Family Influence across the Ages:

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 discussion of family history in their writings and presentations. 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 considerations of family history in the lives of individuals and the influence of family relationships on adolescent identities and across the life span.

As to process, we generated and sent a set of initial 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 a deeper appreciation for this theme and these insightful authors.

How tightly connected are our family history and our individual present? Can we escape the effects of our past?

Bonnie-Sue: I think this is a question that dates back to Greek mythology (or even further) and has been a favorite theme of philosophers, religious clerics, and writers alike. Personally, I like the idea that family history somehow travels through time in our DNA. I like to read about these themes in literature as well, because they lend a bit of mysticism to the world, but family history can also be stifling and limiting, not to mention downright depressing if it makes a person feel trapped.

Rahul: I really don't know the answer to either of these questions. Sociologically, I think the importance of outside forces is underappreciated. Where you end up in life in terms of career, family, wealth, etc., is largely a product of your parents' circumstances, and your parents' circumstances are largely a product of broader societal forces. But when we're talking about psychology, I think family trauma is emphasized *too* much. Human beings are very resilient, and the present has much more of an effect on our psyche than does the past. Yeah, perhaps your parents were neglectful or abusive, and perhaps you live in a system of terrible, overarching oppression, but if the sun is shining and your apartment is clean, and your bills are paid, and you've just eaten a great pulled pork sandwich from the corner deli, well then, you're probably pretty happy.

Bonnie-Sue: I have often wondered if everything we do or think has been set down already and if it's perspective that we are lacking. I don't mean this in a religious sense, but rather in a physics sense, that time and experience are really just matters of perception and that our inability to conceptualize our place in the world has led us to believe that we have more of a say over our future or are less tied to our past.

Kristin: Whoa! Bonnie-Sue just threw me into an existential crisis! (It's all right—I'm prone to them. Just let me breathe into this paper bag for a minute.) Okay, physics, perception, and fate aside

(I'll think about them tomorrow), I'm inclined to believe our family history has a tremendous impact on us. How can it not? We are the product of our experience, and family is a pretty big influencer of experience. I don't think it's possible for the past *not* to affect us, but we can make choices regarding how we allow it to influence our present outlook and behavior. This kind of ties in with Rahul's point about finding happiness in a clean apartment and a tasty sandwich. Wretchedness and turmoil leave a mark. The question is, how do we respond? With self-destruction or pulled pork and gleaming cabinets?

Sara: I don't know if "escape" is possible, because it seems like that would involve denial of a certain part of the self that is as real as any other part. I do think we can transcend family history. We aren't doomed, as long as we can see the problems. I think it's not seeing the problems that gets us stuck in family patterns—thinking of our family patterns as normal or inevitable. That's especially a problem for kids, because when you're a kid, whatever is going on in your family is "normal," and you adapt to it and learn how to survive it until you get older and start seeing other models, other possibilities.

What is our moral obligation to stand by family? Is the family bond immutable, or can/should we cut ties and under what circumstances? How are these ideas explored in your novels?

Sara: That's a tough one, because the belief that one is morally obligated to stand by family is one of the things that can keep people in abusive or neglectful situations. At the same time, I have sympathy for people who feel a special obligation to family that might have fewer limits.

Rahul: I can't dictate other peoples' moral obligations. Personally, I feel a strong moral obligation to support my family. Of course, my family is both small and relatively well-off. However, I recently got engaged, and to my mind, that obligation immediately enlarged to include my fiancé's somewhat larger family. If someone were to say to me, well my family is awful—they're not supportive, and they suck the life from me—I don't know what I'd advise.

Kristin: I'm with Sara on this one. I say there is no moral obligation to stand by an abusive, neglectful, or unsupportive family, but I do think the decision to walk away should be examined deeply and acted upon (or not) according to circumstances. The idea of cutting ties with family is explored in both *Freakboy* (2013) and *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity* (2016). Each book comes to a different conclusion. In *Freakboy,* the character Angel is mistreated, abused, and cast out of her family for being trans. For her own safety, it makes sense for her to sever ties with most of the members of her family. In *Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity,* the character Jess is set to cut ties with her father because she feels he isn't supportive of her transition. In the end, she doesn't detach herself from him, and I'm glad, because in that particular case, through communicating, she is able to perceive (a little) that his fears for her are what made him originally say no to signing the waiver for her hormone treatment. By choosing to talk to him, she is able to help him grasp that her need to live her life as her authentic self is no passing fad. I like to think this conversation sets the two on a path of greater understanding, the kind that might make full reconciliation possible. In each case, although my characters make different decisions, both are right in that they lead to peace for the individual making the choice.

