

Independent scholar

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The troll under the bridge: should Australian publishers of young adult literature act as moral-gatekeepers?

Abstract:

In the world of Young Adult Literature, the perceived impact of certain texts on the moral, social and psychological development of its readers is a cause for debate. The question ‘what is suitable content for a pre-adult readership’ is one guaranteed to produce conflicting, polarising and impassioned responses. Within the context of this debate, the essay explores a number of key questions. Do publishers have a moral obligation to avoid certain topics or should they be pushing the boundaries of teen fiction further? Is it the role of the publisher to consider the impact of books they publish to a teenage audience? Should the potential impact of a book on its reader be considered ahead of a book’s potential to sell and make money? This article analyses criticism and praise for two ‘controversial’ Australian Young Adult books: Sonya Hartnett’s *Sleeping Dogs* (1997) and John Marsden’s *Dear Miffy* (1997). It argues that ‘issues-books’ are necessary to the development of teens, and publishers should continue to push the envelope of teen fiction while ensuring they make a concerted effort to produce quality, sensitive and challenging books for a teen market.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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‘But how do you know?’ Oliver yelps. ‘How do you *know* it’s wrong? Who *told* you that? How come you’ve heard that, and my dad hasn’t? Why is it peculiar? How do you know? How do you know what’s right and what’s wrong? Do books tell you? Does television? Does school? My dad reads and watches television and he went to school so how – where –?’ (Hartnett 1995: 70–1).

When the character of Bow Fox suggests that a father beating his son is both peculiar and wrong, Oliver Willow’s reaction reveals the failings of his moral education. It is an unsettling moment in which the reader of Sonia Hartnett’s Young Adult (YA) novel *Sleeping Dogs* must consider how a child can reach the age of fifteen without understanding that the physical abuse of his older brother is unjustifiable, and why he reacts, not with outrage at his brother’s mistreatment, but with resentment toward Bow for daring to suggest that his father is morally fallible. When Bow questions why the Willow children let their father Griffin beat their brother Jordan, all Oliver can offer is: ‘he’s the dad’ (Hartnett 1995: 70). It is suddenly clear that he has never moved beyond a state of moral realism, passively receiving and never questioning the omnipotence of his father’s moral code.

The function of Children’s and YA fiction is varied, such as to encourage a love of reading, to entertain and to induct the reader ‘into society by teaching them social orthodoxy’ (Nimon and Foster 1997: 9). In some respects, Children’s and YA books can be viewed as an ‘extension of [a child’s] moral education.’ (West 1988: 106) For some, such as Pausaker, the morally didactic function of YA is all too prominent in the minds of adults, specifically parents (1994: 310) and, as such, too often YA is seen as ‘primarily a teaching tool and only secondarily an art form’ (1994: 318). Should YA treat its reader as an Oliver Willow, as a passive receptor of the unambiguous views and values dictated to him or her by knowledgeable, authoritarian adults? Or should YA be a space to safely and objectively navigate complex, open-ended moral dilemmas?

Sleeping Dogs does not impose a clear-cut, absolute morality on a passive, unquestioning reader; instead, there is space within the novel for its readership to engage in higher-level reasoning, a helpful exercise for young people still developing their moral awareness. For this moral ambiguity, however, *Sleeping Dogs*, and other YA books like it, have received harsh criticism.

YA literature is sometimes maligned for needlessly imposing pessimistic, tragic, sensationalist and violent story lines on a vulnerable audience (Gurdon 2011, Eckersley 1994, Jameyson 1997). Conversely, it has been defended for its ability to challenge and empower growing minds, to break down taboos and provide a platform for teens to traverse isolating and overwhelming issues like suicide, rape and drug addiction (Alexie 2011; Flood 2011; Leavitt 2011; Sullivan 2011; Marsden 2002). Nevertheless, because of a prevailing perception that books for young people should complement their socialisation, publishers and writers of YA must consider several key concerns. Do they have a moral obligation to avoid certain topics or should they be pushing the boundaries of YA further? Is it the role of the publisher to consider the impact of books they publish to a teenage audience? Should the potential impact of a book on its reader – i.e.: will a book such as Cheryl Rainfield’s *Scars* (2011)

encourage its readers to engage in self-harm? – be considered ahead of a book’s potential to make a profit?

