

# Teaching Girls on Fire and Not

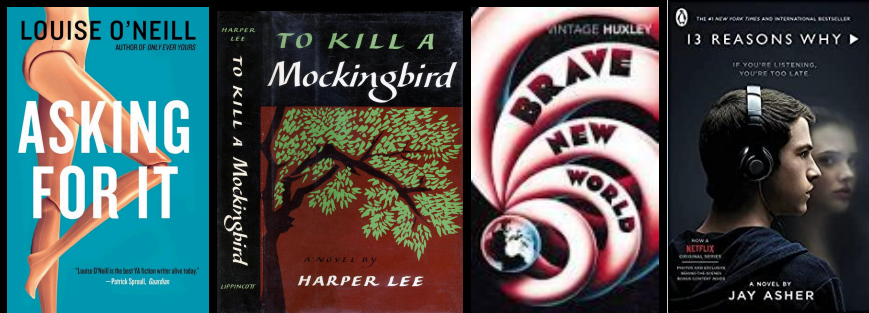


**What is a Girl on Fire? What can prevent girls from catching fire?**

How can we become better allies and advocates?

How can reading a Girl on Fire text help shape educators' thinking? But also how can reading a girl who doesn't catch fire such as in *Asking for It*, provide a fuller perspective for educators?

How can reading a Girl on Fire spark conversations for all students about complex social issues?



“The Girl on Fire trope, which offers young readers examples of characters who, in the face of injustice, exploitation, and oppression, know what is right and are willing [to] stand up and fight for themselves and others” ( p. 106).

Lechtenberg, K., Spiering, J., Thein, A.H., & Amato, N. (2020). Troubling “girls on fire” in young adult literature about sexual assault: A critical examination of systemic violence and trauma in *Asking for It*. In S. H. & Connors (Ed.), *Teaching girls on fire: Creating consciousness, informing action* (pp. 105–120). McFarland.

## Trauma is more than a singular event

“A definition of trauma that considers the everyday effects of systems on oppression such as racism, classism, and sexism.”

Recognize and fight against societal problems and expectations that make it harder for girls to catch fire after trauma:

- Expectations for beauty and sexuality:** a person obsessed with appearance responds in that manner when a society has overly valued appearance.
- Controlling female sexuality-** slut shaming, Myth: “Sexual assault is the fault of girls and women, not boys and men” ( p. 111)
- Complicity in sexual violence:** believe victims, educate on trauma and sexual assault as often as we teach drug/alcohol abuse

-Response to trauma is **not one-size fits all** and not all will fit the Girl on Fire trope. In *Asking for It*, using a single-event view can result in reactions that do not address **communal or institutional responsibility**.

-Not all girls on fire are Katniss and will react in extrinsic, powerful ways, especially in a patriarchal society where their agency is limited.

-Survival looks different for everyone, you don't know a person's internal dialogue, what a person's non-trauma mind would do in a situation is not the same as what a survivor might have done

-Students may find *Asking for It* a more relatable text based on the difficulty the character faces in working through her trauma instead of the reader wondering why they are unable to catch fire like other female protagonists.

**Table 6.1: Understanding Emma: Agency and Institutions**

| Analytical Themes                                                                                                                    | Potential Questions for Literature Discussion                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Systemic violence and persistent trauma                                                                                              | What evidence of violence and persistent trauma exists before sexual trauma occurs? That is, how have the conditions been set?                                                                                                                             |
| Expectations for beauty and sexuality                                                                                                | How do characters navigate conflicting expectations for gender, beauty, and sex?                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Systemic and institutional response to systematic violence                                                                           | How do families, religious institutions, criminal justice systems and other aspects of communities respond to sexual violence? How do people close to trauma survivors respond to the changing emotions and actions related to a survivor's sexual trauma? |
| The internal voice of survivors of sexual violence                                                                                   | What do we learn about survivors' experiences, agency, and sense of self from their internal thoughts?                                                                                                                                                     |
| Judgments about “correct” choices                                                                                                    | What implicit and explicit messages do survivors receive about how they “should” act after being raped?                                                                                                                                                    |
| How do survivors position themselves (and how are they positioned) in relation to discourses of responsibility, guilt, and evidence? | Who or what informs a survivor's choice to pursue or not pursue legal justice? Does a decision to pursue justice necessarily reflect an agentic choice?                                                                                                    |
| Making choices for self or others                                                                                                    | What are the costs and benefits of pursuing justice for sexual trauma?                                                                                                                                                                                     |