

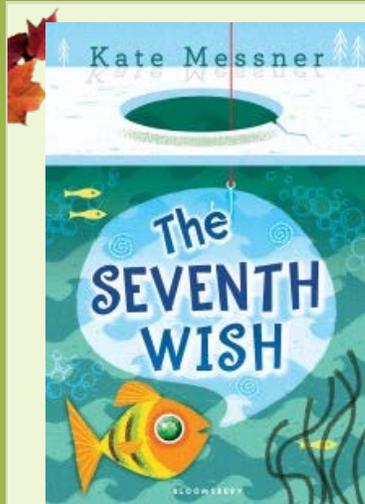
# KATE MESSNER



HOME BOOKS BLOG KIDS WRITERS SPEAKING APPEARANCES ABOUT ME

## REMEMBER WHO WE SERVE: FINDING SOLUTIONS, MOVING FORWARD, AND SOME FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Published: JUNE 17, 2016



I've been having [an open conversation with an elementary librarian](#) who emailed the week THE SEVENTH WISH came out to let me know that she had placed the book on her order list but removed it when she found out what it was about.

[THE SEVENTH WISH](#) earned a starred review from Kirkus, which called it "Hopeful, empathetic, and unusually enlightening." The book is about lots of things – Irish dancing, ice fishing, magic, entomophagy, flour babies, and friendship. It's also about the shattering effect our country's opioid epidemic has on families.

[In response to that librarian's original email, I wrote a blog post called "Remember Who We Serve: Some Thoughts on Book Selection and Omission," which you can read here.](#) We've been talking back and forth since then via email and have shared much of our conversation at the link above. We have fundamental disagreements about what kinds of books belong in an elementary school library, but we've been voicing those respectfully, listening to one another, and trying to see if we might find some common ground. Along those lines, I asked for help from other K-5 librarians who do manage to offer a more diverse selection of books. How do they meet the needs of older readers and provide access to books that kids need without facing challenges from the parents of younger readers?

Many agree that the answer lies in education – explaining to parents that a library serves a wide range of readers, and while every parent has a right to guide their own children's reading, none have the right to make those decisions for anyone else's child. Teaching children how to select books for themselves is also key – advising them about how to choose an appropriate book and how to bring that book back if it turns out not to be the "just right" book they hoped it might be, so that they can choose something else. Here's a sampling of responses from teachers and librarians:

*I have a letter that parents sign explaining that I am an avid reader and have a large and diverse classroom library. I suggest that they talk with their student often about what books they are reading. I don't view it as a permission slip, more as an acknowledgment of awareness.*

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*-Kathryn Hoffman-Thompson*

*I teach 6th grade. I simply say at Open House that the school library and my personal library contain a great many topics and reading levels, including mature or controversial topics. Please monitor your child's reading choices and have discussions about topics that may concern you. I've never had a problem with this policy (so far).*

*-Nora Hill MacFarlane*

(Note from Kate: I did something very similar to this when I taught middle school, and [you can find that letter to parents here](#). Feel free to use it and adapt it to meet your needs.)

*My grade 5/6 library had some materials that were appropriate for students in grades 3-5 and some materials were appropriate for 6-8. I took great pains to let students know they had the right to read anything I had in our library, but that they should also consider what their families would allow them to read as well.*

*Kathy Durham Aurigemma*

*I've had one parent question (about ROLLER GIRL). I was honest and said there are many things that their child will see and read after their time with me. They accepted my answer and I said that children have a natural inclination to self-censor themselves (which their 3rd grader did when she decided the book was too old for her. We then worked to find the right book for her*

*Your new book (The Seventh Wish) is on my shelf. And I have had two 4th graders reach for it. Neither had a complaint. One read it. The other self-censored and didn't. She simply said with empathy, "I started to read it but my life isn't the same so I'm bringing it back." And that was it.*

