

## Supporting Students' Right to Read in the Secondary Classroom: Authors of Young Adult Literature Share Advice for Pre-Service Teachers

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Young adult literature spotlights the complexity of the adolescent human condition, which helps adolescent learners better understand themselves and those around them (Wolk, 2009). Yet, teachers who are able to find a place for young adult literature in their classrooms or schools often find themselves defending their choices rather than celebrating them (Curwood, Schliesman, & Horning, 2009). Because nobody is more invested in books than the authors, we wondered how they perceived censorship of young adult literature in the classroom. This article shares the advice young adult authors offer to secondary pre-service teachers as they prepare to infuse young adult literature in their future classrooms.

A parent of a high school student challenged the use of Laurie R. King's *Twisted* in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English course. It went something like this:

*Parent:* "Who in their right mind would give a student something like this to read? It is pornographic and does not belong in the hands of children!"

With that, she picked up Anderson's *Twisted* and proceeded to read from page 37: "Bethany sucked some frosting off her finger and moaned. The moan woke my trouser snake (*Down, boy! Down, I Say*) so I wandered up to the kitchen to get some forks and paper towels and room to breathe. When the snake crawled

back under a rock, I went downstairs.' This is just pornographic and NO child should be reading this, especially in school and especially a book assigned by a teacher!"

*Teacher:* "Why do you feel this is pornographic? Is it not a great example of an adolescent making a positive choice to excuse himself from a situation that he does not feel he is ready for?"

*Parent:* "Look. This book uses the following profanities in it and it talks about sex too." She showed me a paper printed from a Christian Family web site that posts lists of texts that children

and adults should not read because of content.

*Teacher:* “Have you read the book *Ma’am?*”

*Parent:* “No, only a few pages.”

*Teacher:* “First, allow me to say that that I think it speaks volumes about your relationship with your daughter that she trusted you enough to come and talk to you about something that was making her uncomfortable. More parents should hope for relationships such as that. Second, I appreciate your opinion and concern regarding your daughter’s reading of this book. I am happy to assign her another novel for independent study; however, I do believe that other students deserve the opportunity to read this novel.”

*Parent:* “Well, that is just not good enough. These parents probably do not know that they signed forms to allow their children to read books like this. Some parents don’t pay attention. I want to challenge this book for all parents. I want this book banned from your class and from the district. Where do I go to do that?”

*Teacher:* “On our district web page, there is

a link under the parent home page that will direct you to the forms.”

The very next day, she removed her daughter from the class and filed the papers.

After sharing the above scenario with a class of secondary pre-service teachers, students began turning to their classmates, eyes wide revealing a look of disbelief and fear. While the above scenario actually occurred in one of our classrooms, similar conversations about young adult (YA) literature are all too familiar within school districts, schools and libraries across America. As such, it becomes important to include our future teachers in this conversation, as we prepare them to include diverse YA literature in their future classrooms.

### **Current State of Censorship of Young Adult Literature**

An educator who understands the adolescent learner knows the value of reading YA literature in the classroom. Not only does it have the potential to support content curriculum, YA literature spotlights the complexity of the adolescent human condition, which helps adolescent learners better understand themselves and those around them (Wolk, 2009). Young adult literature can create a safe space for readers as they come to discover they are not alone in their experience and search for identity (Sokoll, 2013). But many adults view the world of adolescents as controversial and inappropriate for study in a classroom. Consequently, teachers who are able to find a place for YA literature in their classrooms or schools often find themselves defending their choices rather

than celebrating them (Curwood, Schliesman, & Horning, 2009).

According to The American Library Association, over the past decade there have been over 5,000 YA literature challenges reported to the Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALAOIF). In a recently published report by ALAOIF, in 2016 a total of 275 books were reported challenged or banned, with the majority being done so in secondary contexts. Reasons cited for challenges include the following: sexually explicit material, offensive language, unsuited for a particular age group, violence, religious viewpoint, and homosexuality (Frequently Challenged Books of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, paragraph 3). While this number alone may not seem significant, ALAOIF also notes that out of every challenge received, there are four or five challenges that are not reported. Lesesne (2014) argues “we must consider the 20% of challenges that we see as a warning about the 80% of the challenges that might be ‘below the surface’” (p. 77).

