

# KATE MESSNER



HOME BOOKS BLOG KIDS WRITERS SPEAKING APPEARANCES ABOUT ME

## REMEMBER WHO WE SERVE: SOME THOUGHTS ON BOOK SELECTION AND OMISSION

Published: JUNE 10, 2016

 My newest novel, *THE SEVENTH WISH*, is about a lot of things – Irish dancing, ice fishing, magic, entomophagy, flour babies, and friendship. It's also about the effects of opioid addiction on families, especially younger siblings. On the day my book was released this week, I was disinvited from a school visit in Vermont on less than 24 hours notice. The librarian and principal told me they felt they hadn't prepared their students well enough for that visit, despite the fact that it was scheduled in January and a copy of the book was provided to them at that time. They also returned all of the copies of the book they'd purchased for the school library. [You can read more about that situation in this post](#), and [this one about the heroic effects of the town's public library and an independent bookstore to get books into the kids' hands anyway](#).

I've gotten lots of messages of support about this from people who agree that we need to share books like this with kids. But I also got an email this morning from a school librarian in another state, who said she wanted to offer me a different perspective on *THE SEVENTH WISH*. She wrote:

*As a huge super fan of yours I did want to offer a new perspective of *The Seventh Wish*. It was on my book order list before I even read what it was about. However, after reading the description, I too sadly had to remove it.*

She says I'm one of the favorite authors in her K-5 library. They have all of my other books, and they fly off the shelves. But this one won't be added to the collection. She continued:

*It's not that I don't think heroin addiction is extremely important. Our community has faced its share of heartbreaking stories in regards to drug abuse but fourth and fifth graders are still so innocent to the sad drug world. Even two years from now when they're in sixth grade this book will be a wonderful and important read but as a mother of a fourth grader, I would never give him a book about heroin because he doesn't even know what that is. I just don't think that at 10 years old he needs to worry about that on top of all of the other things he already worries about... For now, I just need the 10 and 11-year-olds biggest worry to be about friendships, summer camps, and maybe their first pimple or two.*

This breaks my heart. As a writer. As an educator. As a parent. As someone who loves kids. It breaks my heart because I know this feeling so well. Those are all the things I want 10 and 11 year olds to worry about, too. But I don't get to choose what those kids' lives are like. None of us do.

We don't serve only our own children. We don't serve the children of 1950. We don't serve the children of some imaginary land where they are protected from the headlines. We serve real

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children in the real world. [A world where nine-year-olds are learning how to administer Naloxone in the hopes that they'll be able to save a family member from dying of an overdose.](#) And whether you teach in a poor inner city school or a wealthy suburb, that world includes families that are shattered by opioid addiction right now. Not talking about it doesn't make it go away. It just makes those kids feel more alone.

When we choose books for school and classroom libraries, we need to remember who we serve. We serve the kids. *All* of them. Even the kids whose lives are not what we might want childhood to look like. *Epecially* those kids.

When we quietly censor books that deal with tough issues like heroin addiction or books like Alex Gino's *GEORGE*, which is a wonderful story about a transgender fourth grader, we are hurting kids. Because no matter where we teach, we have students who are living these stories. When we say, "This book is inappropriate," we're telling those children, "Your situation...your family...your *life* is inappropriate." This is harmful. It directly hurts children. And that's not what we do.

[As Pernille Ripp pointed out so beautifully in this blog post](#), it is not our job to censor. It is not our job to keep books away from kids. It's our job to make books available for the families who need them, to respect the rights of families to choose or not choose whatever books they want and need. But not to make those decisions for them without ever giving them a chance.

Instead of carefully erasing books that might be controversial, what if we did a better job educating our school families about what we do? When I taught middle school, I used to talk with families about why my classroom library was so diverse. I explained up front that it included titles they might not find appropriate for every single reader because my students were all wonderfully unique, with different lives and different needs. We talked about what that diverse book selection meant for families.

*Kids, in general, do a fantastic job self-selecting books, and when they find they've picked up something they're not ready for, they're usually quick to put it down and ask for help choosing something else. As teachers and librarians, we'll offer recommendations and steer kids toward books that are age-appropriate, and we encourage you to talk about books with your kids. We have multiple copies of many titles in our library. Let us know if you'd like to check out two copies of a book so you can read together. And if you find that your student has chosen a book that you think might not be the right book for him or her right now, talk about that, too.*

*We respect your right to help your own child choose reading material, and we ask that you respect the rights of other parents to do the same. If you object to your child reading a particular book, send it back to the library, and we'll help your student find another selection. We'll put the first book back on the shelf because even though you don't feel it's the right book for your child right now, it may be the perfect book for someone else's.*

Teachers & librarians...[please feel free to use any of this blog post about heading off book challenges](#) if it's helpful to you as you do your job.

And thank you so much for doing that job. So many of you are fighting every single day to make sure kids have access to the books they want to read and the books they need to survive. Thank you for serving the kids. *All* of them.

