

Meanings of Life and Realities of Loss:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation among Martha Brockenbrough, Jennifer Niven, Adam Silvera, and Francisco X. Stork, influential authors known and respected for their willingness to tackle difficult yet important topics that are relevant to so many adolescents. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging questions that center on morality and how it relates to life's meanings and the realities of loss.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all four authors. 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 poignant insights offered in the direct and honest responses from these authors of adolescent literature.

How can literature complicate conceptions about life's meaning and the realities of loss?

Francisco: Kafka once said that a book must be an axe for the frozen sea within us. We numb ourselves to aspects of reality because it is so messy and complicated and painful. The problem is that as human beings, we are meant to grow, and growth can only take place when we are open and accepting of what is—the “is” that is mysterious and complicated and paradoxical and simple, beautiful, and painful all at once. Meaning will only reveal itself in the messiness of life; literature

pierces through the familiar but incomplete reality of our routine lives and takes us into the messiness and mystery of existence. It can be an instrument for remembering and discovering the meaning we may have lost.

Martha: Books almost never begin at the beginning or at the end of a character's life. There are great reasons for this, but it does mean that we have a pretty narrow definition of success in the context of story. Success for a character means slaying the dragon. In reality, though, the dragon always wins. If not now, later. Loss is inevitable, and it is everywhere.

Jennifer: I believe literature can actually simplify our conceptions about life and loss, at least in the sense that it can illuminate and expand the reader's experience. In life, we have only our own personal perspectives, which can complicate our understanding of things like loss. But in literature, we're offered a full array of opinions and ideas—thoughts and feelings we might not be privy to otherwise—which opens us to numerous perspectives. It's easy to judge others or feel isolated when we have only one point of view, but literature enables us to put ourselves in the minds and hearts of others.

Martha: My favorite books are the ones that acknowledge the full complexity of humanity—books where villains and heroes maybe aren't so different from each other, where we can understand the motiva-

tions of each, even as we might prefer the point of view of one.

Adam: My favorite books are complicated in some arena, usually with relationships that become so messy I would have no idea how to navigate them in real life; I wish those characters the best as I read on with snacks in hand to see how they'll untangle these messes. My second novel, *History Is All You Left Me* (2017), is about two boys grieving the same boy—childhood love for one, recent boyfriend for the other. You have these two possessive boys who've had their futures shattered and are now turning to each other to try and heal, which of course isn't simple when both boys are withholding pieces of the puzzle. I was really fascinated by the idea of a relationship like this, and I couldn't shake it, which of course led me to write the book, but the true genesis was loss. The reality of hard-hitting loss is that you're forced to rediscover yourself afterwards, almost as if the old you has died. The only issue I have with representation of loss in literature is when the characters appear fully healed of their grief by the end. Unless your book spans a decade, it feels unrealistic. And even then.

How might your books foster opportunities for readers to explore the gray areas of morality?

Jennifer: I think it's by helping readers to see varying points of view and presenting those gray areas in an accessible way. In my new YA novel, *Holding Up the Universe* (2016), my main male character commits an act that he knows is bad. It's an act of bullying, bordering on sexual harassment, but he commits this act for what he believes are necessary reasons, ones he sees as self-preservation. My challenge in creating him was making him sympathetic because I didn't approve of this thing he did, and I knew my readers wouldn't either. However, I understood why he felt he needed to do this thing, and so my job was to convey that and hopefully enable readers to not give up on him, even to like him and empathize with him.

Adam: I work really hard to form characters that read like real humans. No one is 100 percent good, nor is someone 100 percent evil. In *More Happy Than*

Not (2015), the main cast of characters—narrator Aaron, his girlfriend Genevieve, his best friend/love interest Thomas—are all likable, for the most part, but everyone makes questionable decisions. If they were painted to be too good or too evil, those questionable things they do wouldn't even be considered questionable; they'd be obvious to their highlighted nature. That's not interesting storytelling or realistic representation. People can be awesome, but people can really drop the ball, too. That's a life lesson to learn ASAP so you know how to protect the friendships that mean everything to you with forgiveness.

Francisco: If you go to a place of worship or if you read a religious text, you might be told what is right and what is wrong. When I write, I am more interested in creating questions than in giving answers. I try to write about characters who need to make moral choices that are difficult or ambiguous or involve personal sacrifice. In *Marcelo in the Real World* (2009), Marcelo has to choose between helping an injured girl and hurting his father. In *Irises* (2012), Mary and Kate hold equally convincing but opposing beliefs as to when life ends. The contemplation of choices for which there is no one universal answer can help break our internal rigidity and encourage us to be more compassionate toward others.

Jennifer: So much of the message of *Holding Up the Universe* is about acceptance—of others and of oneself—and of learning not to judge others before we understand who they are. I think that's an important lesson, no matter what gray area you're exploring with your characters. As my female character Libby observes, "This was the thing Mom did—looked at all sides of things. She believed that situations and people were almost never black-and-white."