While the reasons were similar in nature, the outcomes of each challenge differed. For example, YA novels *The Absolute True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, *City of Thieves*, *Just One Day*, and *Looking for Alaska*, were all retained. Other YA novels such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog at Night*, *Some Girls Are*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *Cal*, were removed as required readings. Fortunately, despite the fact they were no longer required, they remained on the shelves of the library in the school where they were challenged. Unfortunately, some YA novels were not met with such luck. The challenge of *This Book Is So Gay* resulted in the moving of an entire YA nonfiction collection to the adult section in an

Alaska library. *Glass*, as well as the *Crank Trilogy*, were all permanently removed from a middle school library in California.

**What YA Author Voices Offer to Pre-Service Teachers.** When teachers find themselves at the center of classroom controversy as a result of the inclusion of YA literature, the overwhelming voice of the opposing parent or organization is what tends to be spotlighted. What follows is often the removal of the book from the teacher’s curriculum, which we would argue undermines our professionalism and our profession. So what can teacher educators do to prepare secondary pre-service teachers to advocate for students right to read, specifically YA literature, given this genre’s proclivity for censorship in the secondary classroom?

As teacher educators who believe in the power and value of YA literature in the classroom, we recognize that teachers may encounter parental concerns, complaints, and attempts at censorship of YA literature. We are witnesses to the many benefits of infusing YA literature into our secondary curriculum and class community, however, our secondary pre-service teachers fear the conflict that can arise should they choose a “controversial” book. From engaging the otherwise disengaged reader to promoting the social-emotional development of adolescent learners, it is our mission to help these future teachers understand the need to hold their ground and speak for those silenced by censorship.

As teacher educators, we do our best to prepare our students for the inclusion of YA literature in the secondary classroom. We engage them in reading and discussing YA titles. We infuse and unpack teaching strategies

aimed at incorporating such titles into their curriculum as a means of addressing the developmental needs of adolescent learners while at the same time addressing state and national education standards. And, we present them with the realities of opposition and censorship. We do what we can to prepare them for battle, but realize that we can never fully anticipate what might lie ahead for them as they enter the classroom.

In addition to our own lessons and course focus, we find it beneficial to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives in the discussion of YA literature and potential issues of censorship in the classroom. Because nobody is more invested in books than the authors of those books, we wondered how they perceived censorship of YA literature in the classroom. What advice might they offer secondary pre-service teachers as they prepare to speak out and hold fast to keeping YA literature available to students within their classrooms and schools?

Between 2009 and 2011, we interviewed over thirty YA authors through a graduate research course on YA literature offered at the University of South Florida. Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured, conversational style interview method (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). During our conversations with each author, we asked them to share their experiences with censorship in an effort to help us prepare our pre-service teachers in combating challenges of YA literature in the classroom. After each YA author shared their stories, we asked “what advice can you give to secondary pre-service teachers in preparing them for potential book challenges in the classroom?” Given the rise of book challenges in secondary classrooms (Lesesne, 2014), and the likelihood that

challenges to YA literature will continue to rise, we felt it important to revisit these transcribed interviews and share this advice so our pre-service teachers can hear directly from YA authors whose books have often been challenged and/or banned to understand their experiences and in turn provide further insights into embracing YA literature within the classroom. We read through each author’s responses, noted similar themes throughout, and found a common call to respect the challengers, put up a solid fight for freedom of speech and expression, and always remember you are not alone in your fight.

### **Respect Those Who Challenge.**

As avid readers, lovers of literature, and teachers of today’s youth, it often feels that stories have a way of latching onto a part of our soul. We learn of students who have their lives changed – or even saved – because of the characters or stories portrayed in a contemporary YA novel. We select books that we believe will benefit the intellectual as well as affective dimensions of our adolescent readers. And then, we find ourselves facing a book challenge, and suddenly it’s as if our whole world has been turned upside down. We think of the many students who will miss out on a potentially life-changing experience as they are not afforded the chance to engage in the reading of an amazing text. In that instant, we might begin to view the challenger as an enemy, an antagonist, someone to be despised and refuted. The truth is that parents tend to challenge material because they are misinformed or are simply looking out for what they believe to be in the best interest of their child.

