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Young Adult Literature: Ethics, Evils, and the Ever-Present Question of Censorship

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In an alcove of her bedroom, lounging in a pillow fort, a teenage girl escapes to the world of her favorite young adult book, *Achingly Alice* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor. With its eccentric characters, awkward but amusing occurrences, and authentic friendships, the *Alice* series reads much like the girl's real life; she returns often, revisiting people who almost seem to know *her* by now, who offer an experience, an understanding of the world like nothing she has found so far.

Without the funds to purchase the books herself, she relies on her school's copies of the series—until the day she no longer can. A librarian informs her that a classmate's parents found the books “damaging” and had challenged the entire series, stating it to be “unsuitable for the age group” (“Top Ten”). The challenge succeeded; for fear of its influence on the students of the school, the *Alice* series had been banned.

In the year 2017 alone, four hundred and sixteen books were either challenged or banned in the United States; of the top ten most commonly challenged, more than half were either specifically from the young adult (YA) genre or generally considered to be teen reading (“Top Ten”). Though the reasons cited vary, the underlying motive for this censorship is always the same: fear of the negative impact YA may have on its readership. Because YA is a genre that speaks to the interests *and* the aches of adolescents, the endless curiosities and unanswerable questions of such an age, it often contains those issues which one

would not discuss in “civilized company.” As a genre, it encompasses everything from the simply thoughtless choices one may make when one is young to the heavier issues involving drug addiction, graphic violence, offensive language, or explicit sexuality. In his paper “The Value of Young Adult Literature,” YA expert Michael Cart says that YA “[tells] its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be”. YA’s stories show reality in all its gruesome glory—but from the viewpoint of those only old enough to see the truth in pieces; often, these fractured issues will seem to cut into safety, releasing the darkness held inside or shattering the barriers barring evil outside. When some adults, particularly parents, discover this side of YA, they fear for their adolescents’ innocence and take immediate action to protect them.

Thus, despite its merit, and because of its illuminative content, YA is often censored, restricted from the very minds it was created to enrich. While some concern for YA’s content is fair and, I believe, born out of love and not intolerance, if these books have proven valuable to so many, there must be a method more productive than censorship through which to handle issues of disagreement. If education and understanding is fostered among parents, teens, and the teachers and librarians offering YA books, a need for censorship is eliminated; we will not need to protect teens by forbidding problematic books, but instead, will easily be able to find the books that benefit each teen without having to stumble over the ones that may cause him or her harm. However, the actual

methods to implement these changes will vary according to each community; we must begin by understanding the books themselves and each other before any other actions can be taken.

The American Library Association (ALA) is one of censorship's staunchest opposers and YA's staunchest defenders. On its website, the ALA states that "[Censorship] is no more complicated than someone saying, 'Don't let anyone read this book... because I object to it!'" ; they claim that censors want to "prejudge materials for everyone," instead of allowing each person, minors included, to read the material themselves and develop their own opinions ("First Amendment and Censorship"). The ALA believes that, whatever content a book may contain, the First Amendment protects a minor's right to consume the literature of his or her choice, thereby abolishing any form of censorship in a public place. Teachers and librarians offering YA are often of a similar view: seeing the value in YA literature, they support the ALA in championing intellectual freedom and keeping these books available to teens.

Contrary to the beliefs of some, these standpoints are not the merely arbitrary decisions of "social justice warriors." YA has many genuine benefits, for example, its ability to improve literacy. Because of its engagement of adolescents' interests, YA feels immediately relevant to teens, helping to assuage their appetite for answers by addressing the problems that today's teenagers are already facing. In his book, *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, Cart quotes

author George W. Norvell in saying, “to increase reading skill, promote the reading habit, and produce a generation of book-lovers, there is no factor so powerful as interest” (21). Put simply, YA talks about the things in which teens are interested (whether in the form of a fantasy adventure, problem novel, or something in between); because of this, they return to it, discovering stories that speak to their experiences, broadening their perspectives, and improving their reading skill all in a mere three or four hundred pages.

On a more subjective level, YA also possesses the ability to “educate not only the mind but the heart and spirit as well” (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 55). As it teaches teens to be better readers, writers, and thinkers, YA offers an extraordinary vantage point of our world, the ability to see our reality in all its gorgeous and gruesome glory. These stories comprehend the parts of their hearts teens themselves cannot fathom, teaching them to plumb their own depths and understand both their own selves and the people around them. In my own case, though I did not encounter censorship while reading these books, the example at the beginning does stem from my own experience: as a young teen, I enjoyed reading the *Alice* books because they taught me to untangle my own mind and to understand the life I was already living. Problems of puberty, flagrant emotions, friendships, relationships, and all the intricate issues that come with growing up, I already *knew* about them; but through the *Alice* books, I began to *understand* them and, more importantly, to feel understood in them. With each *Alice*

installment, and other YA books, showing me some nibble of the truth, teaching me to both see and be seen, I grew in understanding of the world around me and of the very problems I would soon encounter.

