

Challenge of Marilyn Reynolds' *Detour for Emmy*

Grandmother to Grandmother

I have just finished reading the book *DETOUR FOR EMMY* by Marilyn Reynolds. It's the kind of book that makes me feel a sense of sadness when the book is finished because it feels as if I'm saying goodbye to a good friend. Getting to know Emmy was a pleasure, and I will miss her and hope that life is good to her.

I'm a librarian in a middle school, and I never seem to have time to read many of the books on my list of books to read. *DETOUR FOR EMMY* wasn't even on my list. Yes, it had been an award-winning book and on lists of books recommended for teens. Still, when I saw the book, it looked like it would be an ordinary story of a 15 year old girl who has a baby out of wedlock, an all too familiar subject these days. Even though it's an important subject, it didn't seem all that interesting compared to so many other books. After all, there are so many noble books to be read, and I didn't feel this was one of them.

Not long ago on a Monday morning, I began the week with a call from an angry grandmother because her granddaughter had taken the book *DETOUR FOR EMMY* from the library. The grandmother felt the book was inappropriate for her 13-year-old granddaughter. The call was the beginning of a book challenge that first involved the principal and then spread to the local newspaper and finally to a news station in the Dallas metroplex where the book was described as pornographic. The grandmother followed with a formal challenge so it became my responsibility to read the book and work with the review committee that would decide the fate of the book.

I began reading with pen and paper nearby so that I could document my observations. The book had me interested from the first few pages, and it was quick reading interrupted only by my note taking. Finally, I came to the paragraphs, which the grandmother found most objectionable. Yes, I could see that there might be controversy in these paragraphs, but it certainly wasn't pornographic. Knowing that the author, a teacher who works with pregnant teens, wrote the book to dissuade teens from being in such a predicament, I could see that she was trying to instruct naïve girls in birth control methods. After reading those pages, I found very little explicit sexual content in the book. I became involved as Emmy, a promising student with many friends, musical talent, and athletic ability fell in love with an older boy who was also a high school personality who was smart, talented, and well liked; but he didn't have the maturity or responsibility to handle a pregnant girlfriend and an obsessive mother who had grand plans for her son's future.

As I read, I found myself taking fewer and fewer notes as I became lost in Emmy's story and as I realized that she reminded me of a student who spent many hours in my office last year. In conversations with that student, I learned much about her home life; and while reading this book, I saw many similarities such as: a mother who was not often there for her children, a bond and closeness between siblings who looked out for each other, and a grandmother who tried to stand in the gap to take care of the children. Emmy's brother David tried to protect her; and they looked to each other for help, comfort, and support. Emmy thought often of her own grandmother who had been a stable force for Emmy until her death in a traffic accident six years before. So many times in the story, Emmy longed to be sitting in her grandmother's kitchen and

discussing life's issues with her. It was a strong resemblance to my own student who spoke so freely to me in my office. Midway through the book, I found myself too involved with Emmy to take notes, and I put my pen down.

The characters in the book were rich; some were noble, and some were not. Emmy was smart and practical while being a typical teenaged girl who loved to laugh and hang out with friends. As teens are, they were curious about sex and talked together about the subject. Emmy was curious but very cautious about sex until she met charming and popular Art who had a good future ahead of him. When he and Emmy began a serious relationship, she was certain that she had found a lasting love who would be there for her always. Emmy's mother, a waitress who thought very little about the well being of her children and left them to take care of themselves, drank too much and often decided to be gone several days at a time when someone or something lured her to have a good time. Art was Hispanic and grew up with loving family around always. His mother, emotionally unstable, doted on him; and his father, a happy fellow, beamed with pride in his son. Art's grandmother lived with the family; and they revered her, enjoyed her presence, and sought her advice.

Emmy immediately loved Art's family, which gathered together at the same time each evening for meals and enjoyed elaborate holiday celebrations together. Certainly, it was a family very different from Emmy's and was for her the perfect kind of family that she wanted. The relationship between Emmy and Art was idyllic, the envy of everyone, until Emmy became pregnant after an unprotected sexual encounter with Art. The relationship between the two young people unraveled quickly, and Emmy was left to handle the situation of being a pregnant teenager without money and without parental support. She faced friends who turned away from her, schoolteachers who once encouraged her but then seemed to lose all faith in her, and an end to all of the activities that she had enjoyed so much. Emmy faced the question of abortion with courage and knew that she could not take the life of the baby that she already loved even though her mother was angry about her decision and Art pressed her to get an abortion. Emmy matured as she struggled to prepare for motherhood, provide a home for her baby, and still maintain her academic dreams.