Martha: One person's immorality might be another person's Monday morning. *The Game of Love and Death* (2015) portrays both interracial and same-sex love, both of which might be seen as immoral—not by me, but to readers who grow up in different parts of the country and world. So, while I don't view these things as gray areas at all,

I did choose to show them in 1937, a time when interracial marriage was in some states illegal, and same-sex relationships were almost universally condemned. I chose this time because it helped dramatize more vividly some of the heartbreak experienced by people who find themselves in love with the so-called wrong person. Falling in love is a universal or near-universal experience. Readers can relate to how it feels to be in love, and this is a way for a reader to recognize common aspects of humanity. Even if your own life looks different, you can feel how these differences are superficial in the face of deeper truths.

In dealing with loss, do your characters grow stronger or more vulnerable? Perhaps both? Or something else altogether?

Adam: Loss will make your characters stronger eventually, though they're absolutely more vulnerable when we're introducing them to the reader. The characters are in that murky phase of rediscovering themselves, which will lead to some out-of-character behavior before growing into their new selves. It's metamorphosis brought on by tragedy, basically.

Martha: Both, for sure. Some losses are an unburdening. You let go of things you didn't need to achieve or possess in pursuit of something with deeper meaning. Some losses weigh you down with grief that never really diminishes, even as you grow better at carrying it.

Jennifer: It depends entirely on the character, but I think characters, like real, breathing people, tend to grow both stronger *and* more vulnerable through loss. Perhaps it's more accurate to say they grow deeper, more resilient, more aware of life and of their own ability to continue and grow.

Martha: All loss has the potential for helping a character find her strength—strength displayed when she gets up one more time to face her foe. It's not loss doing this, though. It's the character.

Francisco: Suffering and loss bring my characters to a place of self-honesty and surrender to what is hap-

pening in their lives. They are more vulnerable, but vulnerability is no longer something to be feared because when they finally get to this place, there is nothing more that life or others can do to hurt them. There is a certain kind of strength in this. Not the strength of power and force. More like the quiet, gentle dignity of knowing who you are.

What are some take-away messages or thoughts you hope your readers have after reading about challenging moral issues in your books?

Jennifer: I hope they realize the importance of acceptance, of not judging others, and of walking around, as Atticus Finch said, in another's skin. I hope they realize that everyone is important and necessary, including them. That they are not alone. I hope they see that there are bright places around us and within us, even in the darkest times.

Martha: I hope readers grow to love my characters. It's practice in loving other people. This is how nourishing morality emerges—as opposed to the kind that insists on dividing us into the damned and the saved based on superficial differences.

Francisco: Similarly, more than messages, I would like my readers to remember my characters the way you would remember a real person who impressed you with the quality of his or her soul and made you want to be like him or her. My books are always hopeful, even when their endings may not be what we traditionally consider a happy ending. Hope, then, is the virtue that I would like the reader to take from my books.

Adam: *More Happy Than Not* is ultimately about the pursuit of happiness and the desperate avenues we'll wander down to achieve true happiness. But I want readers to understand sooner rather than later that true happiness will very rarely make itself available to us in our teen years. It's always rewarding to see your characters get the guy/get the girl or defeat the bad guy, but readers must also come to understand that lives aren't *less* just because they lack a significant other or some huge victory. It's important to see characters that maybe win the war but lose other battles. I wish I had

understood this sooner. I love happily-ever-after endings, but I can see why some of us become depressed when that literature doesn't match our reality at these ages. I don't think I'm ever going to write a book that doesn't leave you wondering how the characters are going to grow beyond their circumstances after the final page.

Martha: When you can root for a character to be brave, you can root for yourself and others in the real world in the same way. The path isn't necessarily the same for all of us, but we should all be allowed to walk our own paths to their ends. The more we take care of each other along the way, the better. In truth, we are all walking each other home, all of the time. The journey is better with kind company.

Is loss universal or shaped by unique external forces (geographic, financial, social, etc.) that make the experience unique? Can I know your loss?

Adam: Loss—and life—in my experience have been heavily shaped by outside forces. I've lost family members, grandparents mainly, but it was my favorite uncle's plane crash two months after 9/11 that really ingrained itself in me and generated a fear of airplanes that I didn't escape until I decided to fly across the country to see someone I loved. Loss of love has its own sucker punches, but I've been charmed enough to mend those lost loves into my greatest friendships. The details of loss, though, are totally going to be intimate to someone's situation. Some of us will have closer relationships with grandparents than we do our own parents, while others are missing a sibling who's gone away to college. The universal component of loss is emptiness and a desire to feel whole again, which can be impossible in the worst of cases, but finding happiness in our new lives is hugely instrumental in the healing process.

Jennifer: I feel that so much of loss is universal. As humans, we inevitably, unfortunately, must face losing the people we love or a job/home/relationship/pet we love, or something we love. I think loss is one of the things that ties us together. Can you know my loss? Not every facet. Not every sin-

gle way that loss affects me. Not my particular way of expressing loss. Maybe for you loss causes anger or depression, or maybe you pretend it isn't there. Maybe I grieve in a different way. But I believe that the loss itself comes from a similar, universal place, and the fact that you can know what your own feels like is enough to understand mine. It's also enough to know—however you process your loss—that you are not alone.

