

Teens, Teachers and Controversial Text

Note: This paper is adapted from a speech I presented at the 2003 NCTE convention in San Francisco as part of an author panel that also included E.R. Frank and Alex Sanchez.

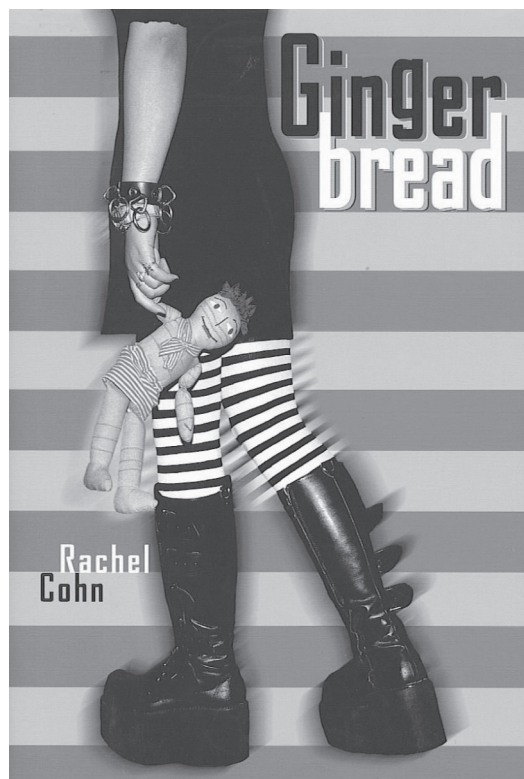
Alex Sanchez, E.R. Frank, and I write YA books that, particularly because of their frank depictions of sexuality and family life, can be challenging for educators in terms of getting the books onto approved reading lists. Nonetheless, I believe there are methods that interested educators could use to bring controversial YA literature into classrooms to stimulate some of the core tenets of education: reading, writing, and thinking.

Although we have each published more than one book, as examples, I am focusing here on my book, *Gingerbread*, *Rainbow Boys*, by Alex Sanchez, and *Life is Funny*, by E.R. Frank, each of which have in common teen protagonists, dark content, and controversial subjects like abortion, adultery, teen sexuality, alcoholism, drug addiction, and incest. Despite these books' sometimes dark subject matter and controversial content—and by controversy I mean frank discussions of sex that make adults

uncomfortable but which teen readers invariably recognize as situations that confront their own lives and those of their peers—these books actually offer uplifting and positive messages about the coming of age experience. I don't think of our books as the "issue" or "problem" books common in YA literature, but rather as honest depictions of the complicated lives that contemporary teens live—sometimes sad, sometimes harsh, sometimes joyful—but always interesting.

Bridging the gap between teenager appreciation of

YA literature versus adult perspectives on controversial YA subject matter is a tricky task. I am inspired to find educational value in these books by teens themselves. Teens don't just have opinions; they are PASSIONATE in their opinions. As an author I have learned that they just don't like your book, they LOVE it, they create fanlisting circles for it, they put up websites and send you artwork they've created based on your book. Before any author should get too big-headed with a teen reader's passionate devotion to a book, however, I need to point out that the haters are equally vocal. To quote two different *Gingerbread* teen



readers, the book “wasn’t worth the paper it was printed on,” or “I hated it so much I threw it across my room.” Focusing on the bright side, however, I’ve culled from my website, and comments posted on Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble, some honest and funny reactions to our books from teens that show me that these readers relate not only to the books’ controversial content, but they embrace it – and could, if given the right nudging, use these books as springboards to learning. Here are just a few:

***Life Is Funny*: by E. R. Frank**

“Although some of the issues the characters have to deal with are very traumatic, such as domestic violence, drug abuse, incest, suicide, and teenage pregnancy and miscarriage, it is not a depressing book.”

“Each character struggles with personal demons, family troubles and young love, and though they often fall flat on their faces, each one picks him or herself up by the time their tale is through.”

“This book tells it like it is in Brooklyn, there is no buttering things up. There’s cursing and some mature scenes, but if u ever can, and u can handle the reality made by E.R. Frank, then definitely read it!!!”

***Rainbow Boys*: by Alex Sanchez**

“I’ve heard a lot said about this novel before I even read it. I’ve heard kudos from the gay community, and much protests against it for its ‘immorality’. Once I read the book, I was forced to laugh. It was so wonderful, so rich, and so captivating. I laughed because all the people who gave it such compliments were right, and all the detractors and homophobes had reason to be pissed!”

