

LIBRARIES FOR YOUTH: LIGHTHOUSES OR IVORY TOWERS?

Section: Up For Discussion

Issues on Book Selection and Collection Development

Children's literature isn't promoting ugly ideas, cruelty, abuse, or hatred by writing about them.

Looking at Paul Zelinsky's *Rapunzel*, I was halted at the illustration of the **tower**. It was so beautiful, yet used for such an ugly purpose. The **tower** is the way that the sorceress keeps the child from life. And, not incidentally, keeps the child completely available to her keeper. It suddenly struck me that this prison **tower** looks much like a **lighthouse**. **Lighthouses** figure prominently in titles such as Deborah Hopkinson's *Birdie's Lighthouse* (Knopf, 1996) and in Jill Paton Walsh's *Grace* (Farrar, 1992). In these stories, the tall structures stand for safety, and the folks inhabiting them are keenly aware of their obligation to keep the light strong.

These books, along with Donna Napoli's *Zel* (Dutton, 1996), jumble together in my brain and combine with the many discussions I have had lately about what exactly it is that makes a book appropriate for children, young adults, or adults. Where we choose to put books says a lot about the differences we see between being a child, a teenager, and an adult.

Libraries and collections of books for our young people must function as **lighthouses** and not be **ivory towers**, removing and protecting them from real life. *Rapunzel* is ignorant, and her keeper, the sorceress, uses the **tower** to keep her that way. It is a pleasant place, and one that many would regard as safe. But is it? For young people, whether they have an urge for truth, a survival instinct, or just curiosity, cannot be confined and made secure. What they need are tools to deal with their worlds and the worlds that lay ahead of them.

I wonder if the sorceress thought she was "protecting" *Rapunzel*? If so, it is clear that whatever she perceived as dangerous arrived anyway. If we think young people need ignorance of the world, separation from knowledge, and protection from their own curiosity, I wonder if we aren't robbing ourselves as sorceresses? And it is a powerful robe. It makes us feel good to think that we can keep kids sheltered from harm. But can we? And are we thinking about the good of the children or our own comfort when we do?

Rapunzel uses her hair to let the Prince into the **tower**, and discovers love. She also discovers sex, pregnancy, and, from the sorceress, pain and abandonment. Ignorance is not bliss. This timeless tale reminds us that we have to let our children inhabit the real world, and that removing them from it simply doesn't work. Richard Peck's *The Last Safe Place on Earth* (Delacorte, 1995) is the more modern version of the futility of trying to separate young people from the adult world.

Instead, our youngsters need beacons of light and knowledge and truth to reflect the reality of their lives--and the lives they will lead as they grow up. Instead of working to protect them by ignorance and separation, we need to find ways to show them the path to safety and understanding.

Sometimes this is done by shining a strong, hard light on very unpleasant rocks. Mildred Taylor's *The Friendship* (1987) or *The Well: David's Story* (1995, both Dial), James Howe's *The Watcher* (Atheneum, 1997), and Brock Cole's *The Facts Speak for Themselves* (Front Street, 1997) are books that immediately come to mind as dealing honestly with tough issues. For the picture-book set, titles such as Barbara Bottner's *Bootsie Barker Bites* (Putnam, 1992) and Eve Bunting's *Smoky Night* (Harcourt, 1994) both deal with serious and often thorny themes.

In today's stories for older readers, the sorceress has some direct descendants. For chilling feminine versions, check out the mother in **Carol** Williams's *The True Colors of Caitlynn Jackson* (Delacorte, 1997). This mother alternately abuses and neglects her children, but never doubts her ability to control them, even as readers realize that the girls'

real lives are completely separate. Another "sorceress" can be found in Norma Fox Mazer's *When She Was Good* (Scholastic, 1997). In this compelling novel, Pamela dominates and terrorizes her younger sister well into adulthood, when a haunting rebellion finally occurs. The parents' silent acquiescence and their eventual abdication of responsibility are not unlike that shown by Rapunzel's birth parents.

There are also numerous examples of men who try to control their children while proclaiming their love. The father in Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* (Greenwillow, 1995) is so locked into a power struggle with his son that he bankrolls the boy's arch rival in a biathlon. Or the Dad in Adele Griffin's *Sons of Liberty* (Hyperion, 1997), who, in his struggles to shore up his own ego, steadily demolishes everything his two sons care about. A neighbor suffers the seemingly more harmful physical abuse from her stepfather, but the similarities in the young people's suffering is striking.

