

First Opinion: A Difficult Glimpse into the World of Juvenile Prison

Goodman, Shawn. *Kindness for Weakness*. New York: Delacorte, 2013.

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In *Kindness for Weakness*, Shawn Goodman's second young adult novel, fifteen-year-old James delivers drugs for his older brother, gets caught, and lands in juvenile prison. *Kindness for Weakness* offers a dispiriting look into the juvenile justice system and the boys who live there. Masculinity is in fact a key issue in the book; as James explains, acts of kindness (never mind senseless beauty!) are perceived as weakness in the fierce arena of prison masculinity. That's also true of the world outside, suggests Goodman, such that boys and men—impoverished, minority boys and men especially—are trapped in a brutal chain of crime and punishment. Juvenile prison isn't a pretty place, and the novel demands our outrage at the injustices suffered by James and his fellow offenders, most perpetrated by the male staff. At the same time, the boys are no angels, and the novel grapples with difficult issues, raising more questions than it could (or should) answer.

Goodman does a good job of showing how poverty and desperation drive not only impossible codes of masculinity, but also racism and homophobia. The closest thing to a friend James has in prison is Freddie Peach, a gay African American boy who's harassed by pretty much everyone. The violence escalates as the novel progresses, and at the end—spoiler alert—James, attempting to defend Freddie from attack, is himself fatally injured by the guards. This is most surprising given that James is a good kid and only sentenced to one year; readers can't help but hope that he will escape. His former English teacher even prophesies such an ending,

writing in a letter, "You will graduate, and you will make a nice life for yourself. If you can't see this due to your present circumstances, then you must trust me; I know how the story ends, and it's a good ending." Not so much.

The ending is appropriate, given the bleak situation with which the novel grapples. YA problem novels tend to try for resolution of a social problem, but such resolution would be unrealistic and unethical here. Goodman takes a page from YA texts such as S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, sacrificing key characters to make a point, except in that book—another spoiler alert—only one of the two "innocents" dies, and not the protagonist, Ponyboy. While reading *Kindness for Weakness*, I couldn't help but think of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, that bleak, naturalist novel in which every wrong turn leads the protagonist further and faster down the road to destruction. In an author's note at the end of *Kindness for Weakness*, Goodman explains that he wishes he could have told a different story, or found a different ending. But as someone who has worked with incarcerated boys, he knows the system and knows he has to sacrifice James to make a point. Goodman clarifies that "kindness for weakness" is a phrase that circulates in juvenile prison culture, understood as a kind of survival code. "[To] be honest," he writes, "I'm not sure I have a point other than that, in the face of violence, showing kindness requires tremendous strength and is often punished severely." So Goodman gives to the English teacher the fantasy of a happy ending for James. Goodman, incidentally, is also a school psychologist.

Kindness for Weakness is intensely, perhaps excessively, intertextual. It invites comparisons with other literary works not simply because of its themes, but because it deliberately invokes a host of texts (in ascending order of importance): *The Catcher in the Rye*, *I Am the Messenger*, *The Outsiders*, the Socrates Fortlow series by Walter Moseley, and most centrally, Jack London's *The Sea-Wolf*. It's fair to think of *Kindness for Weakness* as (like London's novel) a psychological thriller—although London's protagonist, like Ponyboy, survives. But all this intertextuality is overkill. There are also problems with characterization. Adult characters are too easily divided into good guys and bad guys, and the good guys are pretty bookish types, predictably. The boy characters are drawn with more complexity and nuance. James himself is likably drawn, but not everything he thinks or says is entirely in character. At one point, for instance, Goodman has James thinking thus: "Just drive, damn it, because you are all so beautiful, so impossibly beautiful. And there is nothing outside this car except trouble and loneliness, and we owe it to ourselves to burn through the night with the music playing loud and your hair flying in my face like rivers of silk, until we run out of gas or explore or die of pure happiness." Also less than believable are James's constant declarations that he's ready to be a man, to grow, to get stronger, and so forth. On balance, however, *Kindness for Weakness* is a strong, effective, and important story, one that doesn't pull any punches but faces complex issues honestly, if painfully.

About the Author

Kenneth Kidd is Professor and Chair of English at the University of Florida, where he teaches children's and young adult literature. He is the author of *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (2004) and *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature* (2011), both from the University of Minnesota Press.