

Interview for “Choices” by Kate Buckley

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is happy to be joined by Kate Buckley, who is here to talk about her new young adult novel, “Choices.”

Kate Buckley has her MA in human development with a concentration in women’s studies. She has facilitated support groups for middle school girls in California and New Mexico. Kate lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico with her family. “Choices,” her first young adult novel, is about the difficult choices facing a teen girl after she is date raped.

Tyler: Thank you, Kate, for joining me today. To begin, will you tell us a little bit about how Kara MacNeill, the main character in “Choices,” gets herself into her complicated predicament?

Kate: Kara is fifteen, the novel is told from her point of view. She is the only child of two conservative, over-protective parents who hold a very tight rein on her and her social life. Kara decides to defy what she calls “all the ludicrous rules” at home, her all-girls Catholic school, and her life in general. She sneaks out her bedroom window to go out with the town’s star basketball player, Jake Dodson. His crowd is fast, they party hard. It’s a challenge for Kara who is sheltered, naïve, and younger than all of them. She’s hardly ever been allowed out at night, other than with her parents or to go to a friend’s slumber party. So, she succumbs to peer pressure, particularly from Jake, to party along with his crowd. She experiments with Jell-O shots, has way too many and puts herself in a dangerous situation with a very experienced older boy...her world pretty much unravels after that.

Tyler: Despite their best intentions, do you think Kara’s parents could have acted differently to prevent Kara’s lying, sneaking out, and, ultimately, all the traumatic events that follow from her rebellious behavior?

Kate: As a facilitator for support groups and as the mother of two, I’ve heard it all. What doesn’t seem to work, and what causes kids to really explode in a cloud of rebellion, is poor communication, lack of respect, and the inability of some parents to slowly let their teens take more responsibility for their choices. Some parents want to “protect” their children from the big, bad world and, in my experience, this often ends up with the teens going out there with no refusal skills, no experience in speaking their minds or in defending themselves when situations call for it.

Tyler: Kara is date raped after she binge drinks at a party. Why did you choose to have the rape happen in this way?

Kate: Estimates vary, but research indicates that date or acquaintance rape may account for 70 percent of all sexual assaults. Because these rapes occur with someone a girl knows, someone whom she trusted, many of these violations are not reported. Often the girl blames herself for drinking or doing drugs, for putting herself in the situation, for what she was wearing, or for sneaking out. Even though she knew and believed she could

trust the boy at the time, the girl believes, on some level, that she was “asking for it” and “got what she deserved.” That’s why I used acquaintance rape in “Choices.” Needless to say, this type of assault can lead to depression and self-loathing because a girl has trusted and feels the fool. Without help and support it is almost impossible for a teen to pull herself out of this state of being. When events like these are buried they can wreak havoc on a girl’s psyche and personality for many years, perhaps for her whole life. She may never learn to trust herself, she may be unable to become self-reliant, to really grow up.

Tyler: When Kara’s parents learn she is pregnant how do they react, and how does her relationship with them change?

Kate: Well, needless to say, they are not happy. But more than that, they are shocked because they have done everything they can, and more, to keep her out of harm’s way. Strict curfews, sending her to an all-girls school, conservative clothes and lots of rules. The crisis that erupts from Kara’s rape/pregnancy opens up some long hidden secrets that change the family dynamic in many positive and healthy ways for all of them.

Tyler: What would you say are the biggest choices Kara must make in the novel?

Kate: To tell her parents that she is pregnant, to make the decision about what to do about it and to testify to help another girl who has been victimized by Jake, thus exposing what has happened to her.

Tyler: Kate, what do you think is Kara’s greatest learning experience in the novel?

Kate: That her best allies were sitting right across the dinner table from her all along, and that being raped was not in any way her fault. Ultimately, Kara recognizes Jake’s accountability.

Tyler: Kate, I mentioned at the beginning of the interview that you have been involved in support groups for young girls. Would you tell us a little bit about your work?

