

A Story of a Teenager's Suicide Quietly Becomes a Best Seller

By MOTOKO RICH

Among the vampires, dragons and dystopian futuristic societies that dominate young adult reading lists, a debut novel about teenage suicide has become a stealthy hit with surprising staying power.

"Thirteen Reasons Why," by Jay Asher, is made up of the transcripts of audiotapes that 16-year-old Hannah Baker recorded before committing suicide, interspersed with the reactions of a high school classmate who listens to them. Each tape reveals an anecdote about another classmate whose actions the girl blames for her death.

Since it was first published in October 2007 by Razorbill, an imprint of Penguin Group U.S.A., the novel has sold 158,000 copies, according to Nielsen BookScan, which tracks about 70 percent of retail sales. Unlike most books, which are customarily released in paperback about a year after hardcover publication, "Thirteen Reasons Why" has remained in hardcover, with word of mouth and the author's appearances fueling sales.

"Death and dying has always been a popular theme for kids," said Josalyn Moran, vice president for children's books at Barnes & Noble. "Kids like to read about situations that are worse than theirs and figure out that 'O.K., my life isn't so bad.'"

The book enjoyed a short run on The New York Times's children's chapter books best-seller list last spring. Last fall the publisher released a revised hardcover edition that included a new Q. and A. with Mr. Asher.

Razorbill also commissioned the flagship New York office of Grey, an advertising agency, to develop a YouTube campaign featuring videos of a cassette recorder playing Hannah's tapes, as read by the actress Olivia Thirlby, who played the title character's best friend in "Juno."

"Thirteen Reasons Why" reentered the chapter-book best-seller list in November at No. 10. When next Sunday's list is published, it will rise to No. 3.

"It was not a book where a whole house runs out and pushes like crazy, and you have to have success right away, because you spent all this money," said Benjamin Shrank, publisher of Razorbill. The company paid Mr. Asher a low six-figure advance for two books.

With its thrillerlike pacing and scenes of sexual coercion and teenage backbiting, the novel appeals to young readers, who say the book also gives them insight into peers who might consider suicide. "I think the whole message of the book is to be careful what you do to people, because you never know what they're going through," said Christian Harvey, a 15-year-old sophomore at Port Charlotte High School in Port Charlotte, Fla. "You can really hurt somebody, even with the littlest thing."

Ms. Harvey, who bought the book with a gift card last year, said she stayed up until 2 a.m. to

finish it and immediately recommended it to friends. The school's book group read the novel in October, and when Mr. Asher visited Port Charlotte in February, about 35 students bought a copy.

"Thirteen Reasons Why" was partly inspired by a relative of Mr. Asher's who had tried to commit suicide. The idea of using tape recordings, he said, came from a visit to a casino in Las Vegas, where Mr. Asher used a recorded audio guide on a tour of an exhibition about King Tutankhamen of Egypt.

Something about listening to a disembodied voice made Mr. Asher, now 33, think, "This would be a really cool format for a book that I had never seen."

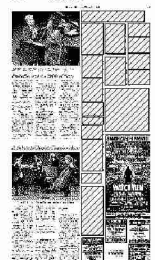
At the time Mr. Asher, who had dropped out of college to pursue a writing career, was trying to sell comedic picture and chapter books for younger children. Before he sold "Thirteen Reasons" to Razorbill, he said, he sub-

mitted a total of 11 manuscripts to publishers. All were rejected.

He was working as an assistant children's librarian and as a bookseller at a local store in Sheridan, Wyo., six years ago when he started reading a lot of young adult fiction. One day, he said, the idea for "Thirteen Reasons" just hit him, and he wrote what eventually became the first 10 pages that night.

The eerie, sardonic voice of Hannah, the suicide victim, came easily. The character of Clay Jensen, the boy whose reactions to the tapes provide another thread through the novel, was based on Mr. Asher's own high school memories.

Booksellers have embraced the novel from the beginning. "I've read a lot of titles that are pretty dark," said Kris Vreeland, the children's book buyer at Vro-

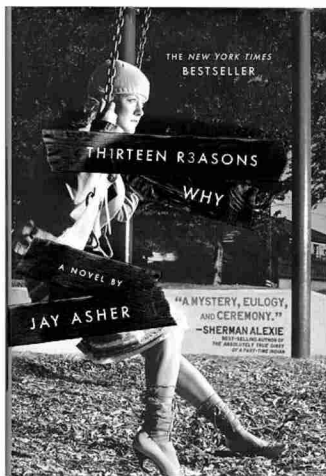


man's Bookstore in Pasadena, Calif. "But not something that was specifically that kind of a format and never anything that really dealt with suicide from the perspective of the person who has committed suicide." Ms. Vreeland said the store had sold more than 250 copies.

Mr. Asher was planning to write a lighthearted high school romance as his follow-up to "Thirteen Reasons," but the intense feedback from readers, he said, caused him to abandon that manuscript halfway through. "I didn't want them to be let down by my next book," he said. Now he is working on a novel that "will go into the complications of high school relationships."

That's enough for fans like Gabrielle Dupuy, a 17-year-old junior at Charlotte High School in Punta Gorda, Fla., who heard Mr. Asher speak at her school. "As soon as he told us he was working on another book," Ms. Dupuy said, "I was like, 'Can I preorder it now?'"

On a casino tour, an author finds a breakthrough.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARISSA ROTH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jay Asher had had 11 manuscripts rejected before he sold "Thirteen Reasons Why," which has gradually become a best-selling children's title since it was published in 2007.