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## Coming of age on social media: Platforms for discussion and critique on the novels of Sarah Dessen

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COMING OF AGE ON SOCIAL MEDIA: PLATFORMS  
FOR DISCUSSION AND CRITIQUE ON THE  
NOVELS OF SARAH DESSEN

A Thesis

by

Liza M. Soria

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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FOR DISCUSSION AND CRITIQUE ON THE  
NOVELS OF SARAH DESSEN

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May 2016



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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes the way Tumblr and Twitter users converse about a variety of topics in Sarah Dessen's novels, not predominantly focused on romance. From 2006 to 2016, tweets and blog posts across Tumblr and Twitter platforms have responded to the twelve novels written by Dessen from 1996 to 2015. Incorporating recent social media commentary on a variety of topics within her first six novels from *That Summer* (1996) to *The Truth About Forever* (2004) demonstrates how Dessen's early novels appeals to readers currently on Twitter and Tumblr. In the last decade of Dessen's writing career, from *Just Listen* (2006) to her *Saint Anything* (2015), novels published after Twitter and Tumblr began in 2006 and 2007 are discussed with enthusiasm. This demonstrates the "narrative intimacy" scholar Sara K. Day identifies in readers of YAL, reader response reveals how readers connect with the protagonists and each other.





## DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to Gloria and Sabrina. We are not statistics. We are not stereotypes. I would not be who I am today without you two, my mother and sister. Thank you to Angela, Jeff, and Mario for being my best friends. My life is beautiful because of the three of you. Thank you to those who let me hide in their offices, took coffee breaks with me, and provided an endless amount of advice. You know who you are and I am forever grateful.



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II. #SARAHDESSEN.....	8
CHAPTER III. KEEPING UP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA: ONLINE READER RESPONSE	
TO DESSEN’S EARLY NOVELS .....	20
That Summer of Exploration .....	21
Finding Someone Like You.....	24
Discovering Relatability within Keeping the Moon.....	30
Abuse Trigger Warning: Dreamland .....	34
Breaking the Rules of This Lullaby.....	36
An Emotional Response to The Truth About Forever.....	40
CHAPTER IV. A DECADE: TWITTER, TUMBLR, AND DESSEN.....	45
Just Listen to Yourself.....	46
Lock and Key to the Past.....	49
Along for the Ride into the Forgotten.....	52
What Happened to Good-Bye to Change?.....	56
The Moon and More than Teen Romance .....	59
Discovering Your Saint Anything .....	64

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION.....	69
REFERENCES .....	76
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	81

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Sarah Dessen, a writer of realistic literary fiction, is regularly referenced in the online YAL community. Over the last decade of popular social media platforms Tumblr and Twitter, Dessen has become a routinely discussed author. A commonly seen hashtag is #me. In context, that hashtag means that the reader of Dessen's novel is someone who has been able to recognize themselves in one of her novels. Readers see their issues or personality in the characters and not feel isolated as they deal with teenaged issues, or if they are older, readers continue to find who they were as teenagers reflected in a character. Teenaged reader or not, the issues the female protagonists Haven, Halley, Colie, Caitlin, Remy, Macy, Annabel, Ruby, Auden, Mclean, Emaline, and Sydney go through provoke critical thinking for readers when they observe how situations are handled by these characters. Whether it is *That Summer's* fifteen-year-old Haven dealing with impending change or *This Lullaby's* cynical Remy, online users are able to find themselves through a character that Sarah Dessen has created within the first twenty years of her work.

The twelve novels of Sarah Dessen have been marketed as teen romance by publishers Penguin books. But in truth the novels of Dessen are more than another YAL love story. Scholar Sara K. Day writes of YAL books and their expectations, "Adolescent women's friendships are framed not only as fundamental but also as fundamentally expressible, containable by language because the emotions associated with these platonic relationships are more common and familiar than those associated with



romantic love and sexual desire” (71). Tumblr and Twitter users do not succumb to what marketing instructs them to focus on. Online social media users find relatability with the characters, other Tumblr and Twitter users, and author Sarah Dessen. Observing this resistance, I will correlate discourse found across Tumblr and Twitter with a spectrum of topics in Dessen’s novels to exemplify how the novels and protagonists resonate with readers beyond the obligatory romantic inclusion.

Sarah Dessen did not initially set out to write for a young adult audience. Yet she created her niche with her first novel *That Summer* (1996), when her agent marketed her novels as YA (Glenn 23). Dessen’s extensive literary work for two decades has made her a popular author and garnered her numerous recognitions, such as being listed multiple times on the American Library Association annual lists of “Best Fiction for Young Adults.” Many of her novels have ended up on the New York Times best sellers list, and her novels are sold worldwide in multiple languages. Since the growing pains of *That Summer*’s female protagonist Haven, Dessen has published eleven novels and cultivated a strong fan base. As she began her career in YAL, with her writing marketed for female teen readers, she set out to create books that teen readers would be able to correlate with the trials and tribulations that plague them. Scholar Wendy J. Glenn asserts about *That Summer*, “Dessen never set out to write a book for young adults. The novel just happens to be a book with a teenage narrator. It is the voice of this young protagonist, however, that makes the book most accessible to and engaging for teen readers, especially girls” (23).

Sarah Dessen’s first six novels range from the year 1996 to 2004: *That Summer*, *Someone Like You*, *Keeping the Moon*, *Dreamland*, *This Lullaby*, and *The Truth about Forever*. These novels were written before the formation of Tumblr (2007) and Twitter (2006). Presently, in

April 2016, these novels continue to be thoroughly referenced and discussed online as they continue to resonate with the generation who grew up reading Dessen's novels and with those who are only beginning. Dessen's last six novels begin at *Just Listen* (2006) and the dawn of Twitter, and *Lock & Key* came a year after Tumblr founder David Karp presented his website to the public in 2007. Soon thereafter, *Along for the Ride* made its way onto bookshelves in 2009. In the years ranging from 2011 to 2015, the online YAL community has received *What Happened to Good-bye* (2011), *The Moon and More* (2013), and *Saint Anything* (2015). These last six novels, representing a second phase of Dessen's career, were presented to us from the beginning of figuring out the use of social media to the acceptance of social media.

Dessen was writing YAL for a decade before the boom of Twitter (2006) and Tumblr (2007), but twenty years after *That Summer*, her first novel continues to be discussed within social media. In 2016, writers are expected to market themselves on social media, to make themselves available to their readers in order to gain popularity. This is something publishers instruct to authors needing to acquire a solid following. Dessen differs from this new wave of YAL writers because she gained a strong following online ten years before having a strong social media presence became the social norm for authors and readers. Dessen began her blogging on LiveJournal, a blogging or journal type media site created in 1999. Her time on LiveJournal extended from 2001 to 2011, at which point she transitioned to her own website to create blog posts for her readers. Since then, she has been active on social media sites Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram where she engages in active discourse with other users and authors. In April 2016, Dessen won the Shorty Award, an award given to authors for their content throughout social media. On April 11, 2016, Dessen tweeted that she won for best author

on social media tying with *Harry Potter*'s creator J.K. Rowling. This recognition signals the importance of social media for reception of Dessen's fiction.

Analyzing a variety of tweets and blogs throughout Twitter and Tumblr, I initiated a critical analysis on how Sarah Dessen's novels are discussed. This online discourse counters the way the books are marketed online and in stores to readers as simply "Teen Romance." My underlying approach is reader response criticism for the presented online discourse, a "legitimate influence over the way we make sense of texts" (Falconer 233). In reader response, meaning is constructed collaboratively by readers in dialogue. A demographic of age and gender can only be implied due to online user photos, usernames, and Tumblr themes. The posts are left neutral, and I am assuming no ages or genders, instead using the plural of they/them instead of singular pronouns she/her or he/him. This pronoun choice is a deliberate one made due to my beliefs about gender identity as well as due to being unable to know about the authors of the online postings. The dates on posts from Twitter and Tumblr range from Winter 2006 to Spring 2016. As I gathered the data, in my searches through Twitter and Tumblr, I utilized the title of the novel and author. I organized an array of feedback from readers associated with a topic from a novel from YAL author Sarah Dessen, and I evaluated the way the topic resonated with the reader from their tweet or blog post.

This thesis is influenced by critical work such as Danah Boyd's *It's Complicated* (2014), Sara K. Day's *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature* (2013), and Wendy J. Glenn's *Sarah Dessen: From Burritos to Box Office* (2005). These three main texts are the framework for assisting in my discussion of how social media is utilized and what is being discussed online, engaging with Day's critical examination of

narrative intimacy, and applying Glenn's content analysis of themes in Dessen's first decade of literary work.

For many people, engaging in social media is another form of unnecessary distraction aiding in the ever present procrastination. Social media is often seen as a waste of time where people participate in mindless conversations. However, social media discourse has proven how online communication innovates the way we converse with one another, and it is here to stay. Observed online are the readers of Sarah Dessen's novels who seek her and others out in personalized messages. In a 2013 online response to Sarah Dessen formulated by one of her many readers, they created a connection and relayed the importance of Dessen and her characters during their reading experience. This is presented in Day's chapter "Fan Fiction and The Reimagining of Narrative Intimacy" in *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*. Day's study argues how narrative intimacy progresses into "author-narrator-reader relationship" in an online space geared towards the online presence of Sarah Dessen, but Day also believes this can be negative (181). How individuals engage with others online is necessary to continue research in online discourse. In *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, Boyd focuses on the online teenaged experience. Boyd notes that teenagers are constantly being updated as they grow up in a networked society. Boyd's overall research provides insights into how social media is being used and what is being discussed on social media.

The tweets and Tumblr posts in chapter three are dated from posts on an array of Twitter and Tumblr accounts, 2006 to 2016. The tweets and blog posts are linked with topics found throughout Sarah Dessen's novels ranging from the release of *That Summer* (1996), *Someone Like You* (1998), *Keeping the Moon* (1999), *Dreamland* (2000), *This Lullaby* (2002), and *The*

*Truth About Forever* (2004). In chapter four, archived tweets from multiple users were chosen closer to the release dates of Sarah Dessen's *Just Listen* (2006), *Lock and Key* (2008), *Along for the Ride* (2009), *What Happened to Goodbye* (2011), *The Moon and More* (2013), and *Saint Anything* (2015). These novels were released within the last decade of Twitter and Tumblr. The submitted tweets were correlated with Tumblr posts to exhibit the divergence in responses.

By collecting tweets ranging from 2006 to 2016 and a variety of Tumblr blog posts, along with the support of scholarly work, I argue for the importance of analyzing social media discourse. Attesting to the academic validity of my research, Chareen L. Snelson's 2016 article "Qualitative and Mixed Methods Social Media Research: A Review of the Literature" states, "Social media technologies have attracted substantial attention among many users including researchers," with 229 journal articles analyzing social media published in any discipline between 2007 and 2013 (1). Snelson's extensive research methods and content analysis on social media show the necessity of social media in academic research. Snelson further notes that methods and terminology are not yet fully established for research with social media (12).

Lyndsey S. Collins' 2015 study is a content analysis on an individual blog found on Tumblr, "Women Against Feminism." In their research, they review the discourse and figures found throughout the blog to comprehend the anti-feminist movement. Following Collins' approach to their study, I quote generously from social media. Within this thesis are Tumblr blogs dedicated to Dessen's novels, conversation on their love and appreciation of many characters found within the pages of Dessen's novels, and interpretation of aesthetically pleasing photos provided by a multitude of blogs. In comparison, tweets found on Tumblr are provided and analyzed. By observing the way others administer blog content, an analysis on a blog, blog

posts, and tweets is made in correlation with the literary work authored by Sarah Dessen to refute the unnecessary marketing of Dessen's novels as simply romance oriented.

Using Sarah Dessen's twelve novels as examples of the variation within readers' responses to her novels through social media discourse, my findings survey a variety of online discourse about topics of relatability to the protagonist, friendship, and family relationships. Sarah Dessen's novels are marketed as "Teen/YA Romance," but I refute the way Dessen's novels are marketed for readers and exemplify the more diverse ways her novels are examined online.

## CHAPTER II

### #SARAHDESSEN

Twitter and Tumblr each carry a distinguishable voice, personality, and audience. We as an easily intrigued audience have included ourselves in the construction of articles going viral. There are many voices online, and each platform has many opinions. By engaging with social media, having a large amount of voices from distinct platforms they provide an endless amount of information. If an individual were to scroll through their diverse forms of online social interaction, they would be met with rampant discord. While social media provides fascinating observations, a limitation is that it can leave you dumbfounded with the flood of disparate opinions. The freedom to speak and provide opinion on any topic being presented on someone's dashboard, newsfeed, and twitter feed brings along difficulties and pitfalls.

