First Opinion: The Road Not Taken, an Opportunity Missed


*Courtney Quinn Shuey*

English teachers will immediately recognize the literary and pop culture foundations Jenny Hubbard has built upon in *Paper Covers Rock*: a death is caused by one student’s dare that propels another student’s leap into a river; boys are forced to fend for themselves while attending a boys’ boarding school; a teacher who inspires poetry in a student is betrayed by the same student; truth is compared to a white whale; and one survivor is left with guilt. Hubbard attempts to break from the constricting framework of classical young adult literature by introducing a student-teacher relationship poised to go a step too far and suggests an undercurrent of homophobia in this all-boys’ school. However, the student-teacher relationship which paints an unsavory picture of young teachers who embrace a less didactic way of teaching, the undercurrents of student plots to hide gay relationships, and problematic relationships between students and teachers are too far below the surface to make real impressions upon high school students. Hubbard fails to rise above the stronger characterization and plots of earlier classics like *A Separate Peace* and popular films like *Dead Poet’s Society*.

*Paper Covers Rock* is an epistolary novel that takes the form of a series of journal entries. Written by student Alex Stromm as a personal response to the accidental drowning of his best friend Thomas, the novel details the accident. Alex was present when his friend...
dove head first off a rock into shallow waters. The boys at the scene were drinking illicitly, and Alex realizes that the death may not have been an accident at all. One of the boys present agrees to take the fall when threatened to be exposed as gay by the enigmatic golden boy, Glenn, but doubts persist because a new female teacher was walking in the nearby woods. When Glenn begins to suspect that the young, attractive English teacher may know what happened that day, he engages Alex in inappropriate activity so they can get Miss Dovecott ousted from the school. Glenn is able to construct evidence of a teacher/student entanglement because Miss Dovecott has met Alex outside of class to discuss his talent as a budding poet. Alex goes along with Glenn’s scheme because Miss Dovecott’s attention excites him, and he writes extensively about his love for her. While this convoluted plot might work, Hubbard does a poor job defining Miss Dovecott’s role in the text.

Hubbard’s characters are stereotypical and uninspired, the most disturbing of which is the young, attractive, “available” teacher, Miss Dovecott. Hubbard writes from a position that reifies the dichotomous seductress/schoolmarm stereotype (McWilliam 1). When students like Glenn make comments filled with sexual innuendo, Miss Dovecott blushes and looks away, refusing to face and diffuse the ridiculous tension in such moments (Hubbard 76). On the other hand, Miss Dovecott’s passion for poetry spills over into her personal relationship with Alex and is eventually her downfall. I would prefer to see a strong teacher who embraces a passion for her subject in the classroom, acknowledges the effect that may have on her male students, and does not allow herself to be drawn into sabotage so easily by the clumsy attempts of two teenaged boys.

Hubbard also attempts to expand her plot by weaving homophobia into her narrative. Unfortunately, Hubbard’s narrator never confronts the issue head on, relating only shrouded implications that Glenn might also be gay and that his friend meant to expose him. Alex’s story causes the reader to suspect that Glenn was responsible for Thomas’ death because Thomas threatened to out him, but in the end nothing is certain. The element of homophobia is so subtle that many students who read this text will probably miss it altogether.

As a teacher, I do not choose books that simply reflect my students’ lives; I choose books that will help them “get better,” as Moffett suggests (29). What inspires me most in a work is the way in which a text goes beyond being a reflection of my students and into the realm of what my students could be. I want a work that will show them a glimpse of that better self waiting to meet them. Hubbard had an opportunity to address complicated issues that the classics have left alone, and she failed to do so, making it difficult to differentiate her novel from all that has come before.
Works Cited


About the Author

Courtney Quinn Shuey is a once and future middle school and high school English teacher who is completing her Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction at Purdue University with a focus on Language and Literacy. Her research interest is the relationship between mentor teachers, student teachers, and university supervisors.