The topic of the appropriateness of YA is not a new one. From Judy Blume to Norma Klein to J. D. Salinger to Meg Rosoff, writers of YA have been pushing at boundaries and generating controversy for decades. A few years ago, Meghan Cox Gurdon’s article in *The Wall Street Journal* claiming that teen fiction is unnecessarily dark and potentially harmful to its audience spawned a raft of heated replies, with parents, teen-readers, authors and publishers all weighing in on the debate (Alexie 2011, Flood 2011, Leavitt 2011, Sullivan 2011). This same debate seems to flare up every now and then, whether as an article like Gurdon’s or as attempts to ban books, such as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) (ALA 2015). Over a decade ago, John Marsden’s *Dear Miffy* required a ‘contents may offend’ warning and throughout the 1980s, Blume endured multiple attempts to ban her books from school and public libraries (West, 1988). The most challenged book in America for 2014 was, according to the American Library Association, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (for being anti-family, depicting bullying and providing sex education amongst other reasons) (ALA 2015). The nature of the debate remains the same: should YA be an extension of a child’s moral education, shield them from difficult, contentious and morally ambiguous topics, and provide an unrelentingly redemptive and positive outlook? Or should it present its reader with an uncompromising and realistic exploration of some of the negative aspects of real life in order to prepare, inform and empower emerging adult readers?

If books show us the world, teen fiction can be like a hall of fun-house mirrors, constantly reflecting back hideously distorted portrayals of what life is. There are of course exceptions, but a careless young reader – or one who seeks out depravity – will find himself [sic] surrounded by images not of joy or beauty but of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds (Gurdon 2011).

Arguments like Gurdon’s maintain that too much doom and gloom in YA creates a dangerously distorted view of the world and, as such, promotes pessimism and anxiety in its readers. Implicit in this view is the notion that ‘problem’ novels are not realistic portrayals of modern life and that reading books ‘of damage, brutality and losses of the most horrendous kinds’ (Gurdon 2011) has a negative impact. In suggesting ‘it is . . . possible – indeed, likely – that books focusing on pathologies help normalize them and, in the case of self-harm, may even spread their plausibility and likelihood to young people who might otherwise never have imagined such extreme measures’ (Gurdon 2011), there is the assumption that the YA reader is passive, impressionable, reckless and incapable of sensible self-reflection. The concern, therefore, is not just about the inclusion of certain topics but the way in which they are presented and to whom they are directed. The level of detail and the lack of moral certainty is seen as an issue, as if an inundation of bleak narratives could promote pessimism, drug use and promiscuity, desensitise young minds to violence, and hinder the hopes of today’s youth:

In any other culture, at any other time, children this age would be being told stories that would help them to construct a world view, a cultural context, to define who they are and what they believe – a context that would give them a positive, confident, optimistic outlook on life, or at least the fortitude to endure what life held in store for them. Our children are not hearing these stories. It is in this sense, I believe, that we are witnessing the cultural abuse of an entire generation of young Australians (Eckersley 1994: 35).

In opposition to the calls to ban books, the pleas to make books for young people morally absolute (whose morality?) and the demand for such books to offer a clear sign of hope – a redemptive and positive resolution – are people who stand by free-expression principles, who believe young adults are intelligent and imaginative enough to work through moral ambiguity and are mature enough to find hope outside the book in their hands. Such arguments claim that fiction for a young market should accurately reflect the real world and should therefore tackle difficult topics in order to help, teach and prepare young adults for inevitable ups and downs of life. Writers of ‘controversial’ books defend their works by opening up their top drawers and waving handfuls of heartfelt letters from young people who have found hope and solace in reading their apparently negative and harmful books. Alexie, criticised in Gurdon’s article, states:

Almost every day, my mailbox is filled with handwritten letters from students – teens and pre-teens – who have read my YA book and loved it. I have yet to receive a letter from a child somehow debilitated by the domestic violence, drug abuse, racism, poverty, sexuality, and murder contained in my book . . . I write books for teenagers because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don’t write to protect them. It’s far too late for that. I write to give them weapons – in the form of words and ideas – that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed (2011).

Having briefly outlined the arguments for and against social realism in YA, this article now takes a closer look at two Australian novels widely deemed inappropriate for a teen market.

