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Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood

By Sherman Alexie



— Everett

Recently, I was the surprise commencement speaker at the promotion ceremony for a Seattle alternative high school. I spoke to sixty students, who'd come from sixteen different districts, and had survived depression, attempted suicide, gang warfare, sexual and physical abuse, absentee parents, poverty, racism, and learning disabilities in order to graduate.

These students had read my young adult novel, "[The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian](#)," and had been inspired by my autobiographical story of a poor reservation Indian boy and his desperate and humorous attempts to find a better life.

I spoke about resilience—about my personal struggles with addiction and mental illness—but it was the student speakers who told the most important stories about survival.

A young woman recalled the terrible moment when indifferent school administrators told her that she couldn't possibly be a teen mother and finish high school. So they suggested she get a General Education Degree (GED) and move on with her life. But, after taking a practice test, she realized that the GED was far too easy for her, so she transferred to that alternative high school, and is now the mother of a three-year-old and a high school graduate soon to attend college.

After the ceremony, many of the graduates shook my hand, hugged me, took photos with me, and asked me questions about my book and my life. Other students hovered on the edges and eyed me with

suspicion and/or shyness.

It was a beautiful and painful ceremony. But it was not unique. I have visited dozens of high schools—rich and poor, private and public, integrated and segregated, absolutely safe and fearfully dangerous—and have heard hundreds of stories that are individually tragic and collectively agonizing.

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. To the contrary, kids as young as ten have sent me autobiographical letters written in crayon, complete with drawings inspired by my book, that are just as dark, terrifying, and redemptive as anything I've ever read.

And, often, kids have told me that my YA novel is the only book they've ever read in its entirety.

So when I read [Meghan Cox Gurdon's](#) complaints about the “depravity” and “hideously distorted portrayals” of contemporary young adult literature, I laughed at her condescension.

Does Ms. Gurdon honestly believe that a sexually explicit YA novel might somehow traumatize a teen mother? Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?

When I think of the poverty-stricken, sexually and physically abused, self-loathing Native American teenager that I was, I can only wish, immodestly, that I'd been given the opportunity to read “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.” Or Laurie Halse Anderson's “Speak.” Or Chris Lynch's “Inexusable.” Or any of the books that Ms. Gurdon believes to be irredeemable. I can't speak for other writers, but I think I wrote my YA novel as a way of speaking to my younger, irredeemable self.

Of course, all during my childhood, would-be saviors tried to rescue my fellow tribal members. They wanted to rescue me. But, even then, I could only laugh at their platitudes. In those days, the cultural conservatives thought that KISS and Black Sabbath were going to impede my moral development. They wanted to protect me from sex when I had already been raped. They wanted to protect me from evil though a future serial killer had already abused me. They wanted me to profess my love for God without considering that I was the child and grandchild of men and women who'd been sexually and physically abused by generations of clergy.

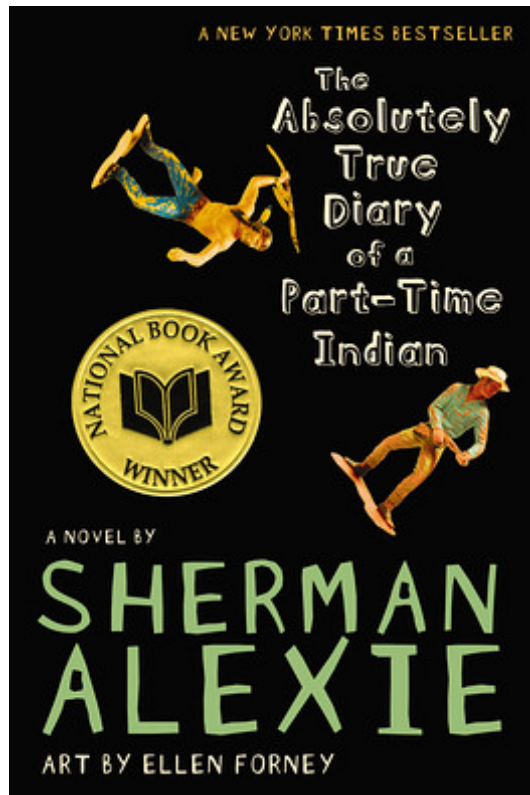
What was my immature, childish response to those would-be saviors?

“Wow, you are way, way too late.”

And now, as an adult looking back, I wonder why those saviors tried to warn me about the crimes that were already being committed against me.

When some cultural critics fret about the “ever-more-appalling” YA books, they aren't trying to protect African-American teens forced to walk through metal detectors on their way into school. Or Mexican-American teens enduring the culturally schizophrenic life of being American citizens and the children of

illegal immigrants. Or Native American teens growing up on Third World reservations. Or poor white kids trying to survive the meth-hazed trailer parks. They aren't trying to protect the poor from poverty. Or victims from rapists.



No, they are simply trying to protect their privileged notions of what literature is and should be. They are trying to protect privileged children. Or the seemingly privileged.

Two years ago, I met a young man attending one of the most elite private high schools in the country. He quietly spoke to me of his agony. What kind of pain could a millionaire's child be suffering? He hadn't been physically or sexually abused. He hadn't ever been hungry. He'd never seen one person strike another in anger. He'd never even been to a funeral.

So what was his problem?

"I want to be a writer," he said. "But my father won't let me. He wants me to be a soldier. Like he was."

He was seventeen and destined to join the military. Yes, he was old enough to die and kill for his country. And old enough to experience the infinite horrors of war. But according to Ms. Gurdon, he might be too young to read a YA novel that vividly portrays those very same horrors.

"I don't want to be like my father," that young man said. "I want to be myself. Just like in your book."

I felt powerless in that moment. I could offer that young man nothing but my empathy and the promise of more books about teenagers rescuing themselves from the adults who seek to control and diminish him.

Teenagers read millions of books every year. They read for entertainment and for education. They read because of school assignments and pop culture fads.

And there are millions of teens who read because they are sad and lonely and enraged. They read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books—especially the dark and dangerous ones—will save them.

As a child, I read because books—violent and not, blasphemous and not, terrifying and not—were the most loving and trustworthy things in my life. I read widely, and loved plenty of the classics so, yes, I recognized the domestic terrors faced by Louisa May Alcott’s March sisters. But I became the kid chased by werewolves, vampires, and evil clowns in Stephen King’s books. I read books about monsters and monstrous things, often written with monstrous language, because they taught me how to battle the real monsters in my life.

And now 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.

Sherman Alexie is the author of “[The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian](#),” winner of the 2007 National Book Award in Young People’s Literature. He is currently at work on a sequel. His website is [here](#).

What did you think of the essay? Leave your thoughts in the comments.

Are dark themes in youth fiction helpful or harmful to teenagers?

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