Sara: In my experience, there are a lot of ways to "stand by" that don't have to include enabling or risking your own mental or physical health and safety. For example, when I was dealing with my dad as an adult, I didn't cut the ties, but I did tell him there were certain things I wouldn't do, like fetch him from the hospital or detox center or otherwise rescue him from situations he got himself into by drinking. I was available for a relationship with the sober version of him. For someone else, the line might be elsewhere. In *Gem & Dixie* (2017), Gem doesn't cut ties, but ultimately you're seeing her communicate by removing herself; she's not going to let herself be put in the parenting or caretaking role anymore. She changes the bond by rejecting the roles she knows she can't take on anymore, but she doesn't sever it.

Bonnie-Sue: Each of my characters in *The Smell of Other People's Houses* (2016) addresses this to some extent. Obviously, I think the family bond is incredibly strong, but everyone should be able to cut ties when that bond is akin to a sinking ship, and the only way out of drowning is to abandon it. However, that's a really hard position to be in. My character Dora is in that position and chooses to confront her father head on, but she never totally abandons her mother, thus altering the roles in that relationship significantly. I chose to write her character this way because where I'm from, this is a common outcome. I think this is something we see a lot when there is abuse in a family or when parents aren't in a position to take care of their children. Kids are really resilient and can rise up and take responsibility, but it doesn't mean they should have to do that from a young age. Of course, it does happen. The same is true for my character, Hank. Once his father is gone and his mother basically checks out, he steps in to make decisions for himself and his brothers. He cuts ties with his mother once it is obvious that it's the only way he can keep his brothers safe. That example is more about choosing his moral obligation to his brothers when he senses that his mother has broken her moral obligation to her children, so in that sense, his bond is more immutable than his mother's. I think these are universal questions and themes, and that's why we see them explored so often in YA literature.

Rahul: Sometimes we talk about "found" families, but oftentimes these families are ephemeral, and they disappear exactly when you most need them. What I've observed time and again is people thinking they can rely on their friends and then having their friends disappear when things get difficult. The problem with any relationship based on good feelings is that it'll be severely strained once those feelings are gone. People look to friendships for joy, which is why they're surprised and appalled when those friendships bring pain. Family, on the other hand, is just stronger. I don't know why. There's something mystical about it. Family bonds aren't like friendships. You often don't *like* or even love your family. Frequently these are people who, if you met them at a party, you'd be appalled by. But when they need help, you help them. It's the same with other sorts of community. I've often observed that the Indian American community is *much* stronger than any friendship network I might have. My very best friends in the world might help me move. They might let me crash on their couch for a few weeks if I was having trouble. They might loan me some money. But I could probably walk up to some random Indian person at a gas station, tell him I was in trouble, and he'd most likely let me stay at his house. And I'd do the same! Again, I have no idea where this comes from, but it's a real thing.

What about the family relationship might be unique during adolescence? How do your characters navigate family during this time of life?

Rahul: In adolescence, family as a concept doesn't really matter as much because you have something stronger: you're actually dependent on another person for all your material needs. Later on, when those financial ties are cut, I think it's a shock to realize that, err, I actually *don't* need to talk to these people anymore. This is why family ties are much weaker in the industrialized world. In India, that financial independence never happens; until your parents die, you will most likely be financially entangled with them in some way.

Bonnie-Sue: The main thing that occurs during adolescence, in my opinion, is that sort of gray period when a character isn't a child anymore but isn't an adult yet either. It's like having a foot in both worlds, and it's rather an exciting but also scary time. For many people at this age, so much of life experience is seen and experienced through the lens of that first family. I think this is critical because this reality shapes those most formative years; the absence of a parent, the death of a parent, the activities of a parent, the vices of a parent—all of these things will play into who we are and who we become while growing up in a particular household. All of my characters struggle with defining who they are and who they want to be in light of what they've known most of their lives. Even my character Alyce, who has wonderful parents, has a certain amount of guilt when she realizes that she might want something different than what she was raised to want. She had this

wonderful life fishing with her dad that obviously shaped her, but it's always a challenge to walk away, because the unspoken expectation that parents have with their children, at least in the world that I came from, can be really demanding. Choosing what you want for yourself rather that what you've been given, that's huge.

Sara: Adolescence is this transition period, from childhood to adulthood, and it's a long and complex transition period. You are beginning the process of detaching from parents and differentiating yourself from them in behaviors and beliefs. At the same time, an adolescent still needs parenting and still needs guidance. Even in a healthy family system, it's not an easy time. There's a lot of negotiation and pushing away and then wanting to pull in close again. Gem and Dixie are not in a healthy family system, to say the least, so this transition kind of brings to the fore one dominant question for the daughter, who can see it's not working: *How am I going to get myself out of here and on to something better?* That's not how she articulates it, but it's what's going on in her gut when a window of escape is unexpectedly opened. I think a lot of teens and young adults can relate to that feeling of looking at your family and thinking, "I don't know exactly what I want, but I know it's not this . . . ."

