

## Young Adult Authors as Trusted Adults for Disconnected Teens

**T**here is in our society a culture of abandonment, a culture of isolation, a culture of alienation, a culture of adolescence. Different researchers call it different things: a second family (Ron Taffel, Taffel & Blau, 2001), a tribe apart (Patricia Hersch, 1998), the world underneath (Chap Clark, 2004), and more. But no matter how it is conceptualized, these terms all describe one thing: adults live in one culture, adolescents live in another, and for the most part, these two do not connect or overlap. Middle and high school students have fewer and fewer adults in their lives who can act as role models, and, as a result, they must learn how to become adults from their peers, rather than from adults themselves, as the previous generations have done.

In the past, adolescents proudly proclaimed their independence and rejection of adult beliefs and mores. Today, however, it seems as if adults are rejecting *them*, and this rejection seems to begin when the children are statistically younger than they used to be. It appears, in fact, that adults do not bother to reach out to these adolescents; instead, they leave adolescents on their own (Clark, 2004) and, in many instances, condemn them for making costly mistakes borne of ignorance of the way the world works (C. Crutcher, personal communication, January, 2010). And this is happening at a time when evidence proves that adolescence today is more difficult, complex, and treacherous than previous gen-

erations experienced (Bodart, 2006).

A wide variety of things have contributed to this phenomenon. First, we must look to changes within the family: the fracturing of the nuclear family, increased mobility and relocations, and the necessity for two-paycheck households (Taffel & Blau, 2001; Thurnow, 1997). Second, we need to be aware of changes within society as a whole: the increase of societal dangers and predators, the growing sophistication and immediacy of communication using a variety of technologies, and changes in the social/athletic organizations originally designed to support adolescence and adolescents (Clark, 2004). Modern adolescents are on their own, entering a time of life that has traditionally been difficult to navigate, even with the support of caring adults, and today's teens must do it with only the support of their friends, who are likely to know very little more about being an adult than they do.

When children entered adolescence in the late 1940s, it was part of a culture far different from ours today. Then, most teens grew up in extended nuclear families, and divorce was rare—something to be

avoided at all costs. Church and community organizations helped families coach adolescents, teaching them what adulthood was and how to achieve it. Today, for a variety of reasons, those things are no longer true.

We live in a culture that is physical, but also virtual. The World Wide Web touches every

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part of our lives, and has changed the ways we communicate, learn, shop, and are entertained. Email has replaced handwritten, stamped, and delivered “snail mail,” listservs and other online user groups instantly connect anyone who wants to be connected, allowing individuals to share their ideas and beliefs with thousands of people at a time. Social networking software has made it possible for anyone to reinvent themselves, and many have. Twitter lets people share even the most mundane events or ideas in 140 character bursts—nothing is too trivial for a tweet. A wide variety of computer games have gone online, allowing players from all over the world to compete against each other. Cell phones have replaced telephones, slowly at first, and then more and more rapidly, as they became smaller, smarter, and more reliable. Personal computers first became affordable, and then essential. Laptops made them portable, and ubiquitous when traveling, making it harder and harder to limit work to 40 hours a week. People not only want information, they want it immediately, and the easier to find, the better. And teens and tweens, “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) who have had instant communication for their entire lives, are most likely to use the newer or newest technology to stay in touch with their worlds and the people in them (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

As a result of all these changes, our society and culture look very different from just a few years ago. While some adolescents still have an original nuclear family, with the extended family from previous and current generations, the vast majority do not (Delisio & Bendro, 2008; Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2005). Their parents are busy with their own lives, relieved or delighted to be free of caretaking responsibilities. In many families, teens come home from school, decide what they’ll eat and when, and if they’ll do homework, watch TV, text or call their friends—all without much or any contact with their parents (Williams, 2000). Adolescents spend 40% less time with their parents than they did 30 years ago. The single-mother household is becoming the norm, and with those mothers at work, more than 2 million children under the age of 13 are left completely without adult supervision, both before and after school. No one takes care of them (Thurow, 1997). The social/sports activities that preadolescents and adolescents par-

ticipate in have, in most cases, become competitive rather than recreational, increasing participants’ stress rather than reducing it (Clark, 2004).

