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# The Moral of the Story: Young Adult Authors Speak on Morality, Obligation, and Age Appropriateness

*This article presents the responses of some young adult authors to questions about morality, the writing process, and the obligation of the writer to his or her readers.*

During our preparation to teach a college course on adolescent literature in the secondary classroom we came across an article on morality and young adult (YA) literature written by Carol Jones Collins. In her commentary, Collins examined the role literature can play in "[i]mparting to young people, and especially to young adults, moral values" (158). Collins asserts YA literature can serve as a moral conduit for adolescents. In support of this perspective, Collins cites the works of theorists such as Louise M. Rosenblatt and Rita Manning who purport fiction can help readers determine and understand their own ideas about morality and can help them work through moral quandaries, something both authors have witnessed in the use of YA literature in their own classrooms. Framed through these classroom experiences, the authors of this article not only agree that YA literature contains the power to affect an adolescent's sense of morality, but also recognize the use of YA literature to promote this developmental aspect of the adolescent is absent from our current classroom dialogue.

In the summer of 2011, we had the opportunity to interview a dozen YA authors through a graduate course at the University of South Florida. Each week we met and spoke to YA authors about their lives and their works. In a conversation with Lauren Myracle, the topics of morality and age appropriateness within her novels arose. Her response to questions posed about these topics led us to author Shannon Hale's blog. In this blog, Hale solicited responses to the question, "Do young adult writers have an obligation to have moral standards and create boundaries in their books so as not to expose children to issues/situations that are age inappropriate? Why or Why not?" The dialogue included authors such as Holly Black, M. T. Anderson, and Carol Lynch Williams. Their blog responses started us thinking again about Collins's article and the power YA literature potentially has in influencing the moral values and beliefs of its adolescent readers.

When it comes to morality in YA literature, we often hear from parents, educators, or members of community groups who are challenging a book's moral content, yet we do not often have an opportunity to hear from the authors themselves. As secondary educators we see the value of YA literature in the classroom as a medium for not only academic growth but for personal growth as well. However, we are left wondering to what extent YA authors write to impact the personal growth of their readers, if at all. Furthermore, do morality and obligation intersect in the writing process? Because these questions could only be answered by the authors themselves, we posed our questions to 22 YA authors, of whom 17 graciously responded. In addition to the email responses, we also examined responses from Shannon Hale's blog where she asked YA authors' views on morality and the obligations that YA authors may or may not have to their readers.

## What Does *Moral* Mean?

Any talk of morality must first begin with a definition of *moral*; yet because of the diversity of people



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and lifestyles in our world, no one definition of this word exists. With its ambiguity, it was not surprising many authors also felt the need to define *moral* prior to answering our questions. Some believe the word itself is indistinct, while others believe *moral* is often used to mean something else. While there was no one definition agreed upon, the idea that moral is something personal was accepted by all.

Alan Sitomer

Truth is, I think if you ask five different writers you will get five different answers. Additionally, that which constitutes "moral standard" in one person's mind might not constitute such the same in another.

—Alan Sitomer

I believe the word *moral* is very subjective, because morality differs from person to person. For instance, there are people who would say it's immoral to portray homosexuality in young adult literature, while there are others who would say it's immoral NOT to.

—Neal Shusterman

*Moral* is a term most often used, in my opinion, to propel an agenda. Most of the time that's a sexual agenda. How in the world did moral come to mean sexual? I get that it sometimes includes violence, but those two terms usually wrap it up. To me, *moral* has to do with the way we treat people. I can put an asshole into a story and no one complains at all. In fact they discuss what makes that character an asshole. They should be able to do the same with sexual or violence issues.

