“Nineteen Minutes” That Changed Lives of Many: A Close Look into School Bullying

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篇名：
“Nineteen Minutes” That Changed Lives of Many:
A Close Look into School Bullying

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I. Introduction

Nineteen Minutes is New York Times bestselling author Jodi Picoult's most raw, honest, and important novel yet (Amazon, 2007). It is both a page-turner and a thoughtful exploration of popularity, and social ruts that can define us in ways we may not wish to be defined (Jennie A. Camp, 2007). In the beginning, a surprisingly violent incident interrupts the peace of Sterling, a small town in New Hampshire. A seventeen-year-old high school student, Peter Houghton, pulls the trigger to kill his classmates and teachers with his own hands. While everyone grieves over their families’ loss, people start to wonder what drives a normal teenager to commit such a crime.

The truth turns out that Peter Houghton has endured bullying for many years. Sterling is a small town where everyone knows everybody else since childhood. In other words, Peter has almost the same classmates with him until high school. His classmates take a liking to assault him in various ways. Some tortures like being shoved into lockers, beaten by jocks, being called names are Peter Houghton’s daily routine. Even his best friend in childhood, Josie Comier, isolates him for fear of becoming a victim like him. She begins to socialize with the popular people in school and plays practical jokes on other students. Struggling with her conscience, Josie sometimes hates the way of her life.

In the critical moment of the campus shooting, Josie takes Peter’s side and shoots her boyfriend, Matt, who constantly inflicts pain on Peter. Matt is a boy with violent nature, and he sometimes treats Josie as his personal item and hurts Josie. At the last minute of the slaughter, Josie realizes that she can’t bear the life full of comparisons and alert, therefore, she decides to seize the chance to get away for good. Eventually, she ends up in jail with Peter for the choice she makes. Peter is not the only one who is assaulted, but he chooses the most impulsive way to stop the nightmare, which puts him in the spotlight with those unforgettable nineteen minutes.

Bullying in school is very common all around the world. It takes various forms and causes a lot of traumatic and long-term psychological effects on the victims, such as depression, insecurity or even aggressive behavior, which is what Peter opts for. Apparently, we seem to underestimate the impact of frequent harassment. In this paper, I will look into the main character, Peter, exploring the typical traits of the victims of bullying, types of bullying he has to endure and its effects on their lives.
Although the bullying takes up many forms, I will only analyze those that are mentioned in the book. In those cases, the bullying among students can be discussed in detail. Hopefully it can help us to stop, even prevent bullying in the future.

II. Thesis

1. Typical Traits

1-1. Physical

Physical conditions may be the most common trait of the bullied. And the victims are “likely (if boys) to be physically weaker than same-age peers” (Batsche & Knoff, 1994, p.166). Therefore, they are unable to protect themselves for the lack of physical strength. Take Peter Houghton for example, he is “a slight boy” with “wire-rimmed glasses” and “his chest sort of caved in at the bottom”. The features above make him unable to fit in the social group full of athletic people and seem defenseless against the harassments from the bullies.

“You can’t fight back, because you’re not as strong as they are, and you can’t stop it. . . so you just kind of wait it out.” (Picoult, 2007)

In most cultures, students with strong physical power and athletic potential are cherished and valued. Consequently, they become arrogant as to think they have privilege over everything. Matt, who is a hockey player in Sterling High and one of the most popular students, always picks on Peter. One of the reasons is that Peter is too waiflike, and when it comes to fighting, he is always a loser. Those tall and well-built boys don’t need to worry about the retaliation from Peter, so they will do it over and over again. Not until the tragic incident happen to them do they finally realize that they are wrong at the price of their lives.

1-2. Personality

1-2-1. Introversion

Besides the biological conditions, personality also accounts for a big part in the case of bullying. Kids who are placid and quiet are easily considered to be loners in school. They may be too shy or don’t know how to fit in the social groups, and “are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem, rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by students who bully them. They may lack social skills and friends” (Banks, 1997)
“Because he didn’t try to fit in.” (Picoult, 2007)

“Well, these young men pull away from others. They tend to be loners. They talk about hurting themselves, or others. They can’t function in school, or are subjected to discipline there. They lack a connection with someone who might make them feel important.” (Picoult, 2007)

In Peter Houghton’s case, he is not socially active; he doesn’t have an interest in sports or other popular fields he can relate to his peers; he reacts passively to others’ jokes, shoving and pushing around; he doesn’t try to promote his status in school, because he isn’t cruel enough to beat other weaker children or hardhearted enough to spread the fake and spiteful rumors to backstab people. Therefore, Peter is left out of the circle and the troubles keep coming after him. Being beaten and insulted become Peter’s daily routine and it seems to be an unstoppable disaster.

1-2-2. Sexual Orientation

People with different sexual orientation are usually not on an equal footing, especially at school. Children tend to consider them disgusting and are afraid of socializing with them, which is the so-called homophobia.