When Griffin Willow picked up a rifle and shot his son Jordan in *Sleeping Dogs*, I had no idea that I was flying, with that bullet, into an arena where strident-voiced adults, their sensibilities thoroughly rattled, would demand I explain my decision to kill him off (Hartnett 1997: 13).

Despite dealing with incest, murder, and physical and emotional abuse, the criticism most commonly levelled at *Sleeping Dogs* is the lack of hope and a clear moral resolution offered at the end of the novel. As Margo Lanagan points out, in the writing of books for young people ‘you can sink as deeply into darkness and despair as you like, so long as you slip a little jet-pack of hope on which your reader can zoom out of the narrative’ (1998: 11).

Griffin Willow has raised his family in relative isolation, rigidly enforcing a uniform world-view, ‘his own system of belief which he uses to grind down his family’ (Hartnett 2002: 216). When an outsider, Bow Fox, arrives at ‘Bonaparte Farm’ he judges the Willows with contempt, calling them ‘pig-ignorant’ (Hartnett 1995: 71).

When he learns of the incestuous relationship between Jordan and Michelle (whom Bow covets) he decides to use this information to his advantage. His meddling ultimately leads to the murder of Jordan and the reader is left to ask: which is the worst crime, incest or murder? Should Bow have just let things be, given that his actions lead to the death of Jordan? These are uncomfortable questions to consider; the discomfort is heightened by the lack of a satisfying answer provided within the text and ‘the posing of the question turns back on the implied reader the final judgement of what is right or wrong’ (Nimon & Foster 1997: 43).

There is further concern that most of the morally reprehensible actions in the novel go largely unpunished. Griffin goes unpunished for his abuse and the murder of his son. Michelle frees herself of blame by lying and manipulating: she too appears to go unpunished. Bow acts, not out of moral outrage, but jealousy and indignation when he decides to reveal his knowledge to Griffin; he remains ignorant of the devastating effects of his actions. In fact, he is self-congratulatory and benignly carefree: ‘if Bow had felt any apprehension, that feeling is now gone. His great anger, too, is gone. Now he thinks of it, he has to laugh’ (Hartnett 1995: 130). It is interesting to note that Hartnett situates *Sleeping Dogs* in the genre of Australian Gothic – questions about the bleakness of her books are therefore considered to be ignorant of the conventions and history of her genre (2002: 216). According to Hartnett, this genre ‘refuses to present happy endings when happy endings are unlikely’ (2002: 216).

Marsden’s *Dear Miffy* is a book equally maligned for its lack of redemption, for telling a story through the eyes of a teenager who cannot see that his violent actions are wrong (a stabbing, a murder, unsafe sex, drunken sexual assault, attempted suicide and drugs). The story of *Dear Miffy* is told through a series of letters from Tony to his ex-girlfriend. Over the course of the eighteen letters the reader learns of their tragic romance, of Tony’s difficult past and his violent acts, all of which leads to the murder of Miffy’s mother and Tony’s failed attempt at suicide (an attempt that sees him lose both his legs). Much reference has been made to the amount of profanities in the text (one reviewer delighted in reporting a swear count of 78 fucks and 14 cunts (Tucker 1998: 109)) as well as the fact that, by the end of the book, Tony has not grown or learnt from his mistakes (‘After the stabbing [my aunt and uncle] went apeshit . . . But it’s not like I killed her or anything . . . I was grounded something bad. I couldn’t see why really’ (Marsden 1997: 19-20) There is no redemption, no ‘moral of the story’.

Essentially, the controversy surrounding YA novels like *Sleeping Dogs* and *Dear Miffy* springs from a lack of understanding of (and I would even suggest a lack of respect for) the intended audience. Nimon and Foster make the point that: ‘*Sleeping Dogs* is unquestionably written for an elite readership on the brink of adulthood’ (1997: 70). Yet it is a book that still carries the tag ‘Young Adult’ in the same way that *Twilight* (2006), *Looking for Alibrandi* (1992), *How I Live Now* (2004) and *Stargirl* (2000) do. All of the aforementioned books are targeted to a female YA readership and would occupy the same space in a bookstore, under the same category heading. Consider *Stargirl* and *Sleeping Dogs* side by side, however, and it is clear that they are vastly different books. One is a bleak but thought-provoking exploration of morality, family and the consequences of one’s actions, the other is a lightweight and chaste ‘be true to yourself and don’t let anyone change you’ moral tale. Despite

