

# Who Decides What's Right for Me?

## Morality and Cultural Norms

**From the Editors:** In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between several YA authors who have addressed explicitly issues of morality and cultural norms 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 around deciding who and what is right in a world of moral complexity and contradiction.

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 that in reading this article, you gain both an increased appreciation for these authors and the challenging topics they tackle.

**In what ways do cultural norms influence individual and societal perceptions of morality?**

**Kekla:** Morality is almost entirely a social construct. The only way to learn what is “right” and “wrong” is to experience consequences and observe other people experiencing consequences for their actions.

**Aisha:** The culture in which we are born is the guiding force for most of the morality we adopt as our personal code of beliefs and conduct. Our families and communities are our first teachers, and as we get older, our teachers and peers also inform us on the nature of morality. As our teaching on what is

right and wrong begins at such an early age, cultural norms have a deep and lasting effect on our perceptions of morality.

**Becky:** Yes, our perceptions of morality are heavily grounded in cultural norms. Furthermore, as social norms evolve, our interpretations of right and wrong evolve alongside them. Consider, for example, the shifting attitudes in the United States toward homosexuality. Up until very recently, there was a relatively mainstream perception that gay couples were somehow immoral. Now, thanks to shifting cultural attitudes, there's a more firmly rooted belief that *discriminating against* gay couples is immoral. It's not a complete shift, and progress tends to come in fits and starts, but these changes are observable and even somewhat measurable.

It's important to note that this is an example of a shift in what *individuals and society perceive* to be moral, as opposed to what actually constitutes moral behavior. I believe the attitude that gay couples are immoral is fundamentally wrong and unjust, no matter the societal context. In other words, I believe cultural norms influence perceptions of what is moral without necessarily influencing morality itself, but perceptions of morality influence behavior in tangible ways.

**Kekla:** Even though some people would argue that there are natural laws, how true is that, really? Nature is defined by a survival-of-the-fittest mentality,

but human morality is entirely about taking into consideration the needs of others as well as your own. Society is built upon expectations that we will collectively care for one another; we establish rules about not hurting, killing, lying to, or stealing from other people so as not to undermine the life and successful existence of other people in service of our own needs. Morality has to be taught, as does compassion, which explains why human cruelty exists in so many corners of the world. Sometimes we fall down on the job of teaching right and wrong, or circumstances combine to produce individuals who choose to act outside of the expected cultural norms.

**Aisha:** As someone who was raised in both the American culture and Pakistani culture, I saw how our cultural norms shape our perspectives in a way that many children who inhabit two cultures do. For example, I grew up viewing arranged marriages as an acceptable way to find a partner. It was how my parents met and how many of my friends' parents met. When I began school, however, I learned that my classmates believed it was unacceptable for parents to choose their child's marriage partner. This early examination of morality in the context of arranged marriage (note: not forced marriage) allowed me to see the different ways morality can fluctuate based on individual and societal upbringing. I learned that what can seem appropriate and acceptable in one culture can be considered unequivocally wrong in a different culture. While once upon a time arranged marriages were acceptable in Western society, they are no longer the norm and are now seen through a different lens.

*How might literature foster opportunities for readers to assess what might be right or wrong and to examine how such determinations are made?*

**Becky:** Our perceptions of morality are influenced by cultural norms; books (and other media) help shape and define these norms. Consider portrayals of disability in literature. Disabled characters are often presented as somehow less than fully human, lacking agency, and existing only to further the development of abled protagonists. This trend has significant real-world consequences for the

ways abled people view and treat disabled people. Misconceptions about disabled people can lead to tremendous harm, even at the hands of people who are actively trying to behave ethically.

**Aisha:** As we grow into an increasingly diverse society, with many different beliefs, it is vital that we learn empathy for and understanding of views outside of our own. Because many of us may not meet people who are different from ourselves in our daily life, a work of literature can help bridge that gap; it allows us to understand others and to realize that though they may not believe or think exactly as we do, their perspectives may be valid and understandable. Literature is the most powerful medium to achieve this.

**Becky:** Literature presents tremendous opportunity for encouraging progressive social norms, thereby influencing perceptions of morality in positive ways. For example, Julie Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* portrays a fat character who is unapologetically human, and in a landscape where fat people are often treated as subhuman, this is a radical choice. When thin/average-sized readers internalize this portrayal, it changes the way they view fatness. Murphy's Willowdean Dickson and her experiences are integrated into the reader's perception of fatness, and they inform the reader's moral decision making in relevant moments.

