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We now know ‘troubled teen’ memoirs like Go Ask Alice were a Mormon wife’s fiction – so why are we still treating them as truth?

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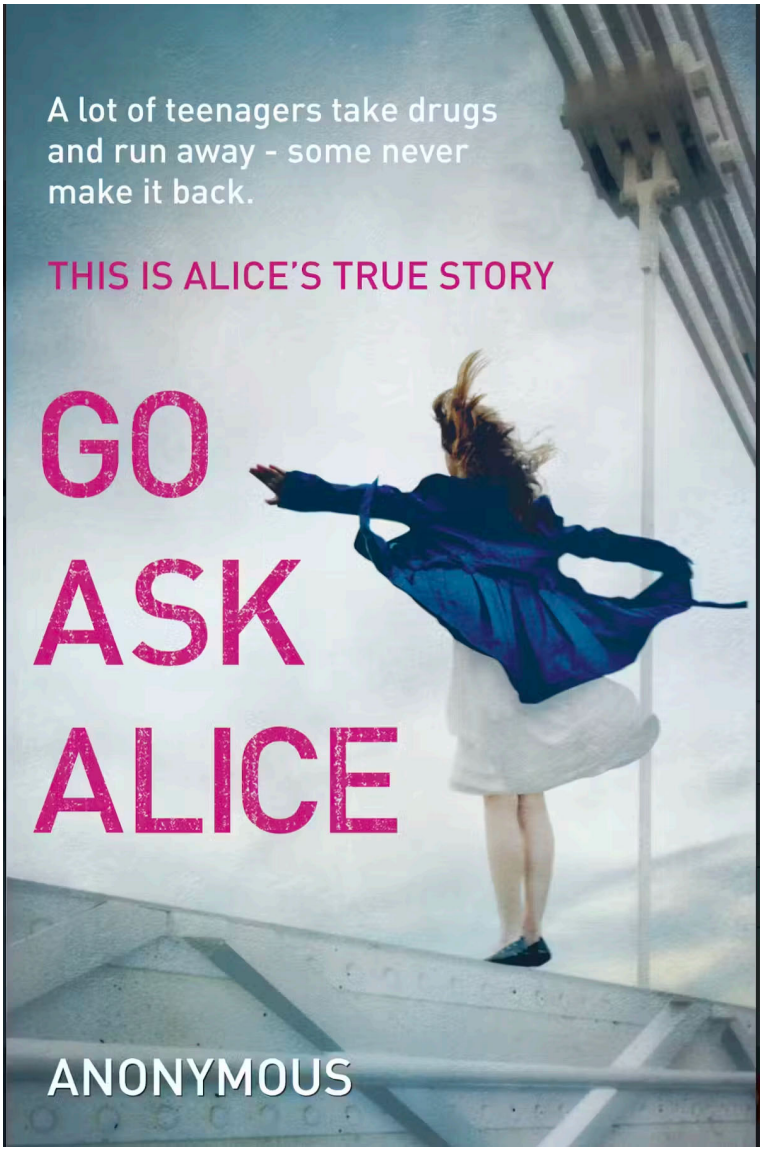
In 1971, an extraordinary book appeared. Published by an “anonymous” author, Go Ask Alice documented the story of an ordinary American girl and her descent into a world of drug addiction, prostitution, and madness.

You have likely heard of this book. Perhaps a dog-eared copy was passed around your schoolyard, or you read it alone at night, turning pages by torchlight. Go Ask Alice was a cautionary tale of the dangers of taking illicit drugs, not only for their physical effects, but for the social and psychological consequences too.

But Alice was also a work of marketing genius. Presented as a true story, the book contained a foreword by “the editors”:

> *Go Ask Alice is based on the actual diary of a fifteen-year-old drug user … Names, dates, places, and certain events have been changed in accordance with the wishes of those concerned.*



Goodreads

The diary, kept in scraps and pieces, was purportedly found by one of the editors and assembled for young readers so they might learn from Alice’s terrible mistakes.

And yet, the story was not true at all. There was no Alice, no diary. Only Beatrice Sparks, an aspiring writer who saw an opportunity for fame and fortune, and grabbed it with both hands.

In the 50 years since its publication, Alice has sold more than five million copies. The book has never been out of print and remains on bestseller lists.

Sparks, who always claimed to be the diary’s editor, was in fact the author of eight novels disguised as diaries by “real” teens. These include Jay’s Journal (1978) – “the shocking companion diary” to Alice – and the closest to a “true” diary that Sparks published, but a distortion still – and It Happened to Nancy (1994), the story of a 14-year-old girl who contracts HIV after she is date raped by her college boyfriend.

Cover of It Happened to Nancy

Goodreads

Sparks certainly has a knack of understanding how teenagers feel, their sense of isolation, confusion, and anxiety. This is perhaps why her books are still popular. Despite their frequent homophobia, their propensity for panic (Jay’s Journal features satanic worship), and their obvious lack of lived experience, there is an accessibility about the stories that appeals to young readers.

But Sparks’s “diaries” raise difficult questions about authorship and authenticity, and the ethical responsibilities of authors, publishers, and book cataloguers.

If an author of non-fiction is not who they claim to be, is their account authentic? Why are Sparks’s diaries still described by publishers and booksellers as “real” stories? What is the responsibility of librarians when describing deceptive works?

Forged endorsements

When Go Ask Alice was published, Sparks was living with her husband in Provo, Utah.

