

## PROFANITY IN YOUNG-ADULT FICTION by Mike Klaassen

Writers make lots of decisions, and writers of young-adult fiction are faced with choices regarding profanity. Like it or not, the use of profanity is an effective device for portraying emotion in fiction, adding realism to dialogue and to a character's introspection. So how do writers balance the desire for authenticity with the need to be responsible to young readers? The choices come down to:

- Liberal use of profanity
- Omission of profanity
- Sparse use of profanity
- Summarized profanity
- Sanitized profanity

**LIBERAL USE OF PROFANITY.** In some ways, this is the easiest of the choices. Rather than agonize about the use of foul language in novels, writers may just use it wherever it seems natural. After all, nearly everyone has heard and read foul language before, and it's been decades since it's been taboo in fiction.

On the other hand, there are serious drawbacks to the liberal use of profanity. First of all, if a writer needs profanity to make teen dialogue seem realistic, then a *lot* of it may be needed. For any work of fiction, overuse of profanity can become an annoying distraction to the reader. For some readers, it's an outright turnoff, leading them to promptly put the book down.

For young-adult fiction, there's a substantial economic price for the use of profanity. Although some youngsters purchase their own reading material, buyers of teen novels are often parents, grandparents, teachers, and librarians. Many adults are reluctant to purchase teen fiction that includes gratuitous use of profanity. Editors and publishers may share those feelings.

**OMISSION OF PROFANITY.** An alternative to the liberal use of profanity is to avoid the issue by totally leaving it out of the manuscript. After all, the best of fictional dialogue isn't a transcription of real-life conversation: it's distilled down to the very best and most appropriate, given the needs of the story.

If the characters and dialogue in the story are believable without profanity, there's no problem. But will all of the characters be believable if they *never* use profanity, even in situations where its use seems natural? Maybe a compromise is in order.

**SPARSE USE OF PROFANITY.** Why not use profanity only in those few situations that are most important to the story? This approach has a benefit: if you seldom use profanity in your writing, it will stand out more when you actually do.

SUMMARIZED USE OF PROFANITY. If a writer is trying to limit or avoid the outright use of foul language, but the needs of the story call for it, the use of summary may be an acceptable alternative. *Summarized profanity* means using phrases like, “he cussed,” and “she cursed,” and “he cut loose with a string of expletives.” In fact, summary may very well serve the story better than interrupting the action with dialogue or distracting the reader with specific curse words.

SANITIZED PROFANITY. By *sanitized* I mean sugar-coated substitutes. “Fiddle-dee-dee,” might be fine for Scarlet O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. “Oh, fudge!” “Shoot!” and “Darn it!” would be appropriate for some characters. On the other hand, there are situations where the words manure, dung, or poop might not adequately communicate a particular character’s emotion.

My young-adult novels deal with troubled teens, boys likely to pepper their conversation with expletives. As a novelist, I’ve weighed the costs and benefits of using profanity and have developed my personal guidelines:

- The younger the intended reader, the harder it is to justify using any profanity at all
- I won’t use liberal amounts of profanity in my writing; in fact, I’ll use profanity only reluctantly where I believe the benefits outweigh the costs
- I’ll use sanitized cussing where appropriate and summarized profanity where it serves the story best

Writing is largely about making choices, and writers of young-adult fiction are faced with decisions that may influence young people. Hopefully, this article has helped you make your own decisions about the use of profanity in your work.

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Mike Klaassen is the author of *Fiction-Writing Modes: Eleven Essential Tools for Bringing Your Story to Life*, which is available for order wherever new books are sold. You may "Look Inside" the eBook edition at Amazon.com.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Klaassen writes stories about young people facing daunting challenges. Each of his three novels, *The Brute*, *Cracks*, and *Backlash: A War of 1812 Novel*, has been awarded a B.R.A.G. Medallion. Ongoing research encouraged Mike to write books about the craft of writing fiction. The use of folktales as examples in his nonfiction books led him to begin Klaassen's Classic Folktales, a collection of ancient stories retold as novellas.

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