their differences, because of the expectation that ‘the function of children’s and young adult fiction is to teach the values that adults (and specifically parents) want to see taught’ (Pausacker 1994: 310) both books come under the same scrutiny from adult stakeholders rather than the intended audience: does this book induct young people ‘into society by teaching them social orthodoxy’ (Nimon & Foster: 1997: 9)? Does this book promote a desired concept of normality? Is this book direct and unambiguous in the moral stance it has chosen to adopt?

Readers of YA are varied and cannot be understood simply in terms of their age: their tastes vary, their abilities vary and their needs vary: don’t they have the right to be presented with a range of books that allow them to explore their tastes, abilities and needs? One seventeen-year-old may be able to sort his or her way through the moral ambiguity of *Sleeping Dogs* while another may not. While there are often similarities between YA books, first and foremost YA is a readership, not a genre; it is as broad a readership as ‘adult’. It is this issue that publishers of YA need to grapple with more than whether or not to ban content. While varieties in taste can reduce the difficulties in appealing to an audience linked arbitrarily by age, there is no escaping the difficulty of producing material deemed suitable for all within such a vast category.

Aside from issues of age versus ability, there is still the concern that many books being produced for a young adult audience are unsuitable, no matter the ability of the reader. In response to *Dear Miffy*, Karen Jameyson complained that, ‘surely no life can be so dismal; surely no group of characters can be so totally lacking in redeeming features; surely no slice of life can be so void of that controversial critical commodity: hope’ (1997: 550). Proponents of gritty and realistic YA would answer Jameyson with a resounding: sorry, but yes it can. With our heads out of the sand, most of us can recognise that life is full of light and shade – we can see that there are negative aspects of life that our children, as much as we would wish to protect and shelter them, need to learn about (some are already facing these issues in their every day lives). ‘Can’t people understand that a fiction book is a very safe place to explore the possible dangers of an unmediated adult world?’ (Tucker 1998: 110). Surely there is benefit in young people safely exploring the issues they are invariably curious of (sex, drugs, et al.) via fiction rather than in real life? And is not a realistically bleak account of the ills of drugs, for example, a deterrent to drug taking (teenagers are a discerning audience and will see through an unbalanced and moralistic story)? In the aftermath of Gurdon’s article, the most resounding criticism came from young people themselves. Taking to social media sites, teenagers used the controversy to share their stories of how reading YA had positively affected their lives. As Sullivan reported, ‘American author Maureen Johnson suggested on Twitter that people share their stories of how young-adult literature had changed their lives. Within hours, she had more than 15,000 responses, overwhelmingly in favour of the genre’ (2011). Furthermore, there appears to be a notion that ‘gaining an understanding of the motivations of different people through the reading of a range of titles is a privilege to be reserved for adults; young readers are to be told the answers, not encouraged to find them for themselves’ (Nimon & Foster 1997: 44). This is, of course, profoundly unfair and an example of the lack of respect too often afforded to adolescents within Western culture. As Pausaker notes, ‘the marginalisation of young adult fiction

reflects nothing more or less than the lack of value given to young adults by society as a whole' (1998: 319).

Kate Legge questions if a book such as *Dear Miffy* promotes nihilism because of its ambiguous and unresolved ending, because Tony fails to see the errors of his ways and because of the extreme pessimism and bleakness of Tony's world (1997). Here is a book about a kid who maims without remorse, kills without regret, takes drugs and has unprotected sex without apology – where is the moral at the end of this tale spelt out in black and white between the covers of a book? But as Lanagan suggests, 'Don't [parents] consider the possibility that it makes their children profoundly uneasy too? Do they really think that children take the morally ambiguous books as a kind of permission slip to throw away all constraints? Have we really reared such dumb kids?' (1998: 11). Further to this, she suggests:

It's as if we don't trust our readers to just look up from the book and find the hope in their own lives. It's as if we don't trust ourselves to have created a world in which hope can be recognised, not even enough hope to stop them sinking under the weight of a single depressing book (1998: 11).

