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## RIGHT TO READ

Tracey **Flores**  
and Meg **Medina**  
with  
E. Sybil **Durand** and  
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# Embracing the Difficult Truths of Adolescence through Young Adult Literature

*This article is also available in an online format that allows direct access to all links included. We encourage you to access it on the ALAN website at <http://www.alan-ya.org/publications/the-alan-review/the-alan-review-columns/>.*

In the call for submissions for this issue of *The ALAN Review*, the editors explain that “how we conceive of adolescence influences our perception of adolescents.” With respect to this column, we wondered what censorship reveals about censors’ perceptions of young people. It seems to us that when adults block adolescents’ access to books that address the concerns and possible difficult realities young people face, they suggest that adolescents are incapable of handling these challenging situations. Such a stance aims to cover and largely silence the ugly truths of adolescence—that young people are not always innocent and that some young people are the victims (and perpetrators) of violence, including bullying and verbal, physical, and sexual assault. Ultimately, censoring books that represent these issues in realistic and accessible ways works to undermine the lived experiences of so many adolescents readers.

If censors hold a narrow perception of adolescents, the reverse is also true. As an organization, ALAN is evidence of the authors, librarians, and educators who recognize that many young people face challenging situations and who believe that, as a whole, adolescents are fully capable of understanding and addressing these issues. These adults honor youth cultures by creating discursive and literary spaces

where young people can engage with social issues in safe ways. For this column, we asked two youth advocates to share their thoughts about youth culture, censorship, and young people’s right to read. Tracey Flores, the director of Arizona State University’s (ASU) youth literacy event, “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros,” discusses her approach to creating a space that honors young people and their cultures, languages, and literacies. Meg Medina, the author of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013) and a keynote speaker at Día, shares her experience with censorship and the importance of writing and providing access to books that embrace the difficult truths of adolescence.

## (Re)mediating Youth Spaces through Literature

In May of 2015, ASU hosted its fifth annual “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros.” This event, organized by Tracey Flores and Jim Blasingame, features authors, poets, and scholars who write about issues relevant to young people. In 2015, over 600 middle and high school students attended Día. They listened to keynote speakers such as poet Alberto Ríos and slam poet Myrlyn Hepworth, as well as young adult literature authors Matt de la Peña, Bill Konigsberg, Tom Leveen, Meg Medina, and Jeanette Rallison.

At Día, the few adults in the room—teachers, authors, chaperones, and other program facilitators—all worked to honor the often difficult realities young people have to face. The authors spoke about and against the marginalizing experiences of youth of

color and shared their own stories of growing up with challenges that persist in the lives of youth—bullying,

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cultural stereotypes, and being the first in their family to attend college. The students also had the opportunity to share their own stories in workshops led by authors, ASU faculty, and local teachers. In the following interview, Tracey Flores explains the vision for Día and the process of creating a space that supports young people.

*How and when did “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros” get started? What is your vision for organizing this program?*

This year, Día will celebrate 20 years of literacy events and celebrations across the United States.

The event was created by author/poet Pat Mora. In May 2016, ASU will host its sixth annual Día celebration honoring youth, language, culture, and literacy.

In the first year of planning, event organizers made the shared decision to create a celebration to meet the unique needs of the adolescent reader and writer. Our aim was to engage participants in activities that would capture their individual interests and open their minds to the liberating power of reading and writing. The goal of our celebration was to create a space that would invite students into the world of story by offering interactive literacy workshops that engaged them in various reading and writing activities and honored their unique cultures, gifts, and talents. With each year’s event, we want to encourage students to share their stories and to empower them to read and write every day by providing them access to relevant YA books and visits with published authors who write from perspectives to which they can relate.

The young people who attend are the heart of our Día celebration. In every aspect of our planning, we work to create an event that truly honors their experiences and provides opportunities for self-reflection and self-exploration.

