

Sticks and stones  
may break my bones:  
can literature help in  
the war on drugs?



“ I wouldn’t recommend sex, drugs or insanity for everyone, but they’ve always worked for me” (“ Hunter S. Thompson Sex Quotes”). Hunter S. Thompson, the famous American journalist, and writer was known for always thinking differently than others toward drugs and sex during the 1960s. Is it possible that talking about sex, drugs, and insanity might do harm during a time when quite literally everybody was doing it, man? Ranked twenty-five on the American Library Association’s list of the most-frequently challenged or banned books, *Go Ask Alice* confronts its readers with all of these topics (American Library Association). Claiming to be written by a real teenager, *Go Ask Alice* is authored simply by “ Anonymous”, giving the illusion that the words of the novel hold a true, real-life value to those who read it. Depicting the story of the stereotypical teenage angst, this story places the audience in the mind of a young girl discovering the tumultuous world of drugs and promiscuity for the first time. This said the diary in which the story narrates the harrowing descent into the character’s ultimate demise presents the reader with graphic and potentially upsetting dialogue. While *Go Ask Alice* is littered with the gut-wrenching discourse of a helpless young woman, Alice, in the battle of her life against a faceless evil, writer Beatrice Sparks gives the audience a near first-hand account of the effects of drug addiction and abuse. Though it is at times inappropriate for certain ages because of its drug and sexual content, *Go Ask Alice* can ultimately serve as the vessel upon which drug abuse can no longer be just a social ineptitude, but a life-saving conversation.

It is the belief of some that the subject matter of *Go Ask Alice* is unfitting for young minds based on its account of drugs and addiction. Many noted

literary critics, however, also feel that the argument against the novel is unnecessary based on the change in dialogue that the story provided to its readers. *Go Ask Alice* opened the door for a healthy conversation about addiction during a time in which drugs were just becoming socially experimental. During the book's publication in the 1960s, a pandemic was spreading across the United States of people trying different types of drugs that were never thought of before. *Go Ask Alice* arrived at a period in which people were unable to physically and emotionally cope with mind-altering drugs, and no one yet knew what the ramifications were of these dangerous drugs. The novel, in its lifelike prose and realistic mannerisms, heeds wisdom and insight into the horrors and dangers of drugs and addiction. Lauren Adams, the writer of "Go Ask Alice: A Second Look," explains how the character Alice serves as the social guardian angel, giving readings of how society's emotions ranged at that time, giving purpose to Alice's light in the darkness: Published right at the height of the psychedelic era and the dawning awareness that experimenting with drugs might have a downside, *Go Ask Alice* provided the perfect combination of voyeuristic appeal and high-mindedness: the book got credit for opening important lines of communication about the dangers of drug use. (Adams 110) Unconsciously doing so, Alice teaches moral as one reads each new diary entry. Every chilling and gripping passage gives a new warning or cries for help against LSD, speed, "torpedos", and all the other ills she befalls in this troubling novel (Sparks 37-213). In one passage, the character describes her depression and her deep longing to escape the prison from where she lives in her addiction, repenting in her diary " Oh Father, I've got to get out of the cesspool! It's fucking me down and drowning me! I've got to get the hell out

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of here while I still can. Tomorrow! Tomorrow for sure!” (Sparks 109) As goes much of her time spent abusing drugs, Alice sufficiently makes the reader believe in the story that after each trip or high, the crash and burn at the end causes deep irreversible regret, along with tumultuous pain and suffering. To that point, the end of the novel closes with Alice’s death, surely as a direct cause of her drug addiction. One could assert that it was likely the author’s intention to raise awareness to the dangers of drug abuse and drug addiction, and not to inflict emotional harm upon the readers of *Go Ask Alice*. Banning or censoring words depicting the damage of drugs or the long-term harm addiction plays on the body do not change the fact that in reality, drug problems exist. However, through works of literature like “*Go Ask Alice*,” it might be possible to change the speed at which this pandemic spreads through the power of education and awareness in reading.

