

Discussing School Violence in America

A Guide for Teachers by T.M. Taylor

I came face-to-face with school violence over fifteen years ago. The small school I taught at in South Georgia had a race riot one afternoon. I don't use the word "riot" carelessly. A fight is two kids slugging it out. A big fight is four to six kids going after each other. But when 15 to 20 kids are fighting, the entire school is surrounding them in the parking lot, and 10 state trooper cars come screaming up to break it up, that's a riot. I was one of the handful of teachers trying to break things up, and afterwards I had the lump on the back of my head and the blood on my shirt to prove it. Like all teachers, I've witnessed many acts of violence in schools, and I've often pondered the issue.

There's been a steady use of violence in our culture and in our media over the past several decades. When the first silent film, *The Great Train Robbery*, hit the theaters in 1903, many in the audience went running into the streets screaming at the depiction of gunfighters. Today, most kindergarteners would watch it and be unmoved. The 1967 movie, *Bonnie and Clyde*, was the first movie to actually show blood when someone was shot. Today we watch movie characters like Hannibal Lector remove part of a person's brain and then start feeding it to the person while he's still alive. Some will say that the media is merely the mirror of a violent culture while others tend to see things more as a vicious cycle: violence influences the media, but the media, in turn, influences the culture. Either way, over the past half century, we seem to have become gradually desensitized to much of the violence around us.

Events around the country in the current school year, however, have forced everyone to take note of violence in general and school violence in particular. The school shootings in Colorado and Pennsylvania have horrified our nation. Violence, which most associate with intercity gang situations, has reached even peaceful rural settings.

Along with the horror of what is happening comes the realization that the educators must attempt to address the issue. The question is how?

Obviously, school safety in general should be beefed up, but what about addressing violence at a grassroots level? Can we as educators talk to students about violence in a way that both engages their interest and holds their attention? Can we begin addressing formation of attitudes that lay a foundation of predisposition either for or against violence?

I believe we can. And the resources may be more readily available than we realize. Perhaps the answer may be as easy as taking the depiction of violence that so engages them because it imitates their life and using it as a starting point for discussion in our classrooms.

In *Players* and *Jammers*, my first two novels for teens, I extensively address the issue of violence: the first on individual level and the second as a culture itself.

Hunt, the main character in *Players*, is a violent individual. He lives in a violent world, and he thrives in it. He and his friend, Tyrell, are star linebackers on the football team. They love hitting people – love it so much that they have a secret bet going on. Whoever can hurt the most players wins. The storyline builds suspense up to a big fight between Hunt and one of his adversaries. The fight in the cafeteria, however, turns out to be even more violent than Hunt and his friend can handle.

In my second novel, *Jammers*, the main character is horrified by what she sees as a culture of violence all around her. Emmy lives her life around the hatred and violence of two rival gangs. Although the gangs are race-oriented and Emmy is black, she feels no identity with either gang. She despises them both. Emmy's constant conversations with her grandmother, a nonviolent foot soldier of the civil rights movement, proves an interesting backdrop for the reality of the violence all around her. In the end, she must choose between the ways of her grandmother and the violence of the street gangs. Her choice and her reasons for it form the base theme of the book.

By reading and discussing *Players* and *Jammers* with students, teachers have the unique opportunity to both hold a mirror up to an important aspect of teenage life and then to discuss the reflection contained in the mirror. As teachers, we do not always like what is reflected in the mirror of literary verisimilitude, but our not liking it does not make it go away.

Violence in our schools and in our culture does exist and we need to talk about it. My novels can prove an excellent starting point.

Discussions Questions about Teen Violence

1. In *Players*, Hunt and Tyrell have an ongoing battle about who can hurt the most football players. What do you think about this? How is aggression in contact sports different from kids fighting on the street?
2. In the book, violence has become a game and an accepted way of life. Even when Hunt knows that he's going to pick a fight with another student in the cafeteria, he simply considers it part of the game. Do you think this nonchalance is common among students? Is it acceptable?
3. The football coach at Hunt's school appreciates Hunt's aggression. Do you think this acceptance of this type of violence "frees" students to be violent in other areas of their lives?
4. Why do students go into spectator mode when a fight erupts? Why does the circle form so quickly?

5. Do all students need an outlet for aggression and violence?
6. Do you think the proliferation of violent video games desensitizes kids to violence?
7. Are there other activities that students engage in that are an outlet for violence? (i.e., hunting, kickboxing)
8. Do you think any of the “violent” activities of life contribute to violence on a mass scale?