



# Seven Nasty Things Guys May Bring to the Library

## *Rough Sexual Comments: Why are Guys so Crude?*

**RW:** Here we go with the second section of “Seven Nasty Things Guys May Bring to the Library.” This month it’s rough sexual comments, a.k.a. cussin’. Recapping the Nasty Seven, they are:

- Drug use or drug deals
- Rough sexual comments (especially to girls)
- Crime (or released from jail)
- Tattoos and piercings
- Rude language
- Challenging security or adult authority
- Physical violence

**RW:** Tell me, Elsworth, how often have you heard teens swear during your working hours?

**ER:** All the time, Rollie.

**RW:** Me, too. Language issues happened EVERY day. Guys getting mad at each other, guys trying to impress girls, guys trying to intimidate me . . . the beat goes on.

**ER:** It’s one of those “little things” that grinds away at staff until they hit the breaking point.

**RW:** So whatcha gonna do?

**ER:** In the Teen Space, we’ve developed our own rules about language. If we hear swearing once, we approach the customer and clearly explain that we do not tolerate that type of language. We let them know if we hear it again, they’ll be asked to leave. This plan works well about seventy-five percent of the time.

**RW:** Procedures in libraries where I’ve worked were worded in general terms stating something like, “Inappropriate behavior will not be tolerated.”

**ER:** The “Rules of Behavior” document for DCPL addresses swearing in an interesting way, stating “any activity that interferes with customer or staff use of the library, including but not limited to: verbally harassing others, use of obscene language, or stalking.”

**RW:** Guys will swear. The issue becomes are they swearing at somebody or are they dropping cuss words in the normal flow of teen conversation?

**ER:** Honestly, if teens are quietly talking and I hear a few bad words, I rarely intervene. It’s not until the behavior becomes showy that I think it needs to be addressed.

**RW:** As a teen librarian, you have to determine what works for you. One guy might greet another with, “How the hell are ya?” Later, another guy may shout, “Go to hell, you fool!” There’s a difference there.

**ER:** And not everyone thinks the same words should be disallowed in the library. What about minor swear words that some staff are comfortable with and some are not?

**RW:** Nobody wants to be the un-cool librarian controlling nasty language when swearing isn’t a big shocker in the teenage world. Video games, music lyrics, and cable television all are flush with shock value words.

**ER:** Swearing is everywhere. If you listen to music lyrics or watch television, you can’t help but get desensitized to some words and phrases. In the library, though, context is very important.

**RW:** As a helpful guide, here’s a list of possible swearing

situations that may be brought on by teen patrons:

**Guy Swearing at Another Guy.** This situation can either use the curse words as a greeting or a challenge to a throw-down.

**Guy Swearing at a Girl.** Although swearing between a guy and a girl can be conversational, in the cases I ran into, one or the other was about to blow up. Usually love gone bad.

**Girl Swearing at a Guy.** See above.

**Girl Swearing at a Girl.** This one may involve the guy as a third party where both girls are involved with him romantically.

**Guy Swearing at the Teen Librarian.** This probably isn’t about the amount of fines he owes or his computer time being cut off. This is about standing up to adult authority. The swearing can explode leaving you bewildered as what to do next. Or it could be the need to show off to his buddies. Either way it makes for an unpleasant day.

**ER:** Things can get complicated quickly when you have all of those scenarios going on at once around the room and you can’t really tell who said what. You know what seems to be a frequent cause for swearing problems? Social media.

**RW:** Social media is a huge catalyst for the conflict between girls and guys. A guy who is in the library everyday may show you a comment on **Facebook** where someone is calling him out with f-bombs. By the way, isn’t it interesting that discussing Internet filtering hasn’t been heard from since social media became the rage?

**ER:** It kind of blends together teens and electronic devices. The easy and immediate access to whatever they can think of—usually for free—can create an environment where all negative behaviors seem less significant. Teen guys seem especially at risk, believing they can get away with whatever their favorite rapper is saying. Usually they can’t.

**RW:** Rough language becomes a bigger problem when guys insult girls with crude sexual comments. Signs stating “no sexual name calling will be tolerated” can be placed in the teen area. Guess what happens? Guys will start saying stuff and then pull the “Who me?” act. Then all the guys join in. You may find yourself screaming, “Every one of you . . . get out!”

**ER:** As lenient as I can be about general swearing, I draw a firm line at any “crude sexual comments.” I have literally emptied the room because of inappropriately sexual or intentionally rough language in a sexual category. I feel like allowing that sentiment in the room makes it seem like I agree with it. For the sake of the teens we serve and the staff in the library, I cannot model indifference when it could lead to sexual aggression or other behaviors.

**RW:** If guys are intent on insulting girls by using suggestive sexual comments, nobody wins. The girls simply leave. It’s quite possible you’ll find yourself fielding complaints either from co-workers, parents, or your supervisors.

**ER:** I manage a department of all women, so I try to be especially sensitive to offensive words about and against females. I have worked very hard to create an environment where everyone

feels as comfortable as possible and expects to be treated fairly and respectfully.

**RW:** Objectionable language doesn't have to be traditional swearing. Insults to sexual orientation or race have huge potential to create arguments or fights. Remind guys that Kobe Bryant was fined \$100,000 in 2011 for barking a homosexual slur at a referee.