As I read, I was reminded of how hard motherhood is and yet how noble is its calling. As Emmy grew emotionally, Art's immaturity and self-centeredness became more evident as he refused to accept that he was the father of the baby and refused to tell his family. He quickly replaced Emmy with another girl and continued to enjoy his life as a school star. When Emmy's baby was born, she named her daughter, Rosemary, her beloved grandmother's name. Emmy worked hard to be a good mother and loved and cared for Rosemary in a way that she had not known from her own mother. She faced exhausting and frustrating days when she didn't go out and did nothing but take care of Rosemary. She felt lonely, ugly, and scared, but was always motivated by her love for Rosemary. Finally, she was able to start back to school to finish her senior year. She found that going back to school added more work to her already full days, but she didn't waiver in her determination to provide a good home for Rosemary and make plans for a strong future. Even Emmy's irresponsible mother began to soften as she took more interest in Rosemary and in her role as grandmother.

Art came back into Emmy's life. He finally accepted that he was Rosemary's father and even thought that she was cute. Yet, he never assumed the responsibilities of being her Daddy and still didn't want his family to know about his daughter. Even as Art tried to keep her away from his family, Emmy grew to understand that it was important for Rosemary to know that she had other grandparents and for Art's family to know about Rosemary. Emmy confronted them in an intense scene when Art was home from college for his Thanksgiving visit. Art's father and grandmother immediately became involved with Rosemary, but Art and his mother remained detached.

As the book ends, Emmy is getting ready to begin college with the help of a scholarship program called Project Hope. Emmy begins to sing in a church choir where her high school choir teacher is director, and Rosemary is in her own Sunday school class while her mother is in church. As the reader closes the last page of *DETOUR FOR EMMY*, there is a feeling of triumph and hope because Emmy is building the foundation of a better future for her and Rosemary. It's like the feeling, which comes at the end of a school year when students have learned and developed and are moving on to another grade or another school. There is sadness at seeing them go, but there is triumph, too, because they've learned their lessons well and are going on well prepared to face other challenges.

As I finish reading the book, I face the questions involved in this current book challenge. I think of the grandmother who is raising the questions about this book, and I remember the importance of Emmy's grandmother and Art's grandmother in the story. I, too, am a grandmother so I ask myself if I would recommend this book for my granddaughter, now only 9, when she is a young teen. The answer is definitely YES. There are so many good lessons about life and so many things that I would want her to know. My 9-year-old granddaughter is becoming an avid reader. When she visits, we enjoy reading together and talking about what we read. I'd like to read this book with her when she becomes a young teen and to talk issues as we read. I'd like to explain to her how it was when I was 13 and how I lived in a "happy days" kind of world without many of the problems and concerns that she will be facing as she moves into her life as a teenager. I'd like to explain to her that even though there seems to be more snares in the world now, the same strong values that I knew and that I find in *DETOUR FOR EMMY* are still important for a successful life. *DETOUR FOR EMMY* clearly shows the temptations that beckon teens today, but it is also full of the good things of life that are lasting values. It also shows how someone can overcome even the worst mistakes. Of course, I'd want to ask her mother, my daughter, if she would be willing to let me read the book because she is the one who ultimately must set standards for her children. In the meantime, I think I'll recommend the book to my younger daughter who is a physician who often works with unwed teenage mothers. This has become a special interest and concern for her. I'd like to recommend the book to her husband who is the pastor of a church. In his past ministry as a youth minister and now as pastor, he has works with this problem often. And I'd like to recommend it to my son, the youngest of my children and a young man who is still single. The book is a reminder that men, as well as women, have a responsibility to be honorable in their relationships. There is much to be learned and experienced by reading *DETOUR FOR EMMY*. Readers who see and take to heart the lessons in this book will grow in character.

