Brendan **Kiely,** Kristin **Levine,** and Isabel **Quintero**

Fighting for What Is Right:

Characters Who Take Risks and Challenge Assumptions

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation among three YA authors who have explicitly addressed issues of agency and activism in their presentations and writings. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage so thoughtfully in such an important topic.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author. We compiled the responses into a single, shared document for authors to elaborate upon and revise until all were satisfied with the resulting piece. We hope that our readers gain an increased appreciation for these authors and the challenging issues they tackle.

How do your characters fight for what is right in difficult situations?

Brendan: How does a person define "right and wrong," and how does that change over time, or what inspires that change? Paradigms of cultural understanding shape the way we think about ethics and morality (rights and wrongs), and fighting for what's right, to my mind, often requires a paradigm shift.

In *All American Boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), Quinn battles the complacency his privilege provides him. Like too many white Americans, he wants to believe that by doing nothing (after witnessing racial injustice), he can remain neutral. That's what he tells himself initially—but he's lying to himself. Quinn's first real fight against injustice is to find the courage to be honest and recognize how he might be part of the problem. But no one should fight alone, and in all my books, the value of friendship is the way in which teens push each other and hold each other accountable. For example, the rampant and unchecked misogynistic culture at a boarding school in my upcoming novel *Tradition* (2018) makes girls unsafe. In order for Jimmy Baxter to fight for what's right, he has to listen when his friends (and especially the girls) hold him accountable.

Isabel: I think that's the key to doing what's "right": listening, to others and to yourself. Gabi and her friends in *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* (2014) have been brought up in similar cultural environments and can therefore relate to each other in some ways, but this by no means signifies homogeneity in their belief systems. For example, Sebastian gets kicked out of his home for being gay. Gabi cannot understand how a parent would do that. She is also surprised by her own mother's reaction, allowing Sebastian to live with them, because she didn't expect that from her. In this case, it is easy for Gabi to do what is right.

In another situation, however, Gabi is confronted with Georgina (a classmate) and her unwanted pregnancy. Here, Gabi struggles more with doing what is "right," not because she isn't pro-choice, but because she has to face the fact that Georgina is a more complex individual than she had originally thought. Going to the clinic is a brave choice for both Georgina (obviously) and for Gabi. They are both in a place their parents would

not approve; however, they both know they are doing what is right. This certainty for Gabi comes from understanding that it is a tougher situation for Georgina than it is for the boy who got her pregnant and who doesn't have to deal with any of the consequences. Ultimately, the characters must do some internal searching each time they face a difficult situation that requires a "right" action. Mostly, they have to ask themselves a version of *Why am I/ am I not doing this?*

Kristin: In *The Best Bad Luck I Ever Had* (2009), Dit, a white boy in the deep South, becomes friends with Emma, a black girl. In *The Lions of Little Rock* (2012), Marlee and Liz help to get the schools reopened when they are closed to prevent integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. In *The Paper Cowboy* (2014), Tommy fights to get his troubled family the help it needs.

Although my stories are set in different times and places, they all start with the realization that the status quo is wrong. I love writing about how adolescents begin to question social conventions and beliefs in which they may have been complicit in the past. It's a scary but exciting time, full of much personal reflection and growth.

However, my characters also fight by realizing they can't go it alone. Learning to ask for help and finding a community to provide it are huge themes in my stories. Change in one person is not enough; activism actually means inspiring change in a community.

Too often, young people are not taken seriously because of their age and lack of experience. How do your characters challenge this assumption?

Kristin: What I love about characters on the cusp of adulthood is that they have a certain naivety about them. They don't realize they are "too young to make a difference," so they give it a try. Often this is simply doing what they know how to do.

Dit can't change his friends' teasing, but he can teach Emma to throw a baseball. Marlee doesn't run the campaign to reopen the schools, but she does open their mail. Tommy can't solve his mother's problems, but he can play the accordion in a fundraiser to help pay his family's bills. It's taking that first, small action that often inspires others around them to take action as well.

