

Rogue Librarians, Episode 27

Crank (Part 1: Why It's Banned)

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Welcome to the Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, and Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians.

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Today, we will be discussing the novel Crank by Ellen Hopkins.

Published in 2004, Crank was Hopkins' first novel, though she had been writing books for children and freelancing as a journalist before that.

Publishers Weekly praised Hopkins saying, quote, the author is definitely on a mission.

She creates a world nearly as consuming and disturbing as the titular drug, end quote.

The book was a New York Times bestseller and was listed on several notable lists, including the New York Public Library's Recommended for Teens and the book since top 10.

It also received the International Reading Association Award all in 2005.

Crank has been among the country's most banned titles in public schools and libraries since its publication in 2004.

Crank was 38th on the ALA's list of the top 100 most challenged books from 2010 to 2019, as well as on the top 10 list in 2010, when it was number 4, and in 2022, when it was number 10.

Amazon recommends Crank for those 14 and older, and Common Sense Media recommends it for those 16 and older.

And I also wanted to add that it is a novel in verse, so it's written in a series of poems, and it is loosely based on the author's experiences with her daughter.

We wanted to offer a trigger warning that we will be talking about drug abuse in our discussion of the book today.

Crank is the street term for crystal meth.

There is also a rape, teen pregnancy, and a suicide attempt in the novel.

Dorothy, would you mind giving us a summary of the book?

Sure.

Crank is about Kristina, a 17-year-old who goes on a court-ordered visit to see her estranged father in Albuquerque, despite the objections of her mother.

Her mother would have gone to bat to keep it from happening, but Kristina was adamant as well.

Dad, however, turns out to be kind of a disappointment.

He works in a bowling alley, sort of under the table.

He talks about women, you know, all the time, to his own daughter, and he does drugs.

And Kristina is kind of starting to see why mom left or why that relationship did not last.

One bonus though, there is a good-looking boy living in the same building.

So the two start a relationship, and he introduces her to what she refers to as the monster, which is crank or methamphetamines, crystal meth.

And no pushback from dad.

Dad kind of figures out what's going on and just tells her to, you know, be careful.

So her relationship with the boy, Adam, doesn't last all that long, but the drugs kind of become a habit, and they follow her back to Reno, where she lives with her mom and stepdad.

And then she hides the problem from the family, but they can kind of tell something's going on, but nobody, you know, clocks what it is or to what degree it is.

She gets involved with a couple of other boys, and she, you know, just everything is driven by searching to, you know, where is her next source of crank gonna come from?

So it's the book, it's, you know, it really explores the habit and how it impacts Kristina's life.

So the book is written in verse and vividly describes both the highs and the lows of drug addiction.

Thanks, Dorothy.

We wanted to talk a little bit more about why it's been banned now.

So the reasons we've seen given for the challenges to this book are for drug use, offensive language, and being sexually explicit.

Of these, by far the most prevalent is the drug use, which is probably obvious from the title of the book.

And meth is the most commonly used drug, but it's not the only drug.

The book is explicitly about drug addiction, especially to methamphetamines.

Common Sense Media tells parents, quote, Kristina snorts it, smokes it, and even injects it.

She also buys and sells, including from a drug gang.

And she smokes cigarettes, does ecstasy, smokes marijuana, and drinks coffee.

This book includes other mature material, including a rape, an unplanned pregnancy, and a scene in which a high Kristina cuts her skin and drinks her own blood.

Mature readers will recognize that this is a cautionary tale describing the stronghold of addiction, and parents could use it to open up some good discussions about drug use and addiction.

End quote.

I love that they put coffee on the list.

Well, the other thing they mention is there is some swearing in the book.

And although Kristina slash Bree, she calls herself Bree at various points when she's under the influence of the monster especially.

While she does engage in sexual activity, the descriptions there are much less explicit than they are when she's describing getting high or how she feels on the drugs.

In terms of historical content, Ellen Hopkins wrote the book Crank rather loosely based on her experience with her own daughter's drug addiction.