Kristin: During adolescence we explore and discover who we are outside the confines of our family unit. It's a great time for individuation, and while the family may remain important in terms of support and stability (if we're lucky), the teen years are when we gravitate toward our peers. Our peers are mirrors, reflecting back at us the outward trappings of our newly explored identities. If we like what we see when we're with them, we align ourselves with these friends. Our interactions with them become a more important part of our lives. In my books, while the families of my protagonists are present and important, in most cases, it's the kids' relationships with their friends that have the most impact.

Rahul: It's interesting that you all stress adolescence as a transition period. I think what I've been struck by, in talking to teens, is how adult they seem. In terms of reasoning ability and social polish, they seem more or less adult. But at the same time, I know from my friends who are parents of teens that there is a tremendous amount of labor involved in making them presentable, feeding them, getting them from place to place. I don't know. I think what's hardest for teens who have a sense of fairness and duty is this idea that they haven't yet earned freedom. I know that was the case for me. I felt so much respect for my parents and gratitude for all they'd done for me. And yet, in America at least, you need to take these steps toward freedom before you're really ready—before you really feel like you deserve it. In fact, without doing that, without rebelling, without learning to follow your own heart, you never really become an adult, no matter how long you live.

How are cultural and/or societal expectations and norms transmitted down the family line? When these change or shift across the generations, what gets lost and found?

Bonnie-Sue: I suppose I touched on this a little bit in that last question. I think this is sometimes such a subtle thing that we don't even recognize it until it starts to change. In my family (and in Alaskan native culture), one of the biggest societal expectations was that you never talked about yourself, and you definitely did not talk about anything that might happen within your family. Even answering this question has taken me quite awhile because I'm hesitant to write specific examples, knowing that it is still frowned upon to talk openly about certain things in our society, or perhaps I can't shake what I was raised to believe. But I have also been really impressed by young people who have stood up and said they want to heal some of the rifts in our society that were exacerbated by not talking, while at the same time holding on to the integrity of that sentiment, "Do not gossip; do not brag." What is lost by speaking out is some of the pain and harm that have been covered up over the years, but what is gained is a chance for elders and younger generations to come together and learn from each other again.

Rahul: What I think is complex about adolescent family relationships is that your parents have to meet a

lot of your emotional needs. They need to socialize you, teach you morals, give you skills to survive, but at the same time, they need to make you feel valued and loved. These are two goals that are sort of mutually incompatible, because how can you simultaneously say, "You are enough" and "You are failing in this, that, and the next way"? The heart of my book, *Enter Title Here* (2016), is, I think, about this tension. Reshma's parents do their best to walk that line: they want their daughter to be successful, but they also want her to love herself. And I think they do a really good job! But the message nonetheless gets garbled. Or maybe Reshma susses out the inherent incompatibility between the two messages. And now, even though parent and child know something has gone wrong, they can't set it right, which I believe is a major part of adolescence. You can't tell your child what to think anymore. Adolescents are starting to form their own opinions about the world, and they're starting to think, well, you know, maybe my parents are wrong. . . .

Sara: I became aware of a few things when I did my family tree as a sort of therapy exercise. One norm was that men/fathers sort of came and went; they were unreliable, and it was largely the women who stuck around, took care of things, and sacrificed to ensure the best for their children—at least as much as it was in their power. A related cultural norm in my tree, on my mother's side anyway, was religion—that the women, having been frequently abandoned by husbands and fathers, turned to faith and to church communities for emotional and sometimes practical support in the work of raising their families. For Gem and Dixie, with addiction in their tree, one of the norms is a kind of resignation or denial that "this is how things are" and there aren't other options.

Kristin: When we think of culture, we often think of a broader swath of individuals making up a society, with its own rules, mores, traditions, and biases, but families have cultures as well. These get passed down and absorbed in ways both conscious and unconscious. Even when we become aware of these things and recognize that not everyone thinks or behaves as our family does, particularly in areas of bias or prejudice, a lot of our actions remain reactions. You can reject your family culture, but your very rejection shapes you—how you are in the world, how you see yourself. I believe it takes a tremendous conscious effort to recognize your family culture without acting or reacting in response to it in some way.