“It’s important to recognize that challenges come from a place of fear,” states Laurie Halse Anderson (personal communication, June 8, 2010). She

maintains, “it’s important to recognize and honor a parent who is afraid. You might not agree with them, but this is a scary time to be a parent of a teenager.” Laurie brings to light the fact that many parents are trying to look out for what they believe to be best for their own children; perhaps are swayed by the ideas and words of others. “What happens is a parent will read ‘that’ page,” she says. “You know that one page where there’s a paragraph or there’s a description of something that horrifies the parent. Then, they storm into the school board and they say, ‘You have to ban this book; this is going to ruin my child.’ I actually think that we need to respect the parents who are worried about that stuff because, you know, at least they care.” Laurie’s advice for teachers who face such parents: “Always have a backup book. Every parent has the right and responsibility to look over their child’s life. No other parent has the right and responsibility to look over every kid’s life. That is a line you have to kind of draw.”

David Klass also offers insight and suggestions concerning ways teachers may both respect the wishes of a parent, while maintaining a stance against censorship in the classroom. “I think people are basically fair...I would ask parents to read the book in its entirety then decide if it is a moral book and something their kids should read. Then, that might change some minds” (personal communication, June 23, 2011). Jack Gantos suggests that we “make sure that whoever is bringing up the challenge has actually really read the book because people that sometimes come up to me...haven’t read my book. You know, they read a small part into the book until they’re disgusted. They don’t like a word. They don’t like the character’s day. They don’t like some violence. They don’t like

sassiness, and some grown-ups don’t even like humor” (personal communication, June 8, 2009).

### **A Battle Worth Fighting**

Robert Frost penned many thought-provoking, inspirational poems. One that comes to mind when considering the challenge teachers face at the hands of YA censorship is his famous poem, *A Road Less Traveled*. In this poem, Frost speaks of a fork in the road and a decision that must be made. Should the traveler take the well-worn path, the road most frequently traveled which promises easy passage to the destination? Or, should they opt for what appears to be the more difficult trail, one filled with obstacles and hardships?

The same can be said for those of us facing the threat of censorship in the classroom. It would be easy to relent and follow a path of complacency. After all, who knows what kind of battle we may face should we refuse to surrender our books? It’s important to remember, however, our cause and the reason we choose to stand behind the texts we make available to our adolescent readers. We must keep in mind our desire to empower our students. As Chris Crutcher states, “If [teachers] can make [a] book empower [a] kid, this is huge stuff!” (personal communication, June 22, 2010). Adrian Fogelin reminds us that “this is a tough world, and books are a dress rehearsal. They’re a dry run for things [the kids] are going to encounter in the world, so censorship is something you should tread very lightly; it’s dangerous” (personal communication, June 1, 2009).

Laurie Halse Anderson explains that while teachers need to keep their jobs, “sometimes [the censorship battle] is a battle worth fighting.” David Klass

readily admits the issue of fighting against censorship is an issue which troubles a great deal of today's writers, yet, "it's easy for [authors] to say you shouldn't give into censorship when [teachers] are the ones who may have to explain this to a principal, to a board, or to an outraged parent" (personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Lauren Myracle echoes David Klass in noting how teachers often face a more difficult battle with censorship because they are in direct contact with parents and administration. "I have distance," Myracle shares. "I get a lot of angry e-mails, and yet I'm physically separated from them...so it's easy to say what I am about to say and I know it's harder for y'all to put it into practice ... You know, every book may not be perfect for every student, but there is one perfect book out there for every student. If we take books off the shelves, we may ensure that students aren't able to find them" (personal communication, July 20, 2010).

