

Trusting Teens and Honoring Their Experiences:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between Laurie Halse Anderson and Chris Crutcher, award-winning authors known widely and well for the respect they afford their readers as young people capable of exploring and examining the complicated world in which we live. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging, important questions of adolescence and adolescents.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to both Laurie and Chris. We compiled their initial responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope our readers enjoy the important insights and playful levity offered in the candid responses of these writers for teens.

How do you define adolescence/adolescents?

Chris: Many of my friends define it as “Chris Crutcher, but a lot younger.” I, however, have a far more mature response. I don’t know about you, Laurie, but to me, the definition of adolescence is more about behavior and circumstance than it is about age. There’s a confused, challenged, first-time quality to it that makes it intriguing to explore and write about. It’s a time when the rational brain is almost there but not quite, so struggles with adults (whose rational brains are supposed to be devel-

oped) become intense. The electric quality of that time, along with the emotional risk level inherent in the decisions adolescents are asked to make, keep me interested.

Laurie: I think it is less about behavior and more about circumstance. A flexible age range (flexible within reason, say up to age 25) is a critical component for me. When I see 40-somethings acting out in typical adolescent fashion, my response to them is quite different than it would be if they were 17. So my definition is the time period after childhood and before adulthood characterized by massive biological, intellectual, and emotional changes.

A more poetic definition is this: the fragile, liminal period during which heart, soul, and mind attempt to unite. When those three components fail to knit together properly (into what we call “integrity”), you wind up with a confused and sorrowful adult.

I like what you said about the “electric quality of that time,” Chris. That intensity is what makes adolescence so profoundly incredible and hellish.

In the media and elsewhere, what stereotypes persist in portrayals of adolescence/adolescents?

Chris: It’s getting better, I think, but for a long time, a significant number of teenage movies played off the impulsiveness of teenagers—and in a far too

simplistic way. Some of them were funny, and there's something to be said for hyperbole, but there wasn't a lot of balance. I think that's changed in the movies, but I think there still is some sense among a lot of adults that teenagers are impossible to understand or that they can't be reached. I think the more we understand that adolescence is a time of becoming and we force ourselves to remember our own becoming, the better chance we have of making connections.

Laurie: There is a lot of lazy screenplay writing in storylines that have to do with teenagers. Film and television constantly sell them short, which is frustrating. I think some of this is done hand-in-hand with the needs of advertisers, who are hungry for the money in teens' wallets and desperate to establish brand loyalty with them. This exploitation is most heinous when it manipulates adolescents' need to belong and their insecure, confused sense of identity.

Other mainstream media don't do much better. The recent *Time Magazine* (2015) list of "The 100 Best YA Books of All Time" showed an appalling lack of understanding about the definition of "young adult literature" (the list includes books like *Charlotte's Web* and *Mary Poppins*), as well as a near total disregard of books that have non-White characters in lead roles. Irresponsible journalists too often reach for stereotypical representations rather than dig under the surface of the story. All of these misguided accounts of the adolescent experience make it hard for our culture to understand, and properly love and support, teens.

Do you explicitly challenge deficit perspectives of adolescence/adolescents in your writing?

Chris: I don't know your intentions, Laurie, but I know you challenge deficit perspectives all the time. When I use examples of your stories in my presentations, I always get a big, positive response; the kids who love your books do so because you "get" them. I hear that sometimes about my own work. I don't set out with the intention to make that challenge, but it happens when I do due diligence on my characters. In other words, if I work

hard to know them, they will be knowable to the reader.

Laurie: Give me a sec, I have to look up what "deficit perspectives" means. . . .

OK, I'm back. Thank you for introducing me to a new term!

My only intention is to write a good story and not to pull out all my hair in the process. I think the stereotypical, disrespectful way that adolescence is typically characterized in our culture makes any well-written YA book a challenge to these deficit perspectives.

Thanks for the kind words, Chris. I shamelessly drop your name when I feel an audience slipping away from me and I want them to think that, if they don't like my books, maybe they should pay a little attention to what I'm saying because I know you. Works like a charm.

How do your readers respond to your representations of them?

Chris: For me, almost always gratefully.

Laurie: My favorite thing to hear from readers is that they appreciate the honesty in my books. Chris, they love your books for the same reason. There is a direct cause and effect between the way teens positively react to the honest portrayals of their worlds in our books and negatively react to the frequent misrepresentations of those worlds in mainstream media that we discussed above.

Does the journey through adolescence contain elements of universality that cut across gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture? Is this journey complicated by the complex interplay of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and culture?

Chris: Yes, the journey cuts across all those things, and yes, it is complicated to the max by those things. Human development—brain and biological development—cuts through every difference. Remember, humans are more like apes than dolphins are like porpoises, so all humans are almost exactly alike in structure. However, a significant portion of

the machinery that runs us is related to our sight, so we are prone to seeing differences that might not be there.

There are certainly big differences between the sexes. I used to marvel at the title of the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1993) because I thought it was too conservative. My idea was, you should travel to the Hubble Telescope, point it one direction, look as far as you could see, and there would be men. Then turn it 180 degrees and look as far down that way as possible, and there would be women.

You don't have to watch the news for more than a couple of minutes to know the complications that exist between and among earthlings because of race, ethnicity, class, and culture. Those differences have the power to end us. And we have to be careful how we depict them, because the reader is just as important in the story process as the writer. I remember, Laurie, you reading the manuscript of my novel *Period 8* (2013) and warning me that the dialect I used for an African American character was too stereotypical, and you were right on the money. In my mind, he was a school-smart, street-smart kid with a unique perspective on things. But the dialect alone obscured that. Those differences are ones we must always pay attention to in our storytelling.