On Tumblr, bloggers write as if fiction is reality through their own critique of prominent YA authors such as Sarah Dessen. In Sara K. Day's *Reading Like a Girl: Narrative Intimacy in Contemporary American Young Adult Literature*, she writes, "These comments, which cast fictional characters as peers, relatives, and especially friends, provide insight into a desire on the part of many adolescent women readers to identify so strongly with characters that the line between fictional story and real reading experience can be blurred or disregarded entirely" (1). The characters in Sarah Dessen's novels are presented in a realistic manner which creates the impression of relatability and friendship among Dessen's readers. Through comments left on

Tumblr and Twitter, readers use the freedom of leaving a review or comment easily. Tumblr, with over 420 million users, is a space that allows anonymity to be who you really are. For a teenager, this liberation is important to individuality. Many find Tumblr as their signifying platform of their own personal freedom where they can be who they are. Tumblr users, who often self-identify as the social justice warriors of the internet, concern themselves with current social issues. Because of this, Tumblr users freely voice their own concerns with Sarah Dessen when it comes to female representation. Commentary is essentially positive, but negative commentary does occur, and occasionally, writers will respond to anonymous feedback from readers. On Tumblr, readers have the ability to leave scathing remarks about an author or to anonymously message popular YA authors. As YA writers know who their main demographic is, many YA authors utilize Tumblr to have a place to speak to their audience and their fellow readers.

Twitter presents itself as a platform that provides the opportunity to be as anonymous as Tumblr yet limits posts to 140 characters or less. On Twitter, in 140 characters or less, a person has the capacity to engage in social media in a positive manner or make a statement that could be a disastrous choice for their personal and professional lives. Twitter discontinues commentary after one hundred and forty characters. This does require a simpler approach in social media discourse. If we are to witness multiple updates regarding the same issue, the handler behind the twitter tends to be passionate about the topic. On Twitter, if someone is discussing Dessen, it is a quick comment or a link leading to a thorough discussion on another website. Noticeably, Twitter users tend to present themselves rather publicly due to the various ways of marketing themselves and others online. As they are marketing themselves or perhaps, sending off



commentary into what many people consider the void of the internet, they are providing unwarranted discourse for those around them online. In a single tweet of a hundred and forty characters or less, Twitter users are able to construct a substantial dialogue on an endless amount of topics.

In Danah Boyd's *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, she explores friendship, privacy, bullying, inequality, literacy throughout social networking, and the effects of social media generationally. Boyd's work exposes the countless issues that plague social media. Tumblr, with the age limit of fourteen and up, has the highest level of freedom as it provides anonymity for those who wish to express themselves freely. Those on Tumblr do not shy away from topics that push social boundaries. Because of this anonymity on the internet, Tumblr users cross boundaries, acquire independence, and arrive at who they want to be (Boyd 28). This leads to my inquiry on what teenagers and adults are doing online. What is it about something that nestles comfortably inside something as miniscule as a smartphone yet has the capability to socially connect people to a particular interest? In Koss and Teale's 2009 article "What's Happening in YA Literature? Trends in Books for Adolescents," they argue about constant internet access that "Information comes at us piecemeal, causing the need to blend multiple perspectives and points of views into one cohesive whole" (570). Different opinions can be easily accessed by internet users, and the discourse can be analyzed to determine how the young adult literature genre is depicted throughout Tumblr and Twitter.

On the fifth of June in 2014, Slate writer Ruth Graham made a daring declaration in her "Against YA" article. This article went viral throughout the internet before the anticipated release of the film adaptation John Green's novel *The Fault in Our Stars*. "Adults should feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children," Graham unabashedly proclaimed. As I was browsing through my social media newsfeeds, "Against YA" was met with shock on how it was trending, indicating a strong disagreement about Graham's opposition of YAL being read by adults. Graham had managed to enrage

a particular reading group of this genre: adults. While sifting through the comments and observing the uproar, I noted that Graham had caused an upheaval of comments by readers who spoke out against this attack on their favorite genre of literature. Many commenters felt attacked by this article and felt compelled to say so. On Slate.com, user CLynn wrote:

Wow. Do you just need a reason to feel superior? I find it narrow-minded that you seem to believe that any adult that reads YA novels couldn't possibly read anything more "grown-up", too. Maybe some people enjoy a variety of genre in their literature. It is possible for a person to enjoy and appreciate five-star, fine dining while still enjoying the perfect fast food burger and fries. I'm just sayin' (let me guess, colloquialisms are beneath you, too?). Also, the real pressing question, to me, is, why do you even care? Who are you to decide who should be embarrassed about what they read? Why don't we just trust that grown people can decide for themselves how to spend their time and money? Worry about you.

This user had a strong reaction to Ruth Graham's implicit attack on their intelligence. Many other users felt likewise that they could read what they wanted, regardless of age range. Graham's article had the ability to warrant a strong reaction from readers and in doing so, provoked thousands of comments that began a conversation on the negative perception individuals have on young adult literature.

Perceptive of what she was accomplishing, Graham wrote this article by stating her low estimation of young adult literature. Shortly before she makes her scathing criticism of the readers of YAL, Graham writes, "But reading YA doesn't make for much of a confession these days: A 2012 survey by a market research firm found that 55 percent of these books are bought by people older than 18. (The definition of YA is increasingly fuzzy, but it generally refers to books written for 12- to 17-year-olds. Meanwhile, the cultural definition of "young adult" now stretches practically to age 30, which

may have something to do with this whole phenomenon.) The largest group of buyers in that survey—accounting for a whopping 28 percent of all YA sales—are between ages 30 and 44. That’s my demographic, which might be why I wasn’t surprised to hear this news. I’m surrounded by YA-loving adults, both in real life and online” (Graham). For Graham, twenty-eight percent of sales in an older demographic was an excessive amount of people who were reading these novels. Graham inveighs against the amount of adults reading YAL. The comments acquired by her article are not favorable, but are incensed comments directed at Graham for her criticism of adult readers of the YAL genre. As Graham continues:

Let’s set aside the transparently trashy stuff like *Divergent* and *Twilight*, which no one defends as serious literature. I’m talking about the genre the publishing industry calls “realistic fiction.” These are the books, like *The Fault in Our Stars*, that are about real teens doing real things, and that rise and fall not only on the strength of their stories but, theoretically, on the quality of their writing. These are the books that could plausibly be said to be replacing literary fiction in the lives of their adult readers. And that’s a shame.

(Graham)

Graham is not only attacking adult readers, but all readers of these novels. For teen readers, these novels are “serious literature” for them. They carry these novels with them as they walk around their communities and should be able to do so without being susceptible to public ridicule. Teenaged readers create entire fandoms for these fictional characters. Curiously so, it is a wonder how readers online are affected by the literary work itself. Graham also seems intent on preserving hierarchies of books by contrasting literary fiction to inferior works that are “a shame.” This piece became Graham’s most popular Slate article, prompting some to speculate she wrote it as clickbait. Regarding Sarah Dessen, online commentary on Tumblr and Twitter challenges the way media perpetuates the way things should

be read because the varied online YAL communities have the capability to resist the marketing and provide their own interpretation of a Dessen novel.

“Attacks on YA books are nothing new,” states Chris Crowe, a scholar of YAL and also an author of YAL, in his 2001 article “Young Adult Literature: The Problem with YA Literature.” “For more than a century there have been vocal parents, teachers, and librarians who have attacked books written specifically for teenagers. Their complaints have varied over the years, but most objections generally fall into one of two categories: YA books are bad because 1. They aren’t the Classics. 2. They corrupt the young” (146). Aside from these complaints, online discourse by readers treats Dessen’s books seriously and sees classic potential in contemporary books.

When someone reads the novels of Sarah Dessen, they conclude their reading experience having been met with an array of characters who vary in characteristics and personal issues. For instance, Haven, from Dessen’s first novel *That Summer* (1996), is going through a season of change because of situations that are beyond her control and are evolving in front of her. The setting is summer, and Haven is transitioning through the tumultuous times that are the teenaged years. Implementing summer in her novels is something Dessen is known for, as the setting provides seasonal background of development for her characters. Readers gain the ability to identify with someone like them while they are going through or have gone through their own transformation outside of the schooling that structures most of adolescent life. They gain the impression that they are not alone in their personal lives, and they progress into another perspective when they scroll through conversations online on *That Summer*.

A veteran YAL writer, Dessen is someone who comprehends what works for her in terms of her character creations. Dessen consistently refers to herself and the issues she dealt with growing up and transmits her personal situations onto paper by giving her protagonist a voice and personality. Characters will weave within each other’s stories, never to be forgotten by her loyal readers. Dessen

presents less than perfect lives for her teenaged female protagonist, the gender she is comfortable voicing. Dessen has created a fictional and intimate environment for many of her characters, but critics can explore how these moments of intimacy into the minds of her characters are regarded by her readers as reported on social media.

Dessen creates fictional narratives based on realistic teenage situations where teenagers find themselves negotiating with discovering their self-identity and handling the conflicted emotions which plague them daily. As they are addressing these new found emotions and arduously seeking their own way of being as they transition into adulthood, Dessen's protagonists range from fifteen years old to eighteen years of age. These are the ages where many discover a new sense of identity within their development. In Dessen's cluster of female protagonists, she has them interact with serious issues such as teenage pregnancy, death, parental and sibling abandonment, friendship, abusive relationships, body image, and low self-esteem while dealing with internal arguments as they process these newfound conflicts within their growth.

The situations Dessen's characters find themselves in are typical and middle class, but Dessen keeps consistency in her characters with new situations for her loyal readers. Koss and Teale discuss the frequent subject matter within YA novels and their realization of what YA entails for readers:

Traditionally, YA books have been identified as “problem novels” – novels with social issues that affect teens—and coming-of-age novels—books that deal with a significant event in a teenager's life that transforms one from childhood/adolescence to adulthood. The content analysis suggested that, although YA novels do still focus on social issues, there has been a shift from the big event/coming-of-age stories to a more general focus on teens struggling to find themselves and dealing with typical teenage life. (567)

Koss and Teale observed this switch in YAL content as early as 1999, but Sarah Dessen, having published her first novel in 1996, has always written realistic fiction that included yet went beyond social problems. Rather than utilizing social issues to discuss formulation of her character's advancement when it comes to their internal arguments with themselves, she focuses on the individual whose mind Dessen has designed for her readers. Dessen portrays a teen discovering herself while dealing with common issues which resonate with many of her readers.

While romance is an element of Sarah Dessen's novels, it is not the goal of her novels. In *Keeping the Moon*, Colie is dealing with body image issues and the alienation of those she thought she could trust. Annabel in *Just Listen* has to deal with the severity of sexual assault and the rumors which surround her due to the betrayal of her friends, and she ends up finding solace in the eclectic character Owen Armstrong. The function of Dessen's novels is to allow readers to identify with characters and problematic issues that could be plaguing her readers and thus to find a friend, to find someone sympathetic to identify with. Reading Dessen's novels could be the cathartic experience her readers are seeking out when they choose one of her novels. The female protagonists are multifaceted, each facing an array of issues, something teenagers and adults online recognize as prevalent with Dessen's novels. When each character is dealing with the proposed predicaments Dessen places them in, they often find solace in a core group of friendship as they process their emotions surrounding these dilemmas in their lives.

Throughout young adult literature, as in adolescent life, a frequently found thematic element is friendship. Noting the elements that make up a young adult novel, friendship will take precedence as the muted point of a novel that is casually placed in the backseat of a YAL storyline. Eventually, the bonds and strengths of friendship prevail throughout YAL. Sara K. Day argues how discovering oneself or seeking out a friend within a novel is an important and intimate moment for young and older readers.

However, Day does contend the false expectations that can arrive with YAL novels and believes readers could develop an inability to distinguish fiction from reality (3). Continuing, Day discusses the “blurring of boundaries” which will create “narrative intimacy” in readers, “by constructing narrator-reader relationships that reflect, model, and reimagine intimate interpersonal relationships through the disclosure of information and the experience of the story as a space that the narrator invites the reader to share” (3). To seek insight from a story can be a positive reading experience for many readers because of the relationship it creates between the narrator and the reader. This dynamic is seen throughout social media as they convey their personal reviews and feedback to other readers on the internet.

Dessen has the skill to provide realistic situations and make them into entertaining, yet valuable fictional quality. Dessen has cultivated a strong following of readers due to writing about her surroundings and the inspiration she found through those around her (Glenn 18), and readers found Dessen and her characters accessible. In doing so, Dessen faithfully visits themes of relationship, personal identity, community, and grants her characters’ access to embracing humor through the challenges of life.

In the summer of 2013, during the release of Dessen’s eleventh novel *The Moon and More*, Penguin Young Readers Group created a colorful brochure to market the intimate online access to Dessen that her readers would receive if they joined Dessen’s fan website and “The Summer of Sarah.” By joining this seasonal event, they would be welcomed into an online community and an assemblage of the “summer of Sarah” book club kit to further initiate local book clubs into participating in this YAL event (Sarah Dessen Brochure). The inclusion of this event was to implement the ideology of being able to gain one on one access to Sarah Dessen as a popular YAL author and to feel as if the reader was constructing a friendship with her. At the time of this event in 2013, social media was and continues to

be a popular online space, but Dessen, who had been blogging on LiveJournal since 2001, continued to embrace new ways to communicate with her fan base.

In the Summer of Sarah book club, the contemporary way of connecting with her readers was by initiating a book club coordinator who would take on a leadership role in creating an intimate platform for her readers and who would discuss Dessen's novels and themes. Continuing with Dessen's frequent summer setting for her novels, the proposed book club would make readers think about what her characters go through in their own season of change. By doing this, they would be able to correlate their season of change and carefree attitude that continues to remain in a person's life by combining summer to their own evolution. Since summer contributes to this attitude, Penguin made sure to include things such as entertaining quizzes, a dessert recipe from Sarah Dessen, and music selected by Dessen for her readers to listen to while they enjoyed this summer book club event. This contradicts how Dessen's novels are normally marketed as romance because the goal of the book club is to instill a sense of community among Dessen's readers.

