

Embracing Discomfort in YA Literature

Although I don't set out to make myself or anyone else uncomfortable, discomfort is often central to my writing process. In many cases, it begins with the first flicker of an idea for a book. My file of "next novel" ideas contains an assortment of news snippets, half-formed "what if . . .?" questions, imagined scenarios, and overheard conversations. Often, these bits stick with me because there is something that bothers me, something that needs room to grow in order to be properly understood. These possibilities demand my attention the way a ragged fingernail can become an obsession until you can finally do something about it.

The ideas that become books are the ones that I can't dismiss, the ones that irritate and vex and trouble and fascinate me. And once I start working at making sense of an idea—figuratively filing at its rough edges—I discover that I'm dealing with something more complex than a ragged fingernail. The originating idea opens onto new provocations and problems that I must contend with as I develop my characters and their world. I have to get ready for the long haul with discomfort.

The seed for my first novel, *What Can't Wait* (2011), came from my experiences as an English teacher in a Title I Houston high school where I taught mostly seniors. I worked hard to shepherd my students—many of them reluctant readers with a history of frustrating school experiences—toward a love of reading and, even more urgently, toward college and career possibilities that fit their interests, needs, skills, and motivations. Throughout my teaching, I kept returning to the same question: Why did

my best students—students who were smart, driven, and resourceful—consistently pass up the educational opportunities that seemed to be the best fit for them academically, opting instead to attend decent but unremarkable local colleges and universities?

My discomfort with this reality drove a number of conversations with my students over the years, conversations that unfolded in my classroom before and after school, across the margins of their own writing, and between the shelves of our library. I didn't want to impose my idea of "best" onto my students, but I did want to understand their way of thinking about the future and the pressures and priorities that influenced their choices. I got some insights from the work that students produced through our fall semester's "Planning for the Future" unit, which included research on colleges and careers, college application essays, and the creation of step-by-step strategic plans toward specific goals. But the biggest breakthroughs came through our conversations about YA literature.

My smart, savvy teens wanted a novel that captured the particular challenges and compromises of their world, especially when it came to their families, educational experiences, and social lives. In particular, many of them felt that YA lit made it seem too easy to make it to college as a first generation student, as though a good GPA and an application form were all you needed. What was missing was any acknowledgment of the tension they felt between their own hopes and plans for the future and the expectations of their families, which in our predominantly Latino community often included staying close to home and helping out.

What Can't Wait features a strong female protagonist with a passion for math and a killer work ethic, and her journey toward college is a key thread in the plot. These are features of the narrative that adults readily cleave to, and they are no doubt a big part of why I'm often invited to do talks or workshops related to the novel and its themes. But I wrote the novel for my students first and foremost, and that meant engag-

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ing with the uncomfortable aspects of the experiences that they shared with me.

Some of the realities I incorporate in the novel have caused little controversy, such as the economic situation of families struggling to make ends meet and relying on contributions from every family member old enough to earn a wage. But other thematic aspects of the novel provoke discomfort or a sense of mild outrage from some readers, especially adults. While the novel doesn't glorify sex, it

also doesn't ignore it. The possibility of sex is powerfully present, even for characters that never actually "go all the way," and a near-rape scene in *What Can't Wait* reflects the high rate of sexual assault (almost always unreported) among my female students.

Profanity shows up in dialogue, as does injustice on the family level (a clear double standard exists for the protagonist and her brother). Teen pregnancy appears as an issue for two secondary characters, and students cut class and do some drinking. When adults question me about these elements (Why couldn't I just keep it clean?), I explain that they're in the novel for the same reason that cockroaches also make appearances: they are part of the characters' world.

As the world of my characters grows darker, so does my portrayal of it. My second novel, *The Knife and the Butterfly* (2012), explores how a deadly gang fight connects a Salvadoran American MS-13 gang member and a troubled White girl whose need for belonging draws her into violent conflict. The novel takes grit to another level, not because I relish vio-

lence, casual sex, crime, teen homelessness, or drug use, but because these were a part of the reality that my protagonist faced as a dropout, a gang member, and a kid on the fringe of the institutions and support systems many of us take for granted.

In *The Knife and the Butterfly*, I worked hard to create a fictional space where, despite all these factors, my characters have a chance to make meaningful choices. For me, this was a way of countering the actual courtroom narrative that unfolded after the violent encounter that inspired the novel, a courtroom narrative that essentially framed young men like the novel's speaker as waste, as disposable people. Driven by my own discomfort with the outcome of the trial, I weighed the risk of dramatizing violence against my desire to humanize and particularize the lives of marginal youth. Rather than redeem the callousness of my characters, I strove to imagine a set of circumstances that might give them room to redeem themselves.