*How do programs like Día support young people and their lived realities?*

Through the engaging keynote presentations, interactive literacy workshops, and youth performances, Día works to create a welcoming and inclusive space for young people, a space that values different ways of knowing and being. In this space, there is no one way of viewing the world and no one dominant experience that is privileged over another. We understand that the young participants who attend Día come from all over Arizona and bring with them a wide range of interests, talents, cultures, languages, literacies, and identities.

In the larger world, these identities are sometimes silenced, viewed as a source of shame, or looked upon as lacking or in need of fixing or remediation. Día hopes to reverse the negativity that is sometimes imposed on our youth. Día represents a (re)mediation of space, mind, and discourse for both adults and adolescents. We strive to encourage young people to share their stories from their lived experiences, and we acknowledge the value of their voices. We want them to realize the power of their stories and their perspectives; we want to challenge and create a new discourse about youth.

*What do programs like Día communicate about young people?*

The strength in community. The beauty of cultures and languages. The importance of literacy for empowerment. The power of youth stories and voices. The commitment of youth to be understood, heard, and to make a difference in their world. Despite rhetoric that describes young people as disengaged or as lacking the fight that past generations had, our participants are aware and engaged in their communities in so many ways. They are wide awake and aware, deeply conscious of the oppression, racism, and prejudice that impact their lives, their families, and their communities.

Día is a place for young people to talk with others about issues that matter to them most. Whether the conversation is about racism, prejudice, immigration, or LGBTQ issues, Día allows youth to engage in these discussions, to learn new ways to use the power of their words, spoken and written, and to get their message across and fight in powerful ways.

*The authors and poets at Día 2015 all addressed difficult topics. What is your process for selecting speakers for Día? How do you ensure that they engage the audience in ways that are authentic and not didactic or moralistic?*

We are so honored to have so many brilliant, compassionate, and caring authors, storytellers, poets, university professors, and community literacy advocates celebrate Día with us. When inviting authors to serve as keynote speakers or present literacy workshops at Día, I like to select authors I love! This is the truth. If I've read their books and enjoyed their stories and know that participants will love them, too, we work to bring them to Día. I'm a little kid when it comes to this aspect of Día. It has always been my dream to be surrounded by my favorite authors because I love stories and writing.

On a more serious note, the topics that authors write about and the messages they share through their writing play key roles in deciding whether to bring them to ASU. We are interested in soliciting authors who, through their writing, speak to the concerns and lives of our youth, tackle tough issues, are real and authentic, and speak the truth about their experiences as young people. Due to the political climate and the decisions of our politicians in Arizona, we have a history of silencing narratives and voices in our schools—not through teachers, but through the banning of books, among other mandates and policies. As mentioned earlier, Día fosters a (re)mediation of space, a counter-space where, thankfully, we have a great deal of autonomy.

Over the years, we've been blessed to host so many talented authors who *genuinely* care about young people. These authors come for the youth! It is inspiring to listen to their message and feel the love they have for what they do, especially their excitement in engaging with our participants.

*“Right to Read” is the title of this column. What would you want to tell readers of The ALAN Review (teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and YA authors) about young people’s right to read?*

We all have the right to read books that matter to us and speak to our individual experiences. If we take away this right from our young people and censor the books that we allow them to read, we send the message to them that their identities, their experiences, and their voices do not matter. This censorship of books silences the narratives of historically marginalized populations by continuing to privilege the dominant narrative of youth identities and lived experiences. It normalizes a certain youth identity, way of being, and way of knowing.

It is through books that we make sense of our lives. It is through books that we learn about perspectives that differ from our own. It is through books that we can heal and nurture our souls. By taking this away from young people and only placing certain titles in their hands, we do them a huge disservice.

### **Writing and Embracing Difficult Books**

Meg Medina was one of the keynote speakers that Tracey invited to “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros.” Meg is a Latina writer and award-winning author of books for children and adolescents. Her young adult book, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013), is a frank portrayal of a young girl who is the victim of bullying. This title won the 2014 Pura Belpré Medal for Latina/o authors whose work best portrays, affirms, and celebrates the Latina/o cultural experience in an outstanding work of literature for children and youth. In spite of the award and the popularity of the book, it was challenged numerous times because of the word “ass” in the title. As an invited speaker at secondary schools, Meg has experienced both overt

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and subtle forms of censorship, which she discusses in the interview below.

