

Seeing Teenagers As We Wish They Were: The Debate Over YA Fiction

by Linda Holmes

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Over the weekend, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a piece claiming that fiction at least nominally aimed at readers under 18 — young adult or "YA" fiction, that is — is entirely too dark. Calling out the books about kids who cut themselves or suffer abuse right alongside the books with abundant profanity in them, it laments the fact that young readers will be "surrounded by images not of joy or beauty but of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds."

Unsurprisingly, the commentary has come under intense criticism — it's not in any way a new complaint, and every response to it points that out, along with plenty of other problems.

But as easy as it is to tear the piece apart — for its complete failure to acknowledge V.C. Andrews, who was writing books with incest and rape themes in the 1980s and is the go-to choice for adults my age who want to talk about the screwed-up YA fiction they read, if nothing else — I'm more intrigued by the aspirational nature of the quaint but sad idea that teenagers, if you don't give them *The Hunger Games*, can be effectively surrounded by images of joy and beauty.

While the *WSJ* piece refers to the YA fiction view of the world as a funhouse mirror, I fear that what's distorted is the vision of being a teenager that suggests kids don't know pathologies like suicide or abuse unless they read about them in books.

Do you remember being 15?

For some people, it was a breeze. There are absolutely, positively people who had a very easy time as adolescents, who feel a little guilty about the fact that they didn't actually find youth all that difficult, and it's unfair to declare their experiences invalid or uninteresting or inauthentic.

But there are plenty — plenty — of people for whom, if they are honest, it was a time of isolation and bafflement and plain old gutting it out until they got older. And even when it wasn't miserable, it was often complicated, and a lot of kids who don't experience abusive dating relationships or self-harm or eating disorders? They already know somebody who does. Surrounding them with books full of joy and beauty is fine, but confining their reading to those things because we are afraid that they cannot tolerate being exposed to the things they are already so often exposed to does them a terrible disservice. It's difficult to say to a teenager, "We don't even let you read about anyone who cuts herself; it's that much of a taboo. But by all means, if you're cutting yourself, feel free to tell a trusted adult."

Honestly, the kids who are reading the scary YA fiction — the dark stuff, the creepy stuff, the adventurous and weird and dirty stuff — are the same kids who, if YA fiction weren't dark and creepy sometimes, would just read dark and creepy books for adults.

I read Rebecca in fifth grade and *Gone With The Wind* in sixth. I was reading Stephen King by the time I was 12 or 13, and Jackie Collins by about that same time. I was a curious goofball of a kid, and I liked long books, and so that's the kind of stuff I read. I loved how serious it felt because it had all that heaviness and death and melodrama. And, in the case of Jackie Collins (and shortly thereafter, Judith Krantz), lots and lots of nakedness.

Even the things we read for school were things like *Animal Farm* and *Lord Of The Flies* and even that horrible thing in *Johnny Tremain* about being burned by molten metal OW OW OW. If we're speaking thematically, *The Hunger Games* has nothing on *Lord Of The Flies*.

(I also took an entire class in high school where we read books about killing your family, double suicide, drowning, being murdered in your bed ... it was called "Shakespeare," I believe.)

Look: Once you're talking about older teenagers, they read whatever they want from the world of YA and adult books anyway, if they happen to be readers, and if they aren't readers, they aren't reading the tough books about abuse and the apocalypse to begin with. They have already decided they don't care about reading for pleasure. They have moved on.

And with younger kids, like 13-year-olds? If they're interested in dark themes, they're going to find them, whether it's in YA novels or something else. Curiosity about death or illness or suffering doesn't have to be grafted onto 13-year-olds by fiction writers. The ones who seek out dark themes are the ponderous ones, the ones who like the idea of things feeling Very Very Serious, who like the idea that they are doing something daring when they open a book. Yes, some of them are depressed. But some of them would be depressed anyway. You could give them books about uplift and clean living, and it wouldn't cure them of depression, because depression is chemical. If depression were treatable with copies of *Cherry Ames*, *Jungle Nurse*, they wouldn't make medication for it.

