

Paul McComas' introductory remarks at Writers Read for RAINN, July 19, 2011

This was a hard gig to schedule; D.C. is a tough market for author events, unless folks already know, or *think* they know, who you are. That's why, beginning with my *next* book, I'll be using the pen name "P.C. Rowling." (Not really.) Anyway, my thanks to Meade Hanna here at The Potter's House for hosting; to Tim brown for reading and signing with me; to Stef Sylvester for being my D.C. hostess, tour guide, and Gal Friday; to Chelsea Bowers at RAINN for not taking "no" for an answer—and to all of you for coming.

I first learned about RAINN ten years ago, in the same way so many others have: through the work of its co-founder, the brilliant pianist/singer/songwriter Tori Amos. At the time, I was revising my book *Unplugged*, which deals with the aftermath of rape. That may seem like a strange topic for a male writer to tackle in his debut novel, but I had my reasons. They're the same reasons why I was drawn to RAINN; why I've looked for novel ways, both financial and artful, to help them; why this Leadership Circle pin means more to me than any of my writing or film awards; and why this RAINN "gummy bracelet" has been on my wrist continuously since Chelsea mailed it to me four years ago. (I've actually shortened it and SuperGlued it back together, so it's not going anywhere!) And they're also the reasons why RAINN is my favorite charity, will be foremost in my heart for life—and will benefit upon my (eventual!) death.

One muggy night in September 1984, my first-ever girlfriend, a talented young acting and music student, was raped by a stranger in a downtown-Milwaukee alley. I can't refer to her as a "rape survivor," because she *didn't*: six months later, traumatized, desperate and depressed, she took the wrong step: namely, off the roof of the tallest building on the UW-Milwaukee campus. And so, the rapist—who was never caught—is a murderer, too, just as surely as I'm standing before you. J_____ was 20 years old.

On some level, I suppose I've been trying in vain to undo this tragedy ever since. By re-editing the short films J_____ and I made together in our teens, I've showcased her early, budding talent. By basing the character "Stefanie Slocum" in my second novel, *Planet of the Dates*, on J_____, I've resurrected the winsome, winning teenager I dated and loved as an irresistible literary character. By bringing help and healing to the heroine of *Unplugged*, I've rewritten J_____ 's final chapter in an attempt to encourage and affirm girls and women like her.

And by working with RAINN—the number-one anti-sexual-violence organization in the country—I've allied myself with the perfect organizational partner: committed, driven, bipartisan, expansive, pro-active, and always open to the oft-strange strategies and peculiar projects I propose: a charity 2-CD set from *amateur* musicians—called "Amateur"; a benefit concert by my 30-year-old band of aging punk-rockers; a reading at Potter's House by two quirky Midwestern men who have more height than we do fame. Chelsea, I'm so grateful for the faith that you, [RAINN President] Scott Berkowitz, and the rest of RAINN have placed in me. But even more so, I'm inexpressibly thankful for the work that you and every one of your colleagues do, each and every day. Nothing is, or ever could be, more important, for you are preventing the J_____s of today from themselves taking the wrong step.

You are handing them back their lives.