“This book was one that really made me think of what it would be like to be homosexual in this society. It gave me a better understanding of the feelings and actions that these boys went through and how they grew to accept the way they are. It taught me a valuable lesson, not to judge people.”

***Gingerbread*: by Rachel Cohn**

“I am a social outcast and I like it. I dress weird and have never done what people wanted me to, like shop at preppy stores or have a million friends I don’t like. I was going through a hard time with my family. They did not like how I was so independent, but your book always reminded me that I’m not the only one and that I should never change myself for any one.”

“This story actually helped me cope with my problems, and my divorced parents, my boyfriend, my police situation.”

“This book made more sense to me than my own thoughts do practically.”

“When I read the book I was like “FINALLY! Someone who understands ‘different’ people and doesn’t make them sound like freaks.”

Thinking on the passionate and diverse reactions teens have to controversial realistic fiction, here are some ideas I came up with for translating these reactions within a classroom environment. Keep in mind that I have no training in teaching or social work, so my methods are unscientific to say the least, but definitely from the heart.

Lesson 1: Reading—The Book Challenge. A common thread I find among kids’ responses to controversial YA literature is the sense of recognition and affinity they feel with the protagonists. I never cease to be amazed by the volume of letters I get from girls who tell me that Cyd Charisse, the main character in *Gingerbread*, reminds them of themselves, or that she feels like she could be their best friend. The fictional Cyd Charisse considers herself a social outcast, even though she comes from an exceptionally privileged background. She has two nutty families on two different sides of the country, she’s been kicked out of a posh boarding school, her best friend is an old lady who lives in a nursing home—and yet so many teen girls relate to her? Here’s why: the emotions – her vulnerability and quirkiness, her boy craziness, her desire to be independent of her family and yet not alienated from it.

Life Is Funny and *Rainbow Boys* strike the same chord. One not-so-kind librarian posted the following about *Gingerbread* on the Internet, “The protagonist is a whiny, spoiled teenaged girl who doesn’t understand why everyone else’s world doesn’t revolve around her.” Teen readers, however, see teen characters (and themselves) differently; one reader wrote to thank me for a book that wasn’t about “fake perfect families,” while another told me, “it gave me kinda of a relief to know that I wasn’t totally screwed up,” or from another reader, “*Gingerbread* made me feel like it’s ok to be different, and proud.”

Books to which young people can relate, however dark their content, get challenging students to read, period. One reader posted this appraisal of *Gingerbread*, “There are no words for this book! I can’t believe how this book changed my life, it showed me how reading wasn’t just for school, I was so into the

book that I read it in one day in 5 hours non stop, it really changed my life, I read all the time now.” Another passionate reading convert wrote, “*Gingerbread* has inspired me to read all the time. I love reading now. I used to hate hate HATE it. Now it’s like a must.”

I believe that if YA books can ensnare the reluctant reader and turn that reluctant reader into a passionate reader, then we’re one step closer to bringing that reader happily—and not reluctantly—to the classics on the school curriculum. A Book Challenge can bridge the reading choices of a teen versus the imposed choices of adults. I know that books like *Gingerbread*, *Life Is Funny* and *Rainbow Boys* are slipping into the curriculum by student choice, via the infamous book report. I think you could take a student book report choice and pair it with the Board of Education choice, as a challenge to the student. Dare students to find the same alienation or outcast feelings experienced by the protagonists in *Gingerbread*, *Life Is Funny* and *Rainbow Boys* in assigned reading like *Othello*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Great Gatsby*, and of course, *Catcher in the Rye*. Our YA books have hormonal teenagers grappling with issues of sexual identity—aren’t the characters in *Romeo & Juliet*, *Wuthering Heights*, and again *Catcher in the Rye*, doing the same? I’ll confess that I loathed high school English classes and particularly the lofty English literature classics that I felt were shoved down my throat—but when I look back on my high school self, I think I would have found genuine excitement in a teacher challenging me to take those perceived stuffy classics and compare them to a book I could relate to, and even better yet, to one my mother wouldn’t have approved of me reading.

