

# Unconventional Families and Making Our Own:

A Collaborative Conversation

**From the Editors:** In this piece, we are honored to feature a written conversation among David Arnold, Jenny Torres Sanchez, Teresa Toten, Jeff Zentner, and Ibi Zoboi, inspiring and honest authors who explore unconventional definitions of family. We appreciate the generous response of the authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging questions that focus on exploring constructions of family, particularly how we form our own families in ways that might differ from more traditional definitions of family.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to all five 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 important insights offered in the thoughtful responses of these authors for adolescents.

*How do you envision the concept of family?*

**Jenny:** Family is interesting because it can mean so many contradicting things. It's blood ties and not blood ties. People you love, people you hate, people you don't know well sometimes, and people you can't imagine going through life without. Overall, though, I guess family is whomever you feel tied to in some strong way, whether by blood or not.

**Jeff:** In my mind, a family is any grouping of mutually loving people that agrees to consider itself a family. I'm not very concerned with the presence or absence of legal or blood ties.

**Ibi:** I envision the concept of family as being one that consists of some biological ties, where members share common lineages with one another, however close or distant. Such members can also adopt others into their respective families, and those relationships expand to include family members bound by love. Ultimately, love is the unifying force within any given family—an energy that nurtures, supports, and protects each member.

**David:** I think family is a person or a group of people who accept you for exactly who you are no matter what. They may not always like it, and they may not always show it, but at the end of the day, you can come home to these people because these people are home.

**Teresa:** I believe that families defy definition, and that's as it should be. Many of us have agonized over the word *family*, especially when ours have fallen short of what our culture still holds up as "normal"—that is, a family that's intact and nuclear. Family is messier and looser. It's also the most powerful force in a young person's life. And its reach is long.

*What roles do parents and guardians, extended family members, friends, siblings, neighbors, teachers, caregivers, etc. play in defining family for adolescents?*

**David:** I'll speak for myself here, but when I was an adolescent, I was fairly convinced that adults had pretty much lost their grip on reality. Now that I am an adult, my opinion hasn't changed all that much. I spend a good amount of time in schools and bookstores and festivals with teens, and I always walk away thinking the future is brighter than the present. This isn't to say adults have nothing to offer. I'm a dad of a four-year-old, and there are times when I feel I just have so much to teach him, and while that may be true, I think back to when I was a kid and try to remember: there's a lot he can teach me, too.

**Jenny:** I think many different people can play a role in an adolescent's definition of family, but it's obviously very particular to a person's experience. Some of us are born to individuals we never meet, or ones who don't know how to care for us, or ones who love and support us, and there are all shades in between. I think when you don't feel that love and support, you seek it, and whomever you find it in becomes family. Those who will love and look out for you just as much as, or more, or in place of, your parents (whom we trace ourselves back to time and time again).

**Teresa:** Aside from immediate and extended family members, a *consistent*, caring adult can play a critical role in supporting and shaping a young person. Absent that, peer groups or even gangs will stand in for the semblance of family. The thirst to belong is primal and paramount.

**Jeff:** I think the most important thing that these people can do to define family for adolescents is to model the sort of unconditional love and acceptance that's the hallmark of a family and to teach adolescents that *this* is what defines a family, whether or not that family meets stereotypical narrow criteria. I think it's important, too, that these people honor and teach young people to take pride in unconventional families, hopefully inoculating

them against those who attack unconventional families.

**Jenny:** Adolescence can be such a confusing, lonely time when we feel misunderstood; in a way, it becomes a time of looking for family, a time of looking for those who understand and get us. Maybe that's why friends are especially important to us when we're teens; they are the people we spend so much of that time with and who, ultimately, become family to us—sometimes for a lifetime and sometimes only during that point in our lives.

**Ibi:** Our culture instills this idea that both parents are supposed to play vital roles in defining family for adolescents. In truth, far too many children are raised in single-parent homes, oftentimes isolated from extended family. There's a stark difference between what society says ought to take place within families and the reality within many households. Parents should be the primary teachers who impart values, faith, culture, and tradition to their growing children. Extended family members serve to reinforce those values. But when friends, neighbors, and teachers don't share many of these values, they can still function as support systems that connect adolescents to their larger community. If the core values at home are those of empathy, building strong character, and making right choices, every single person an adolescent comes into contact with should echo those same core values, both in their personal lives and in how they interact with others. This will ultimately cultivate overall well-being in teens, their families, and the community at large.

*What role might an unconventional family experience play in the lives of young people? How are your characters influenced by their families?*

**Teresa:** Unlike Tolstoy, I believe that no two families are alike, whether they're happy, unhappy, or near unrecognizable. Who raised you? Did it matter that it wasn't a family like all the other families on your block? Hopefully someone met your emotional and basic needs, gave you boundaries, encouraged your dreams, and a whole lot more. If those needs were met, awkward moments aside, I'll bet you

reached adulthood as a decent human. If your family was traditional, perhaps you had a friend whose household was not—the variations of *different* are endless. Witnessing that love is love, no matter the architecture, alters you. Experiencing a family construct other than the one you know goes a long way toward obliterating the fear of “the other.” I believe that fear can also diminish if it’s experienced through the pages of a YA novel.

