

Scary Kid Stuff

By Beth Birnbaum



TERRY LABAN

WHEN KIDS ARE LITTLE, parents painstakingly choose books for content and quality. But that oversight goes out the window when they hit school and learn to read for themselves. Then, so the theory goes, anything children read, even if it's garbage, is better than nothing.

The primary series of books advanced by the read-anything proponents (principals, teachers and librarians) at my kids' elementary school, P.S. 101 in Queens, is *Goosebumps*, a franchise created by R.L. Stine. *Goosebumps* are scary because they turn everyday, commonplace events into vicious, supernatural horrors. Numbering more than 200, these plot-by-numbers books are churned out by ghost writers who feed off of childhood fears. Indeed, kids send in their nightmares to be turned into story lines, giving the series a steady supply of psychologically true trauma.

For children who prefer true drama, an endless number of books reinforce television as the ultimate reality. Novelizations of *Full House*, *The Olsen Twins*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek* multiply with each new television season. Jerry Springer or salacious reports on the 10 o'clock news have apparently inspired the plots of other books. Erika Tamar in *Fair Game* tells the story of a high school gang rape of a handicapped girl. The reviewer for the American Library Association noted, "While [Tamar] might have laid her message down more subtly, it would certainly not have made as strong an impact, especially among

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When Hope Dies

An exclusive excerpt from the next children's best-seller

This is the story of a group of kids who have all grown up together. They think they know everything about one another, but they're only beginning to find out the truth.

Weldon, 18, wakes up in a hospital with his right foot, front teeth and bowel control gone, under arrest for killing two people and injuring his girlfriend while driving drunk. At a juvenile detention facility awaiting trial, he uncovers the warden's secret.

His injured girlfriend, Billie Jo, is no stranger to tragedy. When her pregnant mother accidentally boiled kerosene instead of water, Billie Jo threw the burning

pot out of the house, setting Ma on fire. Putting the fire out with her hands has hurt her ability to play the piano. ("The doctor cut away the skin on my hands so it hung in crested strips; he poked my hands with pins to see what I could feel.") Billie Jo couldn't look at her mother because she smells like scorched meat. She doesn't even have a face. After Ma dies giving birth, her infant brother dies while her father is still out drinking, so she runs away.

Meanwhile, across town, Lexi, angered by her father's moving away and her mother turning into a drunken slut, shaves her head, and tattoos a

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