

## VIOLENCE IN YOUNG-ADULT FICTION: Acceptable, Beneficial, or Inexcusable? by Mike Klaassen

Violence in children's fiction isn't new. Just think about the old fairy tales. Two of the little pigs were eaten before the third pig boiled the Big Bad Wolf alive. After a wolf ate Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother, a hunter sliced the wolf open to let them out. A wolf eventually ate the boy who cried wolf.

More recent fiction also includes plenty of violence. The young protagonist in *Hatchet*, by Gary Paulsen, hunts and kills to survive. The choirboys of *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, hunt wild boars, and then each other. All of this is a little tame by today's standards, where it seems no subject is absolutely taboo. For example, in *The Lovely Bones*, by Alice Sebold, a girl narrates a story in which she is raped and murdered. That subject is as touchy as it gets, but the novel is well regarded.

How much, if any, violence is appropriate in young-adult fiction today? At the risk of being roasted alive on a virtual bonfire, the short answer to that question is that it depends on how it's presented. Violence in young-adult fiction is a lot like working with fire. Properly handled, fire can be a vital resource. Misused or out of control, it can be terribly destructive.

When I started writing young-adult novels, I decided my target market would be reluctant readers, especially teenage boys. To get my readers' attention and to hold it, I intended to use lots of action. I would put my characters in dangerous, scary, and potentially violent situations. But how much is too much? And does violence in fiction foster violence in real-life behavior?

Our generation isn't even close to being the first to wrestle with this issue. Daniel Chandler, of the University of Wales, in "Television Violence and Children's Behavior," states "Concern about children and popular media has a long history. Plato proposed to ban poets from his ideal republic, because he feared that their stories about immoral behavior would corrupt young minds."

Reasonable people may disagree on this subject. Some have little or no tolerance for violence in young-adult fiction because they believe that it encourages violent behavior in real life. Others may feel that violence in fiction may be overly traumatic for young readers.

On the other hand, some believe that violent fictional situations create opportunities for young readers to experience traumatic situations without actually facing real danger themselves, just as my brothers and I did when we played Cowboys & Indians. Potential benefits include learning skills for problem solving, conflict resolution, self-defense, survival, and fear management. As Chandler's article indicates, research on the subject isn't conclusive, either way.

As I see it, the challenge is to gain and hold the reader's attention, but also to present the subject in a manner that doesn't trivialize serious subjects or encourage destructive behavior.

While developing my novels, I considered dozens of situations in which young characters experienced or committed violence. For example, I developed scenarios in which one teenage character or another:

- Breaks a younger boy's arm
- Hits a dog with a 2-by-4
- Imagines himself biting through a dog's jugular vein
- Pulls the head off a chicken
- Is eaten by wild hogs
- Kills an adult
- Dies from a shotgun blast to the neck.

First reactions to this list might be that there's no excuse for any of them. But the context in which the situation is presented can make a huge difference. In each of the situations listed above, questions need to be asked before reaching a conclusion. For example:

- How does the violent scene serve the story?
- Who commits the violence? The hero? The villain? A minor character?
- Was the violent act intentional or accidental?
- What was the character's motivation?
- Was the act malicious or cruel?
- Was it in self-defense?
- Did the offending character express remorse?
- Did the violent character suffer consequences, or was he rewarded?
- Was death or injury presented as a trivial event? Or tragic?
- Were alternative courses of action considered?
- Did the victim's behavior contribute to his own demise?
- Did the character actually commit the violence, or just imagine it?

Although I discarded many other violent situations during the process of writing my novels, each of the situations listed above were retained, and fully dramatized, as part of the stories.

As with fire, violence in fiction has the potential to be destructive, but used appropriately, it can serve the story and the reader well. I feel I have a responsibility to make sure it's appropriate within the context in which the violence occurs. Part of me would like clear-cut guidelines as to when violence in teen fiction is appropriate and when it isn't. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple. It's a judgment call, to be handled case by case.

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#### 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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