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The Drug Issue: Be a Writer, Not a Pusher

Remember those movies-of-the-week? The issue-driven after school specials? Jason's friend, we'll call him Tommy, offers him a joint at a party—the moment is staggeringly dramatic and amped up by the ominous twang of early-'90s electric guitar. Jason accepts a toke, against his better judgment. Guilt ensues. Two weeks later: BAM! Tommy is dead of a drug overdose. We use those phrases, *after school special*, *movie-of-the-week* synonymously with melodrama. A friend is concerned that you're working too hard, drinking too much coffee, addicted to those chocolate-covered, peanut butter-filled pretzels from Trader Joe's. Your response? Oh, come on. Don't be so movie-of-the-week. Those shows were always so horrendously didactic, their attempts at communicating with real kids stilted and verging on insulting. So how does a writer go about tackling the "problem novel," aka the literary equivalent of movie-of-the-week, without making the same mistakes? How can an adult author write a story that depicts drugs as harmful without falling prey to the same pitfalls as those ill-fated made-for-TV stories?

In her novel *Rx*, Tracy Lynn keeps it real. Although the book is about a normal, honors-society girl (Thyme Gilcrest) who finds herself becoming the resident high-school dealer, it never comes across as didactic or moralistic. Lynn doesn't feel the need to initiate us into the drug-world because she knows the likelihood that the reader has already been initiated, in some

way or another, to that scene. The first mention of drugs made in the book is a casual reference that the main character makes as she is describing one of her best friends: “Lida (rhymes with weed-a, perfect for her current incarnation as a perpetually mellow chronic) had large, wide-set eyes and long black lashes that made her always look sleepy, cool, or sarcastic” (page 6). This first reference to drug-use is written in the exact way that teens are likely to hear drugs referenced in the context of their own lives—casually, in passing, and without cause for alarm.

Notice that the point of this sentence is not that Lida smokes weed. As a matter of fact, the part of the sentence in which this information is revealed is within parentheses, downplaying the importance of this particular detail. The point of the sentence actually seems to be Lida’s appearance. This is not an accident, nor is it the only instance where Lynn downplays drug usage in the novel.

Throughout *Rx*, Lynn shows us all different levels of drug abuse. However, Thyme’s focus as a dealer and, thus, the focus of the story, is prescription drugs. At various points in the novel, Thyme makes charts of what prescriptions her classmates are on—Wellbutrin, Xanax, Ritalin, Paxil, Adderall, Vicodin. You know, the usual. By doing this, Thyme develops a trading system that she facilitates between her classmates. Interesting that the dealer rarely ever has to go outside of the school environment itself to acquire any of the drugs—they are already ever-present. And when she does need to go outside the school, where does she turn to get the mother load of prescription drugs? Why, her and her classmates’ parents, of course.

Lynn utilizes her knowledge of the modern high school drug environment to her advantage, rather than her ammunition. She doesn’t hold the mirror up to say “how can you let yourselves get involved in this? What is wrong with you?” She uses it to say “I how easy it is, and I know that we all make it look so harmless. So now what?” Infused throughout, Lynn

inserts various snippets of conversation that Thyme overhears—from her classmates, her family, her friends, even her teachers, which exemplify the ever-present nature of medication (drugs) in one form or another in all of our lives:

OVERHEARD IN THE HALLWAY, Mrs. Anderson to Mr. Phillips:
 “I hate this time of year. I’m on a total NyQuil/caffeine abuse cycle.”
 “NyQuil to get to sleep, coffee to wake you up?”
 “Yeah. Thank God it comes in different flavors.”
 “Have you tried Lunestra? It’s supposed to not give you a hangover the way cold medicines do . . .”

(page 187)

This has the potential for some major movie-of-the-week follow-through. Thyme could rush forward, point out to the teachers, or to her friends, or to her parents, that they are *part of the problem*. There could be a rally, a picket line. Instead, Lynn allows this exchange to exist autonomously from the rest of the story—and by doing this, she makes the point that this is not just the background conversation in the book; this is the background conversation everywhere, for all of us. Again, she writes the scene realistically—hearing conversations such as these have become so ordinary, there is no need to even take notice or comment. It just *is*.

A major identifier of the movie-of-the-week is, of course, its ending. People often die, they are hospitalized, expelled, etc. In other words, there must be a moral: if you do this, X happens. But if you stop, or refrain to begin with, you’ll be fine. By those standards, we would expect *Rx* to end with a dramatic drug bust—Thyme gets arrested, almost ODs, dies or quits for life. But the ending to this novel . . . oh, the ending. It is so deliciously anti-movie-of-the-week.

Because just as our heroine has achieved her dream and gone off to college (both having decided to stop dealing drugs for good, and stop abusing Ritalin herself *without having gotten in trouble or caught for dealing*), we’re feeling safe. But that’s too easy—we know it, and Lynn knows it. And so, something happens. Something that never happens to those made-for-TV

characters. Now in college, Thyme discovers two long-forgotten Ritalin pills. She's about to go flush them down the sink when:

I take [my toothbrush] and everything else into the bathroom, planning to brush my teeth and drop my pills into the john. My hand is over the swirling, turbid waters, in fact, when two loud voices burst into the coed bathroom.

"I am *completely fucked*. I was so *stupid* for signing up for accelerated French.

Are you sure you don't have *anything*?"

"Fuck no," the other voice said. "I'm cleaned out."

"Shit." Then, louder, to the bathroom at large: "Does anyone have any Adderall? Ritalin? Strattera? I'll pay . . . fuck it, I'll pay fifty bucks a pill."

I react without thinking, my hand closing, stopping the pills from their downward roll into the water.

(page 261-262)

Lynn conquers the problem-novel beautifully here. She succeeds in writing an important story about drugs and addiction in a realistic, accessible way. And through her understanding of an accurate teenage-environment, she has access to readers in ways that those TV movies never could. How can you trust someone who claims to know what your life is like, but clearly has no idea? *Rx* is an engaging, thoughtful story that skips the sugar-coating, the melodrama, and the formality for something much more important—something that teens seem to be hungering to read more and more of these days: reality.

Works Cited

Lynn, Tracy. *Rx*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2006.