

The Case for Good Taste in Children's Books

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ON JUNE 4, 2011, the number one trending topic on Twitter was the Anthony Weiner scandal. I happen to remember that, because the number two topic on Twitter that day—almost as frenzied, though a lot less humorous—had to do with an outrageous, intolerable attack on Young Adult literature . . . by me. Entitled "Darkness Too Visible," my article discussed the increasingly dark current that runs through books classified as YA, for Young Adult—books aimed at readers between 12 and 18 years of age—a subset that has, in the four decades since Young Adult became a distinct category in fiction, become increasingly lurid, grotesque, profane, sexual, and ugly.

Books show us the world, and in that sense, too many books for adolescents act like funhouse mirrors, reflecting hideously distorted portrayals of life. Those of us who have grown up understand that the teen years can be fraught and turbulent—and for some kids, very unhappy—but at the same time we know that in the arc of human life, these years are brief. Today, too many novels for teenagers are long on the turbulence and short on a sense of perspective. Nor does it help that the narrative style that dominates Young Adult books is the first person present tense—"I, I, I," and "now, now, now." Writers use this device to create a feeling of urgency, to show solidarity with the reader and to make the reader feel that he or she is occupying the persona of the narrator. The trouble is that the first person present tense also erects a kind of verbal prison, keeping young readers in the turmoil of the moment just as their hormones tend to do. This narrative style reinforces the blinkers teenagers often seem to be wearing, rather than drawing them out and into the open.

Bringing Judgment

The late critic Hilton Kramer was seated once at a dinner next to film director Woody Allen. Allen asked him if he felt embarrassed when he met people socially whom he'd savaged in print. "No," Kramer said, "they're the ones who made the bad art. I just described it." As the story goes, Allen fell gloomily silent, having once made a film that had received the Kramer treatment.

I don't presume to have a nose as sensitive as Hilton Kramer's—but I do know that criticism is pointless if it's only boosterism. To evaluate anything, including children's books, is to engage the faculty of judgment, which requires that great bugbear of the politically correct, "discrimination." Thus, in responding to my article, YA book writers Judy Blume and Libba Bray charged that I was giving comfort to book-banners, and *Publisher's Weekly* warned of a "danger" that my arguments "encourage a culture of fear around YA literature." But I do not, in fact, wish to ban any books or frighten any authors. What I do wish is that people in the book business would exercise better taste; that adult authors would not simply validate

every spasm of the teen experience; and that our culture was not marching toward ever-greater explicitness in depictions of sex and violence.

Books for children and teenagers are written, packaged, and sold by adults. It follows from this that the emotional depictions they contain come to young people with a kind of adult imprimatur. As a school librarian in Idaho wrote to her colleagues in my defense: "You are naïve if you think young people can read a dark and violent book that sits on the library shelves and not believe that that behavior must be condoned by the adults in their school lives."

What kind of books are we talking about? Let me give you three examples—but with a warning that some of what you're about to hear is not appropriate for younger listeners.

A teenaged boy is kidnapped, drugged, and nearly raped by a male captor. After escaping, he comes across a pair of weird glasses that transport him to a world of almost impossible cruelty. Moments later, he finds himself facing a wall of horrors, "covered with impaled heads and other dripping, black-rot body parts: hands, hearts, feet, ears, penises. Where the f— was this?"

That's from Andrew Smith's 2010 Young Adult novel, *The Marbury Lens*.

A girl struggles with self-hatred and self-injury. She cuts herself with razors secretly, but her secret gets out when she's the victim of a sadistic sexual prank. Kids at school jeer at her, calling her "cutterslut." In response, "she had sliced her arms to ribbons, but the badness remained, staining her insides like cancer. She had gouged her belly until it was a mess of meat and blood, but she still couldn't breathe."

That's from Jackie Morse Kessler's 2011 Young Adult novel, *Rage*.

