



“Surviving R. Kelly” reveals R&B singer’s sexual allegations

by Millie Winter

On Jan. 2, Lifetime Television released the six episode series, “Surviving R. Kelly,” a documentary on the sexual assault allegations against American singer-songwriter R. Kelly.

The first two episodes introduce Robert Sylvester Kelly in the context of the childhood he experienced. The purpose of these episodes is to give the viewer insight into how the singer grew up. The episodes also attempt to explain his subsequent actions in adulthood. At a young age, Kelly was sexually assaulted by a family member. He lived on the south side of Chicago in a poverty stricken home where adult supervision simply didn’t exist.

The show then gets into how

his bad behavior started when his music hit the charts. In 1992-93, he released two popular, chart-topping albums, and several of the songs referenced a sexual relationship that he had with the then 15 year-old singer Aaliyah Haughton. At this point in the documentary turns from R. Kelly as prey, to an adult predator.

At the end of the second episode and all through the rest of the series, the show gets hard to watch. I watched it with my mom who remembered having her eyes glued to the news when the initial allegations came out in the late 1990s. Even though my mom had already heard of the accusations, clearly the rest of the show was unsettling for her as well.

One by one, brave and damaged women preached of the abuse they suffered at the hands of R. Kelly when they were only children,

some as young as 14. This was not just sexual assault, but perverse, degrading acts. This, for me, was the hardest part to watch. For the first time, these women were telling their story and they knew it wasn’t just to the person holding the camera, but to the millions of people watching the show, and to Kelly himself.

Every woman looked so strong as they spoke, even when they cried or tried to fight back tears. One woman, whose success as a performer is, in part, due to her relationship with R. Kelly, spoke with strength and insight into the fact that her underage niece was exploited by the famous and wealthy celebrity--and how she blames herself. The ripple effects of R. Kelly’s abuse continue in ways that are still revealing themselves.

In watching this series, my first reaction was shock. Shock that

this kind of behavior even happens. Why would someone think they can behave in this illegal way? How can such a famous (he wrote “I Believe I can Fly!”) singer/songwriter continue his career and the world doesn’t care about the accusations against him?

This documentary proved to me that sometimes celebrities are in their own world with their own set of rules, rules that only apply to them.

It’s disgusting.

There is part of me that wonders if R. Kelly wasn’t talented and had no fame whether or not he would’ve already been convicted. Or, if he hadn’t had all the benefits of fame, would he never have had the chance to exploit and damage so many young girls in the first place?

As of Feb. 10 of this year, R. Kelly was charged with ten counts of sexual abuse here in Chicago. He

was accused of aggravated criminal sexual abuse against four victims, three of whom were minors. This can carry a sentence of three to seven years for each count.

After watching Surviving R. Kelly, hearing the survivors, my heart breaks for their suffering and I want him to pay.

On Apr. 26, R. Kelly failed to show up in court. He lost the lawsuit alleging the underage sex abuse.

This specific lawsuit was only for a single case of his assault, of a girl with whom he had repeated sexual contact with from June 1998. She was 16 at the time

It shouldn’t take twenty years and a documentary series to help these types of cases rise to national prominence.

It scares me to think of how many more stories like this there could be hidden behind the fame.

Appreciating authors’ work despite allegations

by Molly George

The content of several English classes has become controversial with the recent issue over including authors with assault allegations in class curriculums.

American Studies classes didn’t teach the work of Sherman Alexie this year, though his poems have been taught in the past and AS classes read “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven” last year.

Though he writes from a cultural perspective that is valuable to teach in our classrooms, being one of the few published Native American authors, the sexual misconduct allegations Alexie faces were reason enough to take him off the reading list.

There is a fine line between avoiding a controversial author and cutting out one of the limited Native American voices in literature.

This year, teachers favored Louise Erdrich poetry instead, according to library department chair Erika Immel, who said, “We have this diverse population and we need to collect materials that support all the different backgrounds, voices, and perspectives that the school embodies,” when stocking the library.

For a diverse library, discussions about how balancing culture and perspective change the way we approach texts will become more important.

In research, Immel said, “we are constantly saying who’s the author, why should we believe them, why are they reputable, why do they have the credentials to write that article?”

This academic perspective fits research methods, but in considering individual authors’ backgrounds, Immel said, “There’s a difference between having a literary work on our shelves and saying we support the author. We’re looking at much more than the author when we collect materials.”

There is an important distinction between consuming art and supporting the artist. In a classroom, it depends on the context of the text and the reader’s purpose.

Teachers who believe in the value of a text separate from or despite the author’s actions are clear that they maintain the emphasis on classrooms being safe spaces. Considering the diverse (and unknown) backgrounds and experiences of a class, English teacher Brett Rubin said the department discussed that until an author is “demonstrably convicted,” teaching their works can promote nuanced discussion.

Junot Diaz is the author of “The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,” a Pulitzer Prize winning novel. Diaz also faces allegations of sexual misconduct and misogynistic behavior.

Some say the situation depends on the gravity of the accusations; in Diaz’s case, the allegations did not compromise his positions as a Pulitzer Prize board member, MIT professor, and fiction editor of the Boston Review, according to NPR.