This brings us back to Oliver Willow and his inability to consider that his father would act in an immoral way. In *Sleeping Dogs*, moral didacticism has dire consequences. If children never learn to reason through ideas of right and wrong without blindly following an external set of rules imposed on them by an authority figure, they are ill equipped to deal with the world at large. Books for young people can be a part of their moral growth; books that respect their readership enough to believe they have the intelligence and the imagination to deal with ambiguity and do not need moral dogma. Young people turn to books as a form of enjoyment or escapism and that is the function that such books serve in their life. Marsden argues that:

I think we need new stories, to help us make meaning of a world where fears seem limitless. One of the claims I would make for my books is that they communicate to readers the idea that they can resolve fearful situations through self-knowledge and self-awareness, through courage and friendship, by being prepared to take a personal journey instead of staying in the unbearable pain of where you are (2002: 231).

Providing young adults with a varied literature that takes into account the full spectrum of life's ups and downs is hardly 'the cultural abuse of an entire generation of young Australians' (Eckersley 1994: 35). In fact, it seems more likely that bleak YA gives young people 'weapons – in the form of words and ideas – that will help them fight their monsters' (Alexie 2011). And, realistically, a YA book may also be a simple form of escapism that has no lasting impact on the young person's life once the book is closed.

If we can accept that YA should be varied, catering to the widest possible range of needs, tastes and abilities, then we can come to accept that bleak YA fiction has a place. Hartnett makes an important point, however, when she highlights that, 'we need to shed our propensity to write and promote rubbish: those who happily admit that they write to order, who note what gets publicity and churn it out, taking an issue

that should be treated with care and using it as a mere bouncing board to controversy and sales, should be driven to extinction' (1998: 28).

The issue here is in the intention. Social realism is helpful in YA when the issues explored are dealt with in a sensitive and thoughtful manner, not for shock value and not without a thorough understanding of the issues at hand. This does not mean that they must be morally absolute, but it does mean that they should be thought provoking and non-sensationalist. This also means that we – publishers, writers, parents, teacher, politicians, *adults* – need to show respect and trust in young people that they have the courage, intelligence, humour and self-reflection to deal with bleak books. As Eva Mills, Publishing Director of Children's and Young Adult Fiction for Allen & Unwin states:

We always say there are no topics that can't be addressed in books for children and teenagers, it's all in the way they are handled. I don't think it's about pushing boundaries more or less, but books can be extremely useful in exploring a topic in ways that encourage teenagers to think for themselves, e.g. showing several points of view or allowing a reader to 'get inside the head' of someone they wouldn't normally come in contact with (2012).

The key issue for publishers of YA is not whether books should be passed over or altered until they fit an ideal, but what to do about the issue of marketing according to age. Spend just a little time in a room of fifteen-year-olds and you will see a difference in their levels of maturity and ability. Mills remarks on the 'trending down of readership', whereby younger readers are reading books intended for an older or more able audience (2012). Indeed, it is true that many parents who are concerned about the content of YA are often looking at books not intended for their child. The YA market is a great deal vaster than many would give it credit for and therein lies the problem. Some publishers have responded with a ratings system similar to those seen on films but this seems a superficial solution. How often are the ratings of a film obeyed and how often is an R classification a beacon rather than a dissuader for the curious teen?.

While producing content for one market (young people) publishers of YA must appease an entirely different market (adults with a vested interest in the lives of young people) – quite often these two markets have conflicting ideas of what they want and what they perceive as suitable. Perhaps what is needed is greater communication between publishers and this secondary market. Certainly a greater presence of reviews of YA titles in mainstream media might help. Awareness, as often seems the case, is the key.

Bleak books are an important component in the reservoir of tools from which developing teens should be allowed to draw upon, and publishers should not feel obligated to avoid the publication of potentially controversial 'issues-books', but rather continue to push the envelope of teen fiction while ensuring they make a concerted effort to produce sensitive and challenging books for a varied teen market. After all, as Farley states:

Novels can help provide kids with a moral architecture to house ideas about the world. If they are steered away from books that deal with issues they may face in school or on

the playground, they may be denied the intellectual tools to deal with vexing problems. They may also start to see reading as something that's disconnected from their real lives (2011).

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