

Navigating Trauma through the Art of Fiction:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this collaborative conversation, we are excited to feature the voices of three authors for young adults whose books explore trauma in ways honest, challenging, and essential. We are grateful for their candor and sincerity as they share how their fiction creates space for contemplation and healing even in the midst of pain, sadness, and fear.

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 conversation, you gain an increased appreciation for the ways in which these authors generate imagined characters who can provide guidance and reassurance to readers in the real world.

The experience of trauma is highly personal. How do you work to invite readers into the unique and individualized stories of your protagonists?

Nina: My characters' specific traumas are their own—it is fiction, after all—but the emotional core of how they are left feeling *after* the trauma always comes from my own experience. I remember teaching English Composition to high school freshmen and talking about Aristotle's theory of tragedy, that line where he says that characters should be "true to life and yet more beautiful." I take that concept and push it beyond characters and beyond beau-

ty—so that the exercise of writing fiction, for me, is to make sense of human experiences by entering the moments and episodes of a person's life and amplifying it all—the pain, the horror, the joy, the grief, and yes, the beauty—so that we can recognize our own experiences through the experiences of a character.

Meg: For me, it's important to develop the character as a complete person, someone relatable. I give her a strong voice, hopes, things she still dreams about, friends, enemies. I draw her completely so that a reader can find common ground with her, even though she is living in a difficult space that might be unfamiliar. As for the unique situation of that character, I keep the rules simple: No melodrama. No glossing over. I write the trouble as the girl would experience it, and I allow the reader to see how the whole girl is pressured and reshaped by those circumstances.

Chelsea: Books are magical because they transport us—not only to other worlds, but into other *people*. Readers may never experience life exactly like the characters in their favorite novels, but they can *feel* as if they do. Authors accomplish this by writing characters as authentically as possible. Readers should never feel like bystanders to someone else's tragedy. They should be in the characters' heads, living life alongside them. In this way, even deeply personal traumas can become relatable.

How would you respond to a hesitant reader's concern that traumatic experiences are too sad or unpleasant or emotionally difficult to navigate?

Chelsea: I've never felt that writers should shy away from difficult topics. The world can be a dark place, and literature—at least some literature—should reflect that. Sometimes readers even *need* that. People who are struggling or feeling alone might find it therapeutic to read about characters in similar situations. With that being said, no readers should ever feel forced to read a book they're not comfortable with. Though novels serve many purposes, from education to entertainment, they should never cause *harm*. I'd remind a hesitant reader that it's always okay to put a book down if reading it is too painful.

Nina: I agree with Chelsea completely about never causing harm through our work, especially since we write for young people. That said, I would say that art often *is* the way to navigate trauma. We hear and read and watch stories of loss and trauma when we are young, and then, if we are lucky enough to not be children anymore when significant loss or tragedy first impacts our lives, we have at least some memory of processing it. Take William Steig's (1969) picturebook *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, for example, which is the story of a donkey who turns to stone. We are afraid for Sylvester when he turns into rock and can't go back to his family. We watch his parents mourn his loss—experience true and deep grief—and then we see joy return. Of course, in real life, if we lose someone, that person usually doesn't come back to life after making a wish with a pebble, but still, even as we experience loss and grief through the story, we are assured that the sun comes up again and that, with time, there is healing.

Meg: My books aren't for everyone or for every age, and I allow young readers to make that call for themselves. But it's important to me that teachers and librarians not make that decision for readers. To me, that's a bigger problem. Sometimes, very well-meaning adults create obstacles between kids and books. They decide that a book is for a certain kind of reader who faces particular circumstances, or that it's for a reader who is "ready" to read

about a given topic. This is a huge disservice. It's vital that kids choose what they read. So-called "difficult books" can help them make sense of the harder parts of their lives, sometimes the parts that they can't share with others. And books can also help them understand others better, helping them transcend the limitations of their own lived experience.

How much of you is present in the stories you craft?

Nina: So much. Too much, sometimes! But most of the time, it is carefully disguised.

Meg: That depends on what you mean by "me." I often use a real-life incident as the seed for a novel, but I do not write memoir. The plot and characters are never a retelling of facts. What *is* completely true are the questions the main character has about her circumstances, the emotional truth of what it feels like to be facing her dilemma. Those things cut very close to the bone, and I pull them from what I remember in my own life. It's what I find most terrifying and healing about the writing process. It allows me to excavate all the things I wrestled with as a young woman and lay them bare.