The 1960s marked a period of time in American culture that was riddled with drugs, sex, and rock and roll. According to American history and politics professor Dr. Anthony Ashbolt in his article “*Go Ask Alice: Remembering the Summer of Love Forty Years On*,” the sixties could be summarized as: ... the explosion of psychedelic sounds, images, and lifestyles in that decade . . .

While the multiple meanings all carry weight, too often that first general sense of the Summer of Love shields a dialectic of hope and despair behind a banner of optimism and dreams. To put it more bluntly, the hippie experiments of the 1960s were full of utopian promise, while the Summer of Love actually spelled the end of that particular vision . . . (Ashbolt 35) Dr. Ashbolt goes on to describe that a young, vulnerable teenager such as the character Alice would have likely not stood a chance against the wave of

seduction that was false promises and sensations of immediate gratification through mind-altering drugs. According to Ashford, Alice's constant running away from the dissatisfaction of failed friendships and family complications can all be explained in the hippie movement, in that the sixties marked a time in which "[h]undreds and then thousands of 'flower children' had flocked to San Francisco in search of love, peace, community and self. They sought refuge from an American dream that was crumbling quickly in suburban wastelands and urban hothouses . . . (Ashbolt 35). Alice fell into the perfect subculture of children that became victims of abuse in this period of history, exposed and vulnerable to a world of drugs and violence that is documented throughout the novel. In *Go Ask Alice*, the character journals during in her many escapes from home incidents of oral sex with random strangers in order to obtain more drugs, violent sexual attacks of friends made in her travels, and threats of rape from boys with whom Alice is friends with. During one of her drug-induced states, Alice pens to her diary, "" Another day, another blow job . . . Everybody is just lying around here like they're dead and Little Jacon is yelling, ' Mama, Daddy can't come now. He's humping Carla.' I've got to get out of this shit hole" (Sparks 112-113). In this entry, the character is very far into the world of drugs, and is at this point now exchanging her body for drugs. Yet still a part of her conscience realizes that this is not morally correct, as she writes that she wants to " get out" (Sparks 113). Undeniably, the drug-related passages of *Go Ask Alice* such as these are very graphic and explicit in nature. However, based the maturity of the reader, these words serve a greater purpose in that they too deliver an ethical message to the audience – actions have consequences. Each decision Alice makes in the story is almost very clearly documented in her " diary," <https://assignbuster.com/sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-can-literature-help-in-the-war-on-drugs/>

and one can almost see her naïve and childish way of thinking as she makes each poor decision after another, turning away from the moral light of sobriety.

Following the greater story of *Go Ask Alice*, the novel helps show a direct line of cause and effect in drug addiction, which can serve a greater good should the reader be willing to overlook the graphic drug nature. A grade school in Indiana banned *Go Ask Alice* in 1977 from English class because the principal felt it had “dirty” words (Bald et al. 463). A 1978 article from “The Librarians’ Game” titled “*Go Ask Alice* banned; *Fever* book burned” described the hysteria rising around the literary controversy: In a close vote (4-3), the school board of Richmond, British Columbia has banned the controversial book *Go Ask Alice* as encouraging experimentation with drugs and sex and having no redeeming social or literary value. But great many parents and students came to the school board meeting to protest the threatened ban, and it was decided to donate the school’s copies to the municipality’s public library. (The Librarians’ Game 920) Why would parents and students alike come to the defense of the graphic, disturbing novel? Is it possible that the story’s message had been received by both reader and family, causing a call to arms against the school board in the case of the Richmond school board incident? While it is impossible to know fully what actions made the students and parents come to the aid of the book, it is important to realize that *Go Ask Alice* is a moral, reputable work of literature with a pure message to its readers. Undeniably, credited writer Beatrice Sparks gave Alice countless interactions with sexual violence and numerous drugs, but she also gave her another factor throughout the story – hope.

Alice continually had hope that one day, after each high or burn out, that she would escape her internal damnation. Even though Alice's character ultimately succumbs to her addiction and fatally overdoses, Sparks leaves the reader with a message that every choice has a consequence. Through Alice, one can hope that the next generation of readers will learn that every decision is as important as the next, and to learn to make better choices than those made in *Go Ask Alice*.

## Works Cited

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