—Chris Crutcher

## Do Young Adult Authors Have Obligations to Their Readers?

Wolfgang Iser argues literature "is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader" (1). Therefore, reading a text becomes an interactive process of meaning making between the text itself (the author's intentions) and the individual (the reader's interpretations). If, as an author, one accepts this, then knowing who one's audience is becomes imperative, especially if one considers the influence that his or her novels may have on a reader's moral being. It has been noted that writers deliberately choose content and contexts that closely represent or mirror the worlds of their readers to create authentic and real stories. But sometimes these contents and contexts are not familiar to readers. As a result, the argument surrounding certain content and contexts as inappropriate for specific aged readers arises, which leads to books being challenged, censored, or even banned. The question then becomes, What obligation, if any, do YA authors have to their audience? While some authors felt they have a responsibility to their readers in how they present their content, others deemed their only obligation is to tell a good story. In most cases, the authors discuss the importance of being honest and true to their readers and to themselves.

Young adult authors have the same responsibility that physicians do—above all else, do no harm. It is our job to guide and assist adolescents, while keeping an eye on our responsibility to put something into their lives that will help them rather than hurt them.

—Neal Shusterman

No, young adult authors do not have that obligation. They have the same obligation other writers have and that's to tell a good story.

—Chris Crutcher

The writer's obligation, in my mind, is to cast the light of hope, however dark the situation being explored in a story may be. If there is no hope, I see no reason to write my story.

—Marion Dane Bauer

Sharon Draper

I don't think anyone has an "obligation" to be moral, but I believe strongly in boundaries. I can only speak for myself, but I think that difficult or controversial subjects should be dealt with skill and delicacy. Such subjects dealt with in this manner can then be discussed intelligently because it is the ideas and thoughts we want young readers to share, not the experience itself.

—Sharon Draper

> Our job as writers is to tell stories. Our job as writers is to tell our characters' truths. Sometimes our own truths are mixed up in our words of fiction because we are a bit of our characters. So we writers must do what we do best—tell our stories. And critics must do what they do best—be critical.
>
> —Carol Lynch Williams

Lois Lowry

> All we can do as writers is be honest and write books that ask questions.
>
> —Holly Black

> In my opinion a young adult writer's obligation is to be honest, intelligent, and sensitive.
>
> —Lois Lowry

## The Intersection of Morality and Obligation

Do morality and obligation intersect in a YA author's writing process? Collins would argue they do. In her article, she provides a brief overview of the intersection of morality and obligation in literature that was produced in the 19th century. Referencing YA literature such as the McGuffey Readers, the Horatio Alger stories, and works by Mrs. Molesworth, Collins suggests the original intention of literature was to teach moral values and provide moral lessons as frames of reference for personal growth—as seen through adult perspectives. She maintains YA literature produced in the last half of the 20th century has shifted in this purpose and as such, "treats problems in ways that reflect the concerns of young adults, as they struggle to become adults in a complex, technological society" (159). This shift left us wondering whether or not current YA authors believe morals and obligation should both be considered when writing their works.

While many authors believe it is not their obligation to include morals in their stories, others see the inevitability that their own morals are written into their characters and plot. Creating boundaries and setting moral standards in a story is largely seen as an unavoidable part of the process because authors feel that they write so much of themselves in their works. However, they caution just because a character is in a story, doesn't mean that character's morals match their own.

> First, I can't imagine anyone writing for children or young adults who does not have moral standards. Part of why we are writing is because we have a need to convey our view/experience of the world, what we have learned and what we believe, to those who are coming up behind us.
>
> —Marion Dane Bauer

> I follow my own inner compass when it comes to creating boundaries and the truth is, that notion serves me well. There are lines I will not cross, but I have certainly pushed the envelope. But I don't feel the need to push the envelope simply for the sake of doing so. Being "shocking" just to garner attention feels hollow to me.
>
> —Alan Sitomer

> I suspect that it is impossible for me to write a story in which my morals did not show through in some way. Yet, strangely, it seems that readers are often misunderstanding the way in which my morals show through. They accuse me of having certain viewpoints which my characters express but which are not my own, for example. Or of accepting situations because I write about them, even though it seems clear to me that the whole point of the novel is to show how bad the situation is and how the characters are trying to get out of it.
>
> —Mette Ivie Harrison