Martha: I agree that loss is universal. We all experience it. Our ability to empathize with others is the variable here. I suspect there is an empathy spectrum. Some more naturally do this, while others struggle. Everyone can get better with practice. Of course, we also need to practice the flip side, which is not projecting our feelings onto others and making assumptions.

Francisco: In real life, I can only truly know your loss to the extent that I can connect it to a loss I've experienced. Literature, however, allows us to understand through empathy and imagination a loss that we ourselves have not experienced.

Martha: Fiction is a safe way to know another person's loss. We get to read a book however we like, love and despise whichever characters we like. However a book serves readers is fine and dandy, especially when it helps them put their own losses in perspective. To feel less alone in this world is a good thing.

Can hope come from loss? How is the relationship between loss and hope manifested in your work?

Martha: Hope doesn't come from loss. Hope comes from inside of us. It is our decision to be stronger than our disappointments and heartbreaks. You can have hope without loss. Having it after loss is a testament to the wonders of resilience.

Francisco: In many ways, most of my books are about the journey from loss to hope. How does hope come, and how do we hold on to it when hopelessness often seems like the more appropriate response to the world we live in? There are qualities of hope that are gift-like, and there are quali-

ties that require our effort. Learning how to wait for hope in the midst of despair and learning how to create hope in the midst of loss are some of the ultimate concerns expressed in my work.

Jennifer: I don't know that hope can *come* from loss, but I think it can definitely be found *in spite of* loss. In *All the Bright Places* (2015), the thing Violet realizes is that even after devastating loss, life continues, and even in the darkest times, bright places are all around—and within—us. Like Violet, I've lost too many people I love—grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends, a boyfriend, and, most tragically, both my parents. So I know what loss is, and I know what resilience is, and part of that resilience is born from hope and from those bright places that remain.

Adam: There's nothing more defeating than hopeless loss. Loss provides opportunities to grow, but some of us can be really, really stubborn about allowing ourselves to reach that next level. I know this may be an unpopular opinion, but I love when another character/person helps pull someone out of his or her (metaphorical) grave. People need people. And being healed by someone you love or fall in love with isn't a bad thing! Some of us can't be trusted to take care of ourselves independently. Get me the knight in shining armor; then I'll be able to help others heal after learning from someone who saved me.

Martha: I think it's worth making this point: Sometimes bad things happen. They don't always—or ever—happen for a reason. Children don't get cancer because they were manifesting negativity. People don't get hit by cars because they were insufficiently grateful.

Loss is not something we experience so we have fuel for better living. It's something we experience because we are alive. It's the price we pay to be alive. How beautiful we want our lives to be is directly related to how much hope we summon, and it tends to come from the deepest parts of ourselves after we've been crushed by loss. We get the credit for it, though. Loss is generally a jerk.

Martha Brockenbrough has worked as a newspaper reporter, a high school teacher, and an editor of MSN.com; she is the author of *Devine Intervention* and *The Dinosaur Tooth Fairy*. She is also a devoted grammarian and founder of National Grammar Day and the Society for the Promotion of Good Grammar (SPOGG). Martha is the social media diva for *readergirlz*, the nonprofit literacy organization that received the Innovations in Reading Award from the National Book Foundation. She lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband and their two daughters.

Jennifer Niven is the author of the New York Times best-seller (as well as international bestseller) *All the Bright Places*. Her latest young adult novel, *Holding Up the Universe*, was published in October, 2016 and is also a New York Times and international bestseller. She has also written four novels for adults—*American Blonde*, *Becoming Clementine*, *Velva Jean Learns to Fly*, and *Velva Jean Learns to Drive*—as well as three nonfiction books—*The Ice Master*, *Ada Blackjack*, and *The Aqua Net Diaries*, a memoir about her high school experiences. She grew up in Indiana and now lives with her fiancé and literary cats in Los Angeles. For more information, visit JenniferNiven.com, GermMagazine.com, or find her on Facebook or Twitter.

Adam Silvera was born and raised in the Bronx. He has worked in the publishing industry as a children's bookseller, marketing assistant at a literary development company, and book reviewer of children's and young adult novels. His debut novel, *More Happy Than Not*, received multiple starred reviews and is a New York Times bestseller and recipient of a Publishers Weekly *Flying Start*. He writes full-time in New York City and is tall for no reason.

Francisco X. Stork is the author of *Marcelo in the Real World*, winner of the Schneider Family Book Award for Teens and the *Once Upon a World Award*; *The Last Summer of the Death Warriors*, which was named to the YALSA Best Fiction for Teens list and won the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award; and *Irises*. He lives near Boston with his wife. You can find him online at www.franciscostork.com and follow him on Twitter at [@StorkFrancisco](https://twitter.com/StorkFrancisco).

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