Day describes this contemporary way of interacting with readers through online fan bases by observing how one reader felt the need to provide commentary to a post by Dessen "This post, penned in response to a post by Dessen herself in which she thanks all of the members of Sarah-Land for joining the community, demonstrates the possibility of readers extending narrative intimacy beyond the narrator-reader relationship and, in the process, informing some fans' understanding of the author-narrator-reader relationship and of lived experiences of intimacy more generally" (181-182). By choosing to instigate a "summer of Sarah" event for readers, they are left exploring their own interpersonal relationship with Dessen and her characters. This event instigates readers to develop narrative intimacy with the program, Dessen's previous novels, and the then-new, eleventh novel, *The Moon and More*. When Penguin created an online space for readers, they introduced another form of



connecting readers to Dessen, characters, and other readers. But readers also crave online spaces where they can direct the conversation through their own transition.

By integrating the representation of Tumblr and Twitter discourse and observing the varied discussion on Sarah Dessen's array of novels, social media provides a progressive way for popular readers to analyze literary work. On social media, analyzing categorically through certain subtopics of friendship and relatability provides diverse reader response to Dessen's body of work. Since subtopics of body image, response to family issues, low self-esteem, and a sense of identity affect Dessen's female protagonists, many users' posts respond to these topics as they are able to identify with the growing pains of transitioning into adulthood. By representing a multitude of discourse through Tumblr and Twitter, we are able to observe how online communities receive Dessen's literature. Some read the friendship through a feminist lens:

@veronikellymars: Has anyone mentioned Sarah Dessen's books as feminist yet?  
Because they are. #yafeministchat

@ashleyhblake: @catagator: YES. I was just thinking this. Pretty much every single one.  
THIS LULLABY & JUST LISTEN really influenced me. #yafeministchat

@jessicajbeck: YES. all protagonists are grappling w/identity & developing a variety of relationships, not just romantic. #yafeministchat

@veronikellymars: @ashleyhblank With fully realized, respected female characters.

@veronikellymarks: @jessicajbeck Exactly!

Throughout this conversation of tweets and re-tweets, readers are noting the positive implications they have acquired through reading Dessen's novels. They are able to identify with the characters and

understand how there is more to Dessen's characters than only a romance storyline. In this online exchange, readers are discussing the influence and feminism of Dessen's novels by including the hashtag #yafeministchat. By linking Sarah Dessen to this hashtag, it will provide emphasis on her online significance throughout Twitter. The online community growing around Dessen's books is based on mutual identification and support.

The novels of Sarah Dessen are marketed as romance under the assumption that Dessen creates her novels and female protagonists for a female audience who stereotypically would succumb to the colorful book covers and romance oriented marketing. In an interview with [www.perpetualpageturner.com](http://www.perpetualpageturner.com)'s interviewer Jamie in May 2015, Dessen disapproves of this marketing scheme by stating her constant frustration at being pigeonholed as teen romance in the advertisement of her books:

I am the first to say I don't have a ton of boy fans but I do have some, ya know, and they come through and I don't think books are male or female anything. Books are just universal. Books are for everybody. I understand the sales technique in these bigger bookstores trying to compartmentalize but I think it works against it and it's frustrating (Jamie).

Under the assumption that Dessen's novels are geared or perhaps, created for a particular gender, ostracizing males is a risk publishers are taking. Literature should be considered gender inclusive and should not be marketed a novel as reading material for women or reading material for men. Dessen thinks the bookstores' marketing strategies are counterproductive, and she does not perceive her readership as female.

## CHAPTER III

### KEEPING UP WITH SOCIAL MEDIA: ONLINE READER RESPONSE TO DESSEN'S EARLY NOVELS

When Sarah Dessen began her writing career in 1996 with *That Summer*, it was a decade before the instigation of Tumblr and Twitter. In 2016, readers continue to unearth and express their personal association with Dessen's characters. Providing evidence from users on Tumblr and Twitter, in this chapter social media discourse will be combined with topics found throughout the first six novels from Dessen ranging from the year 1996 to 2004. With topics varying from emotional distress due to impending change to parental death, readers who are active on Tumblr and Twitter explore their relatability to the female protagonists, their friendships, family dynamics, and romantic relationships. They also use keywords or hashtags to further the discussion with others online. This augments their understanding in being able to identify, along with other online users, with Dessen's many characters.

In Wendy J. Glenn's *Sarah Dessen: From Burritos to Box Office*, Glenn recognizes how teenagers identify with the repercussions that arrive with change: "Female readers will identify with 'how it feels when your childhood friend is suddenly boy crazy, and you can't understand the language; how it hurts to break the 'tether' with your mother and to be disappointed by a charming boy.' They will respect the narrator's voice" (24). The narrator's voice is generated by Sarah Dessen. She is able to give life to her characters by connecting with her characters on a personal level. Glenn writes that Dessen, "...admits that her own teen years were 'plagued with

this awful uncertainty' and insecurity about who she was and her place in the world" (Glenn 7). Dessen finds relatability with her characters, and her own perceptions of her own life are transformed for her readers. This is where her many readers gain the ability to find a friend in Dessen and in the creation of her eclectic group of female protagonists.

### ***That Summer of Exploration***

Haven, Dessen's first female protagonist from *That Summer*, is the quiet narrator whom we follow as she deals with the issues Dessen has conceived for her that will leave readers establishing a connection with Haven. In *That Summer*, Haven is subjected to a monumental amount of change that in turn leads to her own transformation. On Twitter, seen is the occurrence of combining summer and Sarah Dessen:

@anapaolaramosm1: I am reading *That Summer* by Sarah Dessen and my favorite setting is at the beach. #thompstweets

@kristenwalczak: i just bought a sarah dessen book and that's how you know it's summer

@sarahschriner: Guess it's that time of the summer where I'm gonna have to start re-reading Sarah Dessen books.

We are given the setting of summer for Haven because as teenagers who left the semester to enjoy their summer, returning a bit different to a fall semester is a regular occurrence. The setting is secured, the teen issues are in place, and Haven is ready for a progressive summer.

Tumblr blog "book—quotes" quotes an extended passage from *That Summer*:

It's funny how one summer can change everything. It must be something about the heat and the smell of chlorine, fresh-cut grass and honeysuckle, asphalt sizzling after late-day thunderstorms, the steam rising while everything drips around it. Something about long, lazy days and whirring air conditioners and bright plastic flip-flops from the drugstore thwacking down the street. Something about fall being so close, another year, another Christmas, another beginning. So much in one summer, stirring up like the storms that crest at the end of each day, blowing out all the heat and dirt to leave everything gasping and cool. Everyone can reach back to one summer and lay a finger to it, finding the exact point when everything changed. That summer was mine. (book—quotes)

The quotation taken from *That Summer* is placed against a simple, white backdrop. In the simplicity of its posting, it garnered eighty-five notes. On Tumblr, notes are the likes and reblogs of Tumblr users. The eighty-five notes suggest readers agree on how tumultuous and ever changing that particular season can be for someone. The numerous notes also indicate a sense of nostalgia for Dessen's first novel. The necessity to include summer as the backdrop for a season of change allows us to explore with Haven as she reflects upon the impending difficulties of growing up. Even in a carefree atmosphere, one must be prepared.

As a teenager, change is a burdensome thing to deal with along with other attributes that describe being a teenager. When things that you were not prepared for pile up, you are assumed to be able to deal with things adults would find the norm, because they have already grown up. On Tumblr, users abundantly quote from *That Summer* the issues that come along with change, dealing with heartbreak, whether it arrive from friendship or family, and the first feeling of being let down. The female protagonist, Haven, is distraught with the restricted element of change.

Haven does come off as dealing with things dramatically by constantly exclaiming how she wishes to return back to what she used to know and briefly breaking down under the pressure of change. Many young readers can find consolation in this due to how it shows them Haven is dealing with things normally. While someone of an older age group might deem her behavior as melodramatic, Haven is facing things that are new and surprising for her and is unable to process her emotions to the change enveloping her.

Dessen includes an older male character, Sumner, who can be the understanding ally through all of this and is able to lend a helping hand for Haven as she slowly facilitates her transformation. Sumner is the ex-boyfriend of Haven's soon-to-be married older sister, Ashley. She will be marrying someone else after the previous exit of Sumner from her life. The character of Sumner is inclined to be the representation of what was as he returns to the season that used to be a carefree image for Haven due to her own happiness at witnessing the contentment of those around her. Through all of this, Haven is merely thinking of her own happiness. Consistently blaming those around her for her own sadness and disillusion for the sudden implementation of change in her life, Haven has yet to accept this process in life. When Haven is able to accept what is happening around her, she does in a climactic manner and runs away from those who caused her to recognize how she needed to adapt to the transformations of her life.

Haven shows the inevitability of change in a teenager's life. Dessen creates an intimacy with the narrator, as she provides the words that exemplify how necessary it is to have a friend with the exception of understanding to be careful where you allow your trust to lie. Haven attempted to find solace in another person, Sumner, only to be let down. For the second time, she would be let down by a male figure in her life. The split between her father and mother caused by an affair on her father's part was the first to disappoint Haven. Sumner was someone

she thought she could trust, but her sister, Ashley, reveals how Sumner cheated on her with another woman:

“It is true. I loved Sumner and he hurt me badly.’ She reached up to brush my hair out of my face, an awkward gesture, a try at tenderness, ‘It’s not always so simple, Haven. Sometimes there isn’t a good guy and a bad guy. Sometimes even the ones you want to believe turn out to be liars” (Dessen 191).

Dessen gave Haven the ability to identify reality from fantasy by applying a lesson from Haven’s sister, whom she had long resented, for being another individual who brought change into her life.

### ***Finding Someone Like You***

*Someone Like You*, released in 1998, is about a friendship with an impenetrable bond between Halley and Scarlett. They are best friends who share everything and who are never away from one another. The lesson that arrives to test the bonds of their friendship is the passing of Scarlett’s boyfriend who leaves her pregnant after one sexual encounter. Dessen’s second novel brought us the ever popular quotation that is currently seen throughout social media platforms, “Life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend” (23). Found on Tumblr, the quotation is familiar across social media as a way of sharing the familiarity of friendship. This quote is taken and nestled comfortably on an array of backgrounds that display dramatic seasonal backgrounds, friends holding hands as they walk along the beach. Sharing with friends is a way of cementing the necessity of their friendships with one another. People do this by sharing this quotation throughout the platforms of Twitter and Tumblr.

In March 2016, Tumblr has three blogs dedicated to the analysis of *Someone Like You*. Each blog varies in the way they discuss the novel. Blog number one, titled “Someone Like You” with the tagline “The story of a beautiful friendship,” introduces itself with this tagline to their visitors, which further exemplifies how this user and others will be analyzing the novel. It is a story of friendship. Throughout this blog we see multiple journal entries which date back to December of 2011. Within each entry, the Tumblr user breaks down the novel into sections, much like a literary article might do. But when this individual separates the novel into parts, they correlate each part with their own life. In one entry, previously mentioned is “Life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend” the observation is:

The message that this novel displays is that ‘...life is an ugly, awful place to not have a best friend’ as Halley mentions on page 23. To me, this is completely valid because in life you just need someone there that gets you. They count on you to be strong for them just as you count on them to be strong for you, and also life would just be so lonely and have no meaning without anyone to share it with.

(someonelikeyou-sarahdessen-blog)

This line in *Someone Like You* resonates with many readers due to the ease of its applicability to everyday friendship and the issues that are faced throughout relationships. A seemingly transparent quotation with twelve words has continuously made its appearance throughout social media. On Twitter, while we do not see users as dedicated to this novel as Tumblr users, we do see the sharing of this quote. Many Twitter users find themselves quoting this novel and detect relatability with others in suggesting this novel to others on Twitter due to its understanding of friendship and the trials that come with it:



@ilikevina: @Keah\_Maria @NerdHeather Ooh!! Tell us more! Which books would you recommend? We're all about friendship

@ilikevina @NerdHeather: definitely The sisterhood of the traveling pants series and someone like you by Sarah Dessen

Users @ilikevina and @Keah\_Maria engage in an online Twitter discussion on what novels to read and the importance on the inclusion of friendship within their suggestions. Continuing with suggesting *Someone Like You* to others:

@DarianNipper: I need some good books to read, any suggestions??

@shelbyrbeller: @DarianNipper: someone like you, along for the ride, or saint anything, all by Sarah Dessen, they're so good!!

User @DarianNipper reaches out to other Twitter users by merely asking for some book suggestions. In return, they achieve an enthusiastic reply from another reader who not only suggests *Someone Like You*, but also two other novels and then, extends their suggestions by implying to the reader that all twelve novels by Sarah Dessen relate to friendship.

Uniquely, blog two stands apart from blog one through the array of questions asked within the main page. The blogger and comment describe the characters and plots to their audience and ask and answer. Questions such as, "What message did you get from this novel? How was it conveyed?" and they arrive to a common response that is given to *Someone Like You*:

I think there are two big messages in this novel. One being friendship. Dessen shows us this just by Halley and Scarlett always being there for each other. She doesn't show anything huge. Just them being there for each other throughout the

whole book. The second message is peer pressure. She talks a lot about peer pressure and the struggle with the teenagers in the book to say no to many different things. They face the struggle with saying no to sex, drugs, and alcohol.

