



**Boy Toy by Barry Lyga**

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Now part of HarperCollins), 2007

ISBN: 978-0618723935 (hardcover), 978-0547076348 (paperback)

\*Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Range: 9-12

**BOOK SYNOPSIS**

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Josh Mendel has a secret.

Unfortunately, everyone knows what it is.

Five years ago, Josh's life changed. Drastically. And everyone in his school, his town—seems like the world—thinks they understand. But they don't—they can't. And now, about to graduate from high school, Josh is still trying to sort through the pieces. First there's Rachel, the girl he thought he'd lost years ago. She's back, and she's determined to be part of his life, whether he wants her there or not.

Then there are college decisions to make, and the toughest baseball game of his life coming up, and a coach who won't stop pushing Josh all the way to the brink. And then there's Eve. Her return brings with it all the memories of Josh's past. It's time for Josh to face the truth about what happened.

If only he knew what the truth was . . .

**REVIEWS AND PRAISE**

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★ **Publishers Weekly (Starred Review, September 3, 2007 edition)**

“When Josh was a 12-year-old seventh grader, he was sexually abused by his history teacher, the young, beautiful (and married) Eve, who manipulated him into believing they were in love. Carefully crafting a narrative structure, Lyga flashes between that traumatic time and the present, when Josh, now a senior (at the school where *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* took place), learns that Eve is being paroled. The author handles heavy material with honesty and sensitivity, capturing both the young Josh's excitement and his realization that his 'pleasure brought its own sort of guilt.' Years later, he still struggles: he flies into rages (he punches a baseball coach in an opening scene), and he experiences flickers, brief moments which feel like actual immersions in the past. Josh also has trouble pursuing Rachel, who seems like a perfect match, because he cannot trust his physical instincts; he is, as his psychologist puts it, 'afraid to do anything at all because it

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might be the wrong thing.’ Details like Josh’s obsession with calculating baseball statistics round out his character; the statistics speak to his intelligence and, more tellingly, to his attempts to control his world. Even his inevitable face-off with Eve proves a revelation. Readers may find the ending too neat, given the extent of Josh’s problems, but in their richness and credibility the cast—Eve included—surpasses that of the much-admired *Fanboy*. Ages 16-up.”

★ **School Library Journal (Starred Review, October 2007 edition)**

“For the past five years, Joshua Mendel has struggled with the aftermath of being sexually abused by his seventh-grade history teacher. Now a high school senior, he still experiences ‘flickers,’ his name for vivid, mini-flashbacks of his times with Eve. He still refuses to associate with Rachel, his seventh-grade romantic interest whose insistence on a game of spin the bottle at a party led to the exposure of his abuse, a trial, and Eve’s imprisonment. Rachel is eager to resume their long-abandoned tentative romance, Eve has been released from prison, and Josh wants nothing more than to win a baseball scholarship to a college far from his small town where he feels certain everyone knows about his past. Despite years of counseling, Josh is unable to move on until he reveals the complete details of his experiences with Eve to Rachel and to his friend, Zik, and finally learns to accept the truth about it. Short groups of chapters set in the present alternate with much lengthier segments entitled ‘Flashbacks, Not Flickers,’ in which Josh describes his relationship with Eve from the beginning to the emotionally wrenching trial. The well-paced plot begins slowly, describing Eve’s initial approaches to Josh as she wins his confidence and loyalty, then speeds up as their more frequent contacts move into the realm of inappropriate teacher/student behavior. Lyga’s skillful writing subtly reveals Eve’s cleverly calculated abuse of Josh in a way that older teens will find fascinating, distressing, and worthy of their attention.”

★ **Kirkus (Starred Review, September 1, 2007 edition)**

“Striking out on a baseball bet forces a teen to face past emotional scars. At age 13, Joshua Mendel’s history teacher, Eve Sherman, molested him for three weeks and changed the rest of his life. Five years later, the 18-year-old baseball star is preparing to graduate and working on restoring his damaged relationship with Rachel, a childhood crush. When Sherman is released from prison, Joshua realizes he must confront her in an attempt to gain the answers to the questions that have haunted him for years. Blending present events with extensive flashbacks, Lyga creates a tightly paced narrative that explores psychological turmoil without resorting to either clinical terminology or oversimplification. Authentic and fresh, the narrative voice develops along with Joshua, gaining experience but never overpowering the tortured undertones. Lyga’s portrayal of the fight between

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Joshua and Sherman's husband is riveting and tense; the main character's later reflections on that confrontation are equally powerful. Deftly weaving together a painful confession and ambiguous ending, Lyga's dynamic writing style creates an emotionally wrenching and haunting tale. (Fiction. YA)"

### **VOYA (October, 2007 edition)**

**5Q** (highest rating) "Using several narrative voices...Lyga tackles this incredibly sensitive story with boldness and confidence..... [Josh] works hard at healing himself...and by the end of this well-written, challenging novel, the reader has high hopes that he will make it." — Geri Diorio

**5Q** (highest rating) "Lyga again skillfully captures the turbulent world of high school.... Kudos for another incredible read." — Lucy Freeman, teen reviewer

### **New York Times (March 16, 2008 edition)**

"...takes one of the more uncomfortable themes of young adult literature...and pushes it past the genre's farthest boundaries. This is an upsetting, intense, intricately drawn portrait."

