

Nancy Garden was asked the following question about morality: Do young adult writers have an obligation to have moral standards and create boundaries in their books so as not to expose children to issues/situations that are age inappropriate? Why or why not?

Below is her response.

Dear Paula Taylor Greathouse,

You and Mr. DiCiccio have raised an important--and deceptively simple--question!

The basic answer to it is yes, of course.

But that's far too simple.

Philosophers and religious leaders (and others) have argued for centuries about morality, and have struggled to define and codify moral standards. The closest anyone's come to any kind of universal moral standard is probably the basic idea in the "Golden Rule," which has been expressed in a variety of ways by a variety of moralists, religious and otherwise. But, as the saying goes, "the devil's in the details." Even with the Golden Rule or something like it as a general guide, as I'm sure you know people disagree, often vehemently, about what's moral and what isn't, especially when it comes to specifics--and especially when it comes to children.

The term "age appropriate" is one of the most misleading and misunderstood terms in English. On its face, it seems reasonable and useful--but the fact is that what is "appropriate" information for one eight-year-old child--or eleven-year-old preteen -- or sixteen-year-old young adult--varies hugely depending on the individual kid's maturity, background, education, and experience. Consequently no author can possibly know what is "age appropriate" for all his or her readers. In theory, at least, parents are the best equipped to judge what material in books is and is not "age appropriate" for their own children (which is one reason why most of us say that that parents have every right to control their own children's reading, but no right to control other people's children's reading). Teachers and librarians--those who know individual children well--are also often in a position to make this kind of judgement. But authors can make these judgments only on a very general basis--and most of us do make them based on our own moral codes and our own sense of what might be difficult or inappropriate for some children around a specific age to encounter in books.

The age designations that appear on kids' books are put there by publishers, sometimes with and often without consultation with authors, and they are guidelines only, not hard and fast rules. There are just about always kids both below and above the stated age designations that enjoy the books marked with them!)

For example, some time ago I wrote several books, both fiction and non-fiction about vampires and other supernatural creatures, for, roughly, kids from 8-12 or 10-14. I was aware that some children are disturbed by graphic violence, and I purposely toned down descriptions of some details standard in vampire literature--for example, driving stakes through the hearts of vampires

to kill them. In some or all (I don't remember!) of my books, vampires were disposed of by being exposed to sunlight--another, and far less violent, method of accomplishing the same goal. I used to suggest to teachers when I made school visits about these books that some kids might not want to hear my presentation, and that I hoped they wouldn't be forced to attend. On the other hand a ten-year-old friend of mine, however, was entranced by a photo I showed him that was scheduled to go into a non-fiction book of mine about vampires. The photo, a still from a vampire movie, showed a female vampire lying in her coffin with a stake through her heart and blood on her dress. "Oh, gross!" he said, with what only can be described as glee.

Again, one can guess and generalize, but it's really not possible to tell accurately what's "age appropriate" for any given age child!

Most of us who write for YAs (and children) are aware that kids are exposed to a good many things in life that many adults would prefer be hidden from them. And I think that most of us, too, are aware that one way for kids to become equipped to handle things that disturb them is to be exposed to them in "safe" situations--e.g., in books--and to have the opportunity to discuss those things with understanding adults--parents, adult friends and mentors, teachers, librarians--authors, too, during school visits and via fan mail. And I think all of us are acutely aware that even though most teens for whom we write are not shocked by curse words or by the idea that some young people actually have sex, get pregnant, have abortions, commit violent acts, get STDs, have divorced parents, are LGBTQ, etc., etc., we do also know that other kids do not do these things, although these days most of them do encounter them or are aware of them in real life. We do know that some kids may be disturbed by encountering realistic or unsavory situations in books. When we say that we think parents and teachers and librarians and other adult friends are the best equipped to discuss these matters with kids and to guide their reading (guide individuals, not prevent all kids from reading such books by removing them from libraries and schools!), we are not passing the buck or shirking our responsibility--we are simply recognizing that we have no real control over who reads our books, and we think all kids should have access to them. And most of us also believe that many kids have been and are helped to face and handle life's disturbing realities by encountering some of them, safely, in books.

I haven't touched on the fear, expressed by some parents, that kids will imitate the behavior they read about in books. That may happen occasionally, but if you conclude from that largely unlikely possibility that nothing negative or problematic should be shown in books for kids, you'd have to throw out most of children's and YA literature. Most fiction is about how characters solve the problems they encounter!

I hope that answers your question. And I hope you'll go on seeking answers to it, and discussing it! Good luck with your article.

Best wishes,
Nancy Garden

Please visit my updated website (www.nancygarden.com), and check out two new anthologies, AWAKE! and DEAR BULLY. in which I have pieces.

On Apr 11, 2011, at 8:49:34 AM, "Taylor Paula" <Paula_Taylor@sarasota.k12.fl.us> wrote:

From: "Taylor Paula" <Paula_Taylor@sarasota.k12.fl.us>

Subject: fromwebpage -question about morality

Date: April 11, 2011 8:49:34 AM EDT

To: "nancygarden@aol.com" <nancygarden@aol.com>

Hi Ms. Garden. My name is Paula Taylor Greathouse and we have communicated in the past regarding LGBTQ literature and the fear of its use in the classroom. I am also Dr. Kaywell's doctoral student. Currently, I am working with another doctoral student, Michael DiCiccio on an article for Kaywell's class and was hoping that you would be willing to answer the following question for us.

Do young adult writers have an obligation to have moral standards and create boundaries in their books so as not to expose children to issues/situations that are age inappropriate? Why or why not?

Thank you for your time.

Paula