She started writing simply, as many people do, to process emotions about what had happened.

But as she wrote, she started to feel that the story was much larger than her.

It didn't belong only to her, and it needed to be told.

Really, for everyone is, I guess, a cautionary tale.

In an interview with Women on Writing, which was published around 2010, Hopkins said, quote, as I wrote, I came to feel that this was a case of the story being bigger than the storyteller.

It wasn't just my, parentheses, our story.

It was a story shared by many.

By fictionalizing, I opened the book to a wider audience.

Kristina wasn't just my daughter.

She was the reader's daughter or mother or sister or friend.

And of course, we can't talk about the historical context without thinking about the drug itself and putting that into a little bit of context.

According to the NIH's Library of Medicine article, the methamphetamine problem in the United States, crank, AKA methamphetamines have been around since before World War II.

So interesting fact, it was used by soldiers on all of the fronts in the war to give them energy and to suppress their hunger.

So another interesting fact, the term crank, which I was always curious where it came from, came into use because in the late 70s, motorcycle gangs in California were the predominant makers and suppliers of the drug.

And they would carry it around in the crank cases of their bikes, thereby the term crank.

That is very interesting.

Further, by the early 2000s, high rates of methamphetamine use were reported in almost all parts of the United States.

The numbers of people admitted to treatment for addiction to meth went from approximately 50,000 in 1995 to about 150,000 in 2005, which means this book came out just as the problem was definitely on the rise.

According to Hopkins, she has heard from hundreds of young people who claim that the book crank helped them to make better decisions and steered them away from drugs.

Meth was definitely looming large in the public imagination as the TV show Breaking Bad about a chemistry teacher turned meth dealer premiered three years later.

And another thing you might remember that happened in 2005, I know I remember this, is there was a law, the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act, which requires retailers for non-prescription products containing Sudafedrin, Efedrin, or phenylpropanolamine, to place those products behind the counter or in a locked cabinet.

I know this affected me because I was a big user of Sudafed.

That was what I always gave us in college, Aspartan Sudafed, you know, healed all.

And suddenly it was a lot harder to get a hold of.

But apparently people had been buying these these drugs in bulk amounts from the drug store and then synthesizing the drugs to use in making meth.

Also, according to the NIH, the problem was increased first because it was so easy to get ingredients, that's the law.

And second, because recipes are widely available on the internet.

So just another subtle little way that the internet has impacted our culture.

We also wanted to mention some of the effects of methamphetamines.

According to Ascendant, a drug rehab center in New York, Crank can have several severe physical and psychological effects on the body, most of which can be incredibly dangerous for users, regardless of how long the drug is consumed.

Crank increases dopamine levels in the brain, enhancing mood, energy and alertness.

It also causes an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature.

The physical effects of crank use can cause dehydration, sweating and weight loss.

Crank use can change the brain's chemistry, leading to intense psychological effects, such as mood swings, anxiety and paranoia.

It can cause delusions and hallucinations, leading users to become aggressive and sometimes exhibit violent behavior.

It can also lead to insomnia, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Also, methamphetamine users are seen as some of the most difficult drug treatment patients due to protracted physiological and psychological problems caused by the drug's impact on neural pathways.

Oh, that's pretty frightening.

Yeah, and my understanding is that it also tends to have a faster effect on people's appearance.

Like, it affects their teeth, it affects many different parts of their bodies.

So it's physically can be very damaging too.

I have been around a few people who have been meth addicts and you're right, it does affect the appearance of their teeth, but it also just makes their skin look really old.

And just, you know, as you said, changing their personal appearance, it just makes people look really kind of sickly, which is terribly frightening and sad.

Yeah, and she has some great descriptions of looking in the mirror after she's come down.

Uh-huh.

Yeah.

And then, I mean, we'll get more into this, but just the descriptions of how she feels when she comes down is, you know, the illness, the ill effects, it's frightening.

Yeah, definitely.