I won't read you the most offensive excerpts from my third example, which consist of explicit and obscene descriptions by a 17-year-old female narrator of sexual petting, of oral sex, and of rushing to a bathroom to defecate following a breakup. Yet *School Library Journal* praised Daria Snadowsky's 2008 Young Adult novel, *Anatomy of a Boyfriend*, for dealing "in modern terms with the real issues of discovering sex for the first time." And Random House, its publisher, gushed about the narrator's "heartbreakingly honest voice" as she recounts the "exquisite ups and dramatic downs of teenage love and heartbreak."

The book industry, broadly speaking, says: Kids have a right to read whatever they want. And if you follow the argument through it becomes: Adults should not discriminate between good and bad books or stand as gatekeepers, deciding what young people should read. In other words, the faculty of judgment and taste that we apply in every other area of life involving children should somehow vaporize when it comes in contact with the printed word.

I appeared on National Public Radio to discuss these issues with the Young Adult book author Lauren Myracle, who has been hailed as a person "on the front lines in the fight for freedom of expression"—as if any controversy over whether a book is appropriate for children turns on the question of the author's freedom to express herself. Myracle made clear that she doesn't believe there should be any line between adult literature and literature for young people. In saying this, she was echoing the view that prevails in many progressive, secular circles—that young people should encounter material that jolts them out of their comfort zone; that the world is a tough place; and that there's no point shielding children from reality. I took the less progressive, less secular view that parents

should take a more interventionist approach, steering their children away from books about sex and horror and degradation, and towards books that make aesthetic and moral claims.

Now, although it may seem that our culture is split between Left and Right on the question of permissiveness regarding children's reading material, in fact there is not so much division on the core issue as might appear. Secular progressives, despite their reaction to my article, have their own list of books they think young people shouldn't read—for instance, books they claim are tinged with racism or jingoism or that depict traditional gender roles. Regarding the latter, you would not believe the extent to which children's picture books today go out of the way to show father in an apron and mother tinkering with machinery. It's pretty funny. But my larger point here is that the self-proclaimed anti-book-banners on the Left agree that books influence children and prefer some books to others.

Indeed, in the early years of the Cold War, many left-wing creative people in America gravitated toward children's literature. Philip Nel, a professor at Kansas State University, has written that Red-hunters, "seeing children's books as a field dominated by women . . . deemed it less important and so did not watch it closely." Among the authors I am referring to are Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and Ruth Krauss, author of the 1952 classic *A Hole is to Dig*, illustrated by a young Maurice Sendak. Krauss was quite open in her belief that children's literature was an excellent means of putting left-wing ideas into young minds. Or so she hoped.

When I was a little girl I read *The Cat in the Hat*, and I took from it an understanding of the sanctity of private property—it outraged me when the Cat and Thing One and Thing Two rampaged through the children's house while their mother was away. Dr. Seuss was probably not intending to inculcate capitalist ideas—quite the contrary. But it happened in my case, and the point is instructive.

Taste and Beauty

A recent study conducted at Virginia Tech found that college women who read "chick lit"—light novels that deal with the angst of being a modern woman—reported feeling more insecure about themselves and their bodies after reading novels in which the heroines feel insecure about themselves and their bodies. Similarly, federal researchers were puzzled for years by a seeming paradox when it came to educating children about the dangers of drugs and tobacco. There seemed to be a correlation between anti-drug and anti-tobacco programs in elementary and middle schools and subsequent drug and tobacco use at those schools. It turned out that at the same time children were learning that drugs and tobacco were bad, they were taking in the meta-message that adults expected them to use drugs and tobacco.

This is why good taste matters so much when it comes to books for children and young adults. Books tell children what to expect, what life is, what culture is, how we are expected to behave—what the spectrum is. Books don't just cater to tastes. They form tastes. They create norms—and as the examples above show, the norms young people take away are not necessarily the norms adults intend. This is why I am skeptical of the social utility of so-called "problem novels"—books that have a troubled main character, such as a girl with a father who started raping her when she was a toddler and anonymously provides her with knives when she is a teenager hoping that she will cut herself to death. (This scenario is from Cheryl Rainfield's 2010 Young Adult novel, *Scars*, which *School Library Journal* hailed as "one heck of a good book.") The argument in favor of such books is that they validate the real and terrible experiences of teenagers who have been abused, addicted, or raped—

among other things. The problem is that the very act of detailing these pathologies, not just in one book but in many, normalizes them. And teenagers are all about identifying norms and adhering to them.