> I agree that it would be tough to impose lessons on a story. I believe that as conscientious characters face tough choices, some themes or morals tend to appear naturally. So I would say that writing about thoughtful characters with moral backbones could help bring moral considerations into a story, but that tends to work best when the author lets it happen rather than forces it.
>
> —Brandon Mull

> I want to be all blank slatey, let the story be the story, and all that. I know that's the fashionable view of literature, and I know that a reader brings her or his own values and beliefs into the interpretation of a text. Yay! Hurrah! But—and I'm just speaking for myself—I know that I bring my own morals and value system into the books I write. Of course, I do, because I write from within my own particular world-viewing framework. Can I see beyond it? I try. Do I agree with everything a given character of mine says, does, or thinks?

No. But do my books have a moral compass that matches up with my own moral compass? Yeah, and here it is: Be kind. Love yourself. Love the world. And don't be afraid to laugh.

—Lauren Myracle

M. T. Anderson

I would argue, first of all, that our worldview is already wound into our narratives, whether we're aware of it or not, and that we can't help broadcasting it to our readers. And I would argue, second of all, that we shouldn't be embarrassed of the worldview that's wrapped up in our stories. What's wrong with acknowledging that children are not just learning about the world but actually building their own world as they read? They're making themselves. What's wrong with wanting to be there by their side as they do that? I think that's one of the incredibly exciting things about writing for kids.

—M. T. Anderson

My objection to the idea of morals in YA or children's literature is generally people being too literal in their interpretations. Because I have a divorced character in my book does not mean I advocate divorce. Or teenage pregnancy. Or child abuse. Or war. Or vampires eating people. I mean, seriously, I do not think vampires should eat people, even though they eat people in my books. Do I have to say that? Perhaps I do.

—Mette Ivie Harrison

## Age-Appropriateness

Lois T. Stover suggests adolescents have

> a need to define oneself outside the realm of family; come to terms with new visions of one's family as "less than perfect"; determine an individual set of moral, ethical, religious, or political principles; come to terms with developing sexuality and with the physiological changes brought on by puberty; develop positive relationships with peers; think about the future; and forge a niche in the larger society. (108)

However, these needs of adolescents are often trumped by adult perceptions of when, how, and in what ways they come to self-discover. As a result, YA literature is frequently challenged or censored due to the perception of age-inappropriate content. The question that often stems from these actions is, "Who determines what is and what is not age appropriate?" Authors point out that there are other stakeholders when thinking about what is appropriate for a child to read. Most acknowledge age is a flimsy indicator of appropriateness for children, since each child has different life experiences. What is appropriate for one reader may not be appropriate for another.

The term "age appropriate" is one of the most misleading and misunderstood terms in English. On its face, it seems reasonable and useful—but the fact is that what is "appropriate" information for one eight-year-old—or eleven-year-old preteen—or sixteen-year-old young adult—varies hugely depending on the individual kid's maturity, background, education, and experience.

—Nancy Garden

Nancy Garden

Consequently no author can possibly know what is "age appropriate" for all his or her readers. In theory, at least, parents are the best equipped to judge what material in books is and is not "age appropriate" for their own children . . . . Teachers and librarians—those who know individual children well—are also often in a position to make this kind of judgment. But authors can make these judgments only on a very general basis—and most of us do make them based on our own moral codes and our own sense of what might be difficult or inappropriate for some children around a specific age to encounter in books.

—Nancy Garden

As a parent, I try to read most of the books my kids read first, and then we talk about them afterward. I think this is a great way for my kids to see how I deal with different points of view, and it allows them to do the same. They are going to have friends who have different moral values than they do, and will need to be able to remain friends with them. Or I hope they do. I do.

—Mette Ivie Harrison

But what is prematurely? This might go over like a lead balloon, but I believe that the person who determines the right time is the child reader. I think that in the same way that most toddlers will select a reasonable balanced diet if you give them the choice, that pre-teens and teens can select reasonably appropriate books for themselves if offered the chance.