Discomfort has reached new levels of intensity for me in my most recent novel, *Out of Darkness* (2015). Because I was writing for the first time about the East Texas community where I grew up, I experienced a fresh host of worries around how the book might be received. The story is set against a 1937 school explosion that killed nearly 300 children in New London, Texas, and it explores the precarious beauty and eventual fallout of a romance between an African American boy and a Mexican American girl. For nearly two generations after it happened, public discussion of the explosion was taboo, and even recently when *The Texas Observer* (2013) published a story drawn from *Out of Darkness*, I received letters and messages from upset East Texans who didn't like that I'd coupled this tragic piece of history with an exploration of school segregation, sexual predation, racialized violence, and the forces that divide communities and destroy people. But those were all part of the world that the novel recovers and imagines. Whatever my discomfort with making my old neighbors unhappy, being true to my vision for *Out of Darkness* meant excavating and imagining stories from communities too often relegated to the margins of history.

Especially when it comes to historical fiction, resistance to frank engagements with youth culture and experience often draws strength from false nostalgia. Adults may fantasize a simpler, cleaner past, forgetting their own turmoil and refusing to acknowledge

past generations' struggles, many of which were cloaked in painful silence. In my view, the presence of good and evil in the world is pretty much steady; it just gets expressed differently in different eras. If the 1950s offered safer streets than today's suburbs, weigh that against all the heartache of women raising kids alone while dads worked crazy long hours, the pain of openly expressed racism and closeted homosexuality, and the wounds left by sexual abuse that went unrecognized—or unreported—in those same “picture-perfect” neighborhoods. Of course, there have also always been folks making brave, redemptive choices, whether their world is Internet-enabled or just on the cusp of electrification.

In addition to my engagement with historical possibilities, the fictional aspects of *Out of Darkness* presented a powerful challenge in terms of my ability to reckon with discomfort. In its final form, the novel ends with a tragedy very different from the accidental school explosion that opens the story. For months, though, I fought this outcome, trying to evade this even darker scenario and deliver my characters into safety. But *Out of Darkness* turned out to be a novel about narrating disaster to the end, and the story kept on pressing its case. Ultimately, I had to simply name my discomfort—I didn't *want* to write a tragic book—and embrace it. The alternative would have been to do violence to the story itself, to impose an ending that went against the grain of the narrative.

Embracing discomfort is an important part of maturing as a reader, too. If we feel 100% safe with what we're reading, if we meticulously avoid the chance of encountering discomfort, we're also unlikely to be deeply affected by our reading. There has to be an element of risk and exposure in reading for anything profound or memorable to occur. Certainly this experience varies for different readers, even when they are reading the same book, but we all need it to evolve our reading lives. A great book makes us vulnerable to something—an emotion, a thought, a realization, a fear, a discovery, a way of seeing—and it forces us to reckon with it. I share Franz Kafka's (1904) view that “we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone.” Or, more concisely (and still in Kafka's words): “[A] book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.”

To be sure, discomfort is just one of the ways that literature works on us. Kafka says that we need these difficult books, not that we need *only* these books. Our libraries, brains, and hearts have room for a wide range of YA literature.

Still, I hope my reflections inspire you to take up the work of reading YA novels in class that others may have prematurely dismissed as “not safe for school.” I find it ironic that when racism, violence, teen sex, incest, misogyny, and the like appear in the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Faulkner, we recognize them as part of how these works function as literature. But comparable elements in YA literature too often are taken as rendering a text inappropriate for mainstream classroom consumption—or consumption at all.

Consider the now-classic example offered by Meghan Cox Gurdon's (2011) article “Darkness Too Visible” published in *The Wall Street Journal*. Besides characterizing mainstream young adult fiction as “bulldoz[ing] coarseness or misery” into children's lives, Gurdon suggests that, if it weren't for YA, there wouldn't be darkness in young people's lives—an almost obscenely naïve assumption in the eyes of anyone who has worked with teens from any background. Life doesn't wait for kids to grow up before confronting them with pain, suffering, injustice, abuse, and other assorted ugliness. Even “good” adolescences come with discomfort and challenge, and teens blessed with the most stable, wholesome life circumstances still interact daily with peers who are not so lucky.

In my view, teens urgently need opportunities to navigate discomfort and to use it to understand themselves and their world more fully. This is what becomes possible when challenging, complex YA literature is taken up seriously in the classroom. It makes little sense to attempt to “protect” students from uncomfortable topics when any teen with a library card, laptop, tablet, or phone can access more media, and faster, than the young people of any past

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generation. And reading about a topic or discussing it in class does not constitute endorsement any more than writing about it does. These actions are, rather, ways of opening up dialogue and critical engagement. In fact, the most responsible move for teachers and other stakeholders is to provide access to diverse reading encounters in settings where students can negotiate and develop their responses. Rather than act as gatekeepers or custodians, we can best support students if we present ourselves as fellow travellers on a journey to make sense of our reading experiences, however uncomfortable.

As educators continue working out how to position challenging YA literature more centrally in the curriculum, I'll continue to write books the only way I know how: by opening myself up to the uncomfortable aspects of human experience, working to draw them into the light, and searching for the intersections between pain and possibility. My hope is always that—if the narratives I craft are at all like Kafka's axe—they manage to connect even as they cut, to produce opportunities for meaning in part *because* they produce discomfort.

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