

feature

Don't let the bullies win

Beverley Birch, author of *Rift*, tells how experiences of being bullied got her creative juices flowing

IT'S night-time; I'm stepping into a dark tent. The only light is the beam from my torch.

My feet touch something warm, soft and sticky. Swing the torchbeam down. Something's squelching over my sandals – wet, glistening. It takes a moment to recognise the innards of a decapitated snake spewed across the groundsheet.

I remember (because this really happened) letting out a yell and backing out. Torches flash into life round me. There's laughing. It is, apparently, a great big joke.

Later, when the mess is cleared up, and I'm in my sleeping bag, trying to get the sight out of my head, there are grotesque shapes like snakes' heads rearing up against the tent.

More jokes. From my "friends". I don't know whether they killed the snake, or just found the carcass.

Next night, a gigantic dead spider in my clothes. I am, I'm told, way too squeamish about insects – I need toughening up. So it went on...

Why did all this begin? I can't remember now. These are memories I'd forgotten.

They jumped to mind again recently, when I was developing an idea for a new novel. I imagined a school expedition from Britain going to a remote place in Africa.

A few students disappear. What's happened to them? That was the seed of my idea – a mystery thriller, about young people's encounters with Africa.

I talked to a schoolgirl who'd been on a walking expedition in Nepal a year earlier. (I'll call her Anna, though it's not her real name).

I wanted to know how the expedition was organised. But Anna's recollections were overlaid by the memory

of being constantly excluded by the other girls on the trek.

For some reason, they began to shut her out of group activities. They 'forgot' to pass on information, so she got into trouble.

They wouldn't let her join the card-playing in the group tent in the evenings, or walk with them during the day.

They talked so she couldn't hear, or stopped talking when she came near. There was a lot of giggling with backs turned.

On the day it was Anna's turn to be in charge of the day's routine (everyone took turns at it) they refused to accept her authority.

Relentless and dangerous nastiness – because it meant no one was paying attention to things like group safety and survival in an unknown, remote place, in difficult and dangerous terrain. The adults in charge paid no attention to any of the bullying.

After I had heard Anna's story, I began to think about how little things – jokes that get out of hand, rivalries that become too important, the ups and downs of friendships – can grow to something much more unpleasant and serious. And that's when my novel sprang into focus.

I was 14 when the snake incident happened to me. Suddenly I was angry, in a way I hadn't been at the time, not so much at the people who'd played the stupid jokes on me, but at the friends who laughed on the sidelines – hoping they wouldn't be the focus for 'jokes' themselves.

So this is what I think, and what I have explored in my novel, *Rift*.

Bullying is never just about the bully and the victim. It is always about the culture around it as

well. Where bullying is rife, there is, at worst, encouragement of it, at best, refusal to deal with it or denial that it exists.

Either way, there is a nurturing of the attitudes and the power battles that can go on between people and lead to bullying.

Teasing can quickly become something more, and small acts of malice can become larger. An amused audience for a nasty joke effectively gives licence for a bully to pick on someone.

In *Rift*, three students are bullied by five other students and a teacher. But there are 22 other students around, and five other teachers.

If even one of the teachers, or a few students, stopped turning their backs and walking away, the balance of power would be instantly and radically altered.

A bully's freedom is sustained by a culture that fails to challenge him or her, it gives permission for bullying to grow.

In writing the story, I am asking readers: If you were there, what would you do? Be a bystander? Or be one who links arms with others and says "No"?



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