Rethinking "Normal":

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of normalcy and difference in their presentations and writings. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage so thoughtfully and candidly in this public collaboration.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author. We compiled the responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to authors to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the resulting piece. We hope you appreciate and learn from the wisdom shared.

In your experience, does "normalcy" exist? Is there any such thing as a normal teenager? A normal adult? A normal writer?

Sharon: There is no such thing as normal. Each day brings new experiences, new possibilities. A full moon. A broken heart. A stubbed toe. Giggles. Raisin bread. A dirty diaper. A song. The good writer manages to combine all of these into a story, a created life, a character who can be as "normal" or different as the author chooses. That is the magic of the creative process. I'm proud to be considered a writer who can see those positive (as well as negative) aspects of human behavior, fictionalize them, and use created characters and situations to help real people feel just a bit of our human potential. Normal? I still don't know what that is.

Margarita: We're all unique. Our life stories are weird! Mine is so strange that it could be called magical realism, which—as Gabriel García Márquez pointed out—is typical of Caribbean reality. That makes me normal for *el Caribe*, when normal means average. On the other hand, when normal means meeting a standard of expectation, I'm not a normal Cuban-American, because I traveled back and forth as a child, and I'm neither an exile nor a refugee.

Holly: To me, something that is called normal is expected. The irony of teenage life is that nearly all things are new, untried, and sometimes even beyond explanation and expectation. I believe it is normal at all stages of life to feel at times abnormal.

But there are things that make a person immediately feel different from a group. This can be an external condition—something physical that separates a person. Or it can be something inside, unseen but felt. I have written about a character who has areas in which she is exceptional, and that can be equally isolating and not normal.

I think we all long to fit in, to be accepted, appreciated, and loved. But at the same time, there is a strong pull to express what makes us unique and to understand and celebrate that.

Benjamin: Normalcy can be defined as the opposite of apocalypse. None of us can live in heightened moments all of the time, and in that sense, normalcy is necessary for survival. We all need to normalize our lives because we all need a sense of safety and order. That's why we all have our own rituals—either rituals that are entirely personal or rituals we've acquired from social or religious institutions. I think normalcy can be a good thing, but if we understand the word in terms of just fitting in, it can hamper freedom, hamper the way we express ourselves, and hamper our imaginations, which is a kind of death.

Margarita: As far as normalcy for writers, that would be boring! As a poet, I need to experiment, being honest with my thoughts and emotions instead of trying to fit a formula.

Benjamin: Writers? Normal writers? I don't think so. To begin with, we spend hours keeping our own company. Or rather in the company of people we've made up. But we're normal in most ways. We're stealth normal. I don't think I've ever really wanted to fit in. And I do think I'm often on the edge of normal. On the edge. But still normal. Certainly, on a psychological level, I'm normal. I think I have a developed sense of imagination. Well, I'm a writer and a painter and a poet. Most people are not writers or painters or poets. But that doesn't mean I'm not normal—though a lot of people I know always tell me, "Ben, you are so *not* normal."

Margarita: I love all these different definitions of normal, with subtle distinctions that could be regarded as proof of variety, diversity, and complexity of normalcy.

How might stories help readers consider their own and others' uniqueness?

Benjamin: There is an intimate dance going on between the book and the reader. Reading is necessarily interpretive. So every reader does in fact read a book in a very unique way. Each brings a unique self to the experience that is culturally bound and also bound by the personality and knowledge the reader has acquired. Every reader will find his or her own way of experiencing the text, and that's why books are so important—because when we read something, it's a very intimate and beautiful thing.

Sharon: I think the reason I began to love books as a child was that I was able to read about thousands of other people for whom "normal" was very different from my own life experiences. Because of those books, I learned about other cultures and religions, about different ways to approach life's experiences, about characters who dared. I think it is our uniqueness as human beings that makes the world full of wonderful possibilities. In spite of all the horror and cruelty we have inflicted on each other, I still find that the capacity to love and care and forgive is our greatest achievement.

Margarita: I hope young readers of my poetic memoir, *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings* (2015), will see that they're not the only ones with divided selves. History split my life—and my extended family—in half. It is unique, and at the same time typical, for the children of immigrants to grow up wondering about the invisible twins left behind in their parents' countries of origin. Benjamin and Sharon have pointed out the individual perspective of each reader. That is absolutely true, and at the same time, it is true that certain universal experiences are shared, such as loneliness, fear, hope . . . .

Holly: I think that stories and characters can teach empathy. They allow us to travel to places we've never been and to experience feelings that might be unfamiliar. The first word out of a baby's mouth is never "share."

Margarita: Yes, Holly is showing us that *share* can have different meanings, too. We share universal aspects of experience, but that's different than sharing reactions. There are so many emotional responses to the same incident. After the Missile Crisis, I reacted to the loss of contact with Cuba by growing more attached to childhood memories, practicing Spanish by traveling in other parts of Latin America, and clinging to my Cuban-American

identity. My older sister reacted by deliberately forgetting Spanish and regarding herself as entirely American. Each person finds her own way to cope with personal challenges and historical traumas.

