

Who's Afraid of A.S. King?

As an ALAN member, I have read many issues of *The ALAN Review*. I hoped that one day I would have time between my writing career, my school events calendar, and my faculty work at Vermont College to write a lovely academic piece for this journal that might touch on some of my pet topics. My envisioned piece would not use any personal first- or second-person pronouns; it would involve citations from much research, avoid familiar language, and would make a clear point, just as I instruct my MFA students to do when writing academic pieces.

What you are about to read is not that piece. What you are about to read is a blog post—familiar, with a few curse words, plenty of personal pronouns, and few citations. The research behind this essay is purely personal, and when Ricki Ginsberg wrote to ask me if she might have it for *The ALAN Review*, I faltered. On the one hand, my love for the ALAN organization is enormous, and I knew that ALAN members would understand what I'd written. On the other hand, when I received Ricki's email, I had just turned down a major news website who'd asked me for this piece because I have standards for articles the same as I have standards for academic pieces. This piece was clearly a casual, personal blog post. I told Ricki I would "revise it for a more academic tone."

I've been writing professionally for over 25 years. If there's anything I've learned it is that tone is the hardest thing to change once a piece is written. I have removed main characters and written new endings; I have changed the ages or genders of my characters, and I've changed settings. In fiction, certain elements are interchangeable. But tone or voice is another

story. I couldn't fix that. It is what it is. And so, with Ricki's permission, I have left it as is, for the most part, because the positive reactions to the piece were tied intimately to the tone.

I'm not sure what I was feeling when I wrote this piece. The subject of quiet censorship can make us feel frustrated, angry, concerned, but I think the emotion that dominated as I wrote was one of being tired. I'm tired. I'm tired of defending teachers and librarians. I'm tired of defending teenagers. I'm tired of the adult eye-rolling the minute something teen-related works its way into a conversation. I'm tired of the lack of respect we give teenagers when they are mere moments away from adulthood. To me, it's akin to the laws of basic training. We yell, we disrespect, we limit power, we call their emotions "drama," and then we boot them out into the real world thinking that they might have confidence and self-esteem when, really, our culture on the whole has taken it from them.

I started writing novels 20 years ago because I loved books, and I wanted to write books because I wanted, one day, for someone to love my book enough to make them want to write a book. This has happened, but I still work two other jobs to afford to be a writer because I love writing quality literature for teenagers. The tone of this piece reflects that reality, and I ask you to readjust your reading glasses to blog mode while you read it. The tone in this piece also puts teen readers at the top of the heap, where they should be. They are our future. They are usually underrepresented in intellectual conversations about their own well-being. And yet, when given the opportunity to speak about their realities, I have

heard hundreds of teens share poignant, factual, and well-organized thoughts about this subject. Most of them can't understand why anyone would want to keep books from them. Many of them wonder who, exactly, is in control of this part of their education. Some of them fight (see Muhlenberg School District, Reading, PA—my hometown—and the reaction to the ALAN book boxes their representatives brought home after the 2013 Workshop) but are not taken seriously simply because they are teenagers. Some of them are completely unaware of what's being kept from them because so many books just disappear from classroom library or school library shelves with no fuss. I firmly believe that all children have potential. All of them. I believe that teenagers are in the most important stage of life—where that potential is about to be directed into a vocation. In my mind, it is at this stage where we should allow teenagers access to all books in order to make such important decisions with the full canon of knowledge available to them. With that, I give you “Who's Afraid of A.S. King?”

This week, I heard from a good friend of mine who works in secondary education. She was talking to a friend who works in a public high school's guidance center. My friend's friend seemed shocked that *Reality Boy* would be allowed in my friend's school (due to possible parent complaints) even though she personally loved the book. I hear this a lot. I'm used to it. People from my generation didn't have this kind of literature when they were in school. (I'll add they also didn't have the Internet, cell phones, cable TV, or crime shows that got much worse than *Quincy* or *Hawaii Five-0*.)

But.

