dead father’s library of books, especially *Catcher in the Rye*.

Detractors will zero in on the very themes that excite young adults. As Tom explains, “It’s actually kind of a complicated story, involving at least half a dozen mysteries, plus dead people, naked people, fake people, teen sex, weird sex, drugs, … books, … guitars, …
love, … girls, … a secret code, a head injury, … some crimes, mispronunciation skills, … a devil-head, a blow job, and rock and roll” (1). Can a book start in a more titillating way?

I would love to teach this novel in a classroom of high school seniors. We could experiment with the musical selections described in the novel, even create a CD to be played at precise points in the reading to evoke the prescribed tone or to set the scene. We could recreate the band Chi-Mos, giving music to the lyrics of Tom’s ever changing band. The class could each make album covers with their imagined band names and song titles, even adding liner notes.

More academic activities would include comparing and contrasting this work to *Catcher in the Rye* and *Lord of The Flies*. These novels exist almost as characters in *King Dork*. Students who have studied both would enjoy the novel more thoroughly. Thanks to McCUTCHeON High School senior, Christine Webb, we have student feedback. Her first reaction
was to the importance of music in the story. This paints a picture of “teen-hood.” Instead of seeing Tom’s love of classic rock as unlikely, she thought it was “perfect.” It seemed to be a part of Tom feeling at once a part of his generation and also beyond it. She had already looked up the discography of music that goes with the novel on iTunes.

The mystery was another draw to Christine. The unfolding story with the decoder fascinated her. Imagining the very statue students sat under being made of the murder vehicle that may have killed Tom’s dad made for exciting reading. To her, this is the perfect mystery for teens, because she sees other writers such as John Grisham as beyond adolescent readers. According to Christine, *King Dork* is absolutely on a teen reading level with allusions that they are ready for. “They are not ready for Emerson”—they do not get the imagery yet, but *King Dork* is realistic and on their level.

The problems some may see with this novel in the classroom, such as the sex and language, did not phase this high school senior. *King Dork* has no more cuss words than any other book in English class. It was refreshing, a great book for high-school seniors. She imagined a class reading the novel, then creating their own decoder pages to solve. The parent characters had her thinking of projects where students found things from their parent’s past and sought out the meaning they held. Conversations about bell-bottoms, records, books, and pictures could serve to bring together families at a time when they are moving apart.

The realism of *King Dork* is both a pro and a con. Bullies, outcasts, depression, suicide, and scandals with school personnel make this a book worth recommending, at least for outside reading. The language and sex are obstacles to adopting it for a classroom assignment. The real test of a great book is to put it in the school library. I imagine *King Dork* will become one of the books stolen most often from the library shelves.