Those are the two main messages in this book. (someonelikeyouusarahdessen)

Blog two analyzes the coming of age theme within the novel and the pressures teenagers go through when it comes to the social pressures of sexuality. This is something we observe when it comes to the teenage pregnancy of Scarlett and how the death of her boyfriend is an added obstacle in her life and in her friendship with Halley as she is dealing with her own personal issues. Halley navigates through her own life lessons while making sure she is still there for Scarlett during this turbulent time. It is up to Halley to forego the pressures that come along with being a teenager such as being offered drugs and alcohol and dealing with her potential love interest in Macon. Even though both Halley and Scarlett are dealing with concerns beyond their control, what stands out is their love for one another and the strength of their friendship.

Lastly, blog number three is distinct in how it presents itself and how it is titled as being a part of an English course that most likely required these blogs to be created. Again, we see a blog entry, but at the top of the page we see three separate comments from others who provided commentary to the journal entries about the novel. Each entry is based on parts of the novel. The entries provide a summary, analytical paragraph on a contributed theme from the blog creator, and interactive response from the Tumblr user. These entries also deal with friendship in peer pressure. Yet, while the blog is similar to the other proposed blogs due to the related themes, this blog presents its individuality with the inclusion of interactive response, being the only blog interacting with other readers. For this response, the user is correlating the issues they have

observed throughout the novel with their own lives and has provided an emotional attachment to certain scenes in the novel.

The earliest post within the blog has three separate comments, presumably commentary provided by classmates:

“Janelle C.: After reading your interactive response, I agree that many teens do drugs, drink or smoke and there's always that one person who tries to help you. it's great to see that Halley and Scarlett's friendship lasts throughout the novel even though they go through so much”.

Vivian Y.: I might have a different perspective of the story from you, but to me, the storyline seems a bit cliché. However, your interactive responses catches my attention as I feel the same way as you do. People do lose loved ones and become weak, and it is true that there is always someone -- a friend, sister, or their other halves -- to assist them through the situation. After reading your response, I think i can relate to the book even better”

Cathy X: Was it difficult to keep track of all the different characters? Your summaries make the book sound really interesting, although I usually steer clear of books centered on love stories, I might give this one a try” (pwenglish11term3)

In comment number one, we are able to observe how Janelle C. concludes the novel is about friendship, agrees the significant bond Halley and Scarlett have gone through in a short period of time, and describes the social pressures which arrive with being a teenager. Vivian Y's commentary differs because this person has ultimately decided the story is repetitive and “cliché”, but does not go on to explain how the story can be concluded as such, instead finding

common ground in friendship. Last, Cathy X's response is their concern on keeping track of an array of characters and focuses on a side element in the novel when it comes to Macon as Halley's love interest.

This novel centers on the challenges Halley and Scarlett's friendship faced and prevailed. Dessen proves Day's implication on the expectations of readers to have the ability to discover understanding through the language utilized for friendship, a platonic relationship between Halley and Scarlett. Day argues how being able to relate to the language of friendship rather than love or sex is effortless as the emotions found throughout a friendship are generally uncomplicated within their association (71).

*Someone Like You* provides an approach to the complex situations within Halley's life by integrating the necessity of friendship. Dessen accomplishes such by introducing the power of a female bond and individuality. Halley grows into discovering herself in one pivotal year. It is essential to discover the priority on the bond of friendship as a young reader. A young reader can do so online by doing a simple search and discovering an array of varied responses to this particular novel. By initiating the growth of Halley throughout the novel, Dessen begins conversation. While the previously mentioned blogs may be a part of a class assignment, these blogs were constructed for this novel and became public information. When they became public information, they have the capability to initiate conversation within readers because found within certain posts is feedback from various users on Tumblr who have stumbled upon this blog. This is a conversation we can find on Tumblr. Twitter does its duties as a social media platform by having users who impart enthusiasm for *Someone Like You* to other users and bystanders. When this happens it provides a disparity in conversation and is able to associate with Tumblr creating a new discourse.

### **Discovering Relatability within *Keeping the Moon***

*Keeping the Moon* presents body image issues and the insecurities that plague us. The relatability of the novel has continued for readers currently on social media. On March 21, 2012, Tumblr user imestelomel posted:

That's when it hit me. Sarah Dessen's books are special because yes, we can relate to them, but only because she's showing us those different sides of ourselves, just more pronounced in her characters. Those aspects and characteristics that we don't fully understand, or even notice until we see them spelled out in ink and paper. In her characters, I see myself. This wonderful author has given me a gift through her characters, by allowing me to better understand all the little parts of me. (imestelomel)

Relatability is important to young readers. Finding yourself within a fictional character can bring about a certain catharsis, and Tumblr user imestelomel felt this connection with a certain character in a Dessen novel. They felt the need to hashtag *Keeping the Moon* as they told an entire website how essential it was for them to be able to see themselves within Dessen's novels. By recognizing themselves, they were allowed to see a piece of themselves in *Keeping the Moon*'s protagonist, Colie, as she struggles with low self-esteem and body image issues. Dessen does this by magnifying growing concerns among teenagers and the worries that plague them on a daily basis as they navigate through their teenaged years. What imestelomel regards is the multifaceted sides of the characters who have an array of issues that apply to their own lives. It is how Dessen exemplifies these issues that makes it easier to continue through this journey of growth into adulthood.

Colie warrants a passionate response by being a regular teen with the continuing insecurities many teenagers hold onto. When Colie's mother leaves to tour as a popular fitness guru, Colie ends up spending a summer with her aunt in Colby, North Carolina. Again, we see the inclusion of summer as the season for change or perhaps, improvement. The focus of the novel is Colie experiencing what it is like to comprehend her emotions and to be able to rely on others when it is needed. This is challenging for Colie, but when she does discover how to speak to others on how she feels, she is able to develop a healthier approach at better comprehending who she is as an individual. Colie disregards the false assumptions she gained through the eyes of others who taunted her and infiltrated her mentally and emotionally (Glenn 60).

While many users are enthralled by feeling as if someone is writing for them and finding it therapeutic, other users are less overjoyed in this idea. On May 21, 2015, Tumblr user ghilan-naiin declared:

“I hate Sarah Dessen. I hate her protagonists and I hate her premises and I hate her books. But I have never cried more at a book than I cried at *Keeping the Moon*. Because that was a book about me. That was a book that understood what it was like. And I am so grateful” (ghilan-naiin).

What catches attention with this writer's declaration is their upfront hatred for Sarah Dessen and her novels while lamenting over detecting themselves within *Keeping the Moon*. The writer needs to establish their resistance to Dessen before admitting to connecting with the book “about me!” The writer's hate for Dessen is warranted for them due to being able to relate to *Keeping the Moon* and Colie's dilemmas. It can be perceived that because this writer has discovered themselves in Colie, they now have to face their own personal obstacles. What Tumblr user ghilan-naiin gained is an approach to friendship and understanding. Day uses this book as an

example of narrative intimacy, "...aligning the relationships that Colie pursues within the novel with the implied relationship that she develops with the reader" (Day 36).

This comprehension of relatability to a character continues with Tumblr user [bundledupinhislove](#):

In all of my years of being a bookworm and reading every tale that appealed to me, never have I ever experienced such a strong attachment to a novel than what I have when reading, *Keeping the Moon* by Sarah Dessen.

After closing the book on the final page, I have realized that Colie and I, we're both so much alike. We both fought the same battles since we were little, experienced the same exact struggles, and endured similar, discomfoting emotions in life. And I will admit, it is extremely hard coming to terms with yourself and admitting that you *are* different, simply because you don't have an appearance that resemble others. The blessing of beauty that a majority of the girls can pull off so easily. The ideal version of perfection. But surprisingly, I found someone who truly understands me. And yet, her legend continues while being imaginary.

To me, Colie isn't just any ordinary storybook character. Colie is the greatest inspiration to me. She is the helping hand that built my rising self-esteem, the reason as to why my confidence continues to grow tremendously, and the one who taught me the most valuable life lesson, to sincerely appreciate my true being.

And throughout my journey, I know she will forever be with me. Within the home of my heart, my dearest Colie, Morgan, and Isabel will stay. Always.

(bundledupinhislove)

This blogger has a love for reading within a steady stream of literary experience, but unlike any other novel, this is the novel that has stayed with them. They are able to connect with Colie and her dilemmas and the way Colie dealt with her emotions in a variety of struggles in self-esteem and identity issues. For this blogger, Colie was the revelation they needed in order to better comprehend themselves. When this user's confidence has taken on a negative attribute in her life, Colie's story resonates with them. It is a story which lifts them up and raises their growing self-esteem. Dessen's Colie leaves behind a legacy with readers on Tumblr.

Readers on Tumblr have the capability to relay this message to other young readers and give them a character that was absent in their lives. Colie is a character whose story correlates with others on social media, and they are able to relay their own stories within the representation of Colie. She is a character who struggles with emotional and body image issues. The struggles affect her inability to grasp onto friendships because it would mean a part of her would have to strip itself of its insecurities and allow vulnerabilities that would be seen by others. There is a love interest, but Dessen continues to focus on how this protagonist will grow to have a sense of security and trust in being able to garner friendship. The friends she makes in Morgan and Isabel are the companions to her prosperity in her personal growth.



### **Abuse Trigger Warning: *Dreamland***

*Dreamland*, released in 2000, is Dessen's darkest novel and complicates how readers relate to characters due to the inclusion of an abusive relationship for a teenaged character. Where *Keeping the Moon*'s Colie pauses in terms of prosperity in her own lesson in perceptive to her own self-worth, *Dreamland*'s protagonist Caitlin is on a journey to love herself when an abuser, Rogerson Biscoe, is disintegrating Caitlin's potential to free herself from his restraints. When Caitlin's older sister, Cass, runs away from home, she must forage her own way to self-discovery. Caitlin makes a turn into the unknown that is Rogerson.

Recently dated searches for Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland* on Tumblr in March 2016 indicate that this novel is less popular among the avid Dessen readers in the Tumblr community. *Dreamland* is a step away from what Dessen usually writes, and while friendship is there due to the supportive women surrounding Caitlin, it not the focus of the novel. Nevertheless, social media users have been able to integrate themselves into a "narrative intimacy" with Caitlin and Dessen. Both character and author become the friend for these online users. Many users provide their favorite quotes from the novel with the exception of the few who found their existence in the novel. A posting from Tumblr user thefoundingfuckboi on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016 laments:

"I consider Sarah Dessen novels to be lighthearted reads and I wasn't expecting *Dreamland* and I half like it because it's a good book but I hate that I can relate so there's an issue there." (thefoundingfuckboi)

This user did not relish encountering themselves within *Dreamland*. This Tumblr user can appreciate the novel for its literary worth and disavow it when it came to close to touching upon

their lives. What this novel does for this user is present itself for this reader to where they made a revelation about who they are because of Caitlin.

In contrast, readers assuming this novel would be like the others are surprised by Caitlin and Rogerson's abusive relationship. When something dark occurs within her family that is when she makes this turn to Rogerson and is afflicted with self-doubt. In Rogerson, Caitlin believes she has found someone who accepts her for who she is, but the Caitlin that Rogerson meets by chance is not who she is because she is dealing with the sudden absence of a sister and the repercussions of it, factors which make her susceptible to Rogerson. Caitlin is not a somber character because she has the ability to drive herself out of an abusive relationship.

What Tumblr lacks in readers who discuss *Dreamland*, Twitter picks up on social media discourse by tweeting their thoughts and recommendations of Caitlin's exploration to self-worth:

@KaitlinS16: 82) Dreamland by Sarah Dessen was the first book to make me cry. It's a heartbreaking story featuring an abusive relationship.

@tchallatony: dreamland by sarah dessen is one of the most beautiful heart breaking books I've ever read. major tw for domestic abuse

@amandahaidar: @JMD\_XOX Dreamland by Sarah Dessen, I've read it twice and bawled my eyes out, it's so good

"Major tw for domestic abuse," says @tchallatony. Trigger warning is a popular acronym seen across social media. The rise in this acronym throughout Tumblr shows concern for fellow Tumblr users. TW is a warning for those with triggers when it came to sensitive topics such as rape, domestic abuse, certain phobias, and more. For any topic that could somehow push someone's mental health into a downfall, this warning is now stated. Currently, seeing trigger

warnings throughout social media is the norm to be able to empathize socially and to be concerned for the mental state for others on the internet. *Dreamland* is a trigger for many, which is a contrast when it comes to Dessen's primarily lighthearted novels. While other female protagonists in Dessen's array of novels deal with many issues, an abusive relationship is not one of them. This topic was pioneered with Caitlin. For Tumblr user thefoundingfuckboi what Twitter user @kaitlin\$16 and @amandahaidar point out are the emotional states they are in when they read *Dreamland*. It is both heartbreaking and about an abusive relationship. Caitlin is a character who is manipulated during a defenseless moment in her life when she was seeking an attachment with someone who represented themselves as someone who cared about her. Rogerson was not that individual as he was fighting his own vulnerabilities due to the abusive nature he had with his own parents and projecting them onto Caitlin. Caitlin's quiet strength, along with the assistance of her mother and friends, pull her out of this abusive and reckless relationship.