Read the [complete review at NYTimes.com](#).

### **USA Today (October 18, 2007 edition)**

"Lyga doesn't condescend; he writes about sex and relationships with simplicity and honesty."

Read the [complete review at USAToday.com](#).

### **LA Times (March 9, 2008 edition)**

"*Boy Toy* does what any good novel does: examines the hard truths of human experience."

Read the [complete review at LATimes.com](#).

### **Chicago Tribune (November 25, 2007 edition)**

"...an astounding portrayal of what it is like to be the young male victim."

Read the [complete review in the Chicago Tribune](#).

### **Psychiatric Services (December 2008 edition)**

"All the subtitles [sic] and ambiguities of adult-child sexual relationships are explored in a tasteful understated fashion. This book, besides being a good read, provides great insight into sexual abuse of boys and would be of particular interest to those working in that field."

Read the [complete review in Psychiatric Services](#)

### **The Cleveland Plain Dealer (September 30, 2007 edition)**

“The characters swear liberally, and while the sex isn’t gratuitous, it disturbs, not just for the actions described, but also for the way Eve traps her prey. Lyga does a terrific job of showing how the damage to Josh spirals outward, affecting everyone around him.”

Read the [complete review on The Cleveland Plain Dealer site](#).

### **The Baton Rouge Advocate (December 30, 2007 edition)**

“remarkable.... well written and entertaining, frank but not prurient.”

### **TeenReadsToo**

**5 Stars/Gold Star of Excellence** “...an incredible journey.... strong, powerful...” — Sally Kruger

Read the [complete review on TeensReadToo.com](#).

### **Shelf Awareness (September 20, 2007 edition)**

“Ultimately, this is a novel about healing, and the need to see things clearly in order to accept the past and move forward.”

Read the [complete review on Shelf Awareness](#).

### **MySpace Books (Featured Title)**

“Like Laurie Halse Andersen’s *Speak* and Sarah Dessen’s *Just Listen*, two young-adult classics, this is a thoughtful, readable novel about overcoming trauma and its attendant social alienation by learning to talk about an unspeakable act of betrayal and abuse.”

Read the [complete review on MySpace](#).

### **Kliatt**

“When Josh was 12, his 24-year-old teacher, Eve, seduced him. The affair was discovered as a result of a regrettable incident with a classmate named Rachel, and Eve was convicted and jailed. Now, six years later, Josh is a high school senior, hoping to make it to college on a baseball scholarship; Eve has just been released from jail; and Rachel is determined to make Josh her boyfriend, though he is still haunted by Eve and afraid of relationships with girls. Heavy stuff, but Lyga, author of the well-received *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*, pulls it off brilliantly. We feel for Josh as he struggles to come to terms with his guilt and anger, and with finally understanding who’s really at fault in this case of sexual abuse; his is a memorable voice, smart and suffering. For more mature YA readers, because of the theme, the sex and the language. Sure to be a controversial and influential read.”

### **The Australian (February 23, 2008 edition)**

“Unflinching as it is compelling, this novel centres on a troubled high-school student, Josh, who was molested by a female teacher at the age of 12. Five years later, Josh is still struggling to get his life together when his abuser, Eve, is released from prison, pitching him into further emotional turmoil. Exceptionally well-written, *Boy Toy* offers a psychologically sophisticated and edgy portrait of a male sex-abuse victim: because of misplaced self-blame, Josh refuses to do in Eve to the police. My main reservation involves Josh’s flashbacks to the abuse. Some of these passages are so erotically charged, they inadvertently run the risk of allowing us to forget the victim is a child, and could arouse rather than repel teen readers. That is a worry.”

### **Booklist (September 1, 2007 edition)**

“As in his previous book, Lyga’s cast feels very real, and he knows how play them against each other.... What will seem believable for readers is Josh’s emotional journey.... Teens, who think they know so much about sexuality, may see the subject in a new way here.”

### **Jaemi, librarian at Goshen (NY) Public Library...**

“...some readers may want to get out of [t]his story. But will find themselves pulled in. Because it’s that good. And it’s that worth it.”