A year ago, a friend of mine who teaches high school English, and whose school I've visited many times, was talking to a fellow teacher. She mentioned that I visit her school and that her students love my books, and the fellow teacher, who also loves my work, said, “Aren't you afraid to have A.S. King into your school?”

Yikes.

Last year I was quietly uninvited to a school because a math teacher didn't like the last book (from another author) that the organizing librarian promoted during a previous reading initiative. The principal

got involved. I did not go to that school—an inner-city public school that cannot afford author visits and whose students would have probably loved and needed the presentation I give about the “personal suitcase.” The librarian had worked so hard on this visit that we were both very upset when the final verdict was given—in quiet code that no school board ever discussed.

I have had my books blocked from school libraries based on a principal finding and reading one negative Amazon review.

People have been shocked when I tell them I visit Catholic schools. I have no idea why they are shocked. Do they think that Catholics can't relate to books that talk about everything from bullying to genocide? Last time I checked, Oliver Cromwell was quite a bully and wanted all Catholics dead.

Yet, people never seem shocked when I tell them that I've visited a juvenile detention center or an alternative school. I can't figure out why. Is it because these kids are throwaways? Why, on one hand, do professionals working with teens seem shocked that I would be allowed into a Catholic school or university to speak and yet think it's completely logical that I would go to talk to the kids they've already given up on?

When I take all these facts and swirl them around, I can't make much sense of it. What is it, exactly, that these people seem to think is so dangerous? Sure, anyone who reads any book is allowed not to like it. That's valid and important, and if you don't like my books, then I don't expect you to promote them in any way. But these things are being said either by people who adore my books, or in two cases above, never read them. So why the shock? Why the implied fear of me, in general?

Maybe it's the cursing. I am very aware that some of my characters curse. I curse too sometimes. But I was raised in a no-cursing house, and I am raising my kids in a no-cursing house. I don't even curse when I burn a grilled cheese sandwich. I say, “Shazbot.” I say, “Sugar.” I say, “Darn it!” So why do my charac-

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ters curse? Because some kids curse. All kinds of kids, too. Not just what some people label “bad kids.” Good kids curse plenty. Calculus geniuses curse. Cheerleaders curse. Kids who go to church curse. Top-notch athletes curse. Valedictorians curse.

My eleven-year-old kid learned every swear word on a shared school bus last year. She was nine then. She also learned the racial words. You know. The

N-word, the Sp-word, the Ch-word, the W-word. Usually, these words were used in conjunction with a curse word. Example: “Those fucking N-words are living off the government,” or “Fucking W-words need to go back to Mexico,” etc. You get the picture. Apparently, these children, all of whom attend a private religious school, some of whom were younger than my kid,

learned these curse words somewhere and dutifully taught my then-nine-year-old about them by using them in competent sentences in casual conversation on a bus before eight in the morning.

Luckily, she told me. And I told her what the words meant, why they are offensive, and why we don’t use them in our house. I assume this process is the same for most parents. Frankly, I’m glad she learned the words when she did. This experience made her a voracious reader of novels about racism and injustice, which has made her the type of citizen that I’d be proud to call my neighbor. Thanks to those kids on the bus, she better understood books like *Persepolis*; *Maus*; *American Born Chinese*; *March*; *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; *Boxers and Saints*; *Journey to Topaz*; *Number the Stars*; *Anna of Byzantium*; and the Resistance series, and she is far less likely to hate or tolerate hate.

So, if it’s the cursing that makes some adults squeamish about my books in schools, then why do they project that fear when referring to me, the author? Do they think that my author visits, my assembly programs, or my classroom workshops involve some sort of inappropriate material? Do they think that 40+ schools and libraries per year pay me to

come and talk to their students because I’m scary? I’m thinking that adults are smarter than this. No, it can’t be that they think I will curse or will promote cursing when I go to a school. So I’m guessing it isn’t the cursing.