Kate: Yes. I worked with the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women in a program called TAPP: Teen Abuse Prevention Project. We went into the public schools (seventh through twelfth grades), providing information and facilitating discussions with teens about domestic violence, sexual violence, alcohol and drug use. I also worked in a Burbank middle school co-facilitating a seventh and eighth grade girl’s support group for two years. Young teens don’t have a long life experience, they don’t know that feelings are ephemeral and can pass. They don’t understand how we can help ourselves cope with life by listening to and expressing ourselves in a supportive, caring environment. I saw real changes and emotional growth happen for the girls in the group over the course of a school year. In Santa Fe, I administrated a science-based Life Skills program for three years in the public middle schools. It was amazing to me to see how many challenges these sixth through eighth graders were already handling in their young lives. The program proved to be very informative and helpful for them.

Tyler: In “Choices,” Kara was afraid to tell anyone about her rape until she found out

she was pregnant. Even if she had not become pregnant, do you feel she should have told someone? Why do you think so many girls remain silent when they are raped, and what message would you give them?

Kate: I would advise girls who have been sexually violated to seek help -- from a school counselor, a parent, or other trusted adult. Don't ever keep it a secret or blame yourself. At several points in the book Kara says that she "hates" herself. Girls can have a tendency to turn their bad feelings in on themselves, and not talking about what is troubling them often leads to self-blame, depression and immobility. Culturally, girls are not encouraged to speak out, and begin to pull back from fully being themselves around age eleven. They start to worry too much about what other people think. There is still this sense that "nice" girls are caring and considerate, always supportive of others. A girl's wishful thinking that others will intuit what is going on inside of her, will understand or validate her for unexpressed feelings, is just not realistic. Acceptance, compassion and self-love have to come from within, from her own understanding of whom she is and who she is becoming. A girl's ability to make peace with a painful experience comes from being responsible for her own process and self. This is at the core of all group and individual therapeutic work. In "Choices," the support group becomes a safe haven which allows Kara to "go there," to feel accepted for who she is, not judged for what has happened to her. The group gives Kara and all the group members a protected environment to be who they are and share their deepest fears and feelings.

Tyler: Kate, what were your intentions and hopes in writing this book?

Kate: My intentions were to help and empower teen girls, to foster healthy relationship between teens and their parents based on love, understanding, mutual respect and open communication. I hope the novel encourages teens to think critically, that Kara's story will raise consciousness, not only about cultural mores and topical issues, but will make readers think twice before judging other's choices from the outside.

Tyler: What reactions have you received from teenage girls who've read "Choices"?

Kate: I've had girls from Massachusetts, California, New Mexico, Idaho, Ireland (!), New York ... a wide cross section of teens, really, have read the book and all have reacted enthusiastically, saying the story is very realistic, that they couldn't put the book down. Many have said that they could relate to the feelings of the girls in the support group, that that part of the story brought tears to their eyes. Some of them have written great reviews on Amazon and other sites. I've been asked many times whether or not "Choices" will be translated into other languages. I hope to make that happen.

Tyler: Kate, I understand that Kara and her family are Catholic, and her mother is a pro-life advocate, so I can see how the ending may be controversial for some Catholic readers. Would you tell us a little bit about why you chose to have the family be Catholic, and, if it's not giving away the ending, what kind of reaction you've received from Catholic readers?

A friend of mine gave it to her sister, a conservative Catholic, who lives in Staten Island, NY. Here is a quote from the review she wrote about the novel on Amazon.com “As a mother of a 16-year-old girl, “Choices” is a wonderful catalyst for parents and children to have this sometimes ‘unapproachable talk’ about the pressures of drinking, sex, social life and the importance of education. . .it’s important to know that there are consequences for every action. Some aren’t earth shattering and some change you forever.” She loved the book and gave it to her 16-year-old daughter to read. I was surprised and very pleased by her reaction. Many friends here in Santa Fe (who were raised Catholic) have read “Choices” and been very receptive to it. Not only have they liked the book but they’ve commented on the balanced way it illustrates all sides of the reproductive rights issue. Readers who are neither Catholic nor Christian have related to the novel and found themselves very involved in Kara’s journey.