Sara: When I think about changes and shifts in my own family, I think about how neither my sister nor I have kids, and we're the only children of our parents. What's lost there is our continuing history, both genetically and directly—no more branches of that particular tree. On the other hand, we've found lives for ourselves that aren't all about surviving abandonment and struggling under the responsibility of holding a family together. Similarly, in my book, Gem is radically breaking off from the norms and expectations in her system. She's losing the comfort (if that's the right word) of the familiar patterns and the approval that can come from being the good child, the responsible one, but she will go on to gain so much more as she makes new paths for herself and maybe, down the line, other members of her family.

Rahul: I think you're very astute, Kristin, writing about family cultures. It's only since becoming engaged and becoming intimately involved with another family that I've started to see the ways that my family is idiosyncratic. For instance, my fiancé is always chiding me for being too abrupt, for hurrying too much, for not lingering in my goodbyes. And yet whenever we're around my family, she's the one who confuses them by not hurrying along. There's a sort of expediency and practicality and lack of sentimentality that I've gotten from my parents, and it's not a particularly Indian thing—it's just the culture that these two people formed together. But I didn't know it. And when you're a teen, you're so enveloped by that mini-culture that it's hard to see beyond it. This is something I haven't much thought about, actually—how it's possible for two outwardly similar families to differ so totally in their rituals and their aims and their mores.

What piece of your family history has influenced you as a writer?

Sara: Oh, so many things. My parents were readers and musicians, and we grew up with books and classical music and culture generally being valued. My maternal grandfather was a writer, and all of my aunts have done some kind of writing in their lives, and I do think in some ways that kind of thing either gets into your blood or is passed down by example and what is valued. On the less happy side, kids who spring from generations of alcoholics and their codependent spouses can develop acute sensitivity as far as reading people and detecting the emotions of others. Mind-reading almost becomes a survival skill (though also a huge burden for a kid), and I think that opens up a channel of empathy that might not otherwise be there. Also, as a reaction to chaos, you get into the habit of running "What if?" contingencies and trying to predict what will happen next, and that feeds directly into the part of storytelling that involves imagining what *could* happen.

Kristin: I come from a pretty academic family. My dad was a linguistics professor; my mom was an anthropologist who got her Master's degree when I was a kid. Books were super important in our house. In spite of the love of reading I absorbed from the environment, I was a very, very poor student and had the sense that I was turning out to be a disappointment to my parents. That changed when I wrote a short story to earn a Girl Scout badge. My parents' reaction to the story was overwhelmingly positive, and it held (to my mind) a strong whiff of relief. (She's *not* a total failure!) I was given a sense that there was something I could do and do well. Proud (and relieved), I continued to write. As I type this, I wonder now for the first time if their praise (and my relief) were merited. The story was a day in the life of a baby, told from the perspective of the baby, which seems awfully trite and cutesy now. No matter. It was the right reaction at the right time, and it set me on course.

Rahul: Out of my parents, I'm closest to my mom. She fell into a career as a sociology professor (after not particularly enjoying her undergraduate education, she only applied to graduate school so she could join my dad in America), and she's always emphasized to me the saving power of work. How you should find meaningful work, and then do it. If you've read my book, this is a major theme. Reshma keeps hearing "be successful," when really her mom is trying to give her a subtler message. Like Reshma, I haven't wholeheartedly accepted my mom's values. At least half the time, I think they're BS. I'm much more of a slacker than my mom is, and most days I wonder if it wouldn't be much more satisfying to simply lounge around all day like a Jane Austen hero. But obviously I do work, and I do find meaning in it. I don't know; I think the sorting-through of clashing values is the kind of thing that powers both a writing career and a meaningful life.

Bonnie-Sue: I did not really feel that I had a voice when I was growing up. Writing was a way for me to express myself, even if for many years, it was done only in the privacy of my own journal. I could disappear into books and read about other cultures, other societies, and other teens my own age who might have had different struggles. I could see how writers solved problems in these worlds, and that opened my eyes to other ways of seeing and being. Because I didn't feel confident speaking and wasn't encouraged to speak, I learned to create a world where my voice might matter or I had some control over the outcome. Even after all these years, I still struggle with that thought that maybe I shouldn't be speaking quite so much or being so honest about what it was like growing up in this place. That certainly shows how deeply ingrained our family history can be.

Kristin Elizabeth Clark *is author of* Jess, Chunk, and the Road Trip to Infinity *(2016) as well as* Freakboy *(2013), both with FSG Macmillan. A passionate advocate for youth, she speaks at local and national conferences, presenting programming on literature, LGBTQ themes, and social justice. Clark lives in San Francisco, where in addition to writing, she facilitates workshops, boogie boards, studies healing arts, and moonlights as a bookseller. Visit her online at kristinelizabethclark.com, or follow her on Twitter @KristinClarkYA.*

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