

MEDIA RELEASE

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Child protection expert calls for rating system for YA books

Novels popular with young readers often feature harmful themes including violence and misogyny according to new research, sparking calls for an industry-wide book rating classification system, content warnings, and a parental awareness campaign.

Dr Emma Hussey, a digital criminologist and child safeguarding expert at Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies, has called on parents and educators to take a closer look at popular novels, such as the *Icebreaker* series, which are being read by girls as young as 12.

“Don't judge a book by its cover – pastel covers, bright colours, cartoony figures, and fairytale themes might make a book appear benign, but may not reflect the content inside,” she said.

Dr Hussey's ongoing research includes a thematic analysis of 20 romance, fantasy, paranormal and general fiction novels recommended by BookTok, which are popular among young readers, often available in school and community libraries, and easily accessible to children of all ages where young adult (YA) books are sold.

Each novel contained elements of domestic and family violence such as sexual assault, torture, grooming, power and control including dominance and submission, and sexual objectification, and masculinity tropes including powerful, dangerous, and handsome male love interests. In terms of sexually explicit content, 65 per cent of the books were “extreme” and 25 per cent “moderate”, while 65 per cent featured graphic or extreme violence.

“A 13-year-old reader may not yet have the critical thinking skills or lived experience to fully recognise the nuances of such themes and relationships, whereas someone in their late teens may have a stronger ability to engage critically,” Dr Hussey said. “Yet, both ages are often lumped together in the YA category most often without clear distinctions, leaving younger readers exposed to developmentally inappropriate content.”

Dr Hussey said the themes in the YA books analysed including *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, *Lore Olympus* and *Once Upon a Broken Heart* were aligned with the Power and Control Wheel of domestic violence behaviours.

“If young readers consistently consume stories where love is tied to obsession, jealousy, possessiveness, or control, they may internalise these behaviours as normal – even desirable – in relationships,” she said. “We are already facing a domestic violence epidemic. If girls grow up believing these themes are what they should be looking for in a relationship we run the risk of perpetuating this cycle.”

Dr Hussey said educators, librarians, parents, guardians and young readers needed greater education, and that YA books, often the subject of discussions on sites such as BookTok, should be subject to a standardised classification system as is the case for films, TV shows, and video games.

“A rating system is not about censorship. It is about transparency and ensuring books containing themes such as violence, explicit sexual content, and unhealthy relationship dynamics are classified appropriately,” she said.

While some books, authors and publishers urge caution, including a small-print 18+ warning on the back of the *Icebreaker* novels, more obvious industry-wide classifications and content warnings for distressing material were needed, along with a parental awareness campaign, Dr Hussey said.

“The reality is that many parents have no idea what their children are reading,” she said. “My own parents kept me as safe as they could by restricting access to the internet, mature movies, and violent video games, but they didn’t vet my books. They just didn’t know what I was reading and, as a teenager, I wasn’t going to tell them.

“But as an adult, a mother, and a child safeguarding advocate, I understand the harm that can be done by being exposed to inappropriate content often haphazardly located in children’s and young adult book sections.

“The time for action is now. Parents, schools, and policymakers must work together to implement structured guidance that protects young readers while still allowing them to explore and engage with stories in a way that is safe, educational, and developmentally appropriate.”

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