Read the [complete review on revish.com](#).

### **Ronni, Writer and Copy Editor...**

“...intense and riveting.... realistic without being over-the-top; the tension builds at a perfect pace.”

Read the [complete review on Ronni’s Reviews](#).

### **Lynndy Bennett, Gleebooks (Glebe, NSW, Australia)**

“...I loved it. An odd reaction, maybe, to a saga of misused power and sexual abuse, but....Josh’s character is so tenderly written; I love the unquestioning and unquestioned closeness between him and his friend Zik; the gradual unfolding of the truth about his relationship with Eve is measured, allowing the reader to understand his feelings and reasons and to feel as deeply as Josh did.... The book could have sensationalised the entire sequence of events but instead it peeled them open almost lovingly, with recognisable adolescent humour. This is the first account I’ve read that was utterly clear sighted about teacher-student sexuality, that showed adolescent wish-fulfilment in a realistic and powerless situation. Probably the very people who might want it restricted are those who should read it and see the relevance and ultimate hope within.”

**Banna, [river's end bookstore](#) (Oswego, NY)...**

"It's a fine and deeply unsettling book. . . the graphic material isn't gratuitous, it's a hanger on which the characters and the story are draped."

**Stephanie Anderson, [The Moravian Bookshop](#) (Bethlehem, PA)**

"Barry Lyga's new book *Boy Toy* was so good that I practically gulped down the last half of it. It's elegantly paced and all those other important things, but that's almost irrelevant because Josh's voice is so marvelously constructed. He's confident and confused and angry and driven and female readers will probably have a little crush on him by the end of the book. This won't be a comfortable read for many people, because the primary plot follows Josh dealing years later with the aftermath of being molested by a female teacher in seventh grade, but it is a compelling and important one. This is one of those books that's not only necessary because it tackles a taboo subject that few others have dared go near, but also because it's flat-out good writing and storytelling."

**Frank Hodge, [Hodge-Podge Books](#) (Albany, NY)**

"...a mesmerizing piece of literature. I began mostly with mouth agape but soon was able to close that aperture and open my mind to the brilliant way this author was treating a most sensitive topic."

**Tanya Lee Stone , author of *A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl***

"Barry Lyga digs deep into the troubling territory of innocence and manipulation, trust and betrayal. Brave and unflinching, *Boy Toy* will grab hold of your heart and squeeze."

**Ellen Wittlinger, author of *Hard Love* and *Parrotfish***

"Lyga hits a home run. This book deserves to become a YA classic. Unforgettable."

**Liz Dubelman, Founder, [VidLit](#)**

"This is a genuine fan letter. I found your new book, *Boy Toy*, not only extremely engaging, but important. I am in awe of your talent!"

**Jocelyn Pearce, Teen Book Reviewer**

"In *Boy Toy*, Barry Lyga...shows himself to be a brilliant author.... This is a book that could easily fall into the pretentious-sounding category of 'literature,' but I mean that in a good way here! Well worth reading, *Boy Toy* is highly recommended.... Four 1/2 Stars [out of five]"

Read the [complete review](#).

**"Cedar Librarian"**

"...incredibly well paced, suspenseful, and full of characters you actually come to care about.

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Everyone in this book has dimension.... And if your soul doesn't drop through your knees during chapter 24, then you probably don't have one."

Read the [complete review](#).

**Jennifer Laughran, Not Your Mother's Book Club (Books, Inc., San Francisco, CA)**

(In nomination for BookSense) "...shocking and devastating and brilliant ... Mr. Lyga is a major new talent."

Read the [complete nomination](#).

"I really, really enjoyed Barry Lyga's novel, Boy Toy. I wasn't sure if I was going to when I read the summary, mostly because I wanted to hear more about Kyra and Fanboy. But I found that this novel surpassed my expectations. I was once again struck by how well Mr. Lyga creates completely believable teenage characters. I feel as if I am in my high-school when I read his novels; the characters are people I expect to meet when I round the corner. Their internal turmoil as well as their external voices are spot-on."

— Giselle (age 19)

"The mechanics of the novel were perfect. I was expecting Boy Toy to be an easy-reading, typical, young adult novel but I couldn't have been more wrong. This novel should be read by everyone."

— Holly (age 16)

"I could not put this book down! The greatest thing about Boy Toy is that it's so much more than just a story of a boy who got molested, it's high-school, relationships, baseball, love, fear, friends, family, inner-turmoil, figuring out life and so much more."

— Amanda (age 19)

"I loved it! I could not stop reading it from the first day I picked it up. I stayed up one night straight through the night reading this sucker! It was that addicting."