Maybe it’s sex. I don’t really write sex in my books. I can’t write a sex scene to save my life. And I didn’t have sex in high school (not like it’s any of your business), so I can’t really feel what that feels like, so I find it hard to write about it. That said, I know that the average age American teens first have sex is about sixteen. And I know fourteen-year-olds have sex. And probably twelve-year-olds, too. And no, I’m not comfortable with that, but it’s happening, right? So, I don’t write sex scenes, though some of my characters have had sex or talk about it. But find me a high school student who hasn’t talked about or thought about sex, and I’ll hand-deliver you a home-baked muffin. There are writers in my field who do write sex scenes, and I applaud them, especially those who are writing sex-positive and consent-centered sex in teen fiction. Sex is a huge part of teenhood. Even if teens aren’t doing it, the teen years are where they learn the rules, so it’s an important time. If there is silence from the adults about sex, then how will we, as adults and as a culture, make sure those rules are clear in a world full of easily accessible porn, blurred consent definitions, and rampant relationship violence?

Even listing these things is making me feel a bit ill. As if there is certain subject matter we can’t share with teens . . . while we are happy to watch CSI-what-ever right in front of them. So what’s left?

Violence. My books have a little of that. Sure. So does life. Next. *Death.* Seriously. Death is part of life. Just ask Forrest Gump. Next. *Empathy toward others, or tolerance toward those who are different from the reader.* When I first wrote this piece, I didn’t understand why this would be a problem, but author and teacher Eric Devine made me realize that this is actually a huge issue and can be compared loosely to the “This kind of thing doesn’t happen in our town” idea I mention later. So, a school board doesn’t believe that LGBTQ books belong in its school libraries because they have no LGBTQ students. First of all, this can’t be accurate. But most of all, the idea that a book about something unfamiliar to you is automatically irrelevant is perplexing. To me, reading is a way to explore new worlds and grow as a human. A book is a

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life experience. A book can make you more tolerant. A book can open one's mind. Some people are frightened of this no matter how much we don't understand that reasoning.

Abuse. My books don't touch on this in a full-on way, but again, that's life. Why wouldn't we talk about this? CSI-whatever talks about it all the time. One in four kids in America has been sexually abused or raped by the time he/she gets to be a senior in college. So, why are we keeping this a secret? Don't you think kids talk about it in school when a friend gets assaulted? You don't think they saw it on Facebook? They know. Trust me. *Drugs and alcohol.* Yes. My books do touch on this a bit. I once had an adult contact me on Twitter to say she got to page eleven of *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* where Vera pulls out a bottle of vodka from under her car seat, and she tweeted something like, "A.S. King promotes teen drinking and driving! Not reading the rest of this book!" If she'd kept reading, she could have actually learned that the book was not at all what she thought it was. Then again, it seemed she was looking for a reason to stop reading, and I'm glad she found one. I've recently learned of a small rural town in my home county that is plagued by teen heroin addiction. Do we not think that teens know this stuff exists? They know. Again, trust me. *Bullying.* Yes, my books have this. And so does every school in America. And every workplace. Most schools have anti-bullying initiatives built into curricula, but maybe they don't like the words bullies use. Maybe they don't like the violent, emotional reality of bullying because it is difficult to think about a child living inside that reality.

I'm thinking that might be the problem on the whole. *Reality.*

I mean, real reality. You know—where life is sometimes hard and parents aren't always perfect and school sometimes sucks and college decisions seem pointless and sex is a possibility on a Friday night the same as smoking a joint, drinking to excess, or getting into a fight or studying for SATs. I have yet to write about stealing a car, but that's a Friday night possibility as much as considering committing suicide, and I've written about that, too.

Last year I talked to thousands of teenagers in their high schools. When I talk, do you know what I talk about? I talk about making smart mistakes. Do you know why I do that? Because I meet a lot of

teenagers who are afraid of making mistakes. One of my presentation slides reads: EVERYONE MAKES MISTAKES. That's what I tell students. I tell them that making mistakes is universal. We all do it. I tell them that making a mistake is not a reason to give up. Do you know how many teens need to hear this? Judging by the letters I get from classrooms all over the country, a lot. I'm guessing that's because someone somewhere along the line gave them the impression that they should be perfect.

