
YA Authors Speak Out

Censorship and book challenges in YA fiction are issues not only for librarians, but for authors as well. Many authors are speaking out about their opinions on controversial topics in YA fiction, their own works and those of others, and censorship issues in general.

Sexuality in YA Fiction

One of the most controversial issues in YA fiction is sexuality. Authors are often challenged for their portrayals of this topic. Parents may object to the inclusion of sex-related themes in general or to specific descriptions of sexual behaviour. In responding to these challenges, YA authors note that sexuality is part of adolescence and there is a need for realism in how sexual content is presented to teens.

Lara M. Zeises, author of *Contents under Pressure* and *Bringing up the Bones*, suggests, "Trying to protect teens from sex is futile. Educating them - not just about STDs and condoms, but also about the emotional side to sex - probably makes for better birth control than scared-straight Lifetime movies..." Laurie Faria Stolarz, author of *White is for*

Magic and Silver is for Secrets, agrees:

"Young adults are curious. They want to read about what they're not

doing, as well as what they're doing, or what their friends are doing. I think they often seek to gauge themselves against the decisions and actions of characters; they seek relation and identification. It's important for YA authors to remember this when they choose to write sexual content. Sexual content has value in literature. In a society where it seems families are talking less and less about sex at home, we as authors have more of a responsibility to be a "voice", whether it be to "speak" about values, consequences,

responsibility, coming of age, or otherwise."

Judy Blume, author of *Deenie* and *Blubber*,

suggests that some parents don't want their children reading about sex because it might lead to questions they don't feel comfortable answering. *Alice* series author Phyllis

Reynolds Naylor echoes this sentiment, referring to an

incident where a mother "flew into a rage. She said her seventh-grade son did not know what a condom was

and she wanted to keep it that way." Harry Mazer, whose book *I Love You, Stupid!* has been referred to as pornographic because it includes the sexual fantasies of a male teen, says, "...even acknowledging the existence of sexual thoughts is considered dangerous."

Some authors suggest that this "dangerousness" is actually part of what makes YA fiction popular. Susan Juby, author of *Alice, I Think* and *Miss Smithers*, points out that "YA writers are busy challenging all kinds of ideas about what teen fiction can and cannot do in all areas, including teen sexuality. There are many YA writers pushing a lot of boundaries and that's why YA literature is having such a wonderful renaissance."

Language

Another common complaint of those who challenge young adult books is the language that is used in them. YA authors may use

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“controversial” language, swearing, etc., often in attempt to make their stories more realistic to their readers. Henry Mazer suggests that “complaints about language often mask other objections and objectives. Language is the censor’s foot in the door.”

Many of Chris Crutcher’s books have been challenged and some, including *Whale Talk*, have been banned in certain school districts. Crutcher defends his decision to use what others have suggested is inappropriate language, stating “I think people who believe we can protect our children by keeping them ignorant of hard times and the language those times are told in, don’t realize that by showing our fear of issues and language that are “everyday” to our children, we take ourselves off that short list of people to turn to in a real crisis.”

Robert Cormier, whose books have also been challenged for the inclusion of swear words, also thinks that parents’ need to protect their children causes them to voice their objections to swearing found in fiction for young adults. He suggests, however, that their objections are misplaced, saying, “It amazes me when people

think that they can obliterate certain words from their children’s lives by banning books. If these people ever rode a school bus or walked

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down a corridor in any junior high school, they’d be in for a shock. The words that upset these people are heard so frequently that it would be impossible for a kid not to be aware of them even if the kid never saw them in a book.”

Many authors, including Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and Katherine Paterson, comment on the expectation of parents for the characters in books to be good role models for their children. This causes them to be uncomfortable with the idea of the characters swearing. In the past, many books for young people were didactic in nature.

Today, however, authors tend to try to portray more realistic situations. In doing so, they use language they think people in those situations would use. As Crutcher says, “The truth screams to be told in its own language.”

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General

Censorship, according to many YA authors, is often about

fear. It is the fear of parents and other adults about how things could possibly affect children, the fear that they may have to talk about difficult issues if children read about them, and the fear of having to deal with challenges that might occur.

For parents, challenges may arise due to fear that results from their intentions to protect their children. Judy Blume suggests, “...because fear is contagious, some parents are easily swayed. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children’s lives. This fear is often disguised as moral outrage. They want to believe that if their children don’t read about it, their children won’t know about it. And if they don’t know about it, it won’t happen.” Nancy Garden, author of *Annie on My Mind*, reminds us to keep the following in mind when dealing with these parents: “Nothing is served... by

demeaning those who truly believe that books should be banned, or by arguing against them in a hot-headed way. Conversely, everything is served by reasonable dialogue when that’s possible, and by making the point that although parents have every right to control what their own children read, they have no right to control what other people’s children read.”

...Authors continued

Sometimes referred to as "silent censorship" is the process of choosing what not to publish or provide. In this way, people avoid the possibility of dealing with potential challenges. Judy Blume states, "...it's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers." Norma Fox Mazer agrees. She says, "As for writers, our words, imagination, thoughts, and passion for writing are what we have in the world. If we were to ply our trade with one eye on the censors with the intent of never offending anyone, anywhere, what would we have left? A watered-down, weak, and inoffensive literature that would be a reproach to those of us who work with and write for children and young adults. They deserve much better."

Librarians, along with authors, need to consider

whether they are participants in silent censorship. Mazer notes the following:

The easy way out is to avoid anything that might cause trouble. Not a very good move. You'd have

to weed and throw and discard until you had nothing left but the

sweetest,

nicest, blandest, dullest books in your collection. And then you'd probably overlook something someone would object to anyway. And even if you could discard and disregard everything "potentially censorable," is this the example we want for our kids? Is this the way to teach them to respect and use their minds? Would it convey to them anything except our fear? Would it show them that we respect them? Would they respect us for blanding down their world?

Robert Cormier takes this a step further. He suggests, "political

correctness is one of the worst things to happen to literature. It's killing language and thought. It's evading real life. It's substituting euphemisms for truth."

In attempt to portray realistic situations in young adult fiction, some authors are willing to run the risk of being challenged, or even banned, to get through to their readers. Chris Crutcher emphasizes the importance of writing YA fiction that presents real situations, emotions, and language, saying:

When we turn away from tough material in stories that kids face every day in real life, we take ourselves off the short list of people to turn to. Kids would much rather we found ways to discuss those tough issues than to pretend they don't exist. They will always come up in real life, it seems to me we want to be there when they do. Kids say over and over that we don't understand. Why don't we see if we can prove them wrong once in a while?

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"Censorship is the tool of those who have the need to hide actualities from themselves and others. Their fear is only their inability to face what is real. Somewhere in their upbringing they were shielded against the total facts of our experience. They were only taught to look one way when many ways exist."

~ Charles Bukowski