Like not being able to sleep for days and not being able to eat, and like every time just seems to be really devastating.

Well, we did want to get into, if the two of you are ready, a discussion of the pros and cons from our perspective of reading the book Crank.

So there definitely are some pros.

I think for me, one of the biggest pros is just the writing style.

Ellen Hopkins is a very talented verse writer.

Her verse has kind of become her signature style, and her word choice, even the placement of the words on the page, some of the pages, the word placement actually creates a visual kind of like a picture, like a picture poem.

And I don't know why, but for me, there was definitely an effect of less is more in terms of the word choices used in the writing of this novel.

And it was gripping.

I mean, it just, I just wanted to keep going and keep, and it's almost like each chapter is very short, but because each chapter is like its own poem.

So it's just, it's a beautiful book, even though it's a tragic and very, very sad story.

And yeah, so the writing was somewhat addictive, which is kind of an odd way to describe it, given the nature of the subject that we are discussing.

What did the two of you think?

Yeah, I completely agree, Marianne.

It was really hard for me to put down once I started it, and I read it in just two sittings.

And when I first saw it, I thought, wow, this is a huge book.

But as you said, the poems are short and fast, and you just want to keep reading to find out what happens.

And I also liked how she went, when there were conversations within the poems, I liked how she had Kristina slash Bree's voice on the left-hand side, and then the other person's voice on the right-hand side in italics.

And it was just such a clever way to do dialogue and made it really obvious who was talking.

And in addition to being gripping and beautiful, I thought it explores Kristina's emotions really well.

We get to understand her thoughts and feelings in a lot of detail and see her struggling with choices and decisions and trying to figure out what the best thing to do is in certain cases.

And some parts were especially heartbreaking.

I'm sure we'll talk about this more next time, but I'll just briefly mention it during the rape, which as we said is not really explicit in terms of the writing, but we see how she's feeling and how upsetting it is to her when this is happening.

And we feel those really dark, frightening moments really well.

And we also feel when she's feeling happy, like when she's at a party and dancing on drugs, I mean, we feel her euphoria.

So I think she captured a teenager's feelings really well.

Yeah, definitely.

Yeah, and the choice to do the point of view of Brie slash Kristina, I think, first of all, kudos to Ellen Hopkins because to do that when it's your kid must have been extremely difficult and it must have been really cathartic in a way for her to write this.

But she really did get inside the head of teens, which the best YA books do, you know, it doesn't talk down to kids.

It meets them where they are in the ways that they think about making decisions.

And I'll just quote Hopkins here.

The value of the book, I think, is in walking that walk with her, seeing how one wrong choice can change lives forever.

You know, but seeing her make the choices and then live with them.

So that's a powerful aspect of it as well.

And according to a lot of the reviews that I read on Goodreads and Amazon and statements Ellen Hopkins has made, the book has in fact helped a lot of young people to make better choices than Kristina.

So mission accomplished there.

Right, right.

And just in terms of, you know, people who want to ban this book, I mean, while I understand this is a difficult, difficult topic, I can't think of a better way to start a conversation because the book is, you know, as we've said already, so beautifully written.

And from the point of view of Kristina slash Bree, it really is not a preachy book.

And we know it's not someone condoning this behavior.

Ellen Hopkins did not write the book to condone the behavior.

Ellen Hopkins wrote the book to say, hey, I've been there, and I would like to help, you know, caution your child not to go down this road.

So I just think there's a lot of power in books.

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

What about the cons?

Yeah, so as I said, Ellen Hopkins did not write this book to tell people to go use drugs.

Quite the opposite.

And yet one con that just kind of kept me, kept coming back in my head was that because the writing is so beautiful, the descriptions of being high on crank, maybe to some people might come across as a little too enticing.

And maybe I'm being a devil's advocate here, but I can see that if there is a person suffering trauma of some variety, whatever it is, I mean, as an adult or as a young adult, and they're looking to numb themselves, some of these descriptions of the euphoria might sound rather attractive.