So I tell them that they are not perfect. I tell them that, like me, they are flawed and will make mistakes. And I tell them that maybe, like me, if they think about their own mistakes (and the mistakes of others, through, say, reading fiction) and figure out why they made them, that maybe they can be the lucky ones who learn from their mistakes and go on to make smarter and smarter mistakes. I also ask them to look into their pasts, and I ask them what they're lugging around with them—that personal suitcase—and I tell them that this baggage, we all have it. And then I explain how to unpack and repack that suitcase in order to survive real life and be happy.

My books are on school and state reading lists all over the country and have won state awards and national awards. I get letters every week from students who read my books and find themselves in them. "This book changed the way I look at the world." I also get letters every week from adults who read my books and find themselves in them. "This book changed the way I look at the world. I wish it was around when I was in school."

So why, when chatting over a casual cup of tea on a random morning, would anyone say, "Aren't you afraid to have A.S. King into your school?"

My mother worked in schools and in school administration for years. I understand well what goes

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on. I do not like that teachers—those trained best to teach and run their own classrooms—are not at the top of the decision-making pyramid when it comes to what and how they teach. I do not like most standardized testing because I don't think it prepares students for much . . . other than more standardized testing. Teachers, teacher training professors, and teaching students I know (my husband included) know how I feel about these things. One of the coolest administrators I met actually participated in a community read

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of one of my books and invited me to Skype into her office one day while students were there. It was refreshing to see a superintendent getting involved in reading and reality. Our discussions that day serve as proof that not all administration is bad or limiting. But this is a rarity, and I think we all know it. So we'll move on.

I've worked on library boards and know that some patrons think that "cleansing" the stacks of anything they deem inappropriate is a good idea. Since this piece isn't about libraries, I won't say too much about this, but we all know what happens when a library cleanser comes around. It's always fascinating to me to try and get into the minds of people who think they can remove reading material from the same stacks that I read from—as if they are saving me from something I can't handle. People are weird.

I know parents. I know parents who say, "I loved your book and can't wait for my teen to read it!" I know parents who say, "I loved your book, but I'd never let my teen read it!" I also know parents who tell me at signings, "My child can read at a high school level. Yes, I know she's ten, but she loved [insert popular YA book here.]" I do my very best to explain to this third type of parent that age recommendations are for mature (teen) content and that maybe they should read the book *with* their child, just in case any questions come up. They often tell me they don't have time to read for pleasure and that their child will

be fine. I trust them. I have to. It's not my job to censor their kid's reading the same as it isn't anyone's job to censor what my kids read.

I don't know about you, but quiet censorship freaks me out. It's the censorship that's spoken over tea, over lunch, at random times when we are not prepared to answer because we are caught so off-guard that we really only think about what was said on the plane home. Last year I was asked to be on a censorship panel as an "expert." I had to reply and say I was not an expert at official challenges. So far, my books haven't had an official challenge as far as I know. Instead, I get embarrassed looks from dedicated librarians who whisper, "My principal won't let me have that one in the stacks." I get near-inaudible uninvitations. I get quiet letters from devoted teachers who apologize for not being able to share my book with a student who needs it because of a fear of losing their job. Ah, quiet. It is usually an indication that important information is being withheld. Like the way we whisper *cancer*.

My favorite response to certain books is: "This kind of thing doesn't happen in our town!"

I heard this once in response to *Please Ignore Vera Dietz*. Here's a funny fact: I based the creepy guy in *Please Ignore Vera Dietz* on a real guy named Eddie Savitz. Savitz had haunted me for years after his story came out in the early 1990s. But when the book came out, I got all sorts of letters asking how I knew about "Big Bill" or "Teddy Bear" or other towns' creeps. I got more than ten of these letters just in the year the book came out. None of the letter-writers knew that creeps other than their own town-creeps existed. But creeps happen. All over the place. If you watch the TV news, you hear about them every single day. Check your state's online database. I bet you have a creep living near you.