*Lisa Berner*

*I teach a 4/5 blend with a reading range of 1st/2nd grade up to high school. At the beginning of the year, when I'm introducing the classroom library of over 1000 books and how to take care of it, we spend a fair amount of time talking about the whole "different rules at different houses" thing. I tell many personal stories in the classroom as both a way to teach and a way to connect with my students.*

*During these talks and the library introduction, we discuss how to take care of books and what to do if students come across a book they think is a problem for any reason. I am up front with students and their families that there are books in the library that have words in them not all parents/families might want their kids reading. I share my expectation that, if they are offended or upset by anything they read in a book, or if an adult at home is concerned about content or language, they can come talk to me privately or email or call me and voice their concerns – no hard feelings, no harm, no foul.*

*In the last five years, I have had a total of (maybe) five conversations about the reading material. The first was Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick. Most recently, a graphic novel about MLK that I didn't preview and which contained some harsh language that was*

*historically accurate, but wouldn't be okay with many families. In this case, I was impressed with the way the family addressed it. They felt it was a non-issue BECAUSE it was historically accurate.*

*I do also keep a shelf of "Mr. Kline's Books," which just require students to check out those books with me directly. These are books that are sometimes controversial at this level (The Hunger Games trilogy) and others that are meaningful in one way or another (autographed books, personal favorites that are hard-to-find, mentor texts that I use regularly).*

*Ultimately, I think it comes down to communication with both the students and their families. In K-1, the student connection may not be as easy to build, while kids learn more about what pushes the boundaries at home. However, open communication with home, perhaps even a survey asking if there is any specific material or content they would object to, would be a great way to start out the year.*

*Jason Kline*

Jason's thought about "material or content parents would object" to is a great one to lead us into the next part of the conversation. Should some books in an elementary school library have access that is limited to only certain grades? In certain cases – having a YA title like The Hunger Games available to 5<sup>th</sup> graders but not 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, for example – this seems to work well for some libraries. I know that when I taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade I carried a handful of books recommended for ages 14+, including Ellen Hopkins' YA novels-in-verse, along with my professional books. Kids knew they were there and available, but when someone asked to check them out, I'd make sure the student knew that the books were meant for teen readers and dealt very frankly with difficult issues, and I'd ask the student two questions. First, "Does this sound like a book you'd like to read?" If the answer was yes, I'd ask, "Will your parents be okay with you reading it?" If the student said, yes, the book got signed out. If they said no or hesitated, I'd offer to send an email home to find out more. It worked out well. Those books were never challenged in my classroom library.

Here are some other educator's thoughts on having a separate shelf for more mature readers:

*I kept a mature shelf in my classroom for my middle schoolers who were reading edgier YA. I also talked with parents about our library collection and the importance of access during parent meetings and conferences. If a book was off-level, I made sure to read it, so I could talk to students who were reading it and explain to questioning parents why the book was valuable.*

*Donalyn Miller*

*I have a mature readers sticker on books with heavier content that are recommended for 5th graders only. I'm thinking of some of the Holocaust and WW2 themed books including The Boy in the Wooden Box and Ashes by Kathryn Laskey. Crazy Lady by Jane Conley is another book with that sticker. There aren't many books that have these stickers, but they are a visible reminder for teachers and library staff to talk with the students before check out to make sure they are aware of the topic. It is especially helpful when we have high level readers in lower grades who want longer novels, but they may not be quite ready for these more mature themes. Communication with families and the use of these stickers has worked well for our school.*