Lesson 2: Writing. Controversial YA lit can be effective not just in bringing in the reluctant reader, but in bringing out the reluctant writer. Teens respond to controversial YA literature because the emotions reflect their own, but so do the voices: YA literature—the kind that strives to please teens and not necessarily adults—sounds like a real teen talking, whether it’s Cyd Charisse’s California slang, the urban hip-hop beat of the characters in *Life Is Funny*, or the rainbow boys whose supposed stereotyped roles—jock Jason, nice guy Kyle, flamboyant Nelson—give way to layered and complex personalities. A teacher can use the voices in these books as examples to encourage

students to write in their own voices, naturally, without affectation and without worry of proper English stymieing their attempts at prose. Letting their written words flow without grammatical or literary censorship will encourage students to write—just write, simple as that. As their confidence and experience with writing in their own voices grows, so will their writing skills. And using realistic contemporary YA fiction as examples allows students to see that if they want to start writing, they don’t have to have a *Lord of the Rings*-worthy universe already thought up—they can start with the world and the voices they already know. I know students are encouraged to write by YA literature because I, like several other YA writers I know, had to put up a section on my website about How To Be A Writer in response to the almost daily queries I get from kids who want to be writers after finding books like *Gingerbread*, *Rainbow Boys*, and *Life Is Funny*. These books reflect the way teens talk and feel, and thus encourage teen readers to take the next step forward, to express themselves in writing.

Lastly, **Lesson 3: Thinking.** We all know the value of Shakespeare, the Greek plays, and the classics of English literature that teach students about history, morality, politics, and philosophy, etc. Reading controversial YA literature as supplements to these classics will get students thinking not just on a selfish level—how does this apply to me?—but just as the classics can introduce students to the great ideas that have been debated throughout history, study of YA literature allows teens access to an important developmental tool in their emotional maturity.

In YA books with so-called taboo content and risky behavior, students have to explore the notion that they themselves will, through their actions and those actions’ consequences, have to examine and make decisions that will form who they become as adults. Students won’t just relate but can learn from controversial YA characters by analyzing: 1) what is their opinion of the character and the character’s actions?; 2) what advice would they give to the character?; and 3) what would they do in the character’s position? *Gingerbread*, *Rainbow Boys*, and *Life Is Funny* all give models for, as Emily Plicka, a graduate student in Education at Cal State-Sacramento wrote to me, “dealing with teen issues in positive, or maybe even negative ways—but the end result is that

the reader knows what could truly bring happiness to that character. And the hope is that the application will be for students to think about their actions in their lives—and what options they have for dealing with teen issues, and what they can do to increase happiness for themselves.”

One of the best teen affirmations of YA literature I’ve received comes from my unbiased, very favorite teen reader—my sixteen-year-old sister Martha, who confirmed for me Emily Plicka’s evaluation of controversial YA books’ appeal to teens’ emotional development. Martha wrote to me with her reaction to *Pop Princess*, a YA book I wrote that is coming out in 2004. *Pop Princess* is about a 16-year-old girl who seemingly rises from nowhere to a life of extreme glamour as a pop singer—only the lifestyle might not exactly match who the girl really is or wants to be. Martha wrote to me,

It was just really cool and different to read about a totally different world for most kids, then at the same time, a part of her that kids can relate to as well. Obviously, it deals with issues like sex, bullying and death, but one issue that was interesting to me is the part at the end when she does it all on her own terms: writing her own songs and playing the guitar, too. In a lot of the book she just seems to do

what other people tell her to and expect of her, so when she’s just doing her own thing at her own pace, it’s a lot cooler. And the fact that she had all that experience and she had to go through all the trashy stuff is really important—learning from experiences.

Learning from experiences: Here is the optimal outcome we can hope to absorb from reading literature, be it YA or classic, no matter the age of the reader. Martha’s evaluation offers, to me, the essence of what controversial YA literature can provide teen readers, on a scale different but complementary to the literary classics on a school curriculum: YA books, if given the chance, can teach, guide, and mold, through voices and situations to which kids can relate, and hopefully, that adults, too, can appreciate.

Gingerbread jacket photographs © 2002 by Jane Wattenberg. Jacket design by Anahid Hamparian.

Rachel Cohn is the author of the young adult novels *Gingerbread and Pop Princess* and the middle-grade novel *The Steps*. Her next young adult novel, *Shrimp*, a sequel to *Gingerbread*, will be published in early 2005. She lives in Manhattan.