—Shawn (age 19)

- "Although Boy Toy tackles the very current subject of sexual abuse, it should not be relegated to the pile of teen problem novels."  
—Gretchen (YA librarian)

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- “I recommend *Boy Toy* to anyone who enjoys stories about love and difficult truths. *Boy Toy* has become one of my all-time favorite books.”  
–Alexa (age 15)
- “Overall, it was a very interesting read and shows Barry Lyga’s versatility as a writer.”  
–Kara (age 17)
- “*Boy Toy* was my literary poltergeist for the past few days, and it refused to leave me alone until I sat down for a few hours and finally finished it.”  
–Caitlin (age 17)

#### AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

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- Winner of the 2007 Cybil Award for YA Novel
- Fall 2007 BookSense Children’s Pick
- Judged one of the 50 Best YA Novels of All Time by *Booklist*

#### MEDIA AND RESOURCES

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<https://blbooks.blogspot.com/2008/01/interview-with-barry-lyga.html>

<https://controversialyalit.blogspot.com/2010/03/boy-toy-by-barry-lyga.html>

<https://thebestofthebanned.blogspot.com/2010/05/boy-toy-by-barry-lyga.html>

#### RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

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***“The reality is that books can provide connection for those who feel disconnected,” said Sixth Street resident Jodi Langellotti. “Books can provide solace even through fictional characters.”***

***“When did we decide that books and thoughts and ideas present a bigger threat to our children than AR-15s?” asked Roosevelt Avenue resident Laura Rundell.***

## <https://www.seacoastonline.com/story/news/local/2023/11/02/boy-toy-to-stay-in-dover-nh-high-school-library-author-defends-book/71406333007/>

FROM A LETTER TO NEW HAMPSHIRE DOE FROM THE NEW HAMPSHIRE ACLU (Complete letter available upon request!) The DOE's concerns about *Boy Toy* are similarly invalid. This book depicts Josh, who is about to graduate high school, dealing with the news that Eve, a female history teacher who manipulated him into a sexual relationship when he was twelve, is soon to be released from prison. In other words, this book depicts one boy's experience with sexual abuse—an unfortunate reality of life for many children. This book does not condone or promote abuse; rather, it tells the story of victimization. One reviewer from the *Chicago Tribune* noted that it was an “astounding portrayal of what it is like to be the young male victim.”<sup>3</sup> The American Library Association similarly designated this one of the “Best Books for Young Adults” in 2008.<sup>4</sup> It should go without saying that this book could create a vital sense of belonging for a victim of abuse, as well as help that young victim cope with the trauma of that experience. To remove this book would be to deprive young people of this resource. As Dover's book reconsideration committee correctly asserted: “School libraries are responsible for circulating books which reach a wide range of appeal, viewpoints, and abilities. While ‘Boy Toy’ has mature content, the words and descriptions are familiar to the majority of students at DHS, and the book contains sufficient literary value to merit its continued inclusion in the DHS library.”

Dr. David S. Heath, FRCPC: “The fiendish cleverness of the sexual predator is brilliantly portrayed without a sexual scene ever being described. It is all done by inference... This book, besides being a good read, provides great insight into sexual abuse of boys and would be of particular interest to those working in that field.”

Complete article at <https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/ps.2008.59.12.1480>

### **AUTHOR STATEMENT (OPTIONAL)**

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The absurdity of claiming that a book about the horrors of molestation is somehow pro-molestation is patently obvious. Furthermore, the typical claims that if a work of art depicts something it therefore approves and promotes that “something” is risible, nonsensical, and disproven by, well, literally centuries of critical thought.

*Boy Toy* does not exist in a vacuum. The book is not a fevered flight of an author's fancy. It exists because kids like Josh exist. It reflects the world; it does not create the world. If I'd never written *Boy Toy*, kids would still be abused and molested. This is because (and I cannot believe I have to commit these next words to paper) *people* cause harm, not books.

The rap against *Boy Toy* is consistently that its portrayal of molestation could somehow (in some amorphous, never-described fashion) “damage” children who read it. The idea is ridiculous, of course, but I would like to point out that *Boy Toy* was published (to great acclaim, I add without a whiff of humility) in 2007 and has therefore been on bookshelves for nearly twenty years. If the book was causing harm to kids, we'd know about it by now. There would be massive amounts of evidence and data collected over the past two decades about how dreadful the book is and all the lives it destroyed.

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Instead, there is only an award, placement on a list of the best YA ever written, and nearly twenty years of kids telling me how the book changed their lives and helped them understand themselves and their friends. No damage done. Provably.

### **\*A NOTE ON AGE RANGES**

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A publisher-suggested age range covers the gamut of readers that publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate age range for the diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book's intended use.