*You opened your talk at “Día de los Niños, Día de los Libros” by sharing that, when you announce the title of your book, Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass, “the adults flinch, and the kids smile.” Why do you think the title of this book resonates with youth but not adults?*

I imagine that it feels like a small forbidden freedom for students to be able to use a coarse word in a school or library setting where those words can earn you a detention or some other rebuke. And of course, it’s pretty hilarious to hear their teachers and librarians have to say dirty words, too. But on a deeper level, I think there’s an immediate recognition of the language and issues of their daily lives, regardless of what adults think of the usage. I can assure you that the phrase “kick your ass” is by far one of the gentler threats young people make against one another.

I think some adults look at the title and worry that it is just another way that “media” is making the crude more acceptable. They worry that by promoting this title, decency, as they know it, is in peril. And, of course, if they’re educators, they fear that embracing this title will bring parents with pitchforks to their door.

*What have been the repercussions of the book’s title in terms of its reception by educators, libraries, schools, and the wider adult public?*

The range is so wide. In many places, teachers and librarians have taken the time to educate their principals about the book, and for that I am deeply grateful. But there have certainly been cases where the students’ access to my novel has been politely blocked.

Early on, for example, in my home city of Richmond, Virginia, there was concern about listing my work on a summer reading list. Ultimately, the librarians decided that they could recommend me as an author but not name my book title. Another time, I was disinvented to a school that had contracted me as the keynote for their anti-bullying program. In another instance, the principal opted to keep a box of my books in his office instead of giving them away after my presentation. Students interested in reading *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* had to visit him to request it in person, and he decided if the student was mature enough to read the novel.

What happens most often, though, is that a middle or high school will invite me to visit, but they specifically ask me to discuss my other YA novels instead of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. In every case, the reason cited is a version of this: “Our parents will not like this. Our community standards will not allow for this. We will have a flood of complaints.” What’s interesting, of course, is that this guarding of a moral code hasn’t been effective in stopping the epidemic of bullying and violence in our schools. In fact, it may be one of the reasons violence continues to proliferate.

*In what ways do you think the soft censorship you experienced undermines young people’s realities?*

For all the ways we’d like to reduce teen problems to hormones, pimples, romance, and bad decisions at parties, the concerns of young people are much deeper and scarier than most adults want to admit. There is no such thing as a free pass for young people when it comes to violence. All over the world, they have a ringside seat to it—large and small—and they deserve a means to make sense of it. In the case of *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, we’re dealing with a realistic depiction of bullying as it is, complete with the random brutality and all the well-intentioned and ineffective adults who are part of the scene. It’s an uncomfortable read, sometimes harrowing, but it lays out the situation as kids experience it.

When we block young people from books that describe their realities, we confirm their worst fears: adults are hopelessly out of touch and unable to understand or help ease their hardship. Worse, refusing to allow access to such books creates even more

isolation for kids who are caught in the crosshairs of violence. The censorship implies that the situation is shameful and that people who use those words or experience violent things can't be talked about in polite society. Where does a kid go with the full story of what's happening to her in the face of that kind of abandonment?

So, the question I have for adults in decision-making positions is this: How can young people trust you to help them if you refuse to even name the situations accurately? You can print a million anti-bullying posters. You can create thousands of school assemblies. But it won't work if you are unwilling to be honest.

### ***How have young people responded to the book?***

Librarians tell me that the book keeps circulating, with all copies checked out. They tell me that young readers will sometimes reach for the book simply for the title and then find themselves engaged in the story.