School has also become more competitive, and budget cuts have eliminated the programs considered to be less important or more recreational—art, music, and libraries, even some sports. Teachers have been trapped by required standardized testing, and many no longer have time to include subjects or activities that are not a part of the curriculum that supports the tests, no matter how valuable they are (Clark, 2004).

In addition, life has become more dangerous in a wide variety of ways. More information is available to adolescents, but online information is unfiltered and unreliable. Basing decisions or actions on it can be very risky. Drugs, violence, and gangs are still around, and they have not lost their influence. Shootings still

happen, and innocents still die. We have been at war in the Middle East for 10 years, and today’s adolescents have grown up listening to reports of battles and suicide bombers, lists of dead and wounded, knowing that they could end up being a part of that war, and maybe one of its casualties. Bullies continue to persecute those they see as weak or different, but

the threat of retaliation has gotten more real, as some victims fight back violently, with guns or bombs. Schools have metal detectors, and security lines at airports grow longer in order to enforce more and more restrictions that are supposed to make us safer, even though we don’t always *feel* safer because of them. And, as the recession continues, more and more people are not able to make rent or mortgage payments, and end up going to shelters or living in cars or on the street. Food banks are struggling to meet the increased demand from people who have nowhere else to go. Everyone always seems to be just one emergency from disaster. It’s like the old vaudeville plate-spinning act. Everything is fine until one plate falls. Getting that plate going again while maintaining control over all the rest of the plates is all but impos-

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sible. And doing that as an adolescent, with limited power and limited means, is far closer to impossible than it is for an adult.

Another change in our culture is the length of adolescence, which is now far longer than it was when it began in the 1940s. At that time, adolescents referred to people who were in high school, and the stage lasted only 3 or 4 years. As teens' entry into the workforce has been delayed, and post-high school education has become more

necessary, adolescence has gradually lengthened into the early to mid-20s, after college or graduate school. And while these late adolescents proclaim their independence and adulthood, they may still live at home or depend on their parents to some extent. If the hallmark of entering adulthood is the ability and the desire to live independently of parents—financially, psychologically, and physically—these late adolescents have not

achieved it. They do not yet know how to be adults.

So, what do today's adolescents need to help them survive the rejection, the abandonment of the adult culture? First of all, they need their peers, their friends, the ones that they really trust. They are the "second family" Taffel refers to that has replaced the nuclear family they have lost. This family provides much of the structure in adolescents' lives, helps them make decisions, resolve problems, and provides emotional and psychological support (Taffel & Blau, 2001).

Research has shown over and over that the difference between teens' success or failure, achieving or stagnating, is one adult who is present, affirming, supporting, advising, inspiring, and dependable. Children and teens are resilient, most able to overcome even the most difficult circumstances, but they can't do it alone (Delisio & Bendro, 2008). They aren't "superkids" or "invincibles" who can bounce back from adversity without a scratch. Their experiences leave scars, but with the support of their peers and at least one caring adult, they can succeed in life (Blum,

1998). An adult can show the way, make a difference, change a life.

This connection is so essential that tribal cultures throughout history developed relationship systems so that a child without parents could have several "mothers" and "fathers" (Delisio, 2008). It really does take a village to raise a child (Clinton, 1996). It can be a relative, a friend, a teacher or coach, a librarian, or other adult who is available for the kind of authentic, one-on-one conversation that can allow a teenager to begin sharing what his or her life is really like, behind the façade teens wear when they have to deal with adults or others outside their culture. It is a carefully crafted mask that shows them as independent, successful, coping, maintaining, and self-sufficient. But it is still just a mask (Clark, 2004).

And if no adult is present, sharing one with a friend can be the next best thing—an adult connected with a friend or "family" member. The adult shares information with the teen who trusts him or her, and that information can then be passed on to the others in the "second family," even if they don't know that adult personally. Some adults can draw a whole "family" to them, and build supportive relationships with several teens who are also connected with each other. But there are other ways for teens to find an adult who can be a trusted source of information, wisdom, and affirmation.

