INTRODUCTION

In July 2017, it was reported that American singer/songwriter Usher Raymond IV allegedly gave a woman genital herpes as a result of having unprotected sex with her (Dziemianowicz, 2017). Actor Charlie Sheen allegedly exposed at least one former lover to HIV in October 2015 (Evans, 2017; Hautman, 2017) and was sued for allegedly lying about being HIV-positive before having unprotected sex with the woman. Cardinals pitcher Carlos Martinez (Augustine, 2016) and Toronto Blue Jays slugger Edwin Encarnacion (Rodgers, 2016) have both been accused of passing along STDs to former lovers during unprotected sexual encounters while at the same time misrepresenting their health status. In the late 1990s, Darnell “Boss Man” McGee was accused of exposing—perhaps deliberately—more than sixty women and girls to the AIDS virus after 1992 when he was diagnosed with it (Nossiter, 1997). Such irresponsible, negligent, and even criminal behavior such as this can clearly be seen as reprehensible and cold-hearted. How many of us have such little respect for other people that we would engage in such behavior? Doubtless, few would.

But what if your life depended upon passing along a malicious, deadly contagion that would inevitably kill the individual you infect? Would you knowingly, actively seek out sexual partners with the explicit intention of infecting them if it could mean the extension of your life, even by a few days, trading the life of someone else—perhaps some stranger—so that you could have a few more days or weeks of life? What if the person you passed it to were “deserving” of such a fate? What if they were far more well-equipped than you to manage the threat? Would you?

Sexual activity—and its potentially life-threatening ramifications—is at the core of horror film It Follows (Green, Smith, Mitchell, Kaplan, & Rommesmo, 2014), written and directed by David Robert Mitchell. The film centers around Jamie “Jay” Height, a nineteen-year-old girl who has sex with Hugh, a twenty-one year old boy whom she is dating. After sleeping with her, Hugh explains that he has passed something on to her through the act of sexual intercourse and that “IT” will follow her relentlessly, presumably to kill her, after which IT will continue following Hugh and so on, “right down the line” of sexual activity, according to Hugh. The film explores how Jay deals with this threat.

This chapter approaches the teaching of critical literacy skills from a moral perspective, helping students address some of the questions raised in the first paragraph in the context of the film and its relevance to their own lives. I will begin
by briefly discussing some of the features of the film that make it difficult to place in a secondary school curriculum, ultimately arguing that the long-term benefits to students outweigh its short-term prurient impact. I will then illuminate some metaphorical interpretations of the entity as it is presented in the film, but then move beyond these easy metaphors to share some ways students can make individual meaning from the film as it relates to their own lives as they engage with some of the issues of the film through moral inquiry and self-exploration.

IN DEFENSE OF IT FOLLOWS

For some parents, including a film itself in a secondary school classroom is problematic, if not heretical at a time of falling literacy rates (NY Times Editorial Board, 2013) and increased emphasis on rigorous curricula. But the fact that the film was a horror movie almost adds insult to injury. However, horror texts are important to teen readers “because of how much these books reach teens on a frighteningly human level” (Jensen, 2013). Authors of horror books and stories, to be successful, must address the humanity of the reader through creating a shared humanity with the monster. After all, if we cannot recognize ourselves in Frankenstein’s monster or Count Dracula, then what can we learn about ourselves from these creatures of darkness?

The literary quality of a text such as Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein or Bram Stoker’s Dracula, books which have been continuously published in multiple languages for more than one hundred years, cannot be disputed. But what of the argument that these stories are simply too gruesome, too repellant, too darned scary to share with children and teens? Scholar Joni Richards Bodart has argued that in today’s world, children have access to people and information all over the world in just seconds, and they both talk and read. Teens know what is going on in far more detail than previous generations did. They don’t just know that the world is a scary place, they also know why. So it is important to teach young adults not only how to defeat the monsters but how to make use of them as well. (2012, p. xxiii)

Furthermore, horror literature “allows both students and teachers to go to the fringes of the imagination and personal creativity….By letting students venture to places of…horror, it allows them to cross borders and become more connected with reading and writing” (Aho, 2008, p. 34) in ways mainstream and realistic literature cannot. Horror writer Stephen King (1981) also notes that, while some horror texts contain elements “that will freak [children] out,” ultimately “children have a right to experience the entire spectrum of drama, from such warm and mostly unthreatening programs as ‘Little House on the Prairie’ and ‘The Waltons’ to scarier fare.”

While Bodart’s and Aho’s arguments generally address the written word, King’s comments are aimed at visual media, specifically television and film. Horror narratives are particularly adaptable to a broad array of presentational modes, including “face to face communication, the printed text, the cinema, and the simulated events of the