And, you know, Brie and slash Kristina provides all of the rationalizing that a reader might, you know, in that place of trying to decide what to do, it might provide the rationalization that they are looking for to say, oh, okay, well, she did it, I'm gonna try it.

It'll be okay.

I mean, I don't think that in any way the message of the book is it'll be okay.

No way.

But boy, in the moment, in the moment of the choices that she's making, I think, I agree.

I think it, I would be concerned if I knew my kid had been reading the book, knowing where my kid stands with mental health issues.

So.

Right.

And I will say, you know, the book is long.

It's like 500 something pages.

And, you know, when judging a book in terms of the merit of a book, we look at the book in its entirety, not at individual pieces of it.

And yet, you know, if you're a teenager going through some of the same things that Kristina slash Bree went through, and you're reading this book, either because it's a class assignment, or you just happened to pick it up, and you didn't finish it, but you got to a point where there's a description, and you stopped there and said, oh, hey, yeah, I mean, I don't know.

I don't want to be negative against it, but I guess what I want to say is, you know, some of the challenges, many of the challenges have come from school districts that want to ban the books' use in the curriculum.

And I know that I had read that shortly after the book's publication, Crank had been used and was on reading lists for some high schools.

And I think that's a good place for it to be because to have kids who have to come to school because school is compulsory and therefore, they're not just going to get the beginnings of the book, but they're going to read the whole thing, or even if they don't personally read the whole thing, because we're realists, kids don't necessarily read every book that they're assigned to in its entirety, but they're going to be sitting in the classroom discussion and they're going to be getting the message of the book, which of course, in Crank's case, for obvious reasons, it is going to be that the monster has consumed Kristina's life and there are significant regrets because as we just read from the facts, methamphetamines take a hold over a person and it's exceedingly difficult to get off the drug once you've started.

And to be clear, there's zero evidence that I turned up that anybody has ever read this book and said, hmm, maybe I'll try Crank.

It was just a feeling that I had when I was reading it.

It's like, oh, they make this sound really good.

So, which of course is part of the whole experience and you can't talk about the experience without being honest about the whole thing, so.

Yeah, that is definitely true.

Well, my con, it's a small thing, but one of the characters, Kristina's sister is gay and I did not like the way that Kristina, in particular, it was in that character's voice, talked about her gay sister.

I found it a little bit offensive.

She seems to sort of trivialize it and downplay it and make a lot of assumptions about the way, you know, gay people are supposed to be.

For instance, there's a section where, and she has a close relationship with her sister.

They're talking and her sister, Lee, her name's Lee, is offering to, you know, talk about her own love life, just to, you know, have some back and forth.

They're talking about boys.

And she says, you know, should I tell you about Heather?

And Kristina thinks Heather, lesbians had names like Bobby or Joe, didn't they?

Heather belonged to a model or cheerleader.

She's a cheerleader while a song leader and pretty much perfect.

Lee was almost perfect herself.

If she were taller, she could have been a model.

Picture perfect lesbians, I had to laugh.

So, you know, I'm just like, I don't know, didn't seem necessary to me.

It comes up a couple of different times.

You could probably argue that it is, you know, part of her very self-centered point of view that she's trivializing her sister's experience, but I just didn't know if it was necessary.

I get that.

And I kind of felt that a little bit too.

I mean, I do go back to while it was 2004, and we've come a long way fortunately since 2004, but that doesn't mean it was okay.

And I mean, I guess Hopkins is trying to be realistic about the way 17-year-olds would talk about someone's sexual identity, and yet I also am uncomfortable with it.

So yeah, we can just leave that there.

It's a small thing.

It's a small thing, but be aware.

But it rubbed us all the wrong way.

Yeah, for sure.

How about you?

Well, I had a few other thoughts, and these aren't reasons not to read the book, but they're just things that I was thinking about while I was reading it.

One of them is I had trouble understanding Kristina's motivations for forming relationships with the three young men, because she mentioned that she feels lonely or ignored, especially by her mom, but she was also clearly loved by her mom and stepdad and siblings.