**Jeff:** An unconventional family experience could be a saving grace to a young person. There’s nothing more frightening than feeling alone and unloved when you’re a young person, because it feels like that’ll last forever. My characters’ families often leave them wanting for some sort of emotional satisfaction, so they form families of choice that deliver that emotional satisfaction. This is true even when my characters come from exceptionally supportive and loving families.

**Ibi:** My personal understanding of unconventional families would be that of single-parent households in urban communities where women often work full-time jobs while raising one or more children without much help from extended family or neighbors. Historically, this has played a major role in how urban teens interact with their peers, their school community, and their neighborhood. Without much adult supervision or guidance, teens face a tremendous amount of peer pressure, financial insecurity, and apprehension in striving for personal goals. This is the case for all my teen characters in *American Street* (2017). They are being cared for by single mothers who must find ways to earn a living while in a country and city crippled by large unemployment rates. In these situations, there often isn’t enough time or wherewithal within the household to impart values or traditions. The modus operandi becomes that of daily survival, and within this context, teens can view other teens as threats, while adults and teachers are viewed as untrustworthy.

**Teresa:** Family is the most critical factor in the development of every character I’ve ever written. Adam, in *The Unlikely Hero of Room 13b* (2013), is the product of divorce; both households suffer from various degrees of mental health issues, yet both homes are loving and supportive. It helps. On the

other hand, both Olivia and Kate, in *Beware That Girl* (2016), come from a near nonexistent family structure. They’re damaged and drawn to each other for many reasons, but the most important is their need to *make family*.

**David:** In *The Kids of Appetite* (2016), our group consists of one kid whose father recently passed and whose mother is contemplating remarriage, one kid whose parents are dead and whose abusive uncle is now the primary caretaker, one kid whose mother left when she was born and whose depressed father eventually resorts to foster care for his primary income, and two brothers who lost their parents and sister while fleeing their war-torn country. These kids are nothing if not found family. And while theirs may not be the ideal situation, I like to think they raise each other up.

**Jenny:** I think it helps to broaden our definition of family and extend it outside the bubble of the “norm.” I think it creates understanding, empathy, and insight. Several of my characters find ways to survive *despite* their biological family. And they seek family elsewhere.

### ***In what ways have your own family experiences influenced the portrayals of family in your work?***

**Ibi:** As an immigrant, my own family experiences have always been, at least to a certain extent, in direct contrast to what friends and neighbors in my immediate community were experiencing. I was raised by a single mother, and she relied on her Haitian community of friends for support. For years, I thought these friends of my mother were actual aunts, uncles, and cousins. But they were merely other Haitians who lived in the neighborhood. Family, in this case, was made up of the people who shared a nationality within communities where they were the minority. In *American Street*, I removed this element from the story to examine what would happen to an immigrant family if no one around shared the same nationality. How would the family interact with the surrounding community? How do teens navigate being the only member of a certain group? Do they hold on to their values, which will ultimately keep them connected to their distant cultural community? Or do

they try to assimilate in order to make new friends and create their own unconventional families?

**David:** Family can be complicated, certainly, and every family has its own set of histories, quirks, and flaws. But family can also be a life raft; my family saves me every day. I've often wondered if the reason I'm so drawn to writing found families is the unique ability it affords me to offer a life raft to someone who might be in desperate need of one.

**Jenny:** My family was far from perfect. There was love and strife and tension in my household. My parents were imperfect and had their own difficult pasts that they brought to our family along with the stress, uncertainty, and loneliness of being immigrants in the United States. Those experiences definitely influence the books I write. I think about family a lot—all the ways love and family dysfunction do and can play out, the different ways they manifest in families, the different reasons why. It's hard when you're trying to figure yourself out as a teen to also be trying to figure out the adults around you who shape and influence your life. It's unfair on some level because as a child, you're taught adults know better. But then you realize that's not always true. So that plays out in a lot of my stories—very flawed adults and authority figures and teen characters who don't understand the origin of their dysfunction but have to figure out how to deal with it.

**Teresa:** I'm working on my twelfth novel and just realized that none of my protagonists have ever enjoyed an intact nuclear family! I was raised by a remarkable single mother who never quite got the hang of English. She worked six days and two nights a week. I also had a half-brother who was 18 years older and who was charming, handsome, alcoholic, and violent. He came in and out of our lives like an itinerant hurricane. Although I had no other "family" and we seemed to move every year, I was blessed by a steady stream of caring teachers, librarians, and—most important—friends. The friends I made as a child are my *family* to this day, 50 years later. Friendship and the desire to *belong* are central to my novels, as are the stray but caring adults who arrive and then refuse to leave the page. Write what you know . . .