Contact doesn't need to be face to face; trust isn't dependent on physical proximity; the ability to get in touch with others 24/7 isn't limited to peers or friends. The Web never closes, and anyone who can access it can reach out and touch someone else—through email, websites, blogs, IMs, or tweets. And while it can be a dangerous place for unwary or naïve teens, it can also be a source of information and support. Adolescents feel just as comfortable using these new lines of communication as teens in the '60s and '70s felt using the phone or writing to their favorite music or movie stars. And as the number of young adult books increased in the '70s and '80s, authors also began to get letters and email from their readers reacting to their books.

For years, Robert Cormier had been getting letters from teens who read his first YA novel, *The Chocolate War* (1974). Their passionate letters and questions surprised and delighted him, since none of his three previous books for adults had elicited much response

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at all. It was those letters that convinced him he was a YA author, and that his readers deserved his respect—in what he wrote and in how he responded to them (Campbell, 2006). In 1976, when he realized he would have to put a phone number in his second book for young adults, *I Am the Cheese*, he knew that at least a few of his readers would try it to see if it worked. He didn't want to use a 555 number, because teens would know it was fake and perhaps mistrust some of the other parts of the book. But if he made one up, it might belong to someone, sometime, somewhere, who would get calls that probably would not be appreciated. So, after discussing it with his family, he used his own home phone number, and when teens called asking to speak to Amy, they ended up speaking to Cormier himself, ready to listen, ready to share advice and ideas, ready to be whatever they needed him to be, for as long as they needed to talk (R. Cormier, personal communication, June, 1985). Many of them called him more than once, relying on him to be that one adult who could make a difference in their lives. And at least one of them credits him with saving her life. Because of their conversations, she was able to resist committing suicide. Since Cormier's death, which was traumatic for her, this young woman has corresponded with Patty Campbell, who was Cormier's close friend and biographer (P. Campbell, personal communication, October, 2006).

Today, young adult authors have websites and emails, Facebook and MySpace pages, they blog and tweet, and their readers use all of these avenues to ask for advice, to respond to the books they've read, to share the scary and important questions they can't ask anyone else. And just as Cormier did for more than 20 years, these authors respond, in ways and in numbers that weren't possible in the past, when snail mail and the telephone were the only ways to communicate. Communication today is easier and more convenient than in the past, and today's teens are constantly in touch with those who are important to them: friends, family, acquaintances, and more and more often, the authors of books they read. These authors write the books their readers ask for, the books they need to survive or succeed. They reach out to individuals, share insights and wisdom, and offer solutions that those readers had not thought of or considered. These authors have the same deep commitment to help their readers that Cormier did. They know the power of

their books to connect with teens, to educate, comfort, support, inform, and even amuse them. Teens recognize the reality that these authors portray, and realize that they can be trusted to tell the truth—in the responses from their websites, in the books that they write, and the characters they create (Bodart, 2006).

Adolescence is a time when we all feel alone, even in the middle of a crowd. We are looking for someone who can reduce that loneliness, and help us feel more connected, more accepted and understood. Young adult authors make sure that their readers can make those connections

by including language, characters, settings, and situations that teens can recognize (Bodart, 2006). This frequently means that the books that can help the most are often the ones that are more likely to be criticized because of the emotional intensity of the reality they portray; of course, *this* is why teens identify with them so strongly (Bodart, 2007). That identification can promote change and even healing, as teens are able to see themselves or their situation from a new perspective, with new knowledge, which can help them succeed in changing their behavior, changing their lives (Jones, 2006).

But the emotion that goes hand in hand with such changes can be threatening to adults. Adults who try to protect teens from reality, who believe that if teens don't read about something they will not know about it or think about it, frequently find the reality of these books too much to take, and do all they can to remove them from library shelves and from school classrooms, while caring teachers, librarians, and authors do all they can to keep them available for teens who badly need the information they contain (Bodart, 2006).