And so I was wondering where did she get her ideas of romantic love, especially her parents' relationship fell apart and her dad was dealing with addiction at that time too, so maybe she didn't have a really good model except for her mom and stepdad.

So it was a little unclear to me why she was jumping from boy to boy and why she thought she was in love immediately, but that could ring true for a lot of teenagers.

Yeah, yeah.

Yeah, it is hard to see because her home life seemed to be so great.

Or at least pretty stable.

And she had good friends and she was doing well in school.

So it didn't seem like she was in crisis exactly before she went to Albuquerque.

Though the situation at Albuquerque would be enough to, you know, that's when Breavers showed up.

So messed up, yeah.

I just wonder if she was just disassociating entirely.

Yeah.

It does kind of feel that way.

And to be rejected as a 17 year old young lady, to be rejected by your father, I think is a significant blow.

And I'm pretty sure there've been some psychological studies about, you know, teenage girls and how they react to being rejected by their fathers, and that in some ways, therefore, they're always looking for someone to replace that love that they've lost from their father.

So I don't know if that's part of it.

I kind of also think that maybe Hopkins is writing it this way to kind of, you know, just that cautionary, hey, everything in one's life can seem perfect and they can still, you know, go to the dark side, you know, be taken hostage by the monster and become addicted to crank.

So, you know, we don't know her motivations for that, but I agree that was a part of the story that I would have liked to have known more back story to kind of why it ended up that way.

Yeah, another thought I had was about, you know, this is going to be a spoiler, but about the pregnancy and the baby, how the baby is discussed.

And in the last chapters called Happy Endings and, you know, it's like, it does not end happily exactly, but it does have a hopeful, yet like potentially dangerous feel to the end, like her problems aren't over.

And so number one, I was wondering, why didn't she get better treatment, like medical and psychological treatment at that point?

At the very beginning, in the author's note, the Ellen Hopkins mentions that the baby at the end of the book is now seven years old, and my husband and I have adopted him.

He is thriving now, but it took a lot of extra love.

So we know that things are gonna work out for that baby, which is really good, but we don't know how things are gonna end up for Kristina.

So I guess I just had kind of mixed feelings about the ending.

What did you guys think?

Agreed.

Yeah, go ahead.

Sorry.

No, I did think as soon as they learned exactly what was going on and she's pregnant, I would have liked to have seen them doing some treatment.

And all we get is Kristina saying, really, I promise I only slipped once or twice.

I managed to stay clean for the pregnancy.

You know, that just didn't...

It struck me as wrong, just based on my own experience.

Yeah, I mean, that was my feeling too.

And again, I mean, I'm gonna give a Hopkins the benefit of the doubt here that, you know, perhaps this is a message to our social services in our country, in our society, in the USA, that one of the shortcomings, big shortcomings we have as a society is providing safety nets and services to people who are really, really struggling with addiction, depression, pregnancies, you know, deciding to keep the pregnancy, to service the family and children.

And I mean, those services exist, and I know that they exist, but not everybody knows that they exist.

And if Kristina wasn't even getting some of those services, as you said, Dorothy, then, you know, you think about how many people, therefore, would not be getting services and, I mean.

Yeah, that's a good point, Marion.

Yeah, we've just got a lot of people who have slipped through the cracks.

Yeah, you know, the information that we talked about, about how hard it is to treat meth addicts, it almost kind of makes me wonder, does anybody ever, like, maybe that is just one of the addictions that it is nearly impossible to come out of with any kind of real change.

And maybe that was especially true 20 years ago.

And actually, I think this was, in the real life, this took place in the 90s.

So, you know, that was even longer ago before they had the options that we have now.

So maybe if you are struggling with this addiction, there are better ways to try to help you at this point.

But back then, maybe, maybe not as many.

And, you know, in the author's note at the beginning, Hopkins also mentions that this monster touched not only her daughter's life, but also the lives of her family, my family.

