

The Many Iterations of Andrew Smith

Speech delivered at the 2014 breakfast of the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D.C.

If I had to write a speech to get into heaven, I would choose to go to hell, where they would probably force me to write speeches.

The biggest trouble I had in figuring out the content of this talk was this: Which Andrew Smith should give this speech? I've brought along several and stitched them all together—Andrew Smith the writer, the Andrew Smith who's a high school teacher, the Andrew Smith who's a father, and the panic-attack Andrew Smith who's not very good at giving speeches over breakfast. Andrew Smith the author does not let Andrew Smith the teacher display the books he's written in his classroom. This isn't a censorship thing; it's more an issue of sovereignty.

Okay. So I wanted to say something about this book I wrote that's coming out in March. It's called *The Alex Crow* (2015). In it, the main character, a refugee boy named Ariel, wakes up after falling asleep inside a refrigerator while he's dressed in a clown suit. He is the sole survivor of an attack on his little town. When he's saved by America—which is what America likes to think it's good at—he's sent to a summer camp for boys who are addicted to technology, even though he's never used a cell phone or played a video game in his life. Just so you know, there's also a schizophrenic bomber called the melting man who talks to Joseph Stalin and two other occupants of the motel of his brain, named 3-60 and Crystal Lutz, an accordionist. And there's an icebound barkentine steamer on a failed voyage to the North Pole in the 1880s, a small man frozen in ice who may or may not

be the devil, the possibility of the eradication of all males from the human species, and an extinct-but-then-not-extinct suicidal crow named Alex.

Just thought I'd put that out there.

In the acknowledgments to *The Alex Crow*, I include a statement of gratitude to my English Language Learner (ELL) students—the incredible survivors who introduced me to the novel's protagonist, that refugee kid named Ariel.

There is a real Ariel. He came from Syria. His family left behind everything they had and got out of the country when the civil war there was getting particularly nasty. It was a good idea, because the real Ariel's family is Christian and came from a place that is currently controlled by the Islamic State movement.

The first day Ariel sat in my classroom was just a few days after he left the chaos of Syria. Imagine that! It also happened to be one of the days when I read aloud to my kids, and I was reading from Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) (yes, I go there)—the part about how ridiculous, when you think about it, the lyrics to our national anthem are.

The real Ariel was very confused.

And I said, "Welcome to America, kid," a line that's repeated to the Ariel in my book.

That was a few years ago now. Now, the real Ariel's younger brother—his name is Eli—is a student of mine. The kid is brilliant. He speaks Arabic, French, English, and Spanish. I don't want the administration to find out how well he speaks, reads, and writes English, because I don't want them to take him away from me.

About a month ago, Eli asked me if he could see one of the books I'd written. Andrew Smith the teacher keeps Andrew Smith the author's books locked up inside a cabinet. I also have a singing Justin Bieber doll in there that was a gift to me from a former student. And no, I don't know why.

So I unlocked the cabinet and grabbed a copy of my novel *Winger*. And I watched as Eli opened it up and started reading. About halfway through page one, Eli's jaw dropped and he looked at me and said, "Mr. Smith! There's a bad word in this!" And I said, "What do you mean *there's a bad word in it*? Is it misspelled? Is the printing messed up? What do you mean *bad*?" Eli pressed his index finger down on the page and said (just like this) "No. Mr. Smith, it says *fuck*."

I love it when kids go there with me, because I give them my sermon on what the bad words really are, which goes something like this:

Fuck is not a BAD WORD, Eli. It's just a word, and words are neither good nor bad but can be made that way by the intent you pour into them. Most people here at this school are going to tell you *fuck* really is a bad word, even though when you walk the campus, I'll bet you hear it more frequently than *hello*. But the same people who'll tell you *fuck* is a bad word won't ever tell you that words like *stupid*, *ugly*, *fat*, *illegal alien*, and so on can inflict much more harm than a little word like *fuck*.

There's no such thing as a bad word. But there are some pretty rotten people out there.

Here are the really bad words in my classroom (and forgive me for saying them aloud—I really never use them at all, which is very confusing to my colleagues who are disciples of the church of Educational Jargon):

- *Common Core*
- *SMART Goals*
- *Smarter Balance* (Please tell me this isn't a margarine brand.)
- *College and Career Readiness* (It's the molded tuna-Jello salad on my school's MISSION STATEMENT.)

Gross.

Tuna and JELLO, like college readiness and career readiness (two completely different skill sets), were never, ever supposed to be served in the same dish.

Look, my beautiful daughter, Chiara, is a senior at the high school where I teach. She is 17. I can't even

begin to tell you how much I do not want my 17-year-old daughter to be made "career ready." Are you kidding me? *Career* implies the rest of her life, and she's got an awful lot of trips around the sun in front of her. I want my 17-year-old daughter to be ready for college (she is); I want her to take no shit from anyone (she does not); I want her to have compassion for all human beings (she definitely does); and I want her to love her life. The career stuff is so far down on the list for me, as it is for her.