Chelsea: I try not to write characters *too* much like me (after all, part of the fun of writing is creating characters who do things I'd never dream of!), but it's impossible to leave myself out of a story entirely. I think, to some extent, most writers pull from real life when crafting characters and worlds, and I'm no exception. It's important to me that my books feel honest. I want my characters' emotions to feel *real*. To make that happen, it's sometimes necessary to draw from my own experiences, both the pleasant and the painful.

How do you hope teachers might use your titles in their classrooms?

Meg: I want teachers to allow the books to breathe in the hands of students. I always shudder to think about vocabulary lists or forcing kids to do plot recaps. I think it's more meaningful to ask kids to discuss a character to whom they had a strong reaction, positive or negative, or to ask them to find

the connections between the events in my novels and what is happening in their lives right now, whether it's bullying or police shootings or issues of Latino identity, etc.

Chelsea: Some teenagers are best reached through stories—I know this because I was one of them. During a particularly difficult time in my adolescence, I struggled with discussing my real thoughts and feelings, whether it was with my parents, teachers, or even therapists. But I *loved* books. Sometimes I loved them for the escape, but other times I loved them for their realism. I could read a book and find a character in a situation that reflected my own. And when I discussed those books and characters, I was able to talk about my feelings in a circumspect way. I hope educators use my novels similarly: by using fiction to reach the truth.

Nina: One aspect of being a high school English teacher that I most loved was watching book discussions work on different levels. I loved close reading and analysis—taking a passage and discovering all the meaning held within it. But I also thrived on those big thematic conversations that were sparked from the books we read—conversations that became powerful examinations of life and human nature. Thinking that my books are being used in any of these ways makes me profoundly grateful.

Are your works ultimately hopeful?

Chelsea: I like to think my books are ultimately hopeful. Now, that doesn't mean everything works out perfectly for my characters, or that their stories are wrapped up neatly. They've been through hard times and faced difficult truths about themselves and the world around them, and part of that pain will always be with them. But having experienced trauma doesn't mean the characters' lives are over. They haven't *become* their pain. They'll wake up, ready to face a new day, maybe even stronger and wiser than before—and as long as people are able to pick themselves up and keep going, there will *always* be hope.

Nina: Oh, yes. I keep thinking I will write something darker one of these days—in fact I'm working on

something a little darker right now—but I can already feel the hope slipping in. I guess I can't help myself! Hope is necessary for all of us in life, so it also feels necessary to me in fiction.

Meg: I think so. Not every novel concludes with the character finding a solution to all her problems, but I try to end with the character able to take the next step forward. That's the most realistic way to deal with tough stories. In life, it's rare that all troubles vanish. What's more likely is that we learn how to survive, how to sidestep the obstacles and go on.

Nina LaCour is the author of the Michael L. Printz Award-winning novel We Are Okay, as well as the William Morris Honor novel Hold Still and the widely acclaimed The Disenchantments and Everything Leads to You. She is also the coauthor, with David Levithan, of You Know Me Well. Formerly a bookseller and high school English teacher, she is now on the faculty of Hamline University's MFAC program. A San Francisco Bay Area native, Nina lives with her wife and daughter in Northern California. You can visit her at www.ninalacour.com.

Meg Medina is the author of numerous prize-winning works for teens, including Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass, which received the Pura Belpré Award in 2014, and Burn Baby Burn, which was long-listed for the 2016 National Book Award and was a finalist for both the Kirkus Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. She is a founding member of We Need Diverse Books, a faculty member of Hamline University in its MFA program for children's writing, and on the Board of Advisors for SCBWI. When she's not writing, she works on community projects that promote diversity in children's literature, especially those with a focus on Latino youth and girls.

Chelsea Sedoti is the author of the young adult novels The Hundred Lies of Lizzie Lovett and As You Wish. Before becoming a writer, Chelsea explored careers as a balloon twister, filmmaker, and paranormal investigator. Eventually she realized her true passion is telling stories about flawed teenagers just as strange as she is. When she's not at the computer, Chelsea spends her time exploring abandoned buildings, eating junk food at roadside diners, and trying to befriend every animal in the world. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, where she avoids casinos but loves roaming the Mojave Desert.

Reference

Steig, W. (1969). *Sylvester and the magic pebble*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.