**ER:** Nontraditional swearing can be tricky to handle. Especially if there are varied views on what counts as swearing within the staff of one department.

**RW:** Should it be up to the teen librarian to correct objectionable language? If so, how? I think having a go-to phrase works. Find something short and to the point that lets guys know you hear them. I found the phrase, "Take that mess outside," worked.

**ER:** I say, "That's not appropriate for this space." If I know the customer well, though, I might simply ask, "Really? In the library?"

**RW:** Unfortunately, the easiest thing to do is kick the guys out of the library. Removing guys from the library solves the immediate problem, but how do you get them to come back?

**ER:** I'm guilty of the sweeping kick out, but more often I ask one or two guys to leave, but only after I have spoken to them twice and explained the consequences of their behavior. Unless the situation is truly horrific, I try to let them know when they leave that I look forward to seeing them the next day. And I mean it. Every day is a new day with teens.

**RW:** Being proactive and simply TALKING to guys is helpful, not just reciting rules and regulations. Get to know their names, what grade they are in, and other ice-breaking comments. Then don't push them any more than that. A quick, "Glad to see ya" works well.

**ER:** It's amazing how far general hospitality will get you. And lots of teen guys are logical thinkers. They want to know what the rules are and what will happen when they push boundaries.

**RW:** Cleveland's YWCA offered a session in etiquette during dinner and how to be a gentleman to a lady. One of our branches reported interesting success when that program was offered (especially around prom).

**ER:** Sometimes I threaten to call a teen guy's grandmother. They know I don't have the information to do so, and it's mostly a joke, but it does sometimes make a point.

**RW:** Without a doubt, guys being rude and crude with unwanted swearing in the library can be an ugly mess. Plus, every community and public library is different.

**ER:** The issues I face in the Teen Space with language are mirrored in some of the adult service areas of the library. I've heard some atrocious language from customers waiting for the door to open in the morning, especially when a woman walks by. This issue is bigger than just teens acting up in the library.

**RW:** I find it ironic that many popular books are loaded with language issues. "Offensive and inappropriate language" is the second most common reason books make the annual Banned Books list.

**ER:** That can really serve as a hook to get guys into reading. Sometimes I'll booktalk a title by reading a few sentences with swear words in them. They always get picked up.

**RW:** So what's appropriate? Heck, *Captain Underpants* has been banned. And remember the dust-up over *Harry Potter* and witchcraft? *To Kill a Mockingbird* has the N-word all throughout the story. As a teen librarian in an urban system, I never experienced even a complaint, let alone an official challenge. And I put all THOSE books on the shelves.

**ER:** I've never had a language complaint, either. I think it's about knowing your teens and framing the books in the right way. If you can use a book to engage teens in a discussion about

language and the power of words, go for it. Keep them talking and thinking about the ways they express themselves. Just hope they don't swear while doing it.

## BOOKS WITH LANGUAGE ISSUES THAT WILL BOOST YOUR CIRCULATION

Alexie, Sherman. **The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.** Little, Brown, 2007. 240p. \$18.99. 978-0-316-01368-0. \$11.99 Trade pb. 978-0-316-01369-7.

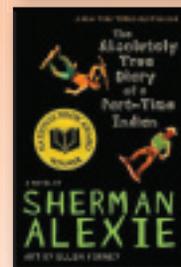
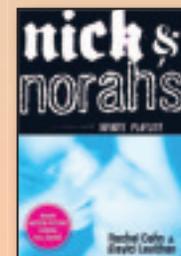
Hopkins, Ellen. All of her novels-in-verse. Margaret K. McElderry, 2007 – 2011.

Cohn, Rachel, and David Levithan. **Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist.** Knopf, 2006. 192p. \$16.95. 978-0-375-83531-5. \$7.99 Trade pb. 978-0-375-84614-4.

Rapp, Adam. **33 Snowfish.** Candlewick, 2006, ©2003. 192p. \$6.99 Trade pb. 978-0-7636-2917-5.

King, Stephen. Most titles.

Ziegesar, Cecily Von. *Gossip Girl* series. Poppy, 2002-2011.



And one without words that will either shock or delight readers:

**The Book of Bunny Suicides: Little Fluffy Rabbits Who Just Don't Want To Live Anymore.** Plume, 2005. 20p. \$10. 978-0-452-28703-7.



## LAST WORD

Swearing is all over the teen world. Try to stay positive and set an example of dignity. For the record, these titles were challenged in part for "offensive language:"



Cormier, Robert. **The Chocolate War.** Knopf, 1974.

Lee, Harper. **To Kill a Mockingbird.** J. B. Lippincott, 1960.

Salinger, J.D. **The Catcher in the Rye.** Little, Brown, 1951.

Walker, Alice. **The Color Purple.** Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

Pretty elite company. ■

*Rollie Welch has worked as a school librarian, a teen librarian with a suburban/rural public library system, a teen coordinator, and now as collection manager for Cleveland (OH) Public Library. He always ran into boys who were interested in books, but they were reluctant to show their enthusiasm for reading.*



PHOTO CREDIT: ANN OLSZEWSKI

*Elsworth Rockefeller has spent his career working with teens in public libraries, first as a teen services librarian in Ocean County (NJ) and now as manager of teen services at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library, which is located in downtown Washington, DC. He's enjoyed working with teen guys throughout his years of service, and especially enjoys helping guys who don't like to read find materials that engage them.*



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