### **Breaking the Rules of *This Lullaby***

*This Lullaby* (2002), Dessen's fifth novel, has one blog dedicated to it on Tumblr, created in the summer of 2011. The sole purpose of this blog, thislullabykassandra.tumblr.com, is exploration of the topics found throughout the novel. The blog creator states the purpose of this blog by relaying the emotional pull Dessen has on her readers and praising how Dessen "manages to pull at the heart strings of anyone who reads her books" (thislullabykassandra). This novel comes after *Dreamland*, a dark novel that had already placed Dessen in the creation of a character and story that would make others uncomfortable. Readers question if they find Remy loveable even through her layers of cynicism:

@ ashleyhblake: 24. Favorite Sarah Dessen book, THIS LULLABY. I loved Remy's prickly nature & how totally rando Dexter was sometimes.

@drmm01: Bouncing off my second Sarah Dessen book (This Lullaby) so hard. I just can't find anything to identify with in the main character.

Remy, the protagonist of *This Lullaby*, is a cynic. She is different from the other characters Dessen had grown to write about who held a bit of Dessen in each one. Wendy Glenn notes Dessen's self-awareness:

Before starting *This Lullaby*, Dessen feared she would repeat herself and create a story too similar to her earlier tales. She struggled with voice and wondered if there was anything new for her to share. To provide a solution, her agent noted that Dessen's protagonists tend to be "serious, thoughtful girls with dynamic, wild friends" and that perhaps Dessen should write from the perspective of one of the friends for a change. Dessen's original reaction to this suggestion was that of disbelief. How could she, the wall-hugger, the shy girl with the loud friends, get into the head of this kind of character? With time, however, Remy's voice became clearer and has come to represent Dessen's id, providing an outlet that allows Dessen to say what she has always wished to but never has. (96)

Remy was now the end of Dessen's comfort zone because of her disdain for all things love and her inability to open her heart to others due to the exemplifications of love that have surrounded her all of her life.

Because Dessen steps out of her comfort levels of writing, bloggers respond in new ways. Tumblr blog, [thislullabykassandra](#), begins their topic for discussion with the necessary inclusion

to delve into Remy's past. Dessen gives Remy the backstory to her consistent negative outlook on life, and the readers perceive what makes Remy who she is, "Remy is surrounded by a cast of romantics pitted against her cynicism, a tactic Dessen employs with skill and intention" (Glenn 96). On July 25, 2011, thislullabykassandra instigates the discourse on *This Lullaby* by introducing the issues Remy has with a song, "This Lullaby," which was written by her father who abandoned her before she was born. The blogger describes the significance of this song which is in rotation on all forms of background in Remy's life, such as commercials and movies, weddings, and radio stations (Dessen 4). This blogger provides her own analysis of the lyrics of the song by stating how Remy "...finds irony in the song being used for a father daughter dance, the lyrics clearly displaying that they will be let down. Meaning that Remy will be let down" (thislullabykassandra). After the blogger completes sharing their personal views on the song, they ask their audience whether *This Lullaby* holds a meaning and makes sure to tag her topic post under the hashtags of Sarah Dessen, This Lullaby, Discussion, and Novel to facilitate searches. This is their way of garnering other Tumblr bloggers to contribute to their proposed topic of choice.

Thislullabykassandra continues her discussion of the novel by transitioning over to the subject of Don Davis as contributing to Remy's cynicism. He is another representation of what will eventually be a failed relationship, but he represents the lingering yearning for hope in Remy's mother's outlook on love. Don is Remy's mother's fourth husband and her supposedly last marriage. Remy's mother, Barbara, wants this marriage to be the last one and is willing to compromise as to not end up alone. As the novel continues, so does the discussion of Don. Like many, Don has a past that eventually catches up to him, and it is his involvement with his secretary that ends in affair along with the continuation of such after his own marriage to

Barbara. All of these issues with Don combined with the multiple failed marriages of her mother leave Remy in a cynical state. The Tumblr blogger ends her topic discussion with a question, “Some people say to forget the past and move on, but what about the past coming back to haunt you?” (thislullabykassandra).

Throughout her existence, Remy has had no control over the numerous marital situations her mother has put her through or the abandonment of her biological father. Remy is now a teenager who refuses to relinquish control, and in doing so she rejects the flaws and imperfections in others. Tumblr blog thislullabykassandra continues their proposed topics of the novel by taking note of this and discussing flaws, the change in people, the influence of friends, Remy’s mother’s own evolution, and what is meant to be. After they introduced the topics that make Remy who she is as a person, they have other users online participate and provide feedback by asking questions on what would prompt Remy to change in the end.

Remy always has a core group of friends as a support system, Lissa, Jess, and Chloe. While Remy is unwilling to relinquish control, Dessen evolves Remy into someone who had to step out of her comfort zone and accept the change that does not halt for anyone, not even for Remy. Blogger thislullabykassandra states:

The outlook on dating varies within the group. They all love to joke about each other, but stick to their own ways. Remy claims to expect too much, others too little. ‘Okay, so maybe I did have a bit of history with expecting too much from relationship. But God, at least I had *standards*. Chloe only dated college guys who cheated on her, Jess avoided the issue by never dating anyone.’ (Dessen 27) And Lissa was still with the boyfriend she planned to go to college with and maybe

even marry. Do the friends influence each other by causing them to want to be different? (thislullabykassandra)

Tumblr blog, thislullabykassandra asks about the influence the friends have towards each other, and like any group they are bound to have influence upon one another. The exception is how much influence the group has on an individual. They can take advice from one another only to discard it and do what they feel is the right thing to do. Remy's core friendship group is a large part of who she is. They soften her away from her cynicism and call her out on misgivings within her life.

Remy goes through an identity crisis when things begin to unravel in front of her. The situations that were love oriented, a step out of what normally Dessen creates for her characters, are no longer being maintained by Remy. Due to this reprieve from responsibility for her mother, Remy is free to begin hers and is let go from being the worrier in the relationship as her mother reestablishes the roles between them. While Remy is a character Dessen initially had trouble creating, the trait of Remy's worry seems comfortable for Dessen as her tagline on Twitter is, "Author. Mother. Worrier."

### **An Emotional Response to *The Truth About Forever***

Posted on Tumblr on February 6, 2016 is a quotation from Dessen's sixth novel, *The Truth About Forever* (2004). The quote is, "There is never a time or place for true love. It happens accidentally, in a heartbeat, in a single flashing, throbbing moment." Under this bolded quote is a gif from the movie *Les Miserables*. Online, Sarah Dessen's fans initiate a crossover with another topic. They attach a regularly quoted piece from her sixth novel and have it resonate with another interest of theirs. When you scroll up within the search of *The Truth About Forever*

on Tumblr, you find an anonymous ask for Tumblr user little-cather, “god, i love the truth about forever. i read it first when i was about 14 (i’m 22 now) and i love it just as much as i did then. in fact sarah dessen does that to me, her stories will stay with me forever i feel” (little-cather).

Macy, the female protagonist, is one of many characters who will stay with this person forever.

Little-cather is loyal to Dessen’s narrative style even as she ages beyond young adulthood.

*The Truth about Forever* makes readers ask themselves the tough questions. Difficult questions many people ask themselves include, “are you really living or just going through the motions?” (Glenn 111). Macy is like many of us. She is an individual who has dealt with the imperfections of life while expecting perfection. When her father dies on a morning jog with Macy, she is left to wonder what could have been. She retracts herself from those around her, and when she dives into the unknown with a catering company, Wish Catering, she is risking human connection through the imperfections of her response to a tragedy.

People respond to tragedy in different ways. Macy is not alone in how she responded to her father’s death. When she realized the ease of how people can leave your life, Macy decided to leave others before she could be left as she dealt with this loss. Macy has made readers online cry and has created unforgettable connections with them. Tumblr blogger little-cather responded to her nonnie, lingo used as a term of endearment for anonymous submissions online, by stating:

But godddd the Truth About Forever is definitely my fave. I had a boyfriend when I was 17/18 who was a lot like Macy’s in the book and I definitely connected with it because of that 2/3 years after, but ... god, there is just so much about that book that I love? I love the fact that it takes place over the summer, that she finds her little family with Wish catering (I waitressed for so many years from the age of 15 and spent many a summer in a catering van like the Wish one haha). I love all the



little tiny plot points that become so huge, like running and the beach house (potentially where I got my Haylor beach house fic from, now I think about it!). And Wes is just such a wonderful character. Dessen's plots are always beautiful, her characters so painfully fleshed out, but there's something so wonderfully subtle about the plot of this book, about the hesitation between Macy and Wes as they slowly and carefully grow closer, all the miscommunication because both of them are in such difficult positions and have come from such testing circumstances ... it's definitely made that book stay with me. Arghhh you've made me want to read it all over again!! I'm glad you love it too :) (little-cather)

This reader found themselves within Macy. She is a fictional character that could be considered a friend, and by considering her a part of her life, this reader is able to correlate parts of Macy's life to her own that make her nostalgic. By perpetuating these complexities in Macy's life, readers are able to discover their own responses towards her and the novel's conflicts with miscommunication and imperfections.

In the first decade of Sarah Dessen's writing career, she gives readers Haven, a character who is merely fifteen years of age and has to deal with impending change, growth that resonates with many of Dessen's readers online. Not only can readers relate to Haven's strong reaction towards change, they have the opportunity to apply Haven's way of dealing and comprehension of emotional issues brought on by the sudden betrayal of people close to her and the way she processes her body image issues. Dessen transitions from a frightened Haven to a quiet and intuitive Halley whose friendship with Scarlett reverberates with the online readers of Dessen's novels. Halley helps her pregnant teenaged best friend, Scarlett, as she grieves the loss of the father to her baby while dealing with her own personal issues. They form the true relationship of

the novel as their friendship remains wound tightly with one another as they go through challenges. The variation of challenges touched many readers as *Someone Like You* is Dessen's most popularly recommended novel online.

In 1999, Colie is introduced as insecure in dealing with body issues. With Colie, readers online discover a connection to a multifaceted character who exhibits ways readers can see within themselves. Only a year later, a darker, triggering story of Caitlin is presented. Loss of a sibling makes Caitlin lose herself within an abusive relationship as she navigates towards positive self-discovery.

Next comes Remy who is the ultimate cynic throughout Dessen's novels. Remy deals with issues by pushing others away and is the adult in a mother/daughter relationship. Until one day, she is pushed back into her teenaged role at a loss on how to process this sudden change in relationship roles. Remy's emotional outlook on family, friends, and love frightens her as she relinquishes control. Readers recognize this control well enough to initiate online discourse and dedicated blog to Remy. Last is Macy who has to deal with the loss of a parent. In dealing with her loss of her father, she shuts herself off as she grieves through this surprising tragedy of a loved one. Macy has to deal with finding out the lack of permanence of someone in her life but gains the ability to open herself up to new individuals and opportunities through the risk of this newly gained insight.

Through all of these characters, users on Twitter and Tumblr exemplify the importance of their themes and topics found within the novels. Readers gain a new perspective on how to deal with certain issues because of "narrative intimacy" with the characters and author. Having the ability to see how Dessen creates a character to deal with common issues that many readers find relatable, readers connect with others as they discuss the novels online. While they have merged

themselves with the characters and Sarah Dessen, they associate with others online through a blend of various topics found within the novels that continue to resonate with current social media users.

## CHAPTER IV

### A DECADE: TWITTER, TUMBLR, AND DESSEN

In the spring of 2006, Twitter was founded. One year later, in the winter of 2007, Tumblr went live. Each has a distinctive online personality and way online users benefit from it. In *Everything's an Argument*, writing specialists observe:

When it comes to making arguments, perhaps the most innovative aspect of new media is its ability to summon audiences. Since ancient times, rhetoricians have emphasized the need to frame arguments to influence people, but new media and social networks now create places for specific audiences to emerge and make arguments themselves, assembling them in bits and pieces, one comment or supporting link at a time. Audiences muster around sites that represent their perspectives on politics or mirror their social conditions and interest. (Lunsford, Ruskiewicz, and Walters 365)

Social media platforms Twitter and Tumblr are the go-to online spaces to discuss a trending topic or a personal topic when seeking advice from a stranger. In the last nine years of Sarah Dessen's writing career, these platforms have gone from a muffled space on the internet to pushing older social media platforms Myspace and LiveJournal to become obsolete. In this

chapter I study a tweet dated close to the release of a presented novel from Sarah Dessen. I then combine it with a recent Tumblr post to showcase a comparison and contrast in online criticism on Dessen's novels throughout the years of social media. The conversation that began on Twitter and Tumblr as Dessen released her seventh novel *Just Listen* has grown from the simplicity of recommending this novel, in conjunction with excitement for one of Dessen's novels and the learning process of how to use hashtags. The conversations have evolved into discussing her novels with other users by posting something to release their inner thoughts onto the web in hopes someone will read and respond. Twitter and Tumblr have become permanent fixtures in many smart phones. Users can update with ease to their accounts with a thought that has just entered their minds to the small screens on their phones, engaging in discussion with many other users or with no users at all.