How might stories offer counter examples of lives and experiences that differ from those most commonly accepted as normal?

Holly: A story is worth telling if it asks a reader to question something in the world. Again, this goes back to empathy. Sometimes not caring is simply not understanding. Most failures are of imagination.

Sharon: From the time I was a child, stories were magical, not because they told of fanciful characters and adventures, but because they offered me a world of possibilities, many of which were decidedly not "normal" for a sheltered little girl from the city. I read about geniuses and explorers, about tyrants and villians, about murderers and rapists. I read about women who dared to challenge men, who dressed as men to survive, who ruled men successfully. I read about people who lived with what were considered to be severe disabilities, yet managed to thrive and exceed expectations. I also read hundreds of other novels and biographies and histories and texts. I suppose much of one's early reading forms a base from which a writer begins, but my characters grow from a seed as I begin writing, then grow to face a challenge—sometimes personal, sometimes social, usually both. The characters then begin to be "real people" for me. I don't really think about their "normalcy." I look to their strength, their uniqueness, their power to propel the reader through the story.

Benjamin: Well, speaking as a Latino and a gay man, there are culturally accepted norms that have nothing to do with "normal" and everything to do with moral and cultural constructions. Unfortunately, American culture "others" groups of people, which is to say dehumanizes people who are thought to be different. All of my books offer a vision of people just being people. You could say I normalize Latinos. And you could say I normalize being gay. Being Latino is not a topic in my books. Nor is being gay. The topics of my books: What it's like to struggle with ourselves and the people around us.

My characters live between exile and belonging. My protagonists see themselves as outsiders, and they want to be a part of something bigger than themselves—but they just don't know how to go about doing the "belonging" thing. Yes, my characters are mostly Latinos (though not exclusively). And yes, my characters are sometimes gay (but certainly not all of them). But always I want to create characters who feel like people.

When we read a good book where the characters feel real, then we experience both ourselves and the characters who are totally different from us; a bridge has been crossed, and we live in the same country.

Margarita: I was born hyphenated. As a Cuban-American, travel to the island was—and still is—a bridge between my two languages and cultures. *Enchanted Air* is a memoir, but the characters in my historical verse novels are often hyphenated, too. *Lion Island, Cuba's Warrior of Words* (2016) is about a civil rights hero of the island's Chinese-African community. When we read about history, we see how cultures meet and clash, or meet and blend. In the case of Chinese indentured laborers and African slaves, they met and intermarried, creating an entirely new culture, with unique religious, artistic, musical, and culinary traditions. I love what Holly says about empathy. There is nothing more essential in the role of a writer. I have to identify with my characters in one way or another. I'm neither Chinese nor a boy, but I identify with the hero of Lion Island by our shared love of words as a peaceful means to seek social justice. Of course, I still needed proofreading by many generous cultural and linguistic experts.

A main character in Alex Sanchez's young adult novel,* The God Box (2007)*, asks, "You're going to spend more time with yourself than with anyone else in your life. You want to spend that whole time fighting who you are?" (p. 139)? Do any of your characters fight who they are? What do they learn? What might adolescent readers learn about themselves as they live this experience vicariously?

Margarita: Teens feel hyphenated in various ways, not just culturally. They are perched in the air, on that gap between childhood and adulthood. Memoirs and stories can serve as bridges that are by nature peacemakers. (That's why bridges are always the first to be destroyed by invading armies.) Stories help us accept the various aspects of our world—and of ourselves. All we have to do is set one foot in front of the other and start traveling across the chasms between minds.

Benjamin: All of my characters are struggling to become themselves. Isn't that what adolescence is all about? Never mind adolescence; isn't that what all life is about?

It is not for nothing that Faulkner said that the only story worth telling was the struggle of the human heart against itself. I think a writer must write of painful things, of hard things. A writer, as Faulkner also said, must banish fear from his vocabulary. We have to be brave. And we have to take our young readers to some emotionally difficult places so that they can understand the possibilities of being a human being.

Holly: I think all of us fight "who we are" every day of our lives. That's part of just being human. But for me, the sooner we accept our own imperfections, the greater chance we have of living bigger, more satisfying, and meaningful lives.

In my novel *Counting By 7s* (2013), Willow Chance struggles not just with who she is, but how she's perceived. Those are two different but very connected things.

Sharon: Since I taught adolescents for over 20 years, I feel very comfortable with them. They've gone way ahead of me in their ability to master the newest tech trend, but the essence of what it means to be 15, for example, has not changed. They don't actually fight who they are, but they certainly question their identity, their purpose, their very essence. They are searching for that existential moment (even though most of them probably haven't the foggiest idea of what that term means!). (☺) They want to fit in. They want to stand out. They want to be noticed. They want to be ignored. They want to know everything. They want to know nothing. They want to be loved. That's the character I like to start with. Then I dress him up with a life, a problem, a conflict, a sorry, a joy, and maybe even a fight. But his essence should scream out and connect with the young person who happens to pick up the book to read it.