There seems to be a vast difference in the attitudes of two grandmothers toward the book by Marilyn Reynolds. Is one grandmother more right than the other? No, I don't think that's true, but each grandmother brings a different philosophy to the reading of the book and a different philosophy to raising children and grandchildren. Each must act in a way that is true to her beliefs. So what's a librarian to do in a situation like this? The answer is that information and books must be available to support each grandmother in her job to pass values on to the generations. The use of the information is left to the grandmothers who face the challenge to leave a legacy to their grandchildren just as Emmy's grandmother left a legacy of love and values to Emmy. Each must be free to read literature that will help them be successful grandmothers. Freedom to read is still the American way.

As I finish reading this book, I am encouraged that young people are resilient and capable in their efforts to grapple with the problems in their world, and I'm convinced that I have a role to play both as an educator and as a grandmother. Thanks to Emmy, I am reminded that old fashioned values are still the best in a new fashioned world. I'm reminded that love and strong families are paramount in the development of strong teenagers. And I'm reminded that there are solutions to problems and that a strong spiritual foundation makes a strong life. Knowing about and understanding a problem doesn't cause a problem; and ignorance and innocence are not the same thing.

Marilyn Reynolds' Response

As the author of *DETOUR FOR EMMY*, a book currently being challenged by the grandparent of a student at Acton Middle School in Granbury, Texas, I would like to offer a different perspective for the consideration of concerned parents and educators.

The letters I receive from teen readers indicate to me that, far from leading readers astray, *Detour for Emmy* often enables young people to make more enlightened decisions about difficult situations. Here are a few quotes from the hundreds of letters in my file:

"The struggles Emmy had to deal with made me sure I would not want to be in her position. I have decided to abstain from sex until marriage."

"That book made me realize where my life was going, which was somewhere I didn't want it to go."

"I'm a sixteen year old girl and I have a three month old baby boy. I quit school when I found out I was pregnant. When my son was born I had no intentions of going back to school or going to work. Mainly I depended on others to help . . . Now since I read this book I'm going back to full time school and I'm going to find a part-time job."

It saddens me to think that teens in Granbury may be deprived of the opportunity to gain such insights through Emmy's story. The challenger has every right to decide what is and is not appropriate for his or her children to read. We might wish that all parents/grandparents would pay such close attention. But, if I were a parent in Granbury, I would be outraged if my rights to decide the appropriateness of reading material for my own children had been stripped from me

by the removal of such a thought-provoking book, based on the complaint of one parent/grandparent.

My twenty-six years in a high school English classroom, convinced me that the availability of realistic young adult fiction in school libraries and classrooms is crucial to the academic and personal growth of many students. Often such books deal with young people who, through either fate or their own fault, find themselves in terrible situations. Their lives have been forever changed, narrowed, perhaps, as happens with teen pregnancy, or a drunk driving accident, or failure to take school seriously. Besides helping readers gain a perspective on their own lives, the stories are compelling. I saw many non-readers turned into avid readers through the stories of Chris Crutcher, or Judy Blume--Gary Paulson or S. E. Hinton. By becoming readers, they increased their vocabulary, usage skills, and writing fluency. Realistic teen fiction has an important place in any balanced school collection.

Many of us have, as teens, taken a wrong turn, or confronted a personal tragedy, and then had to fight mightily to get back on track. All of my "True-to-Life from Hamilton High" books, including *Detour for Emmy*, are about teens who must struggle to make their lives count. As with much young adult fiction, my stories are tributes to the strength of the human spirit, to the desire within each of us to make our lives count for something. That's what Emmy strives for, too. She takes responsibility for her actions and moves on, though her path is fraught with difficulties she would not have faced had she not become pregnant.

Regarding the few passages in *Detour for Emmy* which deal openly with sexual situations, to skip over those important aspects of the story would be a disservice to my readers. They deserve an honest story. As for the fear that reading about sex leads to early experimentation, studies show the opposite. In the Netherlands, where detailed sex education is offered from kindergarten on, teens initiate sexual intercourse at an average age of 17.7, compared to 15.8 for our teens, educated in "abstinence only" programs. The better informed our teenagers are, the better equipped they are to make wise choices in the midst of peer pressure and temptation.

Consider an email from Betty P: "Hello Marilyn Reynolds! . . . your books helped me realize that I don't want to be a fourteen-year-old mother. Right now I just want to take care of myself and finish school . . . Thank you.

It saddens me to think that, in Garland, Texas, teens such as Betty may be denied access to a book that offers the possibility of important personal realizations.