There is no question that young adult authors are committed to writing books that will make changes in the lives of their readers, but how do they conceptualize those readers? Whom are they writing for, and do

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they see adolescents as the culture of abandonment that researchers have found? How do they define adolescents and adolescence? Do they recognize adolescence as a separate culture with its own characteristics, rules, boundaries, and mores? If not, what is their perspective, and what was its genesis? Why do they choose to write dark, gritty, realistic, and controversial fiction? What are the drawbacks and the rewards

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they find? Looking at the writings, websites, and blogs of four YA authors, the articles that have been written about them, and the interviews they have done, the answers to those questions begin to get clearer.

Laurie Halse Anderson is the author of several YA titles, three of which have elicited both praise and challenges: *Speak*, *Twisted*, and *Wintergirls*. She says

that in the ten years since *Speak* was published, she has gotten thousands of letters and emails, and has spoken to half a million high school students. The message she's heard over and over was how much they miss their parents. Some parents are physically gone, working two or three jobs to make ends meet, and other parents are just emotionally gone, even if they're present physically. Although many adults today think that teens are trying to pull away from them, the truth is, teens really need adults in their lives, and a lot of kids are "broken" because adults aren't there for them. They need present, emotionally engaged adults, who are willing to share their knowledge, information, and wisdom, just as Anderson does.

Because she is a YA author writing about the pain and confusion of adolescence, she has "been put in a unique position, as have many YA authors, of becoming a sort of mother/father confessor for this generation. When young people read a lot of books and actually connect with them, they often seek out the writer, through e-mail, letters, or in person, to talk to us in a uniquely intimate way" (2005, p. 53). Anderson, for many of her readers, has become that trusted adult who can help explain what is happening, or has

happened, to them, to their friends, their school, their family, their world. "They want us to show them how to find the strength to go on. They desperately want us to give them the tools they need [to survive]" (p. 53). "Young adults do experience a lot of pain, and often, perhaps, their behavior is an acting out caused by a hurt too deep for words" (p. 55). "Our culture is not equipped to love and cherish teenagers. We'll take their money, we're very happy to take their money, but we don't give them much back in return" (2005, p. 55). "Pretty much every kid in America has . . . that ugly, gloomy, dark hole [inside] that they can't find a way out of. I've gotten letters that say, 'Ok, like, I'm the biggest jock of the school and if you ever tell anybody this I'll kill you, but I know exactly what that girl feels like.' That's something we need to pay attention to" (p. 55).

Chris Crutcher also knows the pain of adolescence from his years as a therapist, and many of his books reflect the increasing gap between adolescents and their parents. "For years kids—teenagers—came into my office to say how unheard they felt by the adults in their lives; parents and teachers. We're either able to hear about their lives in their native tongue, or we're not. When we're not, they stop talking to us. Who can blame them?" (2008).

In 2005, Crutcher posted a letter to the Alabama teens of the Limestone School District, after *Whale Talk* was banned there because of its authentic dialogue, aka, "curses." In it, he shared the story of the girl who was the inspiration for one of the most graphic scenes in the book. She was one of his clients at the mental health center where he worked. "Her biological father didn't even know of her existence and her mother didn't have the emotional strength to keep her out of the eye of the hurricane of her stepfather's hatred. She couldn't eat at the table until her younger, white stepbrothers had finished. She wasn't allowed to play with toys until they were broken and handed over to her. The first time I saw her she was standing over a sink, [frantically scrubbing her arms], trying to wash the brown off her skin so her (step)daddy would love her. . . . The language that [four-year-old] little girl used was even tougher than what my character used in *Whale Talk*" (2005). Because his books are based in reality, Crutcher does everything he can to reflect that reality—"I don't tone down things because they are disturbing, or because

they might be offensive. Life is often disturbing. Life is often offensive. It's just part of the deal" (C. Crutcher, personal communication, January, 2010). Crutcher listens to teens, hears their stories, and writes about them—"I want to be remembered as a storyteller, and I want to tell stories that seem so real that people will recognize something in their own lives and see the connections. [Because] we *are* all connected" [italics added] (McDonnell, 1988). And connections mean seeing the other person clearly, honestly, truthfully. "When we turn away from tough material in stories that kids face every day in real life, we take ourselves off the short list of people to turn to. Kids would much rather we found ways to discuss those tough issues than to pretend they don't exist" (Crutcher, 2008). Pretending that they don't exist means teens' disconnection deepens, and they are left with only peers for advice.