**Kekla:** Books show characters making moral decisions, and just as often, books show characters making poor choices and experiencing the consequences of their actions. This allows readers to vicariously enjoy taking risks that they could never (or should never) take in real life, and it also gives them a chance to consider how it might go if they made certain good or bad choices. It's an incredibly powerful experience to be so close inside another person's head (like a character in literature), to feel what that person feels, and to gain a perspective on the world that you might not be able to arrive at on your own.

**Aisha:** Literature is in the unique position of challenging people's views on right and wrong because it is an opportunity to inhabit the mindset of someone

different. While television and film can achieve a close approximation, they cannot bring a person so completely into the inner life of other people, exposing their thought processes about the choices they make. The goal of inhabiting another person's point of view in literature is not necessarily to change the reader's opinion about the topic at hand, but to help the reader empathize and relate to a person whose point of view he or she may never have considered before. This can help a reader who originally considered certain decisions as black-and-white to recognize that they are, in fact, rife with complexity.

**How might your books help readers ponder the question, "Who decides what's right for me?"**

**Aisha:** My novel *Written in the Stars* (2015) follows the life of Pakistani American Naila. From the time she was a young girl, her parents told her that while she had many choices, they would choose her husband for her. As much as Naila loves her parents and knows they want what is best for her, she struggles with their rule regarding marriage, particularly when she falls in love with a boy in high school. She faces a conflict many teenagers do when raised in two different cultures with occasionally conflicting norms.

I hope that for readers from within the culture who were perhaps raised with similar constraints, this book can provide an examination of this rule and question just how far parents can go in choosing a spouse for a child before it is no longer acceptable and moral. I can only imagine what the effect of a book like this could have had on my friends who faced similar struggles and were conflicted about what the right course of action was.

For those outside the culture who may find the premise a simple black-and-white issue, my hope is that this book draws out the nuanced issues involved. Naila's parents believe they are doing the right thing in forcing her to get married. They think they are saving her from bad decisions and that, as her parents, they know what is best for her. When she ultimately gets forced into the marriage, and her husband learns that she is not a willing participant in this relationship, he believes they should

try to make it work, even though she does not want to; in his mind, this is the right thing to do.

While forced marriages are unequivocally immoral and illegal, there is benefit in learning why someone would do this to a loved one; it is important to understand that Naila's parents believe it is the right thing to do because of the cultural and societal norms they grew up with. I also hope this book serves as an examination of how one's personal norms can evolve over time, as Naila's did.

**Becky:** In my debut, *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), the main character is a gay 16-year-old boy named Simon. At the outset of the book, Simon is only out to one person, and that person doesn't know Simon's real-life identity. However, a straight classmate discovers Simon is gay and uses that information to coerce Simon into helping him meet his own needs. Ultimately, this classmate, Martin, outs Simon to the entire school.

There's a moment in the book where Simon reflects on the fact that every decision related to coming out was taken out of his hands. Later in the book, Martin reflects on his actions as well. I like to imagine that readers will have the opportunity to consider these issues alongside Simon and Martin. What does it mean that Simon lost the opportunity to come out to his family and friends on his own terms? What impact did Martin's actions have on Simon's safety and well-being? What could have been the impact on Simon's safety and well-being in a different environment and cultural context? And how would Simon's coming out experience have played out differently if he had been able to initiate it on his own terms?

**Kekla:** My books very often contain an element of choice for the main character—choices about who they are and who they want to become. In *The Rock and the River* (2009), set in 1968 Chicago, 13-year-old Sam's father is a civil rights activist, so he was raised in the movement. When his older brother, Stick, joins the Black Panther Party, Sam finds himself torn between the path his father has chosen and the one his brother has chosen, and he struggles to figure out where he fits and the kind of person he wants to become.

When I talk with middle schoolers about this book, we discuss the fact that everyone faces these kinds of choices in life—am I going to be like my parents? My siblings? My friends? My teachers? What am I willing to fight for? What do I want to dedicate my time to? For my character Sam, these choices are made within a particularly fraught moment in American history, and so his choices are cut in very sharp relief, which is great for the purpose of creating compelling fiction.

Similar themes appear in *X: A Novel* (2015), in which the teenage Malcolm X struggles to come to terms with his complicated past in order to develop the identity of the civil rights leader and humanitarian that he would ultimately become. While many readers will come to the novel already having a sense of who Malcolm will grow up to be, it is interesting to consider how a person makes choices that lead him to a path of greatness. At age 16, Malcolm had no idea that he was going to become a speaker and leader, so the novel can inspire modern teenagers to recognize that they can change their own lives, and that the choices they make today, tomorrow, and the day after actually make a difference—nothing is set in stone when you are young. *You* get to choose, *you* get to act, *you* get to become the person you want to be.