Tyler: You mentioned many girls from across the United States have read the book, and even in Ireland, and you hope to have it translated into other languages. Into which languages have you had requests for it to be translated?

Kate: Mostly people have asked when it will be translated into Spanish.

Tyler: Why do you think “Choices” is relevant to women in other countries and cultures, who may not be Catholic or even Christian?

Kate: I think every woman on the planet can relate to sexual harassment and sexual violence issues. Most girls and women have experienced it at some level themselves, whether it be a look, a touch, an inappropriate joke, or an actual assault. This is why, I think, teen readers tell me the support group scene makes them cry. As far as Catholicism is concerned, “Choices” is more about beliefs than any specific religious faith. Catholicism is a metaphor for beliefs. “Choices” is about what can happen when you’ve been taught to believe a certain way all your life and then something happens which makes it personal—and suddenly, you view your beliefs from a very different perspective. And, you may find yourself changing them!

Tyler: In the novel, Kara blames herself for everything and becomes depressed. There must be thousands of young women who find themselves in the same situation each year. What advice would you give to these young women?

Kate: Start by reaching out for help. Find out what kind of support will work best for you and act on that. Activism empowers . . . take charge of situations when you are able, do what you can to stand up for yourself and others. Girls should be encouraged to express themselves and their emotions. Talking about feelings with friends and trusted adults, journaling, reading, art, and music are all good ways to express our inner lives. Physical movement is very important: sports, yoga, walking, dance, gardening, and outdoor activities. All of these are excellent, constructive ways to express and expel suppressed anger and guilt, to release endorphins and turn negative feelings into positive, usable energy. Girls should be reading to educate themselves, to find out what their beliefs and opinions are, and talk to others about their discoveries. Having a pet, enjoying

nature, and meditation are all helpful. Girls can also create a sanctuary in their rooms, to help nurture themselves. The most important thing is to take some kind of action.

Tyler: Kate, as we've already mentioned, you've worked with girls in support groups. Are there any plans to have "Choices" available to young women in trouble, as part of a package or something along those lines, or part of curricula in a program to help teenage girls?

Kate: Yes. Two organizations, one in Idaho and one in New York City, who work with victims of violence are using the book with their teen girl empowerment curricula. The Santa Fe Girls School may be using the book as part of its program this year, and have asked me to come in and talk with the eighth grade girls about writing. There are school counselors in New Mexico, California and Idaho who've expressed interest in doing focus groups and having me visit their sites to facilitate discussions about "Choices" with students. A group of fifty plus girls from a public high school in Albuquerque (their school has an abstinence only sex-ed program) has asked me to come and speak to them about "Choices" and the issues. Planned Parenthood and NARAL are also looking at ways they can use "Choices" in their educational materials and programs.

Tyler: How, specifically, does Kara's journey in "Choices" help girls learn about navigating through the complicated challenges of high school and growing up?

Kate: Too often, girls aren't thinking too clearly about risk taking and responsibility. In "Choices," Kara learns what can happen as a result of bad choices through her own difficult experiences. As readers follow the story, viewed through Kara's eyes, they hear her most intimate feelings and fears, and find out how she grows and discovers herself through those ordeals. Most importantly, they see how she changes and survives. Through the novel, teens can perceive how making a healthy choice vs. an unhealthy one can change and transform one's life, and that reframing or looking for some positive result from a bad choice can empower and strengthen a person going forward. The old story that there must be a pony somewhere in here with all this mess sort of works here. The bigger life lessons that arise in "Choices," and the way the characters who have been victimized transform their beliefs about themselves and their relationships can challenge readers to examine what they've been taught. It is my hope that readers will develop new, more investigative thinking and understanding about their culture and their participation in it. Ultimately, "Choices" is a book about beliefs and how strong love and open, respectful communication can pull a family through the most difficult crisis.