Gail Giles also recognizes the gap between adolescents and adults, and explains how she dealt with it during her adolescence. With two people working outside the home, she says, it means that the child (or children) in that home is being brought up by television and video games, a "feral child." And this same situation exists when the parents are present and neglect or emotionally and physically abuse the children. In her dysfunctional home, her mother was home, but was emotionally abusive. Giles had to look elsewhere to find a trusted adult. Her best friend's mother became that adult. Later, as a high school teacher, she saw other teens do the same thing, finding an adult, a teacher, a librarian, someone or something that they could trust, and many times, that something was a book, a book that spoke to them, a book that reflected the world they saw around them. A book like the ones she now writes. And like most YA authors, Giles wants her stories to be real, so she writes in the teen vernacular. When she is criticized for it, she wonders about people who notice the language, but not the violence—"I want to scream, 'He killed someone and you are upset about a swear word? Hello? Priorities?'" (G. Giles, personal communication, December, 2009).

Ellen Hopkins writes verse novels on dark subjects—drug abuse, cutting, suicide, teen prostitution—because she thinks that subjects like these need to be brought into the light and examined, rather than hidden away. "I feel it's important . . . because that's the only way we're going to develop empathy for people

who are going through them. We need to make it real and to be brutally honest about it. That honesty is what my readers appreciate, because those characters don't feel crafted. They feel like they're real people, and to a large part they are. . . . I hope I can show [my readers] a way past the black moments, show them that there are people around them that care. Often they get this feeling that 'It's just me against the world, nobody cares about me.' If I can help them see the connections in their own lives to friends or family, or a way past their addiction, or a way past cutting, or a way past these thoughts of ending it all, that's more important than anything" (Powells.com, 2007).

Ellen's books reflect real life, and they take the reader right to where the action is, allowing him or her to see what the addiction or the predator is really like. The monsters can't avoid the limelight, so all their ugliness can be clearly seen. No one can be adequately protected from a perpetrator who is an unknown. Adults may want to believe that bad

things aren't happening any more, but they are, and knowing about them in all their ugliness is the only way to make them stop. G. K. Chesterton once said, "Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed" (Dosani & Cross, 2007, p. 38). A more contemporary take reflects this need for the truth, even when it is ugly: Young adult literature doesn't tell teens that monsters exist. Teens already know that they exist—they see them every day. Young adult literature tells teens that the monsters can be killed.

"We can't make life prettier for youth, but we can arm them. . . . We have to give our kids the tools [to fight back]." Teens write to Ellen about all of her books, and some she hears from more than once. She met a girl at a book signing who confessed to being a cutter. "She has stayed in touch and as she struggles to stay away from drugs and self-injury, she often

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authors understand and relate to those readers can help teachers, librarians, and others understand their books better and use them more effectively. This information can also be valuable in challenge situations, because providing a context for the work can explain and support the inclusion of graphic and/or controversial content.

But the most important thing about the connections YA authors have with their readers is not the impact on institutions and adults who work with teens, but the impact on the individual teens themselves, and how they are able to change their lives because of a book they read and the person who wrote it. Those connections between reader and writer may be only a drop in the bucket toward reconnecting with this disconnected part of our society, but enough drops, enough connections, can make that bucket overflow.

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emails or calls me, as her mother is largely absent. We have become very close.” For her, Ellen is the trusted adult that can help her believe in herself and succeed (Powells.com, 2007).

And these are only a few of the YA authors who are connecting with, influencing, and being influenced by the teens who read their books. I believe that connection has made YA literature deeper, richer, and better able to impact and influence its readers. Knowing how its

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