*Do you tend to have specific plans or aims for addressing moral issues and/or personal integrity when you begin your novels, or do explorations of right and wrong develop organically through your characters and the situations they encounter?*

**Kekla:** I don't set out to put characters in situations where they will have to address moral issues, but it invariably happens in the course of writing a novel, if the story is going to be interesting. Moral dilemmas can be big or small—deciding whether to join a civil rights organizing movement like the Black Panther Party, potentially placing your life on the line, or deciding whether to sneak out of the house after curfew, potentially angering your parents. The significance and possible consequences of these choices are very different, but readers are always going to be interested in watching characters confront the intersections between their desires, their goals, the “right thing to do,” and the rules.

**Aisha:** The inspiration to write *Written in the Stars* stemmed from a desire to understand how parents can force their children into marriage and how societal and cultural forces can lead to someone finding it difficult to leave such a marriage. I had childhood friends who were pressured and coerced into marriages they did not want to enter into. It was difficult to witness, and my novel was written in some ways to understand for myself how such things come to pass and how parents who I myself knew so well could force their children into unhappy situations. Writing this novel helped me understand the nuances and complexity regarding the matters involved.

**Becky:** To be honest, much of the creative process is a mystery to me, and it honestly feels as though these explorations develop organically. For example, in my book, Simon arrives at certain understandings of issues related to race and privilege. I never deliberately set out to include these themes; these were issues I explored alongside my characters. That being said, I do think my personal beliefs bleed into my work, and my own growth makes room for my characters to grow with me.

*Should there be a place for character exploration of dark, forbidden, or seemingly “wrong” paths in books for adolescent readers, or could this lead to undesirable consequences?*

**Aisha:** I believe that adolescent readers are capable, insightful, and thoughtful individuals who can handle difficult subject matter. As much as we may wish young readers all had conflict-free lives where they did not have to endure painful situations, many young people face incredibly difficult circumstances. *Written in the Stars* covers the dark territory of forced marriage, and the truth is that my friends and many others even today experience this reality. Those readers need and deserve books that mirror their experiences and help educate others on the seriousness of this human rights issue.

**Kekla:** Reading about difficult or challenging or “forbidden” things isn't going to make people run out and try these things—books carry much less influence than peer pressure in this regard. In fact, they

are more likely to serve as cautionary tales and to allow young readers to imagine themselves doing strange and dangerous things as a form of escape, rather than actually going out into the world and trying these things firsthand.

**Becky:** The reality is, many teens experience dark and challenging feelings, and they often experiment with “wrong” or dangerous paths. Books can provide safe spaces for teens to explore these aspects of their internal experiences. When authors approach these stories with care and sensitivity, they have the opportunity to present hopeful outcomes and healthy or ethically sound choices. I honestly believe that it is far more toxic, and even dangerous, to allow these impulses to remain unexplored.

**Kekla:** It would be unfortunate if the first time a teen learns what alcohol intoxication can look and feel like occurs at a party where she is being offered liquor-laced drinks. Sheltering young readers won’t stop them from ever being exposed to risky opportunities, and reading fiction can help prepare them to make good choices when the moments do come in real life. It’s essential for books to allow readers a chance to explore things they might not encounter in real life. There is no place safer for a reader to explore potentially dangerous things and to learn about boundaries and consequences.

*Becky Albertalli is the award-winning author of Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda. She is a clinical psychologist who has had the privilege of conducting therapy with dozens of smart, weird, irresistible teenagers. Her new*

*book, The Upside of Unrequited, will be published in April 2017.*

*Kekla Magoon is the author of nine young adult novels, including The Rock and the River, How It Went Down, X: A Novel, and the Robyn Hoodlum Adventures series. She has received an NAACP Image Award, the John Steptoe New Talent Award, two Coretta Scott King Honors, the Walter Award Honor, and been long-listed for the National Book Award. She also writes nonfiction on historical topics. Kekla conducts school and library visits nationwide and serves on the Writers’ Council for the National Writing Project. She holds a BA from Northwestern University and an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she serves on faculty.*

*Aisha Saeed (aishasaeed.com) is a Pakistani American writer, teacher, and attorney. Her writings have appeared in publications that include The Orlando Sentinel, Muslim Girl, and Rivaaj. As one of the founding members of the much talked about We Need Diverse Books campaign, she is helping to change the conversation about diversity in literature. She is also a contributing author to the highly acclaimed Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women, which features the story of her own (happily) arranged marriage. Aisha lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and sons.*

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