It's a lovely thought that surrounding kids with fun books about beauty will bend their perspectives toward beauty like a plant growing toward a sunny window. And certainly, it would be bad if everything always were murder and death and misery.

But adolescence is a dark time for a lot of people. Not a fake-dark time, because they got a pimple, but a real dark time, because they have a friend who drinks too much or is abused at home or has a mental illness and wants to kill himself. It's sad, but keeping books away from them doesn't make it any less true. Yes, it's always possible that someone will get the idea to cut herself from a book about cutting herself, but if she's in a position where cutting herself seems like a good idea, she wasn't just fine before she opened the book. The odds are she is already familiar with brutality and loss at some level; kids who aren't don't pick up a book about cutting and decide to slice into their arms.

There's nothing wrong with encouraging kids to broaden their reading if you think they're stuck in a vampire rut or a suicide-fiction rut, and there's nothing wrong with pointing out books where you don't like the vision of government or women or society or authority. But I take extreme exception to the suggestion made in the article that book-banning is nothing more than "guid[ing] what young people read," also known "in the parenting trade [as] 'judgment' or 'taste.'"

Banning is banning, not guidance, and if the suggestion is that that's the parenting role, it has to be done ... regretfully, I think. Even for parents acting with regard to their own kids, the act of one human being actually preventing another human being from reading a book is a grave decision. Obviously, not everything is appropriate for every audience — nobody is suggesting you give *Twilight* to your seven-year-old. (Or, really, to anyone, although that's more because of the quality of the writing than because the themes are too dark.) But stopping — actually stopping — a YA reader from picking up a particular book because it describes behavior you don't want him to emulate potentially cuts him off from something that might reach him in exchange for ... nothing, really, except your own comfort level.

Much of this concern comes from a very well-intentioned place, I think. Parents hate the collision of their children with unpleasantness. Everyone wishes life as a teenager were irreconcilable with having an interest in angry, psychologically complicated, perhaps violent characters. Nobody wants to think their kid can really relate to a teenage protagonist who considers suicide or gets beaten up at school or feels crushed by pressure to be perfect. It feels good to make those "adult" themes, but that doesn't make it so.

I was always going to read Stephen King, because I was interested in the way he talked about hope and despair, about finding salvation in other people, and about things like eating your own foot that were just plain freaking crazy pants cool. Not reading scary, weird, dark, or dirty books wouldn't have made me a different kid. It certainly wouldn't have made me a happier kid.

It might have made me a kid who read less, though.

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/06/06/137005354/seeing-teenagers-as-we-wish-they-were-the-debate-over-ya-fiction?sc=tw&cc=share>

Fans of young adult fiction, and in particular female ones like me, seem to respond not just to the action-packed plots of these novels but also the realism of the flawed and complex characters that are found in them. The first UK book convention dedicated to young adult (YA) fiction opened in style with charismatic author Malorie Blackman dressed in a Star Trek outfit, addressing the audience in the language of Klingon! One of the appealing aspects of YA novels and authors is openness to debate. Another suggested that it would be patronising to teenagers to be told that there are certain subjects they shouldn't be reading about. YA has to represent the real world and not just present a rosy image of it. We hadn't seen a computer or a mobile phone. day are respectful, but they want everything NOW. Maybe their parents buy them TOO many things. Becky visited my gran last weekend and she'd found some of her old photos. They were interesting. really liked the hairstyles and fashions, especially the big skirts and teena (IO. guys in suits! ow We go to (dis cos, but we don't dance to live music there. Most teenagers are. Activities in your digital books are also accessible without Internet connection. Download your content, complete the exercises, and upload them when you have Internet again. Having trouble uploading your activities? We will help you! help@blinklearning.com

1. Terminator is one of the best ever a films. 2. Walk the Line is a b of the musician Johnny Cash. 3. Avatar won an award for best f film. 4. I enjoy all film genres, particularly historical or p d . 5. New in Town is a r c about an ambitious woman from Miami who moves to a small town in Minnesota, in America's mid-west. 6. The Wizard of Oz is a classic children's a story. 7. 2012, one of the biggest Hollywood d films ever made, shows the end of the world as we know it. The special effects are truly spectacular.