“Teens are always trying to fit in, if you don’t fit into the popular crowd, you try the athletic crowd. If that doesn’t work, you go to the drama crowd…or to the druggies,” he said. “Ed thought that Peter might be trying out the gay and lesbian crowd.” (Picoult, 2007)

“Peter may have been confused about his sexuality, but it was crystal clear to Ed,” Philip said. “That boy is straight.” (Picoult, 2007)

Peter Houghton has always been considered a gay by his classmates, whether because of his small stature, his mild and feminine temperament, or malicious rumors. Afterward, he starts to doubt whether he really likes boys just as others say. Therefore, he attends a group called GLAAD, which stands for Gay and Lesbian Alliance in school. Later, he uses the fake ID to get into some nightclub just for homosexual people. Apparently, he doesn’t have any feelings for males, and he is definitely a “straight” boy. But despite his efforts to show that he is not a gay, others still make fun of him, isolating him from the school community.
2. Types of bullying

2-1. Physical Bullying

Physical bullying occurs “when a person intentionally inflicts injury or discomfort upon another person, through physical contacts or in other ways” (Olweus, n.d.). In addition, physical bullying results in direct and severe harm to the victims, and the damage is not preventable or avoidable. If no teachers or parents come to their rescue, victims tend to keep all the physical abuse to themselves rather than report the bullies for fear of facing retaliation and more harassment later on.

“…This child has been stuffed into lockers, had his head shoved into toilets, been tripped and punched and kicked. He has had a private email spammed out to an entire school. He’s had his pants pulled down in the middle of the cafeteria.” (Picoult, 2007.)

As described in the book, Peter Houghton isn’t able to protect himself, and those strong hockey players always leave cuts and bruises all over his body. It seems that they enjoy watching the poor facial expression on Peter after getting hurt and take pride in inflicting pain on the “losers” and “weirdoes” like Peter. Physically weak, Peter dares not fight back. Even if he tries to, he always loses the battle and others will laugh harder, convinced of his stupidity and incompetence. Gradually, Peter chooses to endure the unfair treatment and gets used to his miserable everyday life. What’s worse, neither teachers nor their parents fully realize the extent of his suffering and have not been able to provide him with protection and timely help.

2-2. Verbal Bullying

“Survey shows that 77% of students are bullied verbally and physically.” (Bullying Statistic, n.d.) In Nineteen Minutes, verbal bullying mainly takes the form of name calling. Name calling suggests disrespect and contempt, whether intentional or not. Actually, it is to some degrees more powerful than we believe, and leave a long-lasting scar in the victims, causing wrath, self denial and distraught.

“It wasn’t until he got to school the next day that he understood that with better vision came perfect hearing: Four-eyes; blind as a bat. …but only a scar, something else that made him different from everyone else.” (Picoult, 2007)
In Sterling High School, Peter is always vilified by mean and cruel comments that ridicule his appearance or his sexual orientation. People laugh at his glasses and call him Peter “Homo” instead of Peter Houghton. His sexual orientation is put on the spotlight, scrutinized and laughed at. Girls are no better than the boys. They call him a loser, make a dig at him, and keep up a fuss with boys. Even Josie humiliates him just to let people know they are on the different sides. All the disgrace he has been through makes him frustrated, yet they keep pushing him to the point of breaking.

2-3. Cyber Bullying

As Alana James says, cyber bullying is “a relatively more recent phenomenon that has attracted increasing attention in the last decade, and involves using electronic means such as the Internet, email and mobile phones. It is particularly vicious, as nasty messages or images can be spread quickly and seen by many. Research evidence suggested that it tends to happen outside the school” (James, 2010). Once the message has been posted on a public websites, its damage is even irreparable because there is no knowing who. Besides, the spreading speed is faster than we can surmise, so the extent of the impact on the victim is beyond measure.

They’d send me instant messages, saying I was a loser, things like that. And they took an email I wrote and spammed it out to the whole school … made it a joke… (Picoult, 2007)

Internet seems to be indispensable to students. Websites like Facebook or Twitter play a huge part of our daily schedule and become an irresistible habit. But to Peter Houghton, the virtual world is where he can feel secure and free. His hobby is to immerse himself into the magical data-based world. Peter can write HTML code and even design a video game all by himself. It seems that Peter Houghton finally has found himself a little paradise, but his classmates just can’t spare his peaceful haven. When Peter writes an email declaring his love for Josie, Josie’s friends read the letter ahead of her and decide to forward it so that everyone can see it. It is just another prank to hurt Peter. In turn, Peter collapses, knowing that he’s been destroyed in all aspects, so he decides to take action on the spur of the moment to make all those who made his life miserable pay back. He then staged the most gruesome massacre on campus, killing ten people without mercy.

2-4. Sibling Bullying

Sibling bullying is the most particular aspect in this book, for we seldom hear of it in our daily life. “Similarly to peers bullying, sibling bullying can be defined as a
specific type of aggression aimed at dominating another person and at causing physical and psychological harm”(Menesini, Camodeca, & Nocentini, (2010). Peter's brother, Joey, is always the first one to hurt him in school, and it makes other students believe that they can do whatever they like to Peter for his own brother is also doing so.