While Sparks’s qualifications are sketchy – she described herself as a therapist, a social worker, a teen psychologist, a counsellor, and even a doctor – she claimed she was working at a Mormon summer camp when she met “Alice”, a troubled teen who shared her diaries with Sparks before she died of a drug-related accident or suicide (Sparks was always vague on the specifics).

Cover of Unmask Alice

Goodreads

However, as Rick Emerson reveals in his book Unmask Alice, it wasn’t until the publication of Sparks’s next book, Voices, that she outed herself as the author of Go Ask Alice.

According to Emerson, Sparks deeply resented the fact that her name was omitted from the book’s cover in order to lend the diary a sense of veracity (the gimmick was her agent’s idea). When Voices was published, the byline read “from the woman who brought you Go Ask Alice”.

Despite Sparks’s claim that she edited the diary and published it anonymously to make it “more credible to kids”, there is no evidence this is the case.

There *is* evidence Sparks fabricated some of the diary's source material and forged endorsements from fictional experts, including the book's "editors" who describe the diary as "a highly personal and specific chronicle" that "provides insights into the increasingly complicated world in which we live".

What is troubling is that despite all this, the work still features on non-fiction library shelves and reading lists.

On Amazon, Alice is rated highly in the "sociology of medicine" section, described as "a true story" authored by Anonymous.

Penguin Australia sells the book as a biography, promoting the work as "a harrowing true story ... that all teenagers and parents of teenagers should read".

Jay's Journal

In 1971, Utah teen Alden Barrett shot himself with his father's gun, while his younger brother and sister played in their bedrooms. After Alden's death, his bewildered mother sent Sparks her son's diary – a document that Alden's psychiatrist described as a mental autopsy.

Cover of Jay's Journal

Goodreads

In Sparks's hands, however, Alden (as Jay) struggles not with depression but with demonic possession. Sparks, always the opportunist, saw the slow-motion tragedy as a chance to warn parents about the dangers of Satanic worship.

Obsessed with the occult, Jay levitates objects, curses his debating opponents, and even mutilates cattle. In a midnight wedding at the local graveyard, Jay and his soulmate slice each other's tongues, before snapping the neck of a kitten.

The book, which was published without the consent of Alden's family, was subtitled "the shocking diary of a 16-year-old helplessly drawn into a world of witchcraft and evil".

After Jay is stalked by a demon in a jumpsuit, the teen leaves a suicide note for his friends and family, and kills himself with his father's pistol.

Naturally, Alden's family were horrified.

"The book's value," wrote teacher Stan Gillespie, reviewing Jay in 1979, "is that it argues the possibility of a real occult terror in schools, an insidious power that can entice a youngster down a one-way road to fragmentation and death".

Said Publishers Weekly: "This is a compelling document, more mesmerising than fiction, with implications too frightening to forget".

Nancy

Fast forward to 1994, when Sparks published It Happened to Nancy. Dedicated to “every kid who thinks AIDS can’t happen to him or her”, Nancy is emblematic of the fear and stigma that surrounded HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s – a stigma that still exists today.

Indeed, it is possible to read Nancy as pro-abstinence propaganda.

“Sex causes more trouble than it’s worth,” writes Sparks as the teenage Nancy. “I’m still not sure if I was raped, or if I just set myself up for it, but I guess I’ll never know that answer for sure. I do know that I shouldn’t have had a boy over when Mum was gone, and I shouldn’t have got drunk”.

Nancy, of course, is not penned by a real teenager. But the story, like Alice, rings true in terms of its affective authenticity.

The problem is that the diary, which has been espoused as an “educational tool”, continues to circulate today with fake medical advice at the end of the book (“Questions Nancy Wanted Answered about Rape and AIDS”) and forged endorsements from doctors who never existed.

The story itself also promotes misinformation and stigma about HIV infection and transmission. The fact that Nancy dies just two years after diagnosis – when it usually takes up to a decade for HIV to become AIDS – only confirms that Sparks (or “Dr. B” as she called herself) was a literary imposter who used scare tactics to sell traditional values to panicked parents and vulnerable kids.

While the book was recently banned in some American schools, this was due to concerns about the diary’s sexual content rather than its literary deception.

Meanwhile, Simon & Schuster recently released a series of anonymously authored diaries “in the tradition of Go Ask Alice”, including Letting Ana Go (anorexia), Calling Maggie May (sex trafficking), and Breaking Bailey (cooking meth). The books, targeted at teens, are marketed as “first-person novels that explore real-life dangers through the tales of average teens who get in over their heads”.

Undoing the damage

Today, cataloguers of Sparks must confront the question of how to categorise her books – they are, after all, works of fiction, not memoir. The first rule of cataloguing is to represent a book as it represents itself. Yet cataloguers have a responsibility to correct or clarify ambiguous or misleading information, especially when that information is packaged as non-fiction and presented to young readers as “the truth”.

A librarian removing a book from a shelf.

Cataloguers must correct misleading information. DimaBerlin/shutterstock

As writer Jonathan Russell Clark points out, the problem with Alice is not that it was authored by an adult. The problem is

> *what can occur when someone who hasn’t experienced something writes about it, and when readers who also haven’t experienced it read that writing, and believe it.*

Of course, in time, it is not uncommon for authors or publishers to confront charges of deception in their books. Sparks, however, never confessed to her literary crimes.

She died in 2012, at the age of 95. Unlike her teen diarists, whose lives were cut tragically short, Sparks’s life, it seems, was as long as the lies she told.