—Megan Whalen Turner

With regards to age-appropriateness, I use my own children as a guideline. Would I want my own daughters reading this at the age that the book is intended for? So I'm always wearing my parent hat in addition to my writer's hat, and it keeps me grounded as to what is appropriate and what is not.

—Neal Shusterman

The short answer is that authors are no more competent to set moral and immoral standards than anyone else. Those issues need to be addressed closer to home.

—Chris Crutcher

## The Role of the Adult

The role of adults in assisting and guiding youth through adolescence may have a huge impact on not only the development of the adolescent but also the media through which they can explore worlds outside their own. In many of the dialogues about age appropriateness, several authors feel strongly about the role of adults in determining what is appropriate for a minor to read. Most YA authors recognize that they have no real power over who reads their books and suggest adults in the lives of adolescent readers are the best judges for what is appropriate.

I find that some adults approach children's literature as though it is supposed to be a template for how young readers exposed to it should behave. But such limitations create truly boring stories.

—Marion Dane Bauer

If you don't like it, don't read it. And if you do not want your own kids reading it, then as a parent, that is 100 percent your prerogative. But telling others what they can and can't write about based on subjective, if not arbitrary, moral worldviews, well . . . it just doesn't wash for me.

—Alan Sitomer

If parents are doing their job at home, they should have enough confidence in their kids to handle what a book throws at them.

—A.E. Cannon

Marion Dane Bauer

The problem, of course, is that what I have learned and believe may be very different from your experience and beliefs. In fact, it probably will be, because we are different people. That is, in my mind not an argument for a parent or teacher culling books to include only those that support his or her own beliefs, but rather it is an argument for a wide range of book being available, so young readers can learn not simply to absorb but to consider and challenge what they read. For that to happen, an adult—or adults—need to remain close at hand and connected with the reading, to introduce discussion, to encourage challenging thought.

—Marion Dane Bauer

Are your kids going to read something you wish they hadn't? Oh, yes. And sometimes they'll read stuff THEY wish they hadn't. They are going to get a few bumps and bruises, and I am afraid, a few adventurous ones might end up with a scar from something that needed stitches to heal. But unlike bike accidents, I don't believe that any of the injuries will be life-threatening.

—Megan Whalen Turner

When we say that we think parents and teachers and librarians and other adult friends are the best equipped to discuss these matters with kids and to guide their reading (guide individuals, not prevent kids from reading such books by removing them from libraries and schools!), we are not passing the buck or shirking our responsibility—we are simply recognizing that we have no real control over who reads our books.

—Nancy Garden

The thing that I wish parents would remember is that there are lots of readers out there who aren't theory kids and who need books that reflect their reality, their moral quandaries, the way they speak, and the issues and situations which they are not only exposed to but already experiencing. Not every book is going to be right for every kid, but for every kid there should be that right book.

—Holly Black

## Conclusion

Moral outrage has been used to censor literature as far back as literature has been incorporated into the classroom. People who challenge on the basis of moral content do so for reasons such as language, sexual situations or innuendos, inferences to drugs or alcohol use among a novel's adolescent characters, and even sexual orientation. As history demonstrates, the moral debate regarding YA literature is one that may never be resolved. Collins's article on morality and YA literature was written more than a decade ago and still little attention has been paid to this topic. The blame for this, however, is on neither the authors nor the content of their novels. Young adult literature is guilty of only one thing—being realistic. For some, this realism is a hard pill to swallow. As such, the voices of those who oppose this reality tend to be the loudest and most often heard. As secondary English educators who have witnessed firsthand the power of YA literature in the lives of adolescent readers, we hope you hear our voices. In a curriculum devoid of morality, YA literature can become a powerful source for adolescents to explore their own belief systems. This perspective is supported by the YA authors who responded to our questions and can best be summed up by a quote from Catherine Ryan Hyde. She states, "We need to stop using moral outrage as a way to try to control the direction of modern literature!" And that's the moral of this story!

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In the article, book authors were interviewed on various topics. See author interviews on ReadWriteThink.org, where authors share what advice they'd give themselves if they could go back in time. http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-episodes/video-episode-what-advice-31016.html