Interestingly, in face-to-face meetings with young people, I almost always hear curiosity about Yaqui herself, about what made a girl so angry and violent. They wrestle with what to do about the Yaqui in the book and what to do with the Yaquis in their own lives. I've had many requests to write a novel with Yaqui as the protagonist. The question readers all seem to have is *Why?* Maybe it's the question asked by anyone who has ever been victimized. *Why me? Why did you aim your hate at me?*

***You mentioned in your talk that “we owe it to young people to tell them the truth.” What is the truth in Yaqui Delgado for young people? How do you balance telling the truth while contending with adults’ resistance to the often harsh realities of young people’s lives?***

The truth is that in this life you may meet many amazing and wonderful people, but you will also meet many broken and violent ones who will make just as much of an impact on you. The truth is that you won't always be able to find reliable adults at your school or in your personal life who can help. Sometimes the “solution” to a problem will be deeply imperfect, but always you'll have to dig for your resilience to survive—even when it is in short supply.

With regard to balancing truth against adult concerns, I try not to consider the adults at all when I'm writing, which is quite a trick since I am part of that pack and have to catch myself. Instead, I consider respect for readers first and foremost. I wrestle with how I can lay out the authentic facts of the story in a way that invites them to consider their own struggles.

***Your advice to the young people in the audience that day was to guard their right to read. “Right to Read” is also the title of this column. What would you want to tell readers of The ALAN Review (teachers, librarians, teacher educators, and YA authors) about young people’s right to read?***

I believe so strongly in the power of books to help us reflect on the experiences of our lives. That, more than anything else, is the gift that literature offers. In that private act of reading, young people have the chance to tap into self-reflection and empathy. It's where they can ask themselves who they resemble in the pages and—more important—who they want to be in real life.

Through that frame, I can't imagine why we'd want to create obstacles for young people seeking books. Rather than shying away from difficult books, I believe that educators should utterly embrace them, as well as encourage students to self-advocate for their rights through organizations such as the National Coalition Against Censorship.

## **Final Thoughts**

Authors and educators like Meg Medina and Tracey Flores successfully create discursive and literary spaces that honor young people's lived experiences. They convey to adolescents that there are adults in their lives who take their concerns seriously and who believe that young people have the ability to grapple with difficult issues. More important, because they advocate for young people's right to read the books that validate their lived experiences, they position youth as experts on their lived realities and empower them to become agents in their own lives.

*Tracey Flores is a former English Language Development (ELD) teacher who worked in elementary classrooms for eight years. She currently serves as the director of El Día*

*de los Niños, El Día de los Libros, and as the director of youth writing programs for the Central Arizona Writing Project (CAWP) at Arizona State University (ASU). Tracey is also pursuing her PhD in English Education in the Department of English at ASU. Her research focuses on adolescent Latina girls and mothers' language and literacy practices and on using family literacy as a springboard for advocacy, empowerment, and transformation for students, families, and teachers.*

**Meg Medina**, named one of CNN's Ten Visionary Women, is the author of the young adult novel, *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*, which received the Pura Belpré Award in 2014. She is also the author of the novel *The Girl Who Could Silence the Wind* and the picturebooks *Mango Abuela* and *Me and Tia Isa Wants a Car*, for which she won an Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Award. Meg's work examines strong girls, tough circumstances, and the connecting power of culture. When she is not writing, she works on community projects in support of reading, Latino youth, and diversity in children's literature. She lives in Richmond, Virginia.

**E. Sybil Durand** is an assistant professor of English at Arizona State University where she teaches courses in young adult literature and methods of teaching English. Her scholarship is grounded in postcolonial and curriculum theories, which situate literature and education at the intersections of sociocultural, historical, political, and national contexts. Her research focuses on young adult literature in general and postcolonial young adult literature in particular.

**James Blasingame** is a professor of English Education at Arizona State University (ASU). He is Executive Director and Past President of the NCTE's Assembly on Literature for Adolescents and a past coeditor of *The ALAN Review*. He is coauthor of the English Journal annual Honor List and editor of the *Print-Based Texts* pages of the International Reading Association's *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. He is a winner of the International Reading Association's Arbuthnot Award, the ASU Parents Association Professor of the Year Award, and the Arizona English Teachers' Association Lifetime Contribution Award.

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