Despite these allegations against the author, Rubin, who teaches Global Voices, explained that



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there is a place for Diaz’s text in his classroom because “we can make our way through it and leave an opportunity to talk about it, instead of deciding” any conclusions about the situation or avoiding the discussion altogether.

According to Rubin, this discussion provides “an opportunity to sit with the discomfort, navigate through it, and learn how to contextualize those we might immediately disagree with.”

Studying this text teaches students to have difficult discussions in the context of current events. The context of an author’s experience gives a book more weight when it includes similar experiences, like the published fiction and memoirs of Diaz.

Rubin’s class read articles and discussed Diaz’s sexual assault allegations before reading his book, senior Kara Philoon said.

“This definitely affected the way I read the book and shaped some of my perspectives. I wasn’t uncomfortable reading the book but the allegations were something I kept in mind while reading.”

Rubin emphasized the purpose of this dialogue: “We study art in part to better appreciate a nuance. There’s very little black and white.”

Philoon described a “gray area” of Diaz’s allegations appearing less despicable than confirmed assault. She also said, “I don’t think it can be taught without prefacing the situation before, but at the same time there’s lots of great books written by authors who aren’t in this kind of situation.”

This attitude fits with many situations where consuming art is not the same as supporting the artist. It eventually leads to the question of how much we can separate art from artists, and to what extent artists’ immoral actions can be tolerated.

Discussing stories about sexual assault that have already been told in literature forms a culture that allows people to keep telling their stories. However controversial or disturbing, it may be better that these issues come to the forefront when authors face allegations, crafting literature as a platform for cultural awareness and change.

Listen to what you’re listening to

by Alyssa Pak

“If you’re back here only taking pictures, you gon’ have to take your a– back home ‘cause the only thing you’re taking is your clothes off.” If I told you that some guy said this to me, I’d hope that you’d be somewhat disturbed. But it’s actually a lyric from the song “Kiss Land,” which is my favorite album by The Weeknd. Still, if the lyrics are troublesome enough where someone saying them in real life would be problematic, why do we continue to listen to this kind of music?

Obviously everyone has the freedom of expression, so singers and rappers can talk about whatever they want in their songs. Despite the number of songs on my playlist that I always skip, “LA Confidential” by Tory Lanez is never one of them. Lanez is singing about cheating on his girlfriend, saying that he’d never actually leave her, so thus his mistress must 1. Not be just “anybody” and 2. Not expect to be his girlfriend. His excuse is that he gets lonely sometimes.

I’m not gonna lie, I really do like this song, but it makes me wonder—if we’re popularizing songs about a guy who’s straight up saying that he’s cheating because he’s lonely and then asking her to cover up for him in front of his friends, is that normalizing said behavior to a certain extent? I can’t speak for everyone, but I know that I’ve been somewhat desensitized to lyrics that are demeaning to women. And although I try to avoid adding songs that are

overly-misogynistic to playlists, I still listen to songs like “LA Confidential” and enjoy it.

Despite what some might consider offensive language, the production is still well-executed with a catchy beat and ringing synths, making the song a unique form of art that can still be appreciated by many. I think we all realize that listening to music with crude lyrics isn’t an excuse to propagate that behavior in real life, but it certainly normalizes it to a degree.

We accept that with hip hop and rap comes iced out watches, designer brands, and a strong party and drug culture. This is prominent in industries of all music genres, but is highlighted through the lyrics of songs like NAV’s recent “Tussin” when he says “I spend a quarter on my watch, I drip drip my main b– down in rust, put a side b– in Gucci socks.” Often the lyrics aren’t innocuous though, like in “My Collection” by Future when he raps “Any time I got you, girl you my possession. Even if I hit you once, you part my collection.”

Realistically, wherever there’s parties and drugs and women, there’s a pretty high chance that some sort of sexual harassment or assault is occurring. But the popularity of these types of songs almost makes assault seem more of a trivial topic than it actually is. Wealthy male artists who are revered by hundreds of thousands of teenagers taking a serious issue and putting it against a rhythmic beat almost glamorizes the issue and makes it seem like something cool or desirable, like “once you have money and power you can dominate women too.”

Not surprisingly, artists such as Chris Brown, Swae Lee, and recently Kodak Black have all been accused of sexual misconduct. Looking at these lyrics without the context of the synths and the bass always surprises me, and I sometimes feel uneasy listening to so much music from a genre that contributes to the perception of women as just another facet of a wealthy lifestyle or even just lifestyle in general.

Even poppy hip-hop star Post Malone has issues when it comes to respecting women, especially in his angst-filled “Over Now,” where he sings about a lover who he never wants to go back to. “I ma put that b– p– in a mother– bodybag, so you know that I’m never ever coming back,” he says angrily. At his concerts, he has his fans chant “b–,” referring to his ex-girlfriend, which gets the crowd going, but somehow doesn’t feel quite right.

The thing about trap music is that as a result of the explicit wording, the frequent message of domesticating women can be more much more pronounced and derogatory. I’d say that creative license does exist and that the artist’s work doesn’t necessarily reflect the artist, but the words and phrases that are used by many rap artists can be triggering for many. While it’s unrealistic to expect the disappearance of misogynistic culture in general and thus misogynistic lyrics, being mindful of what we’re listening to can be the first step in diverging from a culture that automatically routes towards male dominance.