Tyler: Kate, it doesn't sound like the story has a happy ending for Jake. Do you feel he is an accurate portrayal of many teenage boys today. What would you say to young men to warn them about the danger they can get into by letting their behavior get out of control?

Kate: The girls who've read "Choices" think the character of Jake is very accurate! He's good looking, popular, a star athlete ... all qualities which give him a kind of celebrity status and therefore a lot of control over his peers. Kara says that he "moved in a different world from mine. The coolest of the cool world." But, keep in mind that Jake

is actually a victim of the culture, too. The culture encourages Jake to use his power to his advantage, to think only of himself and winning—to “go for it.” In school, boys are often educated about sexual harassment and taught that no means no, but the messages they get outside of school weigh in a lot more for them. Doing drugs and alcohol, impressing peers, being part of the partying crowd, and the need to win assist boys in forgetting what they’ve learned about inappropriate behaviors, about the dangers of using drugs and alcohol, and about taking responsibility for their choices.

Tyler: Kate, you say you hope “Choices” will help prevent teen girls from ending up in Kara’s situation. What about women who have been raped and even dealt with pregnancy as a result of rape? I understand you’ve actually heard from adult readers who’ve experienced this situation. What has their response to “Choices” been and how was reading the book helpful to them?

Kate: A friend of mine, from another state, gave it to her friend to read and I received the following letter. I was very moved by this reader’s letter and asked her if I can share it at book signings, etc. I assured her I’d protect her identity and she’s given me permission to read it today:

Dear Ms. Buckley,

Many thanks to you for writing “Choices.” I write to you with a grateful heart. Two years ago, in my late fifties, I recovered the memory of being raped at fourteen. I attended a Catholic girls school, had an attorney father and a sheltered home life ... so, mine was a similar tale.

But, at that time, there was no one to ‘tell’ and so my story went underground for 40-some years. There are many things I could say, how touched I was, when the tears came, but what I most want you to know is that the night after I finished it, I had a dream: There were children in cages outdoors. Someone was coming to torture them. I stood outside the cages, with my arm around my fourteen-year-old self, comforting her and assuring her that she wouldn’t be harmed.

Until reading “Choices” I couldn’t embody what healthy, loving parental responses were. I certainly had the intellectual understanding but a circuit hadn’t been wired. Now the wiring feels more complete. So I write this note from a place of deep thanks and appreciation, from a fuller me.

Woman reader

Other women who’ve read “Choices” have told me they were surprised by how much they can still relate to fifteen-year-old Kara’s story; how healing it was for the teen girl part of them that was re-awakened by reading the book.

Tyler: Without giving away the ending, does Kara have hope for a happy life despite the difficulties she's experienced?

Kate: Absolutely! By the last chapter, Kara has become much more empowered. She has a more open dialog with her parents, they trust her, and she's really beginning to trust herself. No longer blaming herself for what happened with Jake, Kara is starting to take responsibility for her choices. There is going to be more to the story, too. Due to popular demand and a lot of inquiries from readers and professionals, I am currently working on a new, expanded edition of "Choices" in which Kara will testify against Jake to help another girl who has been victimized by him. This edition will also reveal more about Jake, and I hope it will encourage teen boys to think about the consequences that can result from their behaviors; how the rest of their lives can be affected by one thoughtless act. Kara's family, friends, neighbors, people from her parish, and her whole community will be affected by the events that follow. Her school and personal lives will be transformed in surprising ways.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Kate. Before we go, would you tell our readers where they may find out more information about "Choices" and how they may buy copies?

Kate: Sure. Amazon.com, iUniverse.com, bn.com ... "Choices" is available through any of the on-line bookstores. And, if they live in Santa Fe, our library and local bookstores carry it too!

I will have a website up soon: katebuckleybooks.com. Readers can contact me there or at: choicesthebook@comcast.net. And, I would love to hear from them!