My characters also learn to see partial success as still worth the struggle. Dit and Emma become friends, but she still has to leave town. Marlee and Liz get the high schools reopened, but they still have to attend separate, segregated middle schools. Tommy helps with his family's medical bills, but he still has to deal with a less-than-perfect home life. Part of their journey is realizing that change is often gradual, slow, and imperfect. But it is still worth striving for.

Brendan: A paradigm shift requires the humility and strength to change yourself to become someone new, and the greater capacity for reinvention that young people have inspires me. In *All American Boys*, Quinn's greater capacity than most of the adults to interrogate his own white privilege enables him to be a better participant in the fight for racial justice. And in *Tradition*, Jimmy Baxter's willingness to challenge the ways he's been told what it means to be a man enables him to embrace what it means to be a feminist and become a stronger ally to the girls in the school.

Isabel: Well, the challenge really is directed at the belief systems young people were raised with. The choice they make when they decide that the adults in their lives have failed them in a way is still questioned. And that's because adults have a difficult time accepting that teens can make good decisions for themselves. Cindy, one of Gabi's best friends, is looked down upon because she is pregnant and therefore deemed irresponsible, even though readers later find out how she came to be pregnant. However, Gabi's mom is pregnant, and there are no repercussions; it is a given that she is an adult and therefore knew what she was doing, yet it was a bit irresponsible. Gabi is able to see this double standard and questions it, if only in her journal.

Kristin: To me, it's not so much that the adults around my young characters have failed them as it is that my protagonists are realizing for the first time that the adults in their lives are imperfect. Growing up means accepting this and learning to think for themselves.

Isabel: I think both Cindy and Georgina make decisions that challenge assumptions of lack of maturity. Both make choices based on the lives they lead and knowing what they can handle. They put thought into their choices and aren't impulsive about them. Even Gabi's decision to go away to college challenges assumptions of what is expected, yet she does what is best for her. Whether or not the adults in their lives will/would understand this is another issue.

How do you craft characters to help them become change agents?

Brendan: I try to create characters who are learning to become better listeners. Listening—non-defensive listening that is open to criticism—always comes first. I often write about characters with vast amounts of social privilege and power; in order for them to fight for what's right, they must have the humility to recognize when they are part of the problem of injustice.

Characters with privilege become change agents when they address and critique those who share it with them. They can never shed their privilege and power—wishing so is its own kind of danger—but they can think about how to live with it more consciously. Quinn's decision to wear a t-shirt asking others to join him at the protest is an act that asks people like him, who are too comfortable in their complacency, to risk discomfort in doing what's right. Jimmy Baxter's decision to confront the misogyny in the locker room comes from really hearing Jules when she tells him she needs him to be her friend not only when he is by her side but, most specifically, when she isn't in the room—when he's in a room full of boys, and her body is under threat from afar.

Kristin: When I'm crafting characters, I like to think about both the external and internal changes they go through. Being a "change agent" at the most basic level involves changing something about ourselves: what we believe, what we say, how we act.

Also, I think for my characters to become change agents, it has to feel personal. Marlee might have felt it was unjust that people of different races couldn't go to school together, but without her friendship with Liz, I'm not sure she would have taken the time to do anything about it.

Isabel: Because I created the characters, I could give them some wisdom that I have gained over the years (ha ha ha). I, too, am inspired by real young people who are agents of change. Gabi and her friends are simply questioning authorities in their lives, and that is probably the best answer I can give; I have my characters question everything and then question the answers to those questions. I think that is how change begins, right? By questioning expectations, rules, and people who attempt to govern us by being dependent on our conformity, we begin to change and then enact change in the world.

When you encourage activism, are there certain responsibilities you have as an author? Are there certain risks or consequences that land on the shoulders of the young readers who take up your charge?

Kristin: As an author, I do feel like I have a responsibility to make sure not to portray people as the good and the bad, the "us" and the "other." Some of my favorite characters in *The Lions of Little Rock* ended up being more minor characters, like Sally and JT, who do bad things and express offensive viewpoints but, in the end, are not bad people.