A single blog on Tumblr can have over a million notes or no notes. A blog may be written by a user who had a thought and put it out on to the internet where someone may come upon their middle of the night thought. On Twitter, a person can provide a one liner on one of Dessen's novels and hashtag it to further distribution of their tweet. Perhaps Dessen herself will respond, or another Dessen reader will engage with them. Either way, whether they actively debate with other readers or are met with silence from the internet, they have contributed to online discourse on Sarah Dessen.

### ***Just Listen to Yourself***

Wendy J. Glenn's book on Sarah Dessen covered the first decade of Dessen's career. She halts at *The Truth about Forever's* Macy and her risk taking adventures when it comes to opening up her heart to new opportunities in friendship and love. In the spring of 2006, two years after *The Truth about Forever*, Dessen would introduce her readers to *Just Listen's* Annabel

Greene. Readers continue seeing themselves in Dessen's protagonists, voicing the affinity through social media.

Similar to Macy, Annabel fears the unknown and attempts to make everyone happy while disregarding her own needs. Annabel's public persona is one of happiness and popularity as she appears in commercials and modeling, surrounded by multiple friends and family. From the outside Annabel is an attractive and contented teenaged girl, but not all is what it seems because she is left to deal with sexual violence at a party, her sister's eating disorder, and the betrayal of her friends leaving her voiceless. After a traumatic event at a party, Annabel's friends have distanced themselves from her due to a rumor mill leaving Annabel to deal with the repercussions of a sexual assault. Similar to *Dreamland* (2000), readers are left to ponder the injustices of abuse and the loneliness instilled in Annabel due to being unable to speak up.

On March 2, 2015, Tumblr blogger "books-and-cookies" relays her personal thoughts on how *Just Listen* made her feel:

Contrary to what you might think at first glance, this is not a love story. At least, the love story is not the central part of the plot. This is a story about family, about how important it is to speak up and at the same time, to listen to others. It's about how we hide the truth a lot of time, for different reasons, either to protect others, or because we consider our problems to not be as important as everyone else's. We keep people in the dark, we push them away because we don't know how to ask for help. We'd rather say we're "fine" instead of saying "I'm not as okay as I seem". We hide things out of shame, or because we believe others might not pay any attention to us if we asked them to. We don't realize that most of the times,

our silence speaks louder than words, it may even become deafening. (books-and-cookies)

Books-and-cookies highlights multiple themes in this novel. Readers are attracted to the variety brought in by the female protagonists and the complications which surround them. This reader recognizes how *Just Listen* is not a story about love; it is a story about being strong and speaking up. While holding things back to protect others can be a positive thing to spare feelings, it is important to recognize when someone like Annabel needs to speak up to her family and Owen because of the help she will eventually need due to her rape. The guilt Annabel feels prevents her from speaking up and acquiring the assistance she needs to get through this trauma. Books-and-cookies continues:

It's a story about loneliness, appearances and how deceiving they may be. About bullying and friendship - how easily it can break and how difficult it is to put back together. About music. About sisterhood and personal growth. About how we shouldn't think or judge sometimes, we should just *listen*.

I saw a lot of myself in Annabel. Her silence, her white lies - it's something I do as well, a lot of the times. Because I never see myself as important or because I don't want to burden the ones around me. She's a compelling character and I loved the dynamic of her family. I loved that this was a story about how family can help, how family can heal and support its members. How, although you may go through tough times, they're always there to help you through thick and thin. Even if sometimes it may seem it's too late. (books-and-cookies)

*Just Listen* will stay with this blogger. They saw themselves in Annabel because of her personality and the way she hid things by staying quiet and telling minuscule lies. Books-and-cookies is able to observe how this novel is more than a romance and comprehend how the narrative is about mending relationships, speaking up, and being there for yourself. It is a novel about how it is acceptable to be selfish sometimes, especially when it comes to the sexual assault Annabel goes through. Readers spend time in Annabel's head as did Tumblr blogger books-and-cookies. This blogger is able to convey what is important to them and to recognize the need to remind themselves what is imperative in their life as they read through Annabel's story.

On Twitter, user @amberrobinson corroborates in eighteen words and a simple tweet what books-and-cookies said in multiple paragraphs:

@amberrobinson: honestly recommend the book 'just listen' by Sarah Dessen literally she put all my thoughts into coherent sentences

*Just Listen* resonated with them. They felt as if they were reading about themselves and were able to correlate their lives with Annabel. Annabel is Dessen's creation, and in turn, readers are able to find solace in knowing a writer has the ability to create someone they never knew they needed. Annabel is that reminder to be kind to yourself when the world is not. *Just Listen* reminds readers online how the "silence is so freaking loud" (Dessen, "Just Listen" 147) and how it is necessary to speak. Annabel had become quiet due to trauma and wanting to avoid disruption to those around her. Annabel was lacking confidence by not seeking help and in the end, was able to find her voice and speak up.

### ***Lock and Key to the Past***

On November 11, 2009, Twitter user @pookasluagh claimed:



Somehow I'd gotten the impression that Sarah Dessen wrote fluff books.

*Lock and Key* is certainly not fluff. Enjoying it a lot, actually.

A reader who previously thought Dessen was “fluff,” just another YAL writer producing mediocrity, realizes she is “not fluff.” What Dessen had released in the previous year of 2008 was Ruby Cooper, the female protagonist in *Lock and Key*, a character who had to deal with abandonment issues brought on by her addict mother and tumultuous upbringing. Ruby is someone who wants to run back to what she once knew. She continues to wear the key to her old house around her neck. The key around her neck is a reminder of what was, and a reminder of something Ruby can never go back to as she now lives with her older sister, Cora, and her husband, Jamie. Ruby faces impending changes with a new school, different friends, and a new family dynamic. Ruby is introduced into a world where people will care for and love her. She is not used to this and therefore has difficulty accepting help from others. The new dynamic in her home life brings about a new relationship with a sister she thought had forgotten about her. When her sister and Ruby begin to mend a broken relationship, Ruby finds consolation in her sister as her friend and family member, and she also finds friendship and love in Nate.

On April 8, 2015, Tumblr user “eyesonfirefromacidrain” submitted her thoughts on *Lock and Key* to penguin teen:

I first started reading Sarah Dessen books when my sister gave me her copy of *Lock and Key* to read. It truly made me think, where would I be without my sister? If I didn't have her at certain times in my life, or at all, I would be a completely different person than from the one that I am today.

(eyesonfirefromacidrain)

The relationship between Ruby and Cora is a relationship eyesonfirefromacidrain sees as parallel with their own relationship with their sister. *Lock and Key* makes them question their relationship with their sister, making them ponder and answer their own inquiry as to where they would be without a sibling. By reading *Lock and Key*, eyesonfirefromacidrain takes from Ruby's story the lesson that they would be a different person without the sibling relationship. They arrive to the understanding that their sister was needed throughout their life during all of its turbulent times.

Unlike eyesonfirefromacidrain, screamingbooks has mixed emotions for *Just Listen*:

As I have come to know Sarah Dessen's books, I have discovered how her novels' protagonists carry out such deep and complicated problems in their lives and I started reading *Lock and Key* with that in mind. The novel was very good, that I know even with all the things that had happen, especially for Ruby, putting the fact that I only read it for 7 hours. (screamingbooks)

From the beginning of their feedback on Tumblr, screamingbooks voices an attachment for Sarah Dessen's novels. They observe how the protagonists are complex and having already known this from Dessen's literary collection, they went into reading *Lock and Key* with the protagonist's potential complexities in mind. Screamingbooks continues their review by being honest about the romantic inclusion:

Though it was really good, I felt that some parts were really weak, Ruby's emotions were just passive, and the transitions were confusing. All that were fine though, but the thing I really have an issue with is the lack of closure in Ruby and Nate's relationship. Everybody would know that I am a romantic and my first

reaction when the novel ended was, “what the hell.” I mean, wth. You gotta be kidding me, you spent half of the story building up the chemistry and conflicts between the two and you ended the novel without the bang. Without clearly saying what would happen next. I understand it’s like “it’s up to your imagination what happens next,” but no, I want assurance because I spent the whole time reading the novel expecting that yes, she will find him and they will sort everything out and become stronger, and be like Cora and Jaime. Seriously! (screamingbooks)

While screamingbooks admits to being a romantic, they introduce their review by making a note of the protagonist, Ruby, before providing feedback on anything else. They become emotionally invested in Ruby only to have been left in turmoil over Ruby being “passive” and relay this issue as frustrating for them. Their expectations of Dessen were created due to Dessen’s earlier work. As a regular reader of Dessen, they were surprised because Dessen wrote this novel differently, in contrast to her other work. Dessen introduces Nate only to have him leave at the end of the novel. Ruby and Nate were each dealing with separate emotional issues within their lives as they dealt with the seriousness of parental abandonment and abuse. Instead, Dessen has Ruby evolve into her own as she furthered her healing the relationship with mother. Ruby is left to process the emotional aftermath of her abandonment, not with the assistance of a romantic relationship, but with her sister and a fresh start.

### ***Along for the Ride into the Forgotten***

Auden West, the main character in *Along for the Ride*, is a quiet girl having lost her childhood due to the chaotic relationship between her mother and father. Growing up with them

arguing and living in their own worlds left Auden with the inability to embrace her childhood. Her scholarly, intelligent mother has treated her like an adult since she was a small child, so Auden does not know how to be carefree. Her parents left her to forget to do the normal things children found themselves accomplishing. There are many things Auden has not done, like riding a bike, and it leaves her nervous to socialize with those in the fictional beach town of Colby where she goes to visit her father after her high school graduation. Unable to process things around her while she is visiting her novelist father, she finds herself wandering around at night throughout the sleepy town and discovers a fellow insomniac, Eli. Eli offers an invitation to the unknown for Auden as she gains new experiences through summer with Eli and others.

On August 23, 2010 Twitter user @xTheMorningSun tweeted:

"Friends are honest with each other. Even if the truth hurts. "-Along For The Ride; Sarah Dessen <- i love that book

By quoting *Along for the Ride* a year after its release, @xTheMorningSun's tweet displays how the novel found a home in the mental library. What lingers is the importance of friendship when going through a turbulent time in self-discovery, having been foreign to yourself for as long as Auden was. While Eli is a love interest for Auden, they end the novel being friends. The fears she has to work through would need to be dealt with, and what she needs as she conquers these fears is a friend. Auden needs someone to be honest with her, even if it is painful, and she finds that in those around Colby, especially Eli.

Comparable to @xTheMorningSun, on March 13, 2011, Tumblr user "andamandasays" stated:

“Just Finished reading Along for the Ride by Sarah Dessen. Once again finishing the book was like saying ~~good-bye~~ see you later to dear friends such as Auden, Eli, Maggie, etc. and leaving Colby, a place I love” (andamandasays).

The characters of Auden, Eli, Maggie, and others become friends for “andamandasays,” and she misses them when the novel ended. They imply the novel will be read more than once; they cross out the word good-bye by saying “see you later” to their “dear friends.” This Tumblr user finds friendship due to Dessen’s creation, seeing characters as people who can be “dear friends.”

On May 14, 2013, Tumblr user escapeinthestars posted:

The wonderful thing about math is the numbers don’t change. They don’t suddenly wake up one morning and decide to change the rules. They don’t sneak up on you with unnecessary drama and they don’t change their mind out of nowhere. Your life could be swirling around you, but numbers are reliable.  
(escapeinthestars).

User “escapeinthestars” leaves you perplexed as to where they are going with their thought process as they discuss the importance of numbers. Numbers seem objective and do not change like people do. “escapeinthestars” then continues:

I read this Sarah Dessen book this spring called “Along for the Ride” and there’s this one part where the main character is basically watching her life fall apart, so she locks herself in her office and finds this calm simply crunching numbers. It sounded so weird to me at first, but now I get it. It’s simple. And simplicity is the seed for a mind at ease. People can change, but numbers don’t, and when you come to the disheartening confusion that there is no right answer to life, you’ll

always find some kind of answer in numbers. I guess I finally figured out why I don't mind sitting down to do my math homework - it's a constant among the organized chaos we all choose to marvel at called life. (escapeinthestars)

Tumblr user "escapeinthestars" finds solace in a scene of the novel due to Auden's expectations on herself and her need to hide when things get difficult. When life becomes a challenge for Auden, she sits down and crunches numbers because numbers are constant. With the consistency of numbers, Auden discovers catharsis in this ritual of calming herself. For this Tumblr user, they understand how Auden feels and relate to her in the simplicity of mathematics due to their own tolerance for doing math homework. They find a serenity in Auden due to being able to see someone like them. These examples show that many distinct aspects of Dessen's books can inspire social media users to post.

Auden becomes the character with whom readers can relate due to her parents' high expectations of her. During the summer, the seasonal setting of many of Dessen's novels, she finds herself discovering things she did not know about herself. Her summer is spent in adventuring into the unknown when it comes to figuring out who is before she leaves for university. Throughout high school, due to her parents, many things were not presented to her that would garner her some normalcy through the chaos. Auden hid behind her books and from those around her. Auden begins to evolve through summer into someone she can finally recognize when she learns new things about herself. No longer hiding behind the words of others, she discovers the world around her.

