

In the Know: Harm Reduction and Holistic Approaches to Sex and Drugs in Contemporary YA Literature

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As the first panelist discusses, the 1960s youth subculture invoked the unholy trinity of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” provoking in adults a fearmongering approach to youth and drugs that led to distressing narratives and authoritarian policies surrounding teens and drug use. In this paper, I will explore how contemporary YA narratives are pushing back against “just say no” approaches to drug education and their moral, rhetorical partner, abstinence-only sex education. Following the arguments of programs like Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) and Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), I will lay out the parallel tenets of a science-informed harm-reduction approach to sex and drug education. I will then critically analyze four recent, notable YA publications--Benway’s *Far from the Tree* (2017), Sánchez’s *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), Acevedo’s *The Poet X* (2018), and Kiely’s *Tradition* (2018)--to discuss how the authors complicate and nuance both sex and drugs narrative scripts. I will explain how they shift away from the moralizing, abstinence-only traditions surrounding sex and drugs and toward an honest, informative, multifaceted harm-reduction approach, embodying what Katie Anderson of the SSDP argues is at “the heart of what everyone in this debate has in common: wanting to make young people as safe as possible. The first step to solving any issue is to acknowledge the realities of the situation...that young people encounter and sometimes take drugs. We must accept this, just as we have accepted that young people might have sex.”