It is hard to watch someone you love fall so deeply under the spell of a substance that turns him or her into a stranger, someone you don't even want to know.

And as someone who has had someone very close to them struggle with substance addiction, this book brought up a lot of difficult feelings, and it was really painful to kind of be immersed in those feelings again.

But on the other hand, it helped me to understand the perspective of someone who is dealing with an addiction and how little control they have over the situation, especially if they're not getting any sort of treatment.

And so I think that is not a problem with the book itself, but even though the author's note mentions this monster and mentions that Crank is a monster, I think it could be helpful to have a more explicit trigger warning at the beginning for anyone who could be triggered by addiction, a suicide attempt, rape, even a terrible dad, just to be aware of that before you jump into it, because if you've dealt with any of those things or have watched someone go through them, it can be a very painful read.

Yeah, I agree with that, Alana, wholeheartedly.

I resemble some of what you said in terms of having been in a close relationship with someone with a substance addiction and also having or knowing, currently still knowing, people who are still using.

It's very triggering and somewhat cathartic.

I mean, I did feel a little bit of catharsis, but a lot of triggering, you know.

And I mean, I was thinking more, you know, all of the people who want to ban this book, I would like to challenge them all to read it cover to cover.

And the reason I say that is because I feel very strongly that not exposing our kids to things does not keep them from discovering it.

And the message kids get, if you don't allow kids at the age appropriate time to handle and solve problems that come along in their lives, then the message kids are getting is, I'm not capable, I'm not able to handle things on my own.

And so they just become followers instead of leaders.

And followers are more likely to get pulled into substance abuses and other, you know, risky behaviors.

So if no other reason, I think that's a reason why this book should be read, by those who are of the appropriate age to read it.

And I do agree that this is probably a 15, 16 and older book.

Well, why we think it's worth reading is, in fact, our last little segment.

Indeed it is, indeed it is.

It turns out there is a book that's called *Flirting with the Monster*, where various people, including Hopkins' daughter, her real life daughter, wrote essays in response to the book and the feedback.

And in it, a writer whose name is Nikki Burnham wrote in her essay that teens connect to *Crank* because Kristina is, quote, someone very much like them or someone they know, end quote.

And then, quote, what Hopkins does in just a few paragraphs shows readers how irrational and overwhelming an addiction to meth can be, end quote.

So I think that that is, I mean, it kind of goes along with what I was saying.

It just, it's important to discuss hard topics in trusted situations with trusted people to know how, or to even role play in a sense, how would you handle this situation if it were to come into your life?

So.

Yeah.

Yeah, in fact, there was another essay in that book, which I really look forward to reading, but I found this other quote by Judge John Tatro.

And I liked the way that he said it.

He said, Ellen has allowed her readers to see and understand the absolute horrors of methamphetamine from a user's perspective, not just from an adult lecturing in a classroom.

So that aspect of it not feeling like a lecture, but also the term absolute horrors.

I think that is true.

I think she has done that.

Well, thank you so much, Dorothy and Marian.

And thank you, Alanna.

Please join us next time for a close reading of *Crank*.

We will be discussing some of the things we touched on here and others in more detail.

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Yes, we really count on you, our listeners, to spread the word most importantly, because this work is very important.

As we continue to be in a culture where more and more books are banned, and the number of books banned and challenged last year continued to increase, and I'm sure it will in 2024, as this trend is just to become a real problem.

But to go on with our thank yous, we definitely want to thank Chris for creating the music.

Thank you to Heather and Lizzie for all their assistance in getting us off the ground and in previous episodes.

And to Dorothy, thank you for editing this episode and other recent ones, because hey, somebody's got to do it, and we're all overwhelmed.

But we are very, very grateful to all of you.

And to our wonderful patrons, thank you for your financial support.

We know that every dollar is precious and the cost of living is insane right now.

So thank you, thank you.

We couldn't have done this podcast without you or any of our supporters.

So, and finally, thank you all for reading with us because we know books are meant to be read.