Laurie: The journey through adolescence is the journey of discovering your soul and seeking out kindred spirits. That is unchangeable across culture or time period. The journey is complicated by every aspect of the human experience, but I think that being surrounded by family and institutions that do not understand the challenges of adolescence is the greatest complication of all.

How do you as authors (and how might readers) navigate adolescent sexuality in your books?

Chris: I tend to not be too graphic because I believe the imagination of the reader can do most of that work. I remember my imagination, and I didn't need a lot of help. At the same time, if you're writing a story about adolescence and you don't include issues of sexuality, front and center, you're

missing a big part of that time. It's a little like writing a story about a scuba diver in Death Valley.

Laurie: Teens are rather aware of the drives and mechanics of sexuality. I like exploring the situations in which sexual activity (ahem) arises and the choices that characters make when navigating those situations.

What made (or might have made) your personal transition from "adolescent to adult" easier? Could it/can it be found in/nurtured by story?

Chris: Number one, it's not supposed to be easy, so nothing could have made it easy. That said, any time I heard or saw or read a story where a character close to my age struggled with the same things I was struggling with, I felt relief. It empowered me. As teenagers, we do need to know it gets better, that there will be a time when we get to take better control. A well-drawn character can be a best friend. Again, Laurie, I can't tell you the number of girls I've run into who said that when they read *Speak* (1999), they felt huge empowerment. And the other side of that is the number of boys who got a quick education from it. *Twisted* (2007) did the same thing in really unique ways.

Laurie: There's a good chance that I would not have lived to age 21 if it hadn't been for the fiction section of my high school library and the patient and kind librarians who let me read there. I was looking for examples of what I was going through. I rarely found it, because there weren't many books like that in the library. I settled for the second-best option of getting lost in fantasy and science fiction. That was good enough to get me through the most dangerous years. If I hadn't gone to the library, I would have spent a lot more time getting high and doing dumb things.

What I needed then is what I try to provide in my stories now: examples of people caught in hard situations. Sometimes they make good decisions, and sometimes they make disastrous decisions. Readers get to experience those decisions and their consequences through the safe medium of Story. They can draw their own conclusions about what

they read. If it's a story that connects with their hearts, they often will wrap the wisdom they take from it into their own bundle of real-world knowledge.

It's fascinating to me, Chris, that we both hear teens talking so often about each other's work! The characters in your books have become the friends of countless teens I've talked to. What these kids appreciate more than anything is finding characters who are feeling what they are feeling. Your books make teens feel less alone.

What role do you think teachers and librarians can/ do play in adolescents' search for identity?

Chris: Learn to listen, withhold judgment, and don't take adolescent rebuke personally. And hook them up with stories, whether they are in print form or any other media. Everybody's looking for connection. This is an old theme for me, but when a teacher or librarian hears a kid use so-called bad language and feels like they have to make a big deal of it, they're taking themselves off the short list of people to turn to. As an adolescent, I want you to hear my story in its native tongue, in my language, and respect the story. That doesn't mean I expect you to let me talk like a soldier under fire in the classroom. There's no reason not to call for decorum and civility. But don't get crazy about it.

Laurie: Look them in the eye, smile, and respect them. So many adults have let them down monstrosously by the time they get to your library or classroom that all of their defenses are on Red Alert. Love them enough to give them time to get used to you. They have to trust you enough to lower their shields in order to open themselves up to the rich literature you want to share with them.

As you consider the YA field and its depiction of the adolescent experience to date, what's working and what's missing?

Chris: I'm not a student of the genre, really. What I've seen is there is a little bit of everything in YA literature—some of it written well, some of it written not so well. What's working, in my mind, are the connections made between stories and kids,

connections made evident by teachers and librarians—in spite of potential uneasiness—willing to expose kids to stories that ignite their passion. What isn't working is the idea that it's more important to teach the so-called classics to more advanced students than it is to teach current YA literature. The two can fold in on each other and make both better. You can't make me a lifelong reader and you can't really connect me to a character if you have to explain it all to me after I've read it. You can engage my intellect that way, but not my psychological/emotional/spiritual self. Balance is what we need.

I love kicking this stuff around, Laurie, and particularly with you. You are such an articulate student of the game.

Laurie: I can think of a lot of teachers and librarians who are better equipped to answer this question! From my limited vantage point, I'd like to see more translations of YA written in other languages and set in other cultures. Teens are incredibly curious and very open to learning about kids whose lives are not like theirs.

This has been super fun!! Thanks so much for letting me hang out with you, Chris!

*Laurie Halse Anderson is a New York Times bestselling author known for her sensitivity and willingness to tackle difficult topics. Her work has earned numerous American Library Association and state awards. Two of her books, *Speak* and *Chains*, were National Book Award finalists. Her most recent novel, *The Impossible Knife of Memory*, was long-listed for the National Book Award. Laurie was the proud recipient of the 2011 Free Speech Defender Award, given by the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) and presented to her by Judy Blume. She also received the 2009 Margaret A. Edwards Award given by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) division of the American Library Association and the ALAN Award from the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN). You can follow her adventures on Twitter (<http://twitter.com/halseanderson>).*

Chris Crutcher's years as a teacher in, then director of, a K-12 alternative school in Oakland, California, through the 1970s and his subsequent years as a therapist specializing in child abuse and neglect inform his 13 novels and 2 collections of short stories. He has also written what he

calls an ill-advised autobiography titled *King of the Mild Frontier*, which was designated by *Publisher's Weekly* as "the YA book most adults would have read if they knew it existed." Chris has received a number of coveted awards, from his high school designation as "Most Likely to Plagiarize" to the American Library Association's Margaret A. Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award. His favorites are his two Intellectual Freedom awards, one from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the other from the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC).

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