*Tracy Lynn Scaglione*

*I feel like the issue is very different for school librarians than it is for teachers with classroom libraries. School librarians have much bigger collections and have to serve a wider school population. We don't have the opportunity to know all of our parents, and we often have assistants and volunteers that check books out to kids and who might not always know if a book is appropriate for a certain age level when a kid comes up to the circulation desk. On the other hand, we have professional training in collection development and are (hopefully) protected by the school district's collection development policy. In general, I think kids do self-censor themselves and tend to avoid books that they aren't ready for, or turn them in once they figure it out. My biggest problem is usually 2-3 graders who have seen a movie like Hunger games and want the book. Also, it tends to be a thing with some 1-2 graders that they just want to check out the biggest book they can find! I have a K-6 library and when I inherited it 4 yrs ago, I didn't have Hunger Games, Maze Runner, or Divergent. These are really books most appropriate for middle schoolers and above, but I knew my 5-6 graders would want to read them. I created a 5-6 grade shelf for just a few books like that so I could have them in my collection. Mostly my criteria for those is just age appropriateness (sexual themes or violence being the major criteria, not social themes). I also have a rotating collection of books from the middle school that I bring in for the 6th graders throughout the year. The biggest benefit is that it increases circulation of the books when I put them on the 5-6 grade shelf since they are considered more mature! Also, if a younger kid comes in with a note from home I will let them take a 5-6 grade shelf book.*

*Rebecca Sofferman*

*I have a mature section, as well. I generally cultivate relationships with both students and their families, so if I think that their parent may have an objection to the material, I have the student go home and ask permission. I have only had a few parents deny their student access to some of my books. Generally, it is a concern about Harry Potter (magic) or topics that are too graphic (violence-they are worried that their student will have nightmares). Parents know their kids better than I do, so I completely respect their right to parent however they deem appropriate, but I am always very clear that I do not censor the books in my classroom. I read them, I learn from them, I share them, but I don't censor them. They know that from day 1.*

*Susan MacKay-Logue*

*I teach 5/6 ELA to gifted students. I have a basket behind my desk labeled "Restricted" (borrowed from Harry Potter.) Students can browse the basket at any time but must get a parent permission slip signed granting permission to read books in basket. Form states book has "mature content and/or language." There are about a dozen books in this basket. They either contain mild sexual content or a lot of strong cuss words. Of course parents can call me to discuss content, but none of them have. I just finished The Seventh Wish. Looking forward to sharing with my students. Might use as read aloud with my 6th graders. It will not go in restricted basket, but will be available to all.*

*Jennie Bergen Albrecht*

Jennie brings up an important distinction between books recommended for older readers (The Hunger Games, etc.) and books written for upper elementary audiences, like THE SEVENTH WISH. My personal concern about having a "restricted" shelf that includes age-appropriate but

potentially controversial books is that it can serve to marginalize the kids whose families are represented in those stories. Some of the books I've heard about being quietly censored (NOT by the people quoted above) include Laurel Snyder's PENNY DREADFUL, a wonderful, funny, magical story in which one character happens to have two moms; Alex Gino's GEORGE, a gentle, age-appropriate story about a transgender fourth grader; and Alex London's book in the 39 CLUES series, MISSION HINDENBURG, which includes a gay character.



I wondered how these authors would feel, knowing that some librarians chose to put their books on a shelf where only some readers had access, so I reached out to ask. Here's an excerpt from our conversation, shared with everyone's permission:

Laurel Snyder:

*I think that this kind of categorization is problematic because it tends to be so inexact. Not unlike Lexile numbers, you'll find that the "mature" books don't appeal to the older readers in so many cases. Penny Dreadful is a prime example of this. Because there happens to be a lesbian couple in the book, it gets shelved for "older readers." But it's a soft summery book about a girl moving to a new town, and trying to make friends, while \*maybe\* believing in magic wishing wells. It's so totally a good book for an advanced younger reader. NOT a book for the kid who has already read Hunger Games.*

Alex London:

*When the mere existence of LGBT characters in books that would otherwise be in a collection makes those books "controversial" the message that sends to a young person is that the existence of LGBT people is controversial. The message this sends is that their cousins or uncles or moms or dads or brothers or sisters merely existing is controversial, or that their own existence, just as they are starting to realize it themselves, is controversial. And for an LGBT child, this message from an adult, from their school, is devastating. This is their community telling them they don't deserve to exist, that at best, they should be kept away from normal people. That they are somehow wrong to even be. Shunning books where LGBT people exist from a community, shuns LGBT people from the community and this leads to bullying, this leads to suicide and to hate crimes. Saying these books do not belong says to LGBT children loud and clear that they do not belong. That isn't library selection policy. That is child abuse. I repeat because I mean it and I did not misspeak: Homophobia, in word or deed or policy, is child abuse.*