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

## 14 Comments

1.

**Kim Keth**Posted June 10, 2016 at 11:03 am | [Permalink](#)

That school librarian/parent is so wrong about this, “but as a mother of a fourth grader, I would never give him a book about heroin because he doesn’t even know what that is.” It is with this attitude that the stigma continues.

[Reply](#)

2.

**Jennifer Laughran**Posted June 10, 2016 at 11:25 am | [Permalink](#)

This drives me bonkers on so many levels. First of all: This book is NOT ABOUT HEROIN ADDICTION. It is about a kid who is great at Irish Dancing, who finds a \*fish that grants wishes\* that causes all kinds of mayhem. It is funny and sweet, as well as having some AGE APPROPRIATE sad elements. It’s not, like, a primer on how to be a junky, it doesn’t glamorize drug use, but nor does it demonize people struggling with the disease of addiction — it is a realistic and sympathetic portrayal of what it’s like to be a \*kid\* who has an addict in the family, but it’s also just, like, ONE aspect of this kid’s life. Would somebody get mad if it was a book about a kid whose mom is dying of cancer? I SERIOUSLY DOUBT IT. \*explodes\*

Your nine-year-old might not know what specific names of drugs are (but I bet they do!) — but there is little chance that they have never encountered the idea of addiction. Hello. Knock knock, who’s there, PRINCE. Many kids – even sheltered rich kids – have a family member who is an alcoholic or addict. I remember being a kid, much younger than 9, and seeing my dad puke, or get in trouble for wrapping his car around a pole, or visiting him in some weird rehab place. Like... I might not have had WORDS for what those things were all about, but I definitely knew they were TERRIBLE, and had this book existed then, I would have seen myself reflected in Charlie and felt some measure of comfort, even though our situations are different, hers is definitely one I could have related to. When you, a kid, through no fault of your own, are dragged through a family member’s mess and have to watch somebody you love making bad choices, and how that affects you.

Anyway, ugh, whatever, I am sending a carton of books to the library to give to kids. xo JL

[Reply](#)

3.

**Allie**Posted June 10, 2016 at 12:12 pm | [Permalink](#)

I’m baffled that 4th-5th graders these days are apparently not being educated about drugs. I think the D.A.R.E. program was phased out due to ineffectiveness, but has it really been replaced with “tell children nothing at all”? When I was in fourth grade, we had a special class where we discussed things like addiction and the effects different illegal drugs have on the body. I don’t see how a novel that involves heroin addiction is not appropriate for 4th graders, regardless of their current living situations.

[Reply](#)

4.

**Karyn**Posted June 10, 2016 at 12:44 pm | [Permalink](#)

“I would never give him a book about heroin because he doesn’t even know what that is. I

just don't think that at 10 years old he needs to worry about that on top of all of the other things he already worries about"

This comment is coming from a place of tremendous privilege. It is very fortunate the librarian's child does not have to worry about heroin or drug addiction. But as this author rightly point out, "we don't serve only our own children." Serving the needs of privileged children shouldn't prevent those who are less fortunate from getting the services/support/community they need. I hope this librarian sees this post and reconsiders.

*Reply*



**Kim Keith**

Posted June 11, 2016 at 11:32 am | [Permalink](#)

Karyn, you are so right, having intimate knowledge of an addicted child, this is the same "not in my backyard" attitude that prevents our young people from getting the help they so desperately need!

*Reply*

5.



**Maya**

Posted June 10, 2016 at 1:09 pm | [Permalink](#)

I just ordered this book. I haven't read it. I can say this though? As a mother of two now high school age children, I never censored what they read.

My daughter was reading the Hunger Games in Elementary School. Fellow parents were upset that I was allowing it because then all the other kids wanted to read it. Too bad

To me, it doesn't matter if the story doesn't primarily deal with addiction or it's just in the background. The reality is there are many children who live in horrible situations. Be it homelessness, drugs, etc. These children don't have the luxury to say "wait I'm 7, my life shouldn't be this way".

It is this way for far too many and I think it smacks of privilege to want to shield a child from what their fellow classmate lives with daily.

We need to teach our children empathy and compassion. Refusing to teach our children about these problems is akin to the ostrich hiding his head.

I'm so so sorry this happened.

*Reply*

6.