### ***What Happened to Good-Bye to Change?***

In Sarah Dessen's tenth novel *What Happened to Good-Bye* (2011), readers are introduced to McLean Sweet, a seventeen-year-old girl who has been dealing with her parents' divorce brought on by her mother's affair, her mother remarrying, and moving around multiple times with her father because of his company job as a restaurant consultant. In dealing with these moves, McLean has learned not to get attached to friends she acquires by taking on a different persona for each move. This is McLean's way of realizing nothing is consistent, for she would rather be in control of her own development than be surprised by it like she was when her parents' marriage ended.

Taking on a new name and persona with every move makes it effortless for McLean to shed a bit of herself as she moves onto the next town with her father. Moving with her father was easier than staying behind with her mother to deal with the ramifications of her mother's infidelity, new marriage, and new siblings. Instead, McLean would rather continue to travel through, creating new profiles for Ume, Dessen's fictional version of Facebook. She reinvents herself for every new group around her as she knows a new town would not progress into permanence for her. Eventually, in Lakeview and her fourth move, McLean is found out by the new friends as they discover the multiple Ume pages. When McLean had started to get comfortable in Lakeview with new friends such as Dave, she now feels uncomfortable and frightened because she must confront the issues brought on by her parents' divorce.

On September 6, 2011, @msig12310 tweeted:

Why don't Sarah Dessen's boy characters exist in real life?? I want a boyfriend like Dave in 'What Happened to Goodbye' Soooooo bad!!

Dave Wade is the boy next door with magnified intelligence who had decided he wanted to embrace having somewhat of a normal high school experience by switching to public school. Dave is McLean's friend for most of the novel, progressing into romance only towards the end. Dave is not the focus of the novel, nor is romance. Dave is merely an element in McLean's whirlwind life. McLean's story is about growing up and her need to accept things she is unable to change, much like Dessen's first female protagonist, Haven in *That Summer*. Shortly before @msig12310's tweet, on August 23, 2011, Tumblr user b-e-a-u-tiful-you regards Dave as the 2 a.m. phone call rather than seeing Dave as a romantic interest. For this Tumblr user, Dave represents something they are missing in their life and their wishful thinking:

So, I just finished reading What Happened to Goodbye by Sarah Dessen, and I absolutely loved it! Except it got me thinking... I don't have a '2 a.m.' I don't have someone to call up at 2 a.m. and have them drop everything and comfort me. I have a few 'best friends' don't get me wrong, I'm not friendless. I just don't have someone who knows everything about me. Someone I can tell my deepest darkest secrets and not be ashamed of them. I want to be able to tell my best friend about all the shit that's happening in my life, but I feel too ashamed. I just wish I had someone in my life that I wouldn't be ashamed of telling my darkest secrets too. I wish I had a 2 a.m. (b-e-a-u-tiful-you)

The novel establishes a "2 a.m." as the greatest of friendships. They want a Dave in the sense of friendship. They have friends, but they do not have a Dave. This Tumblr user has no one to talk to without feeling ashamed of their secrets. They are left alone to deal with their inner secrets and with no one to speak to about things occurring in their life. For them, Dave would be that



person they could call at two in the morning without feeling as if they are disrupting someone. Dave is more than a boy; he is a friend they long for.

In 2014, Tumblr user teenage-f00lery blogged their analysis of the novel and identification:

What Happened to Goodbye? I'll tell you what happened to goodbye. It tore me to pieces. Having issues with my mother as well, having changed myself so many times and ran away from all conflict, I related to Mclean Elizabeth Sweet more than I've connected with any character in a novel-ever. I connected with her more than I did with Lena Halloway in Delirium. It was so real; I saw myself in Mclean. Even if her hair was blonde. I saw myself in the way she thought, the way she was protective over her father, the way her anger fueled her to ignore her mother but secretly craved the past. I saw myself in the way Mclean hid behind her names, the different personas she had made up for herself. (teenage-f00lery)

When teenage-f00lery read *What Happened to Goodbye*, they were left feeling the aftermath of what they had read. They ended Dessen's novel having felt as if they were reading about themselves. McLean was the character who would resonate with them more than any character they have ever read about. There was no need for similar actual features to make this Tumblr user see themselves in McLean. They did not to be blonde to feel like her. They knew McLean by the way she hid behind her personas and her lies to protect herself from further heartbreak. Teenage-f00lery continues by analyzing their maturity:

I give the book five stars all around. The fact that it was Dessen's most recent book made me understand, fully, what it is to mature and to experience. I've been

re-reading her novels and I'm feeling each one on a deeper, more critical level than ever before. I noticed the syntax- thank you, Mrs. Leeds, for your persistence in AP Lang-, I noticed the metaphors, the parallel structure, everything. And in those carefully structured sentences, I fell apart.

I began to cry when Mclean was caught by Dave and company. That damn near killed me. I have been caught before, in ways similar to her, hiding behind name after name after name, and it is humiliating, warts and all. (teenage-f00lery)

The Tumblr user recognizes literary qualities of the book, yet is most impressed by how they have grown older and have the ability to experience Dessen's novel in a different way. They took the time to re-read Dessen's novels to better comprehend the characters in a critical way. Teenage-f00lery discovers resonance due to their maturity, and with their newly learned literary analysis skills, they are able to gain more out of *What Happened to Good-Bye*.

In *What Happened to Good-Bye*, Auden is the older version of Haven. Unlike Haven, Auden chooses to run away from change rather than accept until it follows her forcing her to confront the things she could not change. Haven had change in front of her and refused to recognize it, but Auden manages change by reinventing herself into never accepting her parent's divorce and her mother's infidelity. Readers recognized Auden in their own lives and realized how they needed someone to talk to.

### ***The Moon and More than Teen Romance***

In the spring of 2013, before the release of *The Moon and More* and with a strong social media presence, Sarah Dessen and publishers Penguin orchestrated an online event. Penguin had marked Dessen's eleventh novel as the kick off to the "Summer of Sarah," previously mentioned

as the summer event for Sarah Dessen readers to become actively engaged with other readers. This event would bring readers closer together while they read Dessen's novels so they would sense they were engaging with their favorite author. Commentary on Twitter stated otherwise about the excitement surrounding *The Moon and More* only a few months after its release.

On November 22, 2013, @Phamburst tweeted:

I'm very disappointed in Sarah Dessen's new book, "the moon and more".  
Extremely disappointed

A couple of days later on November 24, 2013, @kirby\_swaims tweeted:

"The moon and More" is probably the worst Sarah Dessen book ever.  
Never again will I read that. the moon and more is definitely not my  
favourite sarah dessen book

Why were readers having difficulty connecting with Dessen's eleventh novel? Emaline is the local girl in Colby who goes through conventional situations, but some readers have difficulty when an author defies expectations. Emaline realizes there is much more for her outside of the beach town of Colby.

The protagonist of *The Moon and More*, Emaline, received attention as a feminist role model for the readers of Dessen's novels. Emaline is a local in Colby, a beach town prevalent throughout the work of Sarah Dessen, and someone transitioning from high school into college over the summer. With this comes her intrigue at a new individual in town, Theo, and her consideration of asking questions about her hopes for herself and her educational goals outside of her local town. In Sarah Van Name's 2013 mic.com article "Sarah Dessen 'The Moon and

More': Will New Book Have Feminist Characters?"; Van Name argues that Dessen's books are feminist and emphasizes that Dessen's characters such as Auden from *Along for the Ride* are not ashamed of their intelligence. "Dessen's characters don't think it's cool to ignore their schoolwork or act unambitious; they are unapologetic in pursuing their dreams. And perhaps most importantly, even though Dessen's books are almost always classified as romances, her characters' successes have nothing to do with their boyfriends," Van Name interprets Dessen's work as feminist due to female protagonist intelligence, independence, and success (Van Name 2013).

In Tumblr user drinkmreadme's June 10, 2013, extensive observations on *The Moon and More*, they also assess the author's career as a whole, stating:

I've come to find that there are two types of Sarah Dessen books. The first is the philosophical, deep-thinking ones that, while they do feature love stories, are more about family and future and often don't have cut-and-dry endings, and are so much more than just simple beach reads. These would include, *Dreamland*, *Lock and Key*, *Keeping the Moon*, *Just Listen*, etc. The second category is: simple beach reads. These are sweet stories that have unique characters and storylines and locations, and they typically have a clear plot with a cut-and-dry ending. These books include *Along for the Ride*, *What Happened to Goodbye*, *The Truth About Forever*, etc. (drinkmreadme)

The writer of this blog takes Dessen's writing seriously and categorizes the books, some as more serious than others. While drinkmreadme takes into account the variety of characters and storylines, they separate novels into two categories and provide Tumblr with the ability to read *The Moon and More*'s Emaline as more than just a small town girl.

The Moon and More is firmly in the first category: honest, philosophical, and with a more ambiguous ending than some of Dessen's other books. Thankfully, I was totally in the mood for this. If you're a fan of Dessen, you will love this book. If you're not a fan of Dessen, then you're on crack and should check into the nearest rehab, then you should go to a bookstore and buy one of her books (might I recommend *This Lullaby?* One of my favorites). (drinkmreadme)

They are dramatic in their love for Dessen and relay this by speaking to their online audience like a friend sitting in front of them. The writer is able to provide their in depth account of the novel while continuing to be themselves in an online space. The user drinkmreadme believes anyone could like Dessen's writing if one just picks up any of her books.

*The Moon and More* is about Emaline. She's been dating the same guy for forever. She's about to head off to a state college at the end of the summer, when she finds out that her boyfriend cheated on her. She breaks up with him, of course, and immediately meets a new boy named Theo, who she has a summer romance with while she navigates a complicated family situation and contemplates her future amidst so many people telling her what to do with her life. The way I'm describing the plot makes it sound like a run-of-the-mill story, but it really isn't.

As this Tumblr user summarizes the novel, they indicate that the story might seem conventional, before allowing literary redemption. They proceed with atoning the novel by stating:

One thing that Dessen does well is that she takes these stories that the reader thinks they've seen before and then makes them so different and real from what

people would expect. Her plots sound formulaic in blurbs, which drives me nuts, because they are anything BUT formulaic. Just trust me on this. So basically, this book is great and deep and wonderful, and if you're about to go off to college, you'll love it. I liked Theo at first. For about a second, then he got really annoying. He was just such a hipster, and so full of himself, and I understand why Emaline liked him (he embodied Something More than what she was used to) but it still killed me. Just when I was starting to grow disappointed with the romance, Emaline dumps him because she realizes she deserves better. Let me reiterate this: A girl, torn between two guys, dumps both because she is aware that she deserves better than either of them can offer.

The post shows that plot situations are not the most important part of the book while drinkmreadme found meaning in the quiet story of Emaline. They reassure the readers to stick around and to see Emaline's growth in her choice to date neither guy, rather than picking one. Due to Emaline being the local girl, she has a small town vibe to her story. Only when Dessen showcases her need for independence do readers see the depth of Emaline as she chooses herself over romance. Drinkmreadme is adamant in their Tumblr post and presents this by saying:

Let me reiterate again: A girl in a romance novel decides that she will be happier alone and creates her own happy ending. She empowers herself and finds solace in being herself and independent. That's her happy ending: being herself and being free of expectations from others. If you haven't yet realized how amazingly revolutionary that concept is, then you haven't read enough YA books where the heroine spends the entire novel pining over a boy for no apparent reason. A girl

finding her own voice without being in a relationship is almost unheard of in this genre (a genre, mind you, that I adore in spite of its ever-present flaws). Which makes sense. For Emaline, having everything means having control of her future and not being weighed down by anyone. Her journey is much more about family ties and self-acceptance than about any romantic relationship (drinkmreadme).

User drinkmreadme justifies the YA genre as a whole while defending Dessen. *The Moon and More* is about more than a summer of change in a local beach town. It is about Emaline, her views on what she is looking for before she leaves for college, and how she goes into making these decisions. Once again, we can recognize how Emaline is strong minded and does not seek validation from anyone as she navigates her way to another chapter in her life. Emaline chooses herself when it comes to the betrayal of a long term boyfriend and the lure of falling for an outsider. Emaline understands that she needs to do some things for herself and her family before she leaves Colby. This is something drinkmreadme is passionate about in their analysis of Emaline, who should not be disregarded as just a small town girl with a mundane life. Emaline continues to learn lessons in acquiring self-identity and becomes a role model for Dessen's readers.

### **Discovering Your *Saint Anything***

Sarah Dessen introduces her latest novel, *Saint Anything*, with a dedication, "For all the invisible girls and for my readers, for seeing me." Dessen's dedication to her readers demonstrated Dessen's writing and the characters she has created over the years. The characters who have storylines where they deal with genuine issues can provide a catharsis for the reader. The protagonist is 16-year-old Sydney Stanford, who is reeling from the loss of her older brother

to imprisonment due to a drunk driving accident that ended in the paralysis of another teenaged boy. Sydney is left feeling alone and ignored by her father and mother as they deal with the loss of their elder child. Sydney is at a loss for how to deal with the emotional turmoil she is going through and switches from private to public school to get away from those who knew the story surrounding her family.

Tweets ranging from March 16, 2016 to April 3, 2016 display the love readers have for Dessen's novels and their loyalty towards her:

@x\_camelot: Just finished Saint Anything by Sarah Dessen and it might just be my favorite book from her. Sad that I have to return it to the library.