But not in your town. I get it. Drugs and alcohol also don't happen in your town, nor does teen sex, violence, or swearing. Or death. If there really is a town like this in America, I am happy about that. Really truly happy. But are your teenagers going to stay in that town forever? Don't you want them to go to college? Or go out in the world and do stuff? Don't you want them to be prepared for all of these real things that happen all the time in real life? Don't you want them to know that they will make mistakes? Don't you want them to learn how to make smarter mistakes?

Fiction can help. I write my books for one reason, whether they are for adults or teens. I write to make readers think. I write to widen perspective. I write to make readers ask questions and then answer the questions or start conversations. And I write sometimes to give voice to the throwaways, of which our society has many, but we usually hide them because we are still uncomfortable with what we see as our own mistakes. Make sure you say that in a whisper. *Throwaways*.

As a parent, it is certainly up to you what your child reads, just as it is up to me what my child reads. We can control this at home. No doubt. But the one thing we cannot control is time, and as time passes, our children will become adults. I know my child would make a good neighbor. She knows what hate looks and sounds like. She knows how to speak her mind, and she knows she makes mistakes because we make her own those mistakes. I know that one day, when she is your neighbor, she will help you shovel your sidewalk of snow if you need help. I know she will babysit your kids responsibly and play a patient game of Scrabble with them. She will make them brush their teeth before bed. If she reads them a bedtime story, it will most likely be Dr. Seuss or a few Shel Silverstein poems.

People who know me read this blog post when I posted it. People who *really* know me. And anyone who knows me knows that I am the least scary person you will ever meet. My books? Are not anything to be afraid of. I mean, unless you're afraid of real things that go on every day. I mean, unless you're afraid of kids knowing more about reality than, you know, CSI-whatever. I mean, unless you're afraid of an adult whose sole purpose on planet Earth is to empower people to be the very best they can be no matter how heavy their personal suitcases might be.

I'm that adult, and I own it. If I'm scary to you, then okay. Most teachers I know also have this same goal: to empower students to be the very best they can be. And many of those teachers know that this also scares some people. I have no idea why.

This isn't about administrator's rules. Those are real, and I know in every job, there are rules that dictate what you can do, even if you want to do more. I am so grateful to teachers and librarians all over the world who share young adult books with their teens. And I stand with those of you who are tied by your

administrations into this uncomfortable atmosphere of occasional, quiet censorship. I know you don't want it. I'm sorry you have to deal with it as well-trained and educated professionals. I don't want you to lose your job and really appreciate the things you do to steer your students toward the fiction they might need when they need it. Thank you.

When I look back at me at 12 years old, in seventh grade, I know that Paul Zindel's books saved the me that finally fought hard to come back. That's the me you know now. The me in between (from 12.5–18.5) was a strange sort of throwaway kid. Bad grades. Bad habits. Bad attitude. I was bored, and I gave up on everything, and the minute I did, so did most of the teachers. But some still knew that deep down, I was a *thinker* . . . and I can bet they were wondering what I was *thinking* while I chose that in-between me who would rather smoke in the bathroom and get detention than study when I was in high school.

Here's what I was thinking: I can't wait to get out of this bullshit place and be myself. Maybe that's what makes me scary. I don't know. What I do know is: I was a throwaway kid in the eyes of my eighth-grade guidance counselor (who, while filling out a soon-to-be-denied form to request the reinstatement of a gifted program for me, spelled cello "chello") and in the eyes of many who came after him. I knew high school had an expiration date and all I had to do was survive until the expiration date was up, so I could think again and be myself again and finally be happy.

I did make it to graduation, thanks to Paul Zindel and many other authors; but thanks, really, to the teachers who gave me those books to read. I graduated from high school thanks to books.

But more importantly, when I entered the real world—the one with awful bosses, crappy paychecks, regular sexual harassment/gender discrimination,

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untrustworthy people, drug addicts, alcoholics, bad friends, bad drivers, bad doctors, keg parties, your-list-here—I was better able to make smart decisions and learn from my not-so-smart decisions because I’d read about characters who made mistakes and who recovered from those mistakes. Well, that and my

parents who never once flagged a book I was reading as inappropriate and who had never once lied to me about the real world.