However, YA can also bring such problems into razor sharp focus—sometimes to the point that they are the only things that can be seen. In her 2012 article “Parents Must Protect Children from Offensive Material in Books,” author and blogger Erin Manning proclaims that much of current YA is “mindless and sensationalized,” full of “sex, violence, drug use, profanity and the like” (3). “It’s just the fallout from our fractured culture,” she says, “which insists on calling evil, good—and then handing it to children” (4). Manning reasserts the reasoning of those from her view: adults who see YA as solely damaging, full of only that which will harm the minds of children. To them, censorship is not the center of discussion at all; the debate actually surrounds an issue of parenting, a right which the ALA, with its firm focus on intellectual freedom, is attempting to steal from parents and guardians.

At a glance, it might seem that Manning is exaggerating the issue with such strong condemnations of YA, but a look at the real statistics shows she has some bearing for her argument. According to the “Reasons for Banning Books” page on Butler University’s *Banned Books* website, the most common reason cited for a book challenge is “sexually explicit content,” closely followed by “offensive language”. In addition, the majority of challenges are initiated by

parents, and, from 1990-2009, nearly all challenges occurred at schools and school libraries (“Reasons”). Thus, when censorship is being discussed, it is rarely a question of paltry, irrelevant matters, but of content that one could easily say should not be within a minor’s reach. While many may ascribe different definitions to “sexually explicit” and “offensive language,” the fact that these are the actual issues being discussed should, at the very least, raise eyebrows. After all, if this were movies or games as our subject, the entertainment form would automatically receive a higher rating, by definition, cautioning parents against allowing their children to consume such media. Although various unofficial rating aids exist, there is no approved guiding system or content warning, so parents and teens easily and often stumble upon potentially damaging content. According to a study by Dr. Sarah Coyne of Brigham Young University, the language content in YA will vary from book to book; however, in several popular stories (for instance, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie and *Gossip Girls, The Carlyles* by Cecily von Ziegesar), the language content is so coarse and pervasive that if these books were converted directly to movies, they would automatically receive an R-rating (20). When such content is found—and commonly—in the teen section of the library, is it any wonder that parents take immediate action to protect their children from harm?

Of course not. Parents should, to their utmost ability, protect their children from negative content, particularly before their children are ready to process such

material. Nonetheless, one of the problems in these occurrences is that the focus is *on* the problems. Parents should not simply ignore these issues nor should they be kept ignorant of their presence, for surely this content may have its effect; however, in these conversations, the focus rarely shifts to what *else* is in these censored YA books. What are teens actually obtaining from these stories, utterly apart from the problematic possibilities?

The academic study, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” offers a preliminary answer to the question of what teens see when they read YA. Attempting to discover a correlation between the female characters in YA and how young women tend to view themselves, news editor Jessica Kokesh and university professor Miglena Sternadori performed a study in which they interviewed a small group of female YA readers. Though Sternadori and Kokesh concluded that there were only a few exceptional female characters in YA and I also noted that several of the interviewees’ favorite books had previously been targeted for censorship (for instance, *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins and the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer), the overall influence of these stories seemed strangely positive. When asked about the level of realism they perceived in the books, the girls saw most YA stories as fairly realistic, but also noted that several tropes (such as excessive partying, portrayals of feminine appearance and attitude, and the prevalence of “shallow teenagers”) did not speak to the reality they knew. When asked to identify bad heroines, in general, they

classified “bad” as “mean, dishonest, [and] manipulative,” as well as those who “do not care about others, use drugs and alcohol, and do things they shouldn’t.” When asked about good heroines, the interviewees named characters who were “loyal, trustworthy, unselfish, and willing to take responsibility for hurt they have caused.” They also mentioned women with strong personalities and those who were not afraid to be themselves. Several girls also stated that they actively attempted to imitate the “good” characters and that the poor decisions of other characters had even taught them what *not* to do (14-16). Though the girls enjoyed YA as a form of identification, entertainment, and escape, they were not simply brainwashed by any negative content; instead, they evaluated each book as they read it, extracting the values and generally leaving the vices. Thus, while stories are incredibly influential, and parents should exercise caution if they do not think their child is prepared for certain content, teens do not simply embrace every action about which they read. Instead, adolescents are capable of reasoning through the actions to which they are exposed and making independent decisions accordingly.

Of course, one study does not eradicate all risk of YA’s negative influence. Though some adolescents already understand the dangers of certain actions and make wiser decisions accordingly, one must also admit that not all teenagers employ such powers of discernment. In addition, some teen readers themselves do not wish to encounter these content issues, whatever the reason for

the content's presence and whatever its possible effect. Thus, because of these varying factors, the only fair way to deal with such powerful yet problematic literature is to endeavor to understand the books being discussed and carefully evaluate their use in each situation, thereby determining which books will be useful to each teen and leaving the rest, at least for the time being, to another reader. And this solution is not as radical as it may seem or as difficult as it may sound: whenever one recommends a book, movie, or any other product to another person, it is with the understanding that no form of media will benefit every individual and that the specific recommendation one is making to one individual is based on the known specifications of that media and that individual. Every teen and every book is distinct; there is no single, perfect method to free all and protect all. Once we have decided to accept these facts, we may progress to the things that are possible: examining the books and teens under our individual reach and guiding each teen to the specific YA stories that are right for her or him.