@thebookgasmblog: I am devouring Saint Anything by Sarah Dessen so freaking fast until I realize I'm late for work

@sarahdrozda: Was going to go to bed awhile ago but started reading Saint Anything by Sarah Dessen and I already can't put it down.

@everlarky: Just finished 'Saint Anything'. Oh, Sarah Dessen books, how I adore thee.

The adoration Dessen's readers have for her books is shown with voracious feeling to continue reading *Saint Anything* regardless of their responsibilities. The desire to own the book shows how readers cherish Dessen's literary creations and want to return to these words repeatedly. Sydney's necessity to untangle herself from her own emotional threads and unravel them to allow others to pay attention to her grab hold of readers, and their loyalty towards Dessen continues.



Recently seen on Tumblr is how readers or booklrs, a term used to describe a community of committed bibliophiles on Tumblr, take aesthetically pleasing photos of novels. In the spring of 2016, searches for *Saint Anything* show an array of photos on attractive backdrops with a dream-like feeling to them. It is a Tumblr user's way of relaying their own loyalty to Sarah Dessen. Booklrs provide photos with care on how the novel will look to present their appreciation for the novel. It is their way of conveying to other readers and booklrs about what they have read and recommend. By providing photos with aesthetically precise and lovely backgrounds for *Saint Anything* and other novels, they are illustrating to online users the interest in their novels. Many booklrs have thousands of followers. Dedicated to their followers, they provide reviews and monthly book giveaways to instill their love of reading to others. Aside from the use of the visual options with Tumblr, there are users who like those on Twitter encountered the intense emotion the previously mentioned tweets expressed.

Whatlovelybooks: i stayed up until 3:30 am reading Saint Anything..i think that should tell you how i feel about that book

Mallyandthebandit: Ever read a book and get so caught up in the character's stress you need to take a break and breathe? If you've read Sarah Dessen's books I guarantee you have.

These tweets show an affection for Dessen that also manifests on Tumblr. Before Tumblr user letsdothisthing2015 begins their review, they claim, "I should preface this by saying that Sarah Dessen is without any doubt my favorite author and I love and will defend her work until the day I die" (letsdothisthing2015). They continue by saying:

This book shows both sides of a coin. How bad situations can begin to tear families apart or how they can make everyone come together for the greater good. What it truly means to be a good or bad friend or a good or bad person. When you need to knuckle under and when you need to stand up for yourself. I think over all this book would be great reading for any teen and would also be good for parents to read. I understand that parents make rules, but it is important to see all the sides of things too and to truly communicate. (letsdothisthing2015)

The Tumblr user analyzes the book's theme while emphasizing Sydney's need to stand up for herself and to not make yourself unknown, but also recommends the need for parents to remain attentive and understanding of their children. Dessen writes of how Sydney went through the motions of pulling through this downfall in her young life and gives Sydney redemption at being seen. Unfortunately, it takes a malicious encounter with her brother's friend Ames for her to be seen by her parents. This is the meaning of Dessen's book dedication, "For all the invisible girls and for my readers, for seeing me." Sydney's parents forgot they had another child to raise and assumed she was handling everything in a positive manner while she was not. Sydney is a character who like Annabel in *Just Listen*, tells Dessen's readers to have a voice, to stand up for yourself, and to communicate with others.

The way *Just Listen*, *Lock and Key*, *Along for the Ride*, *What Happened to Good-Bye*, *The Moon and More*, and *Saint Anything* are discussed online has what the novels from Dessen's first decade of fiction was missing. These novels are discussed with hurried excitement on Twitter before and during the release of the novel as individuals are attempting to figure out how social media works for them. On Tumblr, Dessen's novels are reviewed and observed by many

readers and discussed throughout the multitude of acquired notes from other Tumblr users. While people were trying to figure out the purpose of social media throughout the last decade of online discourse on Twitter and Tumblr, they were contributing to another way of discussing the novels of Dessen. In doing so, they discuss Sarah Dessen's novels in a different way that resists the way Dessen's publisher markets her. No longer limited by how publishers and bookstores have marketed Dessen's and other YAL lit as romance, online users continue to discuss the themes, topics, and issues facing protagonists that Annabel Greene, Ruby Cooper, Auden West, McLean Sweet, Emaline, and Sydney Stanford. They will continue doing so long after the final novel by Sarah Dessen is eventually published.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Presently, there is a certain unrest occurring on social media and chaos involved in social media's evolution. It is no longer a miniscule happening in our lives. It is revolutionary towards communicating with one another. Not only young adult but also adults use social media to talk about books. Social media is not something that will be going away soon because of the amount of marketing situated online. A monumental amount of finances goes into social media. In every ad we see and every product a celebrity is relaying to us through their Instagram telling us how if we use their name we get twenty percent off a product while they tell the online community what a bargain they will be receiving, knowing they are the ones garnering a paycheck for selling it to their millions of followers. This allows for social media to be "free" due to advertising.

Everything an individual seeks online is being archived. This data gets used to target advertisements to individuals on a side bar on a platform similar to the way a person was to solicit to you at your front door. Social media is more than pretty images and romantic quotes; it has become a business where authors are forced to become the business themselves in order to make themselves attractive to others in the hopes to get attention in a positive way. Now, social media spaces such as Twitter and Tumblr have become platforms for authors to tweet a hundred and forty characters or reblog something humorous or aesthetically pleasing. Many writers find social media enjoyable while also finding it obligatory to engage with their readers on a daily

basis. The more accessible a writer is, the more online users will see their novels online being presented to them through various multimedia. Social media thus has become another business, and authors are acculturated towards the fundamental need to be accessible for their readers on various social media sites.

Online discourse is no longer being discarded as drivel or of people speaking to no one. You may think you are speaking to no one when you tweet a simple rant about your job or some other personal issue, but in actuality could be speaking to billions of people worldwide. Having social media accessible worldwide introduces a variety of demographics of age, race, gender, language, and nation to Twitter, Tumblr, and discourse occurring online. Now, there are various ways people are communicating with one another through the internet.

Open Twitter to find the latest news, and whoever you follow or whoever is being promoted at that moment will have just posted seconds ago. There is an incessant amount of information being fed to us online through social media on whatever app you have acquired on your smart phone. When you open your phone, your index finger automatically goes towards any number of apps on the phone. Clicking Twitter, scrolling quickly to see what has been missed, going through Tumblr to see what a mutual friend has posted, or opening up the BuzzFeed app to see what is the latest news in popular culture: These are the habits of contemporary young adults in the United States. All of these subjects are readily available to anyone, just like feedback from readers online regarding Sarah Dessen's collection of novels.

Danah Boyd observes how those who stumble around the internet willingly choose what to release online, but do so in a way that brings them into being considered worthy of online attention (146). Boyd suggests the addictiveness of social media: "Many social media tools are designed to encourage people to consume streams or feeds of updates. A steady flow of

photographs, updates, and comments from friends on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and other services flood teens' screens. Keeping up with everything can be difficult and overwhelming" (146). Boyd suggests that teens enjoy but are also controlled by their social media habits. They may wish to take breaks from the information feeds, but the habits are hard to change.

When we arrive at the way literature is marketed online, commercializing authors, there can be cause for concern. The publisher Penguin spends money and countless hours marketing Sarah Dessen to her older and newer readers. When *Saint Anything* was released in the spring of 2015, Penguin Teen wasted no time in posting a list on Tumblr: "9 YA Romances to Seduce You This Summer." It could be deemed the word "seduce" should have no place next to the acronym for "young adult." Penguin Teen continues by stating how, "Everyone deserves the summer love story they desire...whether IRL or in a book. That's why we've rounded up 9 YA romances that will give your heart what it wants...evaluated by exactly how the book will woo you". The first book on their list was Sarah Dessen's novel which had only been released a couple of weeks before this marketing ploy on Tumblr. Not only does Penguin Teen market certain YAL novels to readers this way, but with every novel they provide a "woo tactic." *Saint Anything's* woo tactic is:

The love you need is the kind where you feel seen, even if for the first time. Pro tip: start by looking in a pizza parlor. Woo tactic: reserve a private garden room at the pizzeria you've been wanting to try, reveal a piano is hidden in the shadows, and proceed to serenade you about the depths of your radiance. \*The feels are strong in this one. (penguinteen)

By using the slang of "feels" for emotional feeling, they envision their own "woo tactic" for readers on Tumblr. Implementing the "woo tactic" of the pizzeria is to display how the regular

setting of *Saint Anything* was a pizzeria Sydney frequented, and they combine this with pizza places being a favorite place for many U.S. teens. Understandably so, Tumblr has a younger demographic than most social media platforms, and many readers would arrive to this list having been entranced by the large lettering and colorful book covers.

On May 16, 2015, shortly after the release of her most current and twelfth novel *Saint Anything*, Sarah Dessen sat down for an interview with website [www.perpetualpageturner.com](http://www.perpetualpageturner.com) and the interviewer, Jamie. The interviewer began enthusiastically and ready to dive into the one thing that had been bothering them all along:

Question: There's been a lot of discussion recently about "books for boys" and "books for girls", and I'm sure you probably get pigeon-holed as the latter sometimes. What are your thoughts and experiences with that?

Sarah: I think what I've seen more of than necessarily books for girl or boys is, in the bigger chain bookstores (not the independents), they have teen fiction and teen romance and they have me shelved into teen romance. (Jamie)

Dessen is aware that she is being marketed for a specific gender and the genre of teen romance within YAL. Current YA literature is more than just romance oriented. But current YA literature implicitly urges individuals to listen to themselves as they navigate through discovering who they are. The interview with Dessen continues with the interviewer, Jamie, exclaiming how passionate they are to prove that Dessen's novels are more than their romantic inclusion:

Me: And your books are so much more than just a romance!

Sarah: I know! And not that I'm bashing romance, I think romance is great, but I feel like if I only had romance in my books than I'd be okay with that but I feel like, especially in Saint. (Jamie)

Dessen sees no wrong in romance if that is what her novels were exclusively about, but her novels are more than one element. Her novels provide multifaceted characters with an array of issues, so that many of her readers find consolation in discovering someone like them. Dessen's novels can be deemed therapeutic or eye opening for her readers.

Sarah: And I've talked to YA writer friends of mine who are like, "it stinks because I have that I've one book I've written in YA romance and one put in YA fiction and people can't find them." It's like, if you love a book you go to the bookstore you go to find a book by that person. So it's really frustrating. I just wish people would give them a chance. I understand when you have a cover like this with the beach and everything (Jamie note: she pointed to a copy of *Someone Like You* I believe) but I was really happy with this cover (*Saint Anything*). When they came back with it I thought, "Okay it's a little bit darker and it's a little bit deeper and so is the book so maybe it has a chance. It looks more adult even so it has the crossover potential. (Jamie)

Dessen comments on the difference in covers for her novels. Usually, her covers are light, colorful, and beach and summer oriented. This markets them as a fun read when Dessen argues for a deeper meaning within her novels. Readers online comprehend the deeper meaning and relate to the issues Dessen creates for her characters. The importance of Sarah Dessen to readers online is met with an overwhelming response from readers around the world. Her global



accessibility invites a range in discourse. The many stories and characters of Sarah Dessen’s twelve novels resonate across social media platforms. Tumblr user “klar425” writes an open letter on Tumblr to Dessen, dated April 12, 2013 shortly after the release of *The Moon and More*, and adoringly states:

Dear Sarah Dessen

I want to thank you for your novels. They helped me get through a big part of my depression after my grandma died. Honestly, you have to be the first female writer who I felt could write any character and instantly have the audience connect with them in the first 4 pages. I know that you probably don’t check this website. And if you do, it’s because your publicist wants to check on the attention your books are gaining. However, if you have a chance to see this, please know you are one of my goals. I know that sounds weird—so let me explain. For starters, I am a filmmaker. I produce short films, and I am a writer as well. I may not be credited for big time titles, but I hope to one day become a Show Runner for my own series. I want to help teenage girls see that they are not alone in a world where you’re considered “weird” if you speak out against the norm. And I have decided, Sarah, that I would love to make your books one of my shows. To work with you would honestly be the best thing ever for me. I would love to get the messages you put into words out onto the screen. I would love to bring your characters to life and show teens that the world is messed up, but you need to keep your head high and not let them bring you down. Thank you for everything, and I hope to work with you in the future.

—An idealistic writer. (Klar425)

Klar425's open letter to Sarah Dessen is a final exemplification of "narrative intimacy." What is seen here is their emotional honesty at noting how Dessen's novels helped them grieve for their grandmother. When Dessen created characters who conveyed their personal struggles, this Tumblr user was able to transfer these struggles into a positive experience. They found a secure connection to Dessen in only a few pages. This establishes a legitimate access to her characters and explores how the characters have conveyed to them how they should continue to stay empowered through their own personal conflicts. Knowing their letter may not be read by Dessen, they continue to write about her influence on their life. As the letter continues, they declare their intention in discovering representation for other "weird" girls, girls who are not afraid to be eccentric. Klar425's letter entails the need to connect to others. By writing an open letter they leave themselves open to realize a connection with Sarah Dessen, her protagonists and other internet users, emphasizing the importance of a "narrative intimacy" that is created through reader responses online. As social media platforms continue evolving, discourse on Dessen will likewise change as readers keep finding each other.

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