**Jeff:** I grew up with a very loving and supportive family, and even then, I turned to families of choice to feel fully understood. That experience made me realize that even characters with families that should fill every material and emotional need still need families of choice.

**How might literature allow readers to find family in fictional spaces and places? Who might serve as your literary family?**

**Jeff:** Literature can provide readers with vibrant, living characters with whom they can surround themselves to create a surrogate family. Any character whose struggles you can identify with and relate to might serve as a member of your literary family.

**Jenny:** I think literature allows for strong, emotional ties to characters, their stories, and their struggles. So any reader might find support and understanding in the pages of a book, might, in a sense, find family in a book. And that's a good thing. As for who might serve as my literary family, I guess any character(s) who identifies as some kind of outsider and flawed individual. Those characters are my family.

**Teresa:** *Little Women* (Alcott, 1869) was my aspirational family, while *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908) prepared me for what I was convinced was imminent orphanhood. My adolescent reading was devoted to science fiction where families were fluid or nonexistent. *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (1999) left me breathless, perhaps because a teacher plays so key a role in Steve's life; Chip's relationship to his single, muddled mom in John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005) moved me. Most recently, Elena Ferrante's (2012–2015) Neapolitan series explored family and friendship with her portrayal of the casual brutality of both.

I believe young adults need to compare, search for themselves, be startled by, aspire to, and be soothed by the endless possibilities of *family*. I used to read with a desperate hunger, searching for a family that looked like mine. I also admit to reading bleak stories in an effort to comfort myself that at least we weren't *that* bad. In reading about other families, worlds opened. I wasn't alone.

**Ibi:** Literature will help young readers better understand the dynamics of family and how it affects their peers in different ways. I hope my readers will gain greater empathy for other teens dealing with trauma by seeing how violence and pain are sometimes generational. And I also hope readers who are dealing with their own traumas can see the larger truths in their experiences and make connections between themselves, their families, and their communities. By providing social and historical context for such trauma, young readers can begin to peel away the layers that make up how societal norms or dysfunctions can affect communities, which in turn affect family dynamics and ultimately the young people who are navigating these circumstances while coming to terms with their maturing selves. In order to do this, a good story has to humanize every single character that lives on the page. The story of a teen is also the story of a family and the story of a community.

**David:** One of the things I love about my job is that no matter where I go—whether it be a book festival or conference, trade show or bookstore, library or school—I know I’ll be among family. Book people have a connection not unlike a bloodline. There’s a current of familiarity, an understanding that even if you hate the books I love, and I love the books you hate, we’re all in this together. We’ve chosen to reside in this little corner of the world where fictional characters are (at least) as important as real people, where whole universes exist on a single page. There are factions, flaws, histories, quirks, and differing opinions, and yet we choose to be together. Sound familiar?

*David Arnold lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with his (lovely) wife and (boisterous) son. He is the New York Times bestselling author of Kids of Appetite and Mosquitoland, and his books have been translated into a dozen languages. Previous jobs include musician/producer, stay-at-home dad, and preschool teacher. David is a fierce believer in the power of kindness and community.*

*Jenny Torres Sanchez is a full-time writer and former English teacher. She was born in Brooklyn, New York, but has lived on the border of two worlds her whole life. She is the author of Because of the Sun, The Downside*

*of Being Charlie, and Death, Dickinson, and the Demented Life of Frenchie Garcia, Her next YA novel, The Fall of Innocence, is scheduled for publication in 2018 by Philomel. Jenny currently lives in Orlando, Florida, with her husband and children.*

*Teresa Toten’s most recent novel is Beware That Girl. She won the Governor General’s Literary Award in Canada and the ALA’s Schneider Family Book award for The Unlikely Hero of Room 13b. Teresa lives with her husband, two daughters, and supremely neurotic dog in Toronto.*

*Jeff Zentner is the author of William C. Morris Award winner and Carnegie Medal longlister The Serpent King and, most recently, Goodbye Days. Before becoming a writer, he was a singer-songwriter and guitarist who recorded with Iggy Pop, Nick Cave, and Debbie Harry. In addition to writing and recording his own music, he worked with young musicians at Tennessee Teen Rock Camp, which inspired him to write for young adults. He lives in Nashville.*

*Ibi Zoboi was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and immigrated to the US when she was four years old. She holds an MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she was a recipient of the Norma Fox Mazer Award. Her award-winning and Pushcart-nominated writing has been published in Haiti Noir, Caribbean Writer, The New York Times Book Review, Horn Book Magazine, and The Rumpus, among others. Her debut YA novel American Street was published by Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins to five-starred reviews. Her debut middle grade novel, My Life as an Ice Cream Sandwich (Dutton/Penguin), is forthcoming. You can find her online at [www.ibizoboi.net](http://www.ibizoboi.net).*

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