“...”Joey was the one to start it”...” He used to tell people I was adopted. That my mother was a crack whore, and that’s why my brain was all fucked up. Sometimes he did it right in front of me, and when I’d get pissed off and whale on him he’d just laugh and knock me on my ass and then he’d look back to his friends, as if this was proof of everything he’d been saying in the first place. So do I miss him? I’m glad he’s dead.”” (Picoult, 2007)

Joey, Peter’s older brother, is “the captain of the baseball team”“who placed first in the state in a French competition” and is “friends with the principal”. Apparently, Joey has everything he wants, tremendous popularity and good interpersonal relationship. However, Joey feels so ashamed of having a sibling who is totally the opposite to himself; thus, he draws a clear line between him and Peter by shouting mean words at him or beating him in front of the crowd to prove that they are different. As for Peter, everyone expects him to be as popular and well-liked as his brother, but when they distinguish the stark difference between the two, they can’t help mocking the weaker one, and encouraged by the attitude with which his own brother treats him, they make Peter’s school life as well as family life a hell. Even after Joey dies from a car accident, Peter’s resentment and hatred does not dissipate but builds up, attributing all his suffering to his brother.

3. Impacts on the Victim

The impacts of bullying on the victims can be various. They may be more withdrawn and reclusive than ever; in the face of confrontations, they tend to hold back their feelings instead of seeking assistance and support. On the other hand, they may also develop violent and abusive temperaments, because it is the only way they have been treated all their lives. When what is being held back is beyond his endurance, they may choose to strike back with the same intensity and violence that has been bestowed upon them, desperate to end the agony they are faced.

“Among school shooters, we have seen a similarity of family dynamics. ...The school itself tended to tolerate disrespectful behavior, exhibited inequitable discipline and an inflexible culture with certain students enjoying prestige given
to them by teachers and staffs. Shooters are more likely to have access to violent movies, television, and video games; ...These hints might take the form of poems, writings, drawings...” (Picoult, 2007)

From the FBI investigation report above, we can clearly find the typical traits which match Peter’s behavior. In his room, the police discover, are material containing violence, shooting and killing. It includes things like the “Bowling for Columbine DVD”, a documentary film about a campus shooting in America which greatly resembles to Peter’s brutal shooting, and “three posters from gun manufactures”, “assorted lengths of pipe” as well. What’s more, Peter Houghton listens to music portraying fury, hatred and anti-social feelings. There is once an assignment about “writing a story in first-person narrator”, Peter picks “John Hinckley” who “attempted to assassinate U.S President Ronald Reagan in 1981 as his topic” (Wikipedia, n.d.), and describes the whole story with the euphoria of a triumphant victor. In addition, he has a “yearbook from Sterling Middle school with various faces circled in black marker.” This is the “checklist” for his project of revenge and vindication.

Apparently, the school shooting is premeditated. While Peter struggles to escape from the collective abuse and bullying, he also imagines a virtual world where he can give vent to anger by killing and shooting. No one, including Peter himself, can have thought of executing such crime in the real world. However, when his dignity is totally crushed in both the school and on line, when his love for the only person he cares is unanswered and becomes a laughing matter, he destroys his own life, dragging along those who destroy his.

Maybe we all disagree with what Peter has done, but after understanding the whole reasons and process, we may start to show our sympathy for him. It’s unfair to impute all faults to Peter, and probably we can be aware of the result causes by an aggressive movement through the whole incident.

III. Conclusion

Peter Houghton was once a distressed victim of bullying, and no one came to his rescue. Neither the school staff nor the parents took notice of the misery and devastation he suffered, but when he fought back, he became the one to blame. Even though we cannot justify his actions, we come to realize that he himself is the victim in need of assistance. Through the entire analysis, we clearly understand how strong the impact of bullying will have on teenagers. It is therefore everyone’s responsibility
to stop bullying in any form. Bullying, in truth, can be prevented. If we recognize the types of bullying, and take action to stop them instead of consenting and abetting, there won’t be victims like Peter. Education should also be enforced about the importance of respecting each other’s difference. What’s more, teachers along with parents should take bullying seriously, taking disciplinary measures when necessary to protect the bullied and to ensure that the bullies stop the vicious habit of deriving pleasure at others’ expense. Most important of all, if anyone should become a target of bullying, he or she must stand up to it and reach out for help instead of enduring it. To cite an instance, Lady Gaga, who is one of the most popular female pop stars around the world, is once a victim of bullying and afraid of going to school, but she doesn’t give up her faith and keep working harder. Recently, Lady Gaga has launched her “Born This Way Foundation”, which she wishes children and teenagers can be brave to speak up and be nice to others. I am touched by what she does, and I am appreciative of her effort to help people in need. As an old saying goes, “Turn a stumbling block into a stepping stone.” we should learn how to change adversity into the power to keep moving on, and be careful of our words and deeds which may hurt others accidentally. I think this is what I learned from this book and the lesson that the author wants to teach us.
IV. References