However, this thorough, personal form of selection cannot occur in an environment where two sides argue in a seemingly holy war over the minds of adolescents: one side fiercely guarding what they view to be intellectual freedom, the other, the innocence of their children. The only way to begin to deal with the problem is to dissipate the defensive, aggressive attitude that overshadows it and to foster understanding, such that parents see the value in YA books and librarians and teachers actively respect the rights of parents, working to alleviate their

concerns instead of seeing them only as censors. However, because each community is filled with diverse peoples and problems, there is no single, easy solution to dismiss this divide for good. A decision to listen to and understand the other side must come first; after that, various methods can be implemented to make these resolutions more efficient. Each of the following are general solutions that would have to be adapted to each situation, however, properly used, each could certainly be effective.

If an official rating system were developed, much like there are for movies and games, it would give teens, parents, teachers, and librarians a previous understanding of a book's content. This approach would also help parents and teens to see what other books are available, rather than leaving them to flounder, feeling as though they come against only "trashy" books. Even if no official rating system is formed, librarians and teachers can use the available, unofficial rating resources (such as Common Sense Media, Compass Book Ratings, and others) to develop smaller rating systems for their own collections (Hill 2-3). Teachers and librarians would need to stress that these ratings are solely informative, not a presumption of patron values. They may also need to explain the context in which the content was found (for instance, violence in a war novel) as this will have a significant impact on the content and the tact with which it is handled (Hill 2). With such ratings available, patrons could easily avoid that which they do not desire to read, leaving those other books for those who do desire such stories or

those who will not be harmed by reading them. With no damage done to any party, there would be no need for censorship.

Another option available would be to require parental permission before teens could access certain materials. This method would have to be used cautiously, since, in one specific case, it was found to be in violation of minors' Right to Read Freely ("Notable First Amendment Court Cases"); nevertheless, it is neither a ridiculous nor an impossible notion. To protect one's children from negative content is simply a right of parenting; to have a portion of the community aiding parents in this by warning them ahead of time should be seen as doing parents a service, rather than doing children a disservice. Teens *can* be smart, far more so than they are often given credit for; however, this does not mean that parents should not be allowed to assist them, guide them, and even restrict their access to certain materials, if the parents so desire. It is no different than the parental controls on certain websites or the requirement for an adult to accompany a minor into a rated-R movie. To quote, Erin Manning, "It's not censorship, it's parenting!" (1).

Finally, and my personal favorite, schools and libraries could sponsor workshops that present a few representative YA books to help parents understand not only the negative content but also the lessons and values teenagers are gaining from YA. A large part of the problem is that parents feel they are being dismissed, the important decisions about their children's education taking place behind their

backs. But with such workshops engaging parents and allowing them to voice concerns prior to presenting a challenge, parents would be more included in their children's development and more informed about their children's reading, thereby having many such anxieties assuaged. One could also use these workshops to encourage teenagers to read critically, thus increasing the effectiveness of YA and decreasing the conflict around this set of literature that we should be celebrating.

On the parental side, parents should be careful to critically evaluate the message of a book prior to deciding that it is objectionable. They should also listen to their teens' side of the story: why do their children enjoy these books? What are they learning from them? In what ways do teenagers think YA might be helping them? In his book *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, literature critic Jack Zipes admits that, looking back on his daughter's childhood, he wishes he had taken the time to discuss her favorite YA series with her instead of writing the books off as worthless (62). He does not endorse the series, nor does he say that he has recently discovered some value in YA; he simply states that, as a parent, he should have taken the time to find what value his daughter had found in her favorite YA books. If he, a staunch children's literature critic (having gone as far as to say that children's literature is nonexistent), can reach such a conclusion, surely other parents can manage the same.

Granted, none of these solutions are perfect and, on either side, one is likely to encounter those who hold so firmly to their views, they are unwilling to enact any change. However, this does not mean that the rest of us cannot begin to move forward, taking whatever actions are available to make YA more beneficial and accessible to the teens in our sphere of influence. If we begin to move, perhaps the others will see the value of our progress and begin to follow.

All-in-all, YA is an important fixture in our world. For the good of the next generation, which is to say, for the good of us all, it should not be censored. However, this does not mean that a willy-nilly, “whatever may be” approach can be allowed either; the very reason it cannot be censored—its power and influence—is also the reason it must be handled carefully. Balance is needed. Wisdom is need. Care is needed. And compassion is needed.

As author Francesca Lia Block said at a YA conference in 1996, “Society is beginning to understand that childhood and adulthood are not really as separate as people think.... Childhood is filled with darkness, the need for love, the search for acceptance. Why can’t we create a category which all the barriers will cross” (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 60).

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