In journalist Emily Bazelon's recent book about bullying, she describes how schools are using a method called "social norming" to discourage drinking and driving. "The idea," she writes, "is that students often overestimate how much other kids drink and drive, and when they find out that it's less prevalent than they think—outlier behavior rather than the norm—they're less likely to do it themselves." The same goes for bullying: "When kids understand that cruelty isn't the norm," Bazelon says, "they're less likely to be cruel themselves."

Now isn't that interesting?

Ok, you say, but books for kids have always been dark. What about Hansel and Gretel? What about the scene in *Beowulf* where the monster sneaks into the Danish camp and starts eating people?

Beowulf is admittedly gruesome in parts—and fairy tales are often scary. Yet we approach them at a kind of arm's length, almost as allegory. In the case of *Beowulf*, furthermore, children reading it—or having it read to them—are absorbing the rhythms of one of mankind's great heroic epics, one that explicitly reminds us that our talents come from God and that we act under God's eye and guidance. Even with the gore, *Beowulf* won't make a child callous. It will help to civilize him.

English philosopher Roger Scruton has written at length about what he calls the modern "flight from beauty," which he sees in every aspect of our contemporary culture. "It is not merely," he writes, "that artists, directors, musicians and others connected with the arts"—here we might include authors of Young Adult literature—"are in a flight from beauty There is a desire to spoil beauty For beauty makes a claim on us; it is a call to renounce our narcissism and look with reverence on the world."

We can go to the Palazzo Borghese in Rome and stand before Caravaggio's painting of David with the head of Goliath, and though we are looking at horror we are not seeing ugliness. The light that plays across David's face and chest, and that slants across Goliath's half-open eyes and mouth, transforms the scene into something beautiful. The problem with the darker offerings in Young Adult literature is that they lack this transforming and uplifting quality. They take difficult subjects and wallow in them in a gluttonous way; they show an orgiastic lack of restraint that is the mark of bad taste.

Young Adult book author Sherman Alexie wrote a rebuttal to my article entitled, "Why the Best Kids Books are Written in Blood." In it, he asks how I could honestly believe that a sexually explicit Young Adult novel might traumatize a teenaged mother. "Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?"

Well of course I don't. But I also don't believe that the vast majority of 12-to-18-year-olds are living in hell. And as for those who are, does it really serve them to give them more torment and sulphur in the stories they read?

The body of children's literature is a little like the Library of Babel in the Jorge Luis Borges story—shelf after shelf of books, many almost gibberish, but a rare few filled with wisdom and beauty and answers to important questions. These are the books that have lasted because generation after generation has seen in them something transcendent, and has passed them on. Maria Tatar, who teaches children's literature at Harvard, describes books like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Jungle Books*, and *Pinocchio* as "setting minds into motion, renewing senses, and almost rewiring brains."

Or as William Wordsworth wrote: "What we have loved/others will love, and we will teach them how."

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The good news is that just like the lousy books of the past, the lousy books of the present will blow away like chaff. The bad news is that they will leave their mark. As in so many aspects of culture, the damage they do can't easily be measured. It is more a thing to be felt—a coarseness, an emptiness, a sorrow.

"Beauty is vanishing from our world because we live as if it does not matter." That's Roger Scruton again. But he doesn't want us to despair. He also writes:

It is one mark of rational beings that they do not live only—or even at all—in the present. They have the freedom to despise the world that surrounds them and live another way. The art, literature, and music of our civilization remind them of this, and also point to the path that lies always before them: the path out of desecration towards the sacred and the sacrificial.

Let me close with Saint Paul the Apostle in Philippians 4:8:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

And let us think about these words when we go shopping for books for our children.

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