Laurel Snyder:

*Yes, exactly. It's NOT controversial. It's like saying, "We're going to put the books with Jews on the top shelf. Our families find Jews and Muslims confusing, and we prefer to leave it to*

*parents to introduce those topics if they choose, so we'll have a book ghetto on the top shelf here, and if kids want to read about Jews and Muslims, they can bring a letter from home."*

Alex London:

*I don't think these librarians want to harm children but the signals they send when they make LGBT children "controversial" harms children in real and devastating ways.*

Laurel Snyder:

*Sex is sex. Not wanting SEX in the library is one thing. But not wanting to include a variety of family dynamics?*

*I get that they don't want a third grader reading an adult book, maybe. Or a violent YA novel. This is why we suggest age ranges for books (though I don't think they're very imperfect). But to set apart an age-appropriate book... no. That bothers me.*

*Because there ARE gay kids in the school, and there ARE kids with gay parents in the school, and there ARE gay teachers in the school, and this is cruel to them.*

Corey Ann Haydu:

*My book (Rules for Stealing Stars) been challenged because of alcoholism, so I'll speak to that since the voices speaking her on LGBTQIA challenges have been so excellent and made me think, too. With addiction books, I think there is a similar damage in placing them on shelves that are "other." I want books that deal with addiction to be on the same shelves as books that deal with cancer. If a librarian wants ALL illness books in a separate area, It wouldn't be my ideal, but it wouldn't single out addiction as BAD, so I think I could live with that, if it's the only way the book will be in the library at all. The work of recovery from addiction has so, so much to do with denial and shame, and that a library would add to that by singling out a book about that disease as different than any other disease is exactly why the issues are shame and denial and addiction are not getting solved still. I'm frustrated, and as the child of an alcoholic, personally hurt by adults who aren't letting the thinking around addiction evolve. I really believe if we start treating addiction as a disease like cancer, and teaching that at a young age, we could see real change. If librarians are concerned with protecting children it is SO much safer to have a child feel they can speak up about their parent's addiction and its effect on their lives. What's not safe is kids struggling with HUGE issues as home being able to hide their truth and carry that burden all alone. Opening up conversation around things we find uncomfortable is how growth and acceptance happen. I would happily talk to any librarian about why a book with addiction should be shelved with all other books about illness.*

Laurel Snyder:

*This is so thoughtful. And makes so much sense. And really does highlight how much this isn't an issue of what kids find scary, but what adults have decided kids should be protected from. Some kids are scared of snakes, but nobody would take out the snake books. Meanwhile, NO kid is scared of gay families. NONE. I've never met one. That's just for parents.*

Alex Gino:

*It's not my call whether she puts it on the shelf. It's theirs. But I want them to know that I'm hurt and offended, and that more than that, they're hurting their students. In the case of my book GEORGE, it's a traditional middle grade story with no sex or violence. the only reason to withhold it is fear.*

Laurel Snyder:

*I once had a librarian tell me she didn't share my books because she preferred to think that kids could experience divorce without it being painful. I think, even when topics ARE "painful" they should be available to everyone.*

Alex Gino:

*Kids who don't have models for how to experience pain are less equipped for their own lives and then they can feel alone in it, ashamed of it. when of course pain is part of life.*

I found this conversation to be an important one and think it's worth thinking about what books, if any, we choose to share with only older readers in an elementary school library. In some cases where the book in question was truly written for older readers, it seems to me like a good solution. But in other cases, with books like *THE SEVENTH WISH*, *GEORGE*, *39 CLUES*, *RULES FOR STEALING STARS*, and *PENNY DREADFUL*, it's a little different. Those books are recommended for elementary readers by industry standard bearers like Kirkus, Publishers Weekly, Booklist, and School Library Journal. And in these cases, I think a librarian needs to take a hard look at why those books are being censored or restricted. In some situations, I fear, keeping those books from kids is directly feeding fear and bias. Many schools teach empathy, and that's wonderful. But if you teach kids about treating all people with respect and fairness and kindness, and then fail to live that teaching in your own book selection policies, that's problematic.