**[mister hernandez](#)**

Posted June 10, 2016 at 2:36 pm | [Permalink](#)

What follows is my reply to a parent on Facebook who shared news about this situation. I've purchased THREE copies for our library. No one from our community will be forced to check out any book I've chosen to add to our collection, or any book Mrs. B selected before I arrived, but an inclusive library, one that embraces the changing demographics of our society, one that encourages families to talk about challenging issues without sheltering them from the realities children face nowadays in a safe environment is a library that I hope to create for the Teller community. We can't forever turn our heads away from the problems we face as a society. We can't build walls in hopes that America will be an island, immune to the concerns people elsewhere deal with daily. We are a great society because of our inclusiveness, because we work to solve conflicts, whether they're personal or societal. Libraries are among the most democratizing institutions on this planet because they provide FREE access to information for people of all colors, nationalities, ethnic groups and religious or non-religious affiliations. If you, as a family, decide to keep certain books out of your child's hands, that is in your interest, but please

don't then push to limit other children and families, who are open to talking about topics they may have already faced or make you uncomfortable, from accessing the same materials. No single person, no single family is the same.

[Reply](#)

7.



**Janet Hilbun**

Posted June 10, 2016 at 3:27 pm | [Permalink](#)

This blog post will be required reading in all of my literature courses at UNT for future (and some new and current) librarians. Thank you

[Reply](#)

8.



**Michael Grant**

Posted June 10, 2016 at 4:33 pm | [Permalink](#)

I agree completely. This is a decision for parents – though I'd argue with them too – not librarians.

To the best of my knowledge there is not a single case of a book harming a child. The notion that we must shelter children from learning about reality or difficult concepts is arrogant, utterly unsupported by facts, and forms part of the reason kids so often don't read.

Stop telling children not to read books. Stop insisting that every book be a multivitamin on a gluten-free cracker. Let kids read. Let them read for fun, let them be excited or enraptured or scared, emotion is the thing that connects reader to book long-term. If we insist on books as medicine they will be just as enthusiastically received as a flu shot.

[Reply](#)

9.



**Tammy Dionne Cancill**

Posted June 10, 2016 at 5:10 pm | [Permalink](#)

4th graders do know what about heroin. Our son was in 4th grade on May 10, 2004 when I had to tell him that his cousin died from a heroin overdose. Also he had a DARE class- Drug Abuse Resistance Education... I assume that this school system must not allow DARE to be taught. Sorry you had to go through this with some schools.

[Reply](#)

10.



**Kate Riley**

Posted June 11, 2016 at 8:19 am | [Permalink](#)

I think it is interesting that the school librarian talks about what \*she\* needs for 4th graders to be worried about. As others have pointed out, it's not about making grown-ups feel comfortable. It doesn't matter how rich your community is- some of your kids are dealing with addiction in their families. Period. They need to feel not alone. They need to feel that if they reach out to others about it, they will not be turned away.

[Reply](#)

11.



**Linda Mitchell**

Posted June 12, 2016 at 7:14 am | [Permalink](#)

Well said, Kate.

I'm sorry you even have to explain why we should have these books.

Someone recently asked...WHY the sad books?

My answer is that for the fortunate kids that don't need them...they don't read them. Or, they don't finish them.

For the kids that need them they are lifesavers! Truly, books can save lives. And for the kids in the middle...at worst they can add knowledge which power and empathy. Keep working the words, Kate. You continue to make a tremendous difference in the lives of kids. Your book will be in my library just as soon as I finish my copy and add it to the collection. Love as always, Linda

[Reply](#)

12.



**Nicole**

Posted June 15, 2016 at 9:49 am | [Permalink](#)

As a school counselor I believe a book like this is so important. It offers parents the chance to start discussions about the dangers in the world. My kids and I are open about what they face before they have to face it so they are prepared. If you wait until you think they are old enough it will probably be too late!

[Reply](#)

13.



**Sad Librarian**

Posted June 19, 2016 at 10:18 am | [Permalink](#)

Thanks. I needed this post. Just to see the feelings of others and hear some words that I can use in my own battle of censorship. This year one family complained about a book a student chose from the visiting bookmobile. Result my principal stopped the bookmobile from coming to serve +300 students. One child, one book, one problem, in over 10 years of use of the bookmobile. And we stopped +300 kids from having access to another source for books. It broke my heart.

And yes, the book was inappropriate for the child but what about the opportunity to discuss your family values and share your thoughts to your own child about why it is inappropriate and how to handle the situation. Speak up for the values you hold but don't expect every family to have your same values and morals.

[Reply](#)

## 6 Trackbacks

- By [The \(Very\) Dark Side of Censorship | Karla Valent](#) on June 10, 2016 at 12:21 pm
- By [Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast » Blog Archive » 7-Imp's 7 Kicks #487: Featuring Lynn Rae Perkins](#) on June 12, 2016 at 2:01 am
- By [The Seventh Wish Update: Some good news and a continuing conversation...](#) on June 12, 2016 at 7:01 pm
- By [An Important Conversation about Elementary Library Book Selection & Omission](#) on June 14, 2016 at 12:32 am
- By ["Stories Will Help You Understand Yourself": An Interview About Censorship with Kate Messner](#) on June 16, 2016 at 7:20 am
- By [Remember Who We Serve: Finding solutions, moving forward, and some food for thought](#) on June 17, 2016 at 1:14 pm

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