Because the fact is that we have to deal with everyone in our society. We can't just avoid those with whom we don't agree, even those whose opinions and beliefs we find abhorrent. True change is standing by those people, too, not giving up, but not forcing our beliefs down their throats, either.

Isabel: There are several ways to be an activist, and I encourage young readers to do what is right for them. Usually, I encourage young readers to write and question; to use their voices to tell their own stories. I think that is a type of activism. Mostly, I think doing things outside of the narrative that has been written for us by others, whether it be attending academic institutions that were never meant for us, writing, saying no to conformity and complacency—these are all forms of activism. Of course, there are responsibilities as an author; we do not live in a vacuum, and we must understand

that what we say or do, or don't say or don't do, has consequences.

Some young women find themselves in the same boat as I did—with a parent who has told them they cannot move away to college because there is no value in it and it promotes promiscuity. To those women I say, "Move out and go away to college if that is what you really want to do." Of course, this goes against what we have been taught and how we have been raised—to obey. It's just another symptom of patriarchy in our communities that limits women (and some young men). When I encourage going away to college, however, I talk about what can potentially happen—good and bad. Ultimately, it is their choice, and they should do what's best for them. That is a form of activism, as well—fighting against centuries of patriarchal expectations of good girl behavior by going off to college.

Kristin: Isabel, I so admire that you had the strength to go away to college when your parent didn't want you to go. I'm not sure I would have been able to do that as a teenager! It's taken me much longer to learn to listen to my own voice about what is right and wrong.

Isabel: I wish! I didn't realize I was strong enough to do it then, but I want to help young women realize that they have options.

Brendan: To Kristin's point about getting away from "good and bad," "us and them," I, too, feel a responsibility to try to find the fuller humanity in all of the characters in a book. I think the story that feels real to young and old readers alike provides the most room for discussion in a classroom and provides the greatest opportunity for young readers to feel inspired and take up the charge of the novel's call for social justice.

From your perspective as an author, how would you like to see your novels used in classroom contexts?

Isabel: I'm not sure. I think this depends on the teachers and professors who have been using it. I know I'd like students to be able to see themselves in the novel, question patriarchy, and challenge biases, and I would encourage them to write their own stories, but beyond that, no se.

Brendan: When I was a high school English teacher, I wanted the books in each course to be in conversation with each other. I write with similar intertextual obsessions. *The Last True Love Story* (2016) is in direct conversation with *The Odyssey* (Homer, trans. 1999), as it asks the same questions about what "home" means, but these texts arrive at different conclusions because I am addressing an odyssey for a different era. *Tradition* is in direct conversation with the biblical book of Genesis, as it asks questions about innocence and experience as they relate to fundamentally corrosive assumptions about sexuality and gender. And while pairing texts is invaluable (many people already pair *To Kill a Mockingbird* [Lee, 1960] with *All American Boys*—which thrills me to no end!), there are many other ways (and many other voices) to add to the conversations as well. What love songs and love poems could be taught alongside *The Last True Love Story*? I dream of classrooms pairing *Tradition* alongside Kirby Dick's (2006) film *The Hunting Ground*.

Also, Isabel, if I were still teaching, I'd love to use *Gabi, a Girl in Pieces* as a novel that introduces a poetry unit. I always used poetry as a way for students to explore and assert personal identity, and your book brilliantly lays that out for folks!

Kristin: I hope my novels are used to raise the topic of race in classrooms. I do a lot of school visits, and many of the schools I visit are still all white or predominantly white. I feel like they have a different understanding of the book than more diverse classrooms.

I specifically hope *The Lions of Little Rock* is used to encourage people to remember the value of school integration. The height of integration in this country was in 1987—thirty years ago! I can't help thinking that some of the fracturedness we've seen in our country lately is a result of us not having diverse enough schools. It's hard to be afraid of people who look different than you if you wait with them at the bus stop every morning.

What is the power of story?