So, we have this *thing* at my school—it's called television. They use it to make video announcements to the kids every day. About a week ago, they played a schoolwide 10-minute video from Bill Gates urging high school kids to learn how to code, imploring high school teachers to encourage their students to code, tempting teachers with prizes if they could get their students to do an online coding lesson. At one point in the video, someone—a spokesperson for the wonder of coding—said that his life was magically transformed when he learned how to code, that he felt like a wizard around his friends (I am not making that up).

At that point, I turned the sound off and told my kids this: My life was also magically transformed, and I honestly do feel like a wizard because I know how to read and write a code called the English language. Bill Gates is the last guy you want to have telling you what to do with your future or how to run schools. Because the reason Bill Gates wants high school kids learning how to code is that they cost a hell of a lot less than MIT and Stanford kids who learn how to code.

Kids, go outside and play and get dirty. Then read a book before you go to bed.

There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to learn how to code, but there's something terribly flawed with a system that does not also encourage or even beg kids to write poetry, which is a sacred thing.

And on the topic of sacred things, Andrew Smith the author wanted to end up by saying a little bit about young adult literature. Well, probably a lot.

I write genre young adult fiction, as opposed to age-level YA. The difference is that I wouldn't claim my books are *for* kids; they're *about* them. Naturally I want kids to read my books, but I also want everyone else who's not a kid to read them, too, because my books, you know, are written in THAT CODE, which

is something intended for all human beings. If I could have one wish, since I'm here in D.C., it would be that somehow someone would get a copy of *Grasshopper Jungle* (2014) into Joe Biden's hands.

I Skyped in to a book club meeting a couple of weeks ago. The book club was called "Bourbon and Books." Located in Philadelphia, it's an all-guy club of seven or eight professional dudes who show up dressed in ties, talk about books, and drink bourbon.

Seriously, this should be a franchise. They asked me to Skype in early so that they'd still know how to turn on their computer. They told me that they'd never read a young adult title before, so they decided to start their exploration of YA by reading *Grasshopper Jungle*.

That was probably a good idea. Right?

I get this from adult readers a lot: the Bourbon and Books guys all told me they wished that books like *Grasshopper Jungle* would have been out there when they were teenagers, because they each found themselves somewhere in that story about Austin and Robby and Shann. And they also all wanted to talk about the undercurrent of sexuality in *Grasshopper Jungle*, too.

I told them this: If I'm going to write stories about young adults, in particular adolescent males, my characters can never be honest or real if there isn't that constantly disturbing ripple of sexuality running through them. Because, let's face it, from about the age of 13 on, guys are pretty messed up by that unstoppable force, and it's almost impossible to reckon with when you're a teenager.

And speaking of impossible to deal with, I want to add a final word—something I said in my *Horn Book Award* acceptance speech—about Andrew Smith the meltdown artist. In the novel *Slapstick or Lonesome No More!* (1976), Kurt Vonnegut quotes the American author Renata Adler as having said that a writer is someone who hates writing.

Let me tell you how strongly I empathize with that statement.

I'm sure my close friends, and especially Michael Bourret, my agent, and Julie Strauss-Gabel and David Gale, my editors, know all too well from experience that from time to time, I have a propensity to melt down about this thing I can't stop doing even when it feels like I'm tearing chunks of stuffing from my soul. I think all of us who write feel the same way on occasion. At least, I sure hope so. I wouldn't want to be the only one, after all.

So Vonnegut wrote about a note he'd received from his agent after Vonnegut's own writing-related meltdown. The note said this: "Dear Kurt—I never knew a blacksmith who was in love with his anvil." Vonnegut goes on to say this: "I am a brother to writers everywhere. . . . It is lucky, too, for human beings need all the relatives they can get—as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency."

There are lots of us anvil pounders here at this event, many of whom are my closest and truest friends. To you all, I say this: Let's make more writers—not of codes but of the things that are truly sacred.

Andrew Smith is the award-winning author of several young adult novels, including the critically acclaimed Winger and Grasshopper Jungle, which received the 2014 Boston Globe–Horn Book Award and the 2015 Michael L. Printz Honor. He is a native-born Californian who spent most of his formative years traveling the world. His university studies focused on political science, journalism, and literature. He has published numerous short stories and articles. The Alex Crow is his ninth novel. He lives in Southern California.

References

- Smith, A. (2014). *Grasshopper jungle*. New York, NY: Dutton.
Smith, A. (2015). *The Alex crow*. New York, NY: Dutton.
Vonnegut, K. (1973). *Breakfast of champions*. New York, NY: Delacorte.
Vonnegut, K. (1976). *Slapstick or lonesome no more!* New York, NY: Delacorte.