How have your unique experiences as a person influenced your work as a writer?

Holly: I write contemporary, realistic fiction, so nearly everything I write about comes out of an experience I had, observed, heard about, or investigated. In the case of Willow Chance, this happened when my two sons attended a school for gifted children. I always start with the central character, and there is always some aspect of that person inside me.

I also love to make people laugh. I never had the courage to do stand-up comedy, but in college, my friends all wanted me to do it. I guess it's never too late.

Margarita: Because I'm both a botanist-agronomist and a poet, I love to interweave natural history with human history. I especially love tropical rain forest biology. If one teen sets down all those noisy gadgets long enough to gaze up at a tree, or walk across the street to get to know someone from a different background, I'll know my efforts to communicate with the future weren't wasted.

Benjamin: I am an ex-Catholic priest. I grew up on a farm in very humble circumstances. I spoke Spanish before I learned English (even though my grandparents were born in this country). I read a lot. I was married to a woman for 15 years. I was abused as a boy and finally came to terms with my sexuality in my early fifties. I love poetry and art and have studied those areas of my life. I studied in Europe for four years. I worked in a homeless shelter one summer in Kilburn (North London). I spent a summer in Tanzania. My intellectual field of study is contemporary American poetry. All of these experiences have directly contributed to who I am and how I think and feel about things. Even if I never write/wrote directly about any of these things, they have made me who I am as a person and who I am as a writer. I am all of the characters

I write. They are all sides of me, and they all live in my head. My head is a very busy place!

Sharon: The longer I live, the more I have experienced, the better writer I hope to be. I hope that my observations of life and loss and pain and joy can be transferred to my readers. I am not the same person I was when *Tears of a Tiger* was published in 1994. I have learned and laughed and loved. I have wept and wailed and screamed. Normal? Maybe. Maybe not. But I hope to transfer all that is me into a set of characters that makes a reader think and learn and embrace our common humanity.

Margarita: I love all the amazing details that I've learned about these other writers during this fascinating conversation! I'd like to end my small contribution by quoting Walter Dean Myers, who wrote in his how-to book, *Just Write* (2012): "I believe that your skills as a writer are not so much defined by intelligence or artistic ability as they are by how much of yourself you are willing to bring to the page. Be brave." I feel humbled and inspired by the intelligence, artistic ability, and remarkable courage of all my colleagues who have shared this discussion. It's a privilege to be included.

Sharon M. Draper *is a professional educator, as well as an accomplished writer of over 30 award-winning books for adolescents and teachers, including* Copper Sun*, winner of the Coretta Scott King Award, the highly acclaimed Jericho and Hazelwood trilogies, and* Out of my Mind*, which remains on the* New York Times *bestseller list. She served as the National Teacher of the Year, has been honored at the White House six times, and was selected by the US State Department to be a literary ambassador to the children of Africa and China. In 2015, she was honored by the American Library Association as the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime literary achievement. Her newest novel is* Stella by Starlight.

Margarita Engle *is the Cuban-American author of many verse novels, including a Newbery Honor book,* The Surrender Tree*; PEN USA Award winner,* The Lightning Dreamer*; and a memoir, the Walter Honor-winning* Enchanted Air. *Her books have also received multiple Pura Belpré, Am*éricas*, and Jane Addams awards and honors. Books for younger children include the Charlotte Zolotow Award winner,* Drum Dream Girl. *Margarita's 2016 books are* Lion Island *(Atheneum) and* Morning Star Horse/ El Caballo Lucero *(HBE Publishers). She lives in central California, where she enjoys helping her husband train his wilderness search and rescue dog. She can be reached at margarita@margaritaengle.com or www.margaritaengle.com.*

Benjamin Alire Sáenz *is an author of poetry and prose for adults and teens. He is the winner of the PEN/ Faulkner Award and the American Book Award for his books for adults. His young adult novel,* Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, was a Printz Honor Book, the Stonewall Award winner, the Pura Belpré Award winner, the Lambda Literary Award winner, and a finalist for the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award. His first novel for teens,* Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood*, was an ALA Top Ten Book for Young Adults and a finalist for the* Los Angeles Times *Book Prize. His latest novel for young adults,* The Inexplicable Logic of My Life*, will be published in Spring 2017 by Clarion Books. He teaches creative writing at the University of Texas, El Paso.*

Holly Goldberg Sloan *was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and spent her childhood living in Holland; Istanbul, Turkey; Washington DC; Berkeley, California; and Eugene, Oregon. After graduating from Wellesley College and spending some time as an advertising copywriter, she began writing and directing family feature films, including* Angels in the Outfield *and* Made in America. Counting by 7s*, her first middle-grade novel, was a* New York Times *Bestseller. Her other titles include* Appleblossom the Possum, I'll Be There, Just Call My Name, *and the upcoming* Short. *The mother of two sons, Holly lives with her husband in Santa Monica, California.*

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