My only two truly significant book challenges in fifteen years of teaching middle school were to books about marginalized groups. One was the anthology *AM I BLUE*, which is a collection of stories about LGBT kids or kids with LGBT family members or friends. I'd shared Bruce Coville's short story "Am I Blue," which is wonderful, warm, funny story about a kid getting picked on because people think he might be gay. He's not sure, and this story uses magical realism to take a gentle look at that process of questioning and at people's biases. I loved it. The kids loved it. And a few wanted to check out the whole short story collection. One of the students who did that is a boy I thought might be asking those same questions about himself. His mother came in, furious that the book was included in my classroom library, and I ended up in the principal's office to defend it. The challenge ended the way most challenges did at my school. I told the parent, "I'm sorry that your son brought home a book you felt was inappropriate. All you need to do is return it, and we'll help him find something that you feel is more suitable." The book stayed in my library, but I was so sad for that kid whose parents clearly disapproved of him even asking questions about who he might be. I so hoped he'd find other books to answer them. I should also add that the book in question was taken from my classroom library without being signed out, not long after that. I have no idea who took it, and I don't care. Books disappear a lot in classroom libraries, and in my room, it happened most often to books with LGBT characters. I cheerfully replaced those books every time, knowing that they were in the hands of kids who needed them more than I needed the eight dollars it took to buy a new one.

My other book challenge was to the novel *ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY* by Mildred Taylor, which is about racism in America during the Great Depression and won the Newbery Medal. A parent objected to me sharing this book aloud with my classes. I was confused. She came in for a conference so we could talk about it, but no matter how many questions I asked, I couldn't understand her objections. Finally, as we both grew more frustrated, she said, "I don't see why the kids should have to read about THOSE people."

I was speechless for a moment. When I recovered, I said, "I feel like it's important to share all kinds of stories with students because that's how we learn and develop empathy for one another. It's how we fight racism and other kinds of injustice. If you have further complaints

about this book, you'll need to share them with the administration along with the specific reasons for your objections." She opted not to pursue the book challenge.

This didn't happen in the 1950s or 60s. It happened in the late 90s in Upstate New York. And it begs this question: if you're willing to censor books about certain kinds of people because of community biases, are you willing to accommodate everyone's objections to every book? What happens when a parent objects to books with an LGBT character? What would happen if a parent objected to a book with characters who are black or Latino or Jewish or Muslim? [I was attacked by a guy on Twitter a few years ago for recommending Hena Khan's beautiful picture book GOLDEN DOMES AND SILVER LANTERNS: A MUSLIM BOOK OF COLORS.](#) He was furious because I dared suggest that it was all right for children to read this lovely, gentle book about an Islamic family.

Discriminating against entire groups of people is never okay. Even when your particular community seems to find some kinds of discrimination more acceptable than others.

Someone else – and I can't find the exact quote or source right now – made a comment on one of my posts this week that said, "Librarianship is not for the faint of heart." I think that's true. But there are many, many resources available to help librarians and teachers who wish to provide kids with access to books. Austin Dacey from the National Coalition Against Censorship provided me with these resources to share:

American Library Association guidelines, which encompass selection of classroom and library materials: <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/preparation/workbook-selection-policy-writing>

The National Council of Teachers of English guidelines for selection in the context of English Language Arts programs  
<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/censorshipguide>

For more in-depth reading, the ALA Policy Manual:  
<http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/tableofcontents>

Also relevant, ALA statement on "diversity in collection development":  
<http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=interpretations&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=8530>

Many, many thanks to all who have been involved in this conversation. It's an important one to have – and to keep having – to make sure we're really serving all of the kids in our care and providing access to the books they want to read as well as the books they need in order to live.

This entry was posted in *Uncategorized*. Bookmark the *permalink*. Post a comment or leave a *trackback*: *Trackback URL*.