For me, the real criteria for deciding if a book is young adult or juvenile is, to ask if it requires a young person's or an adult's understanding and experience of the world to grasp and make sense of the story. Carolyn Coman's *What Jamie Saw* (Front Street, 1995) needs no adult awareness of sexuality or complexity of politics and government to discern the danger and fear that propel Jamie. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is about growing up, marriage, choosing professions and yet it is totally comprehensible to a child. Both books may be read on different levels by adults, but they are not the primary audience.

On the other hand, showing that calm waters mean safety is a forte of children's literature. Lois Lowry's "Anastasia" books, Jamie Gilson, Dean Hughes, and many others continue that tradition. And we thank them. However, even in our most traditional families, with all the accoutrements of solid community and good parents, there can be trouble. Jerry Spinelli's *Wringer* (HarperCollins, 1997) gives a powerful picture of a child struggling on his own to find a way to deal with a problem that he sees as insurmountable. Kevin Henkes's *Protecting Marie* (Greenwillow, 1995) illustrates, in a less sensationalized way, the very real pain of a child searching for safety for herself.

Like the waters of the sea, life can be both smooth and full of danger. Both realities need to be reflected in the literature. I've heard many adults say that they love children's books, but that those "YA books" are so depressing. I always remind them of the many horrors awaiting readers in adult fiction, but underneath, I chafe at the description. Why shouldn't there be unpleasant and depressing books in the juvenile section? Do we put everything that's sweetness and light in the children's room and stick all of the tough books in YA because then we are safe from complaints? Are we trying to make the juvenile section safe? And safe for whom? Ourselves? Our boards and administrators?

Lately I have participated in book discussions in which I feel a little lonely fighting to get tough books on tough issues onto the table. Some ask if these are "realistic kids," while others complain of feeling manipulated by the authors, and generally make evident that they wish these books would go away. Ugh, who wants to read about these horrible cruel, ugly situations! Why can't it be light and funny? It certainly can, and I hope we always have those stories, even as I realize that some children's own lives are not full of light or much fun.

Many of us growing up thought that there was something wrong with us because our families didn't match the ones we saw reflected in the media and in the stories we read. Publishers are learning that families come in all varieties and that children of all colors and socioeconomic backgrounds need to see themselves in their books. Bravo! This year, the trend continues to recognize that kids are dealing with ugly realities and that these stories should not be off limits because they offer little hope and no quick fixes.

Adults who work with many different age groups come into the **library** looking for books to engage the young people they are trying to help. Two recent requests come to mind. One came from a mother who wanted to explain to a child that her father was now female and yet was still and forever the child's Daddy. Another was from a woman who wanted a book that would help her explain that a child should not trust her mother. We talk about serving all of the children, but these youngsters will have a hard time finding themselves represented in our collections.

Children get little respect in this culture. The pay for those working with the young has traditionally been low or nonexistent and few would disagree that children are marginalized at best. As children's and young adult librarians, we must become advocates for these patrons who are rarely present at the table or able to speak for themselves. This means we are arguing for their right to learn, to read, to know what they deem to be valuable. It means offering as rich a range of choices as we can to meet their needs. And respecting them and their decisions about what those needs are. It means taking the really hard step of trusting that in a free society with free access to

information, wrong, fatuous, vacuous, iniquitous ideas and other falsehoods will be better off in the full light of scrutiny than hidden away. Children have always known that the dark is scary--that the bogeyman can't get you when the lights are on.

Taking off the robe of the sorceress and unlocking the **tower** is not enough. We have to do the hard work of keeping the light burning bright, supplies always at hand and in working condition. Children's literature isn't promoting ugly ideas, cruelty, abuse, or hatred by writing about them. These ills don't happen because there are stories about them; they happen, and so the stories must exist. Pretending we can erase one by doing away with the other is abandoning the light and embracing the dark.

Richard Peck concluded his Margaret A. **Edwards** Award acceptance speech (JOYS, Fall 1990; p. 38) with the words of a young reader: "I read because one life is not enough, and in the pages of a book I can be anybody." And, in our complex world, that is surely true. By becoming the characters in the stories, by living in their landscapes, feeling their frustrations, and thinking with them, young people grow. As the world shrinks, we become closer and closer to all of ur neighbors. Books help us to step into boats of all kinds, some leaky, some strong as we go looking for safe harbors.

These books won't be for every child or every reader. But when we can say, there are no young people being abused, physically or emotionally, none are hungry or homeless, none are suffering, then they won't be as vitally needed. If we leave those stories out of our collections, our libraries become **ivory towers**, beautiful, comforting to the keepers, and ultimately irrelevant to our children.

PHOTO (COLOR): Wringer (Spinelli)

CARTOON: Rapunzel (Zelinsky)

by **Carol A. Edwards**

Carol A. Edwards is a Children's Librarian for the Minneapolis Public **Library**, MN.

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