After graduating college, I went to a Philadelphia mansion party with a 60-year-old businessman who’d promised we’d talk about a full-time job (I’d interviewed with him prior to this). When I was grabbed and groped and forcefully kissed by a dif-

ferent 60-year-old man, I knew, after a panicked moment alone in the bathroom, to get the hell out of that swanky mansion and drive the hour home. I was 21 years old on the day of that party. On my way home, I stopped at a friend’s house and bawled my eyes out. I was embarrassed, yes. Gassed out, certainly. But most of all, I was afraid that my parents would be mad at me for leaving the party because they had been hopeful about the job from this businessman.

I’ll never forget the laughter that night. My mother laughed so much as I told her and my father, through tears, what had happened. They laughed to make me feel better, yes. They laughed because they wanted me to see the humor in this sick and twisted world. They laughed because they wanted me to know it wasn’t my fault. They laughed because up until then, they had prepared me for the real world, and I was safe at home and not still at the party getting roofied and god-knows-what-elses. They were, in a word, relieved.

I know why people want their children to remain innocent. I have a six-year-old. She is adorable. She loves unicorns. She loves dressing up like a pirate princess, she has no idea that the real world exists, and so far no harm has come to her, and it’s a beautiful thing. It really is. We read *Freedom Summer* to-

gether, and she knows the evil of racism even though she hasn’t experienced it yet. But she will. And when she does, thanks to books like *Freedom Summer*, she will be repulsed.

I am repulsed by many facets of the real world teens have to navigate now. I am also very aware that my repulsion has nothing to do with its existence. It will exist whether I am repulsed or not.

So I write about it.

It’s that simple.

If that makes me scary, then I’m proud to be scary. But I don’t think I’m scary at all. I’ll shovel your sidewalk if you need help. I’ll make you a big pot of spicy corn chowder if you’re sick. I’ll read Dr. Seuss to your kids, and I will make them brush their teeth. And if one of them doesn’t understand something about the real world—say, racism—and they ask me about it, then I will buy your family a copy of *Freedom Summer*, and if you feel like sharing it with them, then I bet you’ll have a great conversation after you read it, and I bet your relationship will be all the better for the honesty you share.

Lying never helped any relationship improve. Whispering never cured cancer. And some throwaway kids become adults like me . . . if someone somewhere along the way gives them a voice. Fiction does that. Vonnegut did it for me. Zindel. Heller. Rushdie. Plato. Twain. Steinbeck. Plath. Hemingway. Woolf. Dahl. Salinger. Golding. Orwell. Lee. They all did that for me. But they were quietly censored, too. Over tea. During lunch. At random times. So maybe it’s a big club.

It’s scary out there. I know it. I turned on the Winter Olympics so I could watch with my kids, and I had to turn it off because the commercials for prime time that NBC aired—images of terrified, captive children, guns, and violence—were not something I wanted my kids to see. But if I mentioned that I was going to watch the Olympics with my kids, I doubt anyone would say, “Aren’t you afraid to watch the Olympics with your kids?”

I’ve swirled all of this stuff around in my head for years, and I still can’t make sense of it.

Except this part: hiding things from teenagers is a known fail. Teenagers already know what we’re attempting to hide from them. They probably know a lot more than we do about the reality of being a teenager today. They’re a lot smarter than most people give

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them credit for. Contemporary young adult books are not going to tell them anything they don't already know. The people who know this best are teachers, teen service librarians, and others who give their time to the cause of young adult literature and teenagers in general. I only wish the rest of the adult world would catch up.

A.S. King is an award-winning author of young adult books, including highly acclaimed Reality Boy; the 2012 Los Angeles Times Book Prize winner, Ask the Passengers; Everybody Sees the Ants; 2011 Michael L. Printz Honor Book, Please Ignore Vera Dietz; and the upcoming Glory O'Brien's History of the Future. King's short fiction for adults has been widely published and nominated for Best New American Voices. After 15 years living self-sufficiently and teaching literacy to adults in Ireland, she now lives in Pennsylvania. Find more at www.as-king.com.

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