Isabel: Whew, this question. . . . We use stories like we use metaphors and similes—to gain understanding. When we talk about being kind to each other, we talk about the story of the Good Samaritan. When we talk about fascism, someone brings up *1984* (Orwell, 1949). When we try to explain love, often someone (sadly) brings up *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare, 1594/1985). Western Imperialism? *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Garcia, 1978). Stories are important in our understandings of ourselves and the world around us.

Story becomes more powerful when we can see glimpses of our realities in them. When this happens, it's like our existence becomes validated in some way. I will never tire of telling the story of how Michele Serros's work changed my life—it was the first time I saw myself, my Chicananess, in a piece of writing. Suddenly, being Chicana became important. I had a voice. It is easier to preserve your culture when instead of giving in to assimilation, you see it celebrated; that is what Michele Serros encouraged—not giving in. That is a powerful and important thing.

Brendan: I will never forget studying *Frankenstein* (1818/1982) as a sophomore in high school. I was fascinated with the questions Shelley asks about what it means to be human: who is ultimately more human, Dr. Frankenstein or his creation, or do they both embody extreme elements of our humanity? These were big questions, but what I remember most was the plunging feeling in my gut when I suddenly saw myself as one of the villagers chasing the creation out of town. Who had I called or made feel like a monster in my life? Who had I, in a sense, tried to chase out of my social group? This came at a time when I was beginning to think much more broadly about society and its injustices, and while I read articles and case studies about injustice, nothing was as powerful as reading Shelley's *Frankenstein* and asking myself two questions woven into one: What does it mean to be human, and how is justice a part of it? What's my role in the story—who do I become?

Kristin: Story is powerful because it allows us to see life from another person's point of view. It also allows us to see motivation in a character's actions—something that is often missing from real life. JT, for example, is someone who might be dismissed as an obnoxious jerk if we came across him in real life. By seeing his family and where he comes from, we learn a lot about why he acts the way he does.

Story also tells us about possibility and provides hope that change *is* possible. A good story makes you feel like the struggle is worth it in a way that is sometimes hard to see in real life, especially when you're stuck in the middle of a situation you'd like to change. Ultimately, I think, story can make us feel less alone. It's wonderful to know that others in the world share our concerns, even if those immediately around us do not. At its best, fiction can give us the strength and bravery to face the challenges of our own, real-life story.

***Brendan Kiely** is the* New York Times *bestselling author of* All American Boys *(with Jason Reynolds),* The Last True Love Story*, and* The Gospel of Winter*. His work has been published in 10 languages; has received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award, the Walter Dean Myers Award, and the Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award; was twice awarded Best Fiction for Young Adults (2015, 2017) by the American Library Association; and was a* Kirkus Reviews *Best Books of 2014.* Tradition *(forthcoming in spring 2018) is his fourth novel.*

***Kristin Levine** received her Bachelor of Arts in German from Swarthmore College and a Masters of Fine Arts in film from American University. Before becoming a writer, she worked various jobs—from an au pair in Vienna, Austria, to a professor of screenwriting at American University. Currently, she lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with her two daughters. Her first book,* The Best Bad Luck I Ever Had*, was on the American Library Association's 2010 list of Best Books for Young Adults.* The Lions of Little Rock *was selected for numerous state reading lists, was a* New York Times *Sunday Book Review editor's choice, and received the New York Historical Society's Children's History Book Prize.* The Paper Cowboy *is her third novel.*

***Isabel Quintero** is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. She resides and writes in the Inland Empire of Southern California. Her first book,* Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*, is the recipient of several awards—among them the 2015 William*

C. Morris Award for Debut YA Novel and the 2015 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award—and it has been on several best of and recommended reading lists. Her series Ugly Cat & Pablo (Scholastic) is out in spring 2017, and a graphic novel biography on photographer Graciela Iturbide (Getty Publications), which she collaborated on with Zeke Peña (the cover artist for Gabi, a Girl in Pieces*), will be released in September 2017. In addition to writing fiction, she also writes poetry, and her work can be found in various journals online and in print.*

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