« *An Important Conversation about Elementary Library Book Selection & Omission*

## 5 Comments

1.



**Megan F. Blakemore**

Posted June 17, 2016 at 3:16 pm | *Permalink*

Another important and relevant ALA statement pertains to labeling and rating systems:

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/labelingrating>

It makes a distinction between viewpoint-neutral and prejudicial labels and defines prejudicial labels as:

*Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the resource, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the resource, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users. The prejudicial label is used to warn, discourage, or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the resource. Such labels sometimes are used to place materials in restricted locations where access depends on staff intervention.*

It goes on to say "Prejudicial labeling and ratings presuppose the existence of individuals or groups with wisdom to determine by authority what is appropriate or inappropriate for others. They presuppose that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine."

I've been surprised recently to see a number of calls for restrictive shelving — here and elsewhere. For example, in the recent case of THIS ONE SUMMER in Henning, MN, the book was returned to the library (YAY!) but only for grades 10-12 (Boo!). There was also a recent blog post at a professional site (I can't recall where, but will keep looking) that endorsed the idea of a restricted shelf.

Restrictive shelving may seem like an easy fix, but really it's just another form of labeling.

[Reply](#)



**Megan F. Blakemore**

Posted June 17, 2016 at 5:49 pm | [Permalink](#)

Just to clarify: I am speaking as a librarian. I think a classroom library probably functions differently. Basically, I think that shelving decisions should be made to help people find books not keep them from them. One of my libraries is genrefied and that's a way of shelving that helps people find books they like. And I suppose I could see a shelf of "edgy" books for kids who are seeking that type of book (using "edgy" for lack of a better word). In contrast, a shelf that is meant to keep kids away from books goes against the Library Bill of Rights.

Restrictive shelving in the library also doesn't solve the problems that started the conversation. People are reluctant to have books like THE SEVENTH WISH because "Who am I to decide\* what a kid is exposed to?" When you put books on a restricted shelf, you are the decider, so to speak. And there was an acknowledgement that some kids are "ready" for these issues while others are not. So, limiting by grade seems artificial. I have fifth graders who think kissing is gross and that the opposite gender has cooties, and third graders who can't get enough of romances. So I am not sure that the shelf would help solve the problem.

\* "Who am I to decide?" is actually my least favorite phrase uttered by librarians, whether its in defense of open access or given as a reason for not selecting a title. You're the professionally trained expert in children's literature, that's who.

[Reply](#)

2.



**Cheryl Blackford**

Posted June 17, 2016 at 3:35 pm | [Permalink](#)

Thank you for this great discussion Kate and all the other commenters. It's given me much food for thought and eloquent ways to verbalize what I believe. This is the simple but vital thought that has stuck with me: "while every parent has a right to guide their own children's reading, none have the right to make those decisions for anyone else's child."

[Reply](#)

3.



**Shawn Weisser**

Posted June 17, 2016 at 7:50 pm | [Permalink](#)

I have been an elementary librarian for 13 years. My first year I was told to hide the Harry Potter books because some parents were opposed to them. My response? "That's okay, they can choose not to purchase them for their children. A book fair provides all types of materials for all types of readers." We never hid the HP books during book fair and I purchased a set for the library. I purchased numerous books that were diverse and met the needs of my community. When a parent or student explained they could not read a book based upon objections from the parents I said, "Okay." Parents may decide upon what their children read but not others' children. In my job I have made some poor choices based upon reviews. Once purchased and read, I used my education and knowledge of my community to determine if the book is appropriate for the age, maturity, school curriculum, and the community at large. Not all books are right for all schools.

[Reply](#)

4.



**Jenny**

Posted June 18, 2016 at 11:48 am | [Permalink](#)

I struggle a lot with this- personally, I want my classroom library to include all of these kinds of books- but there is some inherent fear, particularly because the district and school tend to be very responsive to parents in a way that makes me think I may not be supported in this kind of inclusion. Do you have any suggestions for how to broach the topic with administration?

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