Judy Blume reminds us that censorship is little more than a fight with a bully. She encourages teachers to stand up for themselves and for their students. "Don't let anybody bully you because that's really what it's about. It's about bullying. It's about saying, 'Not only do I not want my child to read this book, I don't want this book available for any child to read' and there's a difference. Moms, Dads, you can say to your child, 'I don't want you to read this book,' but you can't make that decision for all the other children and their parents" (personal communication, June 9, 2011). Chris Crutcher adds, "If you let [parents] come in and have their way with censorship, they're stealing your life, they're stealing your career. You didn't get into teaching so that you could talk about smiley things all the time. If you let

these people come in and complain and just win...it's your life. If you're a teacher, you're a teacher. You're a teacher all the damn time" (personal communication, June 22, 2010).

**You're Not Alone!** When faced with an irate parent or a book challenge, it is very easy for teachers to suddenly feel as though they have been personally challenged and left to fight alone. As Alex Sanchez shares, "[teachers] are really the ones on the front lines" when it comes to censorship. As he puts it, "[authors] are not facing the administrator who comes to you and says, 'You know, I got this complaint and I don't want you using this book, or I want this book taken off the shelf'" (personal communication, July 13, 2010). Sanchez notes that "teachers and librarians are heroes. You are the ones who get my books and other people's books into young hearts and minds." Judy Blume seconds the beliefs expressed by Sanchez when she comments, "The best thing to remember is, because it can happen to anyone over anything, a book that you think could never be challenged will be challenged. Remember that you are not alone. There's a support group out there for you today" (personal communication, June 9, 2011).

As both of these renowned authors have stated, it's important to remember that we are not alone when facing a book challenge. There are others who have faced similar threats and managed to find the resources and guidance necessary for a successful outcome.

## Resources

One thing is certain; we are never alone in our fight. It's important that teachers recognize the variety of

resources they have available in times of necessary assistance. The censorship battle is not one that must be fought alone. As with any war, we must stand together and approach the confrontation as a united front. We must be prepared and vigilant.

Authors Judy Blume, Alex Sanchez, Lauren Myracle, Laurie Halse Anderson, and Edward Bloor suggest that teachers connect with professional organizations that can provide much needed support and guidance. As Laurie Halse Anderson notes, “Utilizing resources or organizations like ALAN and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), so that you have professional rationales for why you use [a certain] book in your classroom and how you use the book in your classroom is very important” (personal communication, May 25, 2009). The NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center (<http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship>) includes their position statements, resources, as well as a collection of author letters in defense of their books. Up front and center is a box welcomes teachers to report a challenge, including a direct line to call for national help. Teachers should also be aware of the resources and guidance available through the National Coalition against Censorship, the American Library Association, and The Freedom to Read Committee. Such organizations provide teachers with guidelines for dealing with censorship issues in schools, offer letters of support, and at times may even accompany educators as they fight against censorship in school district meetings.

With regards to local support, it’s important for teachers to familiarize themselves with school, district, and state policy concerning book challenges and

censorship. All the authors we interviewed recommend that teachers get to know the book challenge policy for their local area. Marilyn Reynolds advises that in addition to understanding policy, teachers should take the time to get to know their school media specialist. “Librarians know the policy and they’re often on the front lines of fighting for intellectual freedom. There are people out there who know how to fight. Know the policy and be prepared to follow the policy. It’s very frightening to have an irate parent come in waving a book and talking about how it’s leading the youth astray. So, it is very good to prepare yourself ahead of time and to learn that policy and just think about it, what your response would be, because you need to be prepared to give a reasonable response, and people respond to that” (personal communication, June 29, 2009).

## Conclusion

In the battle of censorship, educators are at the forefront. As secondary teacher educators, we see the value of YA literature in the classroom for academic and personal growth, yet this perspective is not always welcome in the classroom. Ted Hipple used to say, “A little bit of censorship is like a little bit of pregnancy. There is no such thing.” If one book is removed from a shelf, then no books are safe. Try to imagine what may happen. Nilsen and Donelson (2009) say it best:

We believe that the school – classroom or library – must be a center of intellectual ferment in the community. This implies not that schools should be radical, but that they

should be one place where freedom to think and inquire is protected, where ideas of all sorts can be considered, analyzed, investigated, and discussed, and their consequences thought through. We believe librarians and English teachers must protect these freedoms, not merely in the abstract, but in the practical, day-by-day world of the school and library. To protect those freedoms, we must fight censorship, for without them no education worthy of the name is possible (426).

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