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Author Study: Laurie Halse Anderson

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Laurie Halse Anderson: Revolutionizing Children's Literature

Laurie Halse Anderson is frequently either loved or hated, depending on the viewpoint being presented. She has become a symbol in a battle over censorship, young adult literature, and highly engrossing novels. Discussing controversial issues, highlighting historical facts, and delighting young readers with her picture books, Laurie has had a huge impact on the world of children and young adult literature and will be recognized for some time to come. Topics that prove to be important when discussing this author are: first, her background, secondly, the variety of genres of books she writes, and lastly, whether or not her books should actually be censored.

Laurie Halse Anderson, Halse pronounced Haultz, was born on October 23, 1961 in Potsdam, New York (Anderson, 2009). She began writing as early as second grade, later becoming a freelance reporter for several different newspapers and magazines. Discouraged by many publishers and their many rejection letters, Anderson really got her break when she joined a literary criticism group through the organization Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). She started first with writing children's picture books, entertaining the children with stories of historical figures. Some examples of these are Independent Dames: What You Never Knew about the Woman and Girls of the American Revolution and Thank You, Sarah; the Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving. Her most recent picture book is called The Hair of Zoe

all of these need to be included in biblog.

Fleefenbacher Goes to School, a story of a young first grade girl with crazy uncontrollable hair that eventually is put to good use helping around the classroom. It, like many of Anderson's books, was on the New York Times bestseller list. She also has written several short chapter books for children that are geared towards older elementary students.

Perhaps best known, though, are Anderson's young adult novels. She has received both praise and censorship for these novels. Reviewers have praised her for her honesty in dealing with difficult subjects. One such supporter, David Mowery from the 2009 Margaret A. Edwards Committee, states, "Laurie Halse Anderson masterfully gives voice to teen characters undergoing transformations in their lives through their honesty and perseverance while finding the courage to be true to themselves" (Anderson, 2009). Others believe the controversial novels are simply too racy and have even gone as far as to call for their removal as they showcase to students immoral behavior (Scroggins, 2010). Whether you agree with these novels or not, they have made a huge impact upon young adult literature in both their material and their style, as they are typically told through the perspective of a teenager. Some examples of her young adult novels are Speak, Wintergirls, Prom, Twisted, and Catalyst. These typically are centered on the theme of a teenager facing a difficult situation and attempting to overcome it as a kind of modern form of the traditional coming of age novel.

Lastly, Laurie Halse Anderson writes historical fiction novels for middle school and high school students. The themes typically follow the development of a brave, heroic character. These novels are fundamentally based in historical fact, with actual excerpts in many from historical figures of the time period, such as Abigail Adams, George

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Washington, and soldiers at Valley Forge. Frequently these follow the perspective of a fictional character placed in real historical events, such as a slave soldier at Valley Forge.

What is interesting though, is Laurie's comment about her novels,

"I am probably better known as an author of contemporary YA novels than as a writer of historical fiction. This bums me out a bit. I adore working in both genres and feel they are equally important. What makes me sadder is the bad rap that historical fiction gets from readers. The phrase itself makes kids bolt for the exit or writhe on the floor in agony because between *Johnny Tremain* and the excruciating boredom of history class, they think all things historical are worse than chewing on barbed wire. Help me change that. Don't call FORGE, CHAINS, OR FEVER 1793 'historical fiction.' Call them 'historical thrillers'" (Anderson, 2009).

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These ^{words} may seem arrogant, but in many ways it seems that Anderson's novels really are thrillers. As one of Anderson's blog readers commented, "The narrators in these books have to cope with epidemics, executions, natural disasters, political upheavals, and family tragedies that boggle the modern mind." The novels are not simply a recitation of a bunch of historical facts, but instead seem almost as exciting as any modern realistic novel. Some examples of these are Chains, Forge, and Fever 1793. These tend to be far more widely accepted ^{than her contemporary novels} and do not seem to face the censorship that her Young Adult novels have faced.

So is the controversy actually something that parents and teachers should worry about? Yes and no. First, there are some very reasonable concerns posed by the opposition. In Anderson's young adult novels, she tends to include many controversial details about supposed high school life, such as wild parties and students' sexual relationships. Wesley Scroggins, a professor from Missouri State University, even went as far as to say that Speak "should be classified as soft pornography" (Tobin, 2010).

While I disagree with his assessment of the novel Speak as such, the novel Twisted, was far too coarse and vulgar for me to even finish. It was so full of language, sexually explicit circumstances, and perverted behaviors that the message could not have been found. It comes with a warning label that it is not for children, but I still felt that a large amount of the details included were unnecessary and seemed to only be included for shock value. This novel was removed from classroom use and the approved curriculum of Montgomery County High School because

preparatory

“Some parents have complained (have complained) about five novels that contain foul language and cover topics - including sex, child abuse, suicide, and drug abuse - deemed unsuited to discussion in coed high school classes. They also contend that the books don't provide the intellectual challenge and rigor that students need in college preparatory classes. The superintendent removed the book because it wasn't on the pre-approved curriculum list and couldn't be added by teachers in the middle of a school year without permission” (Banned Book Week, 2010).

I would agree with this school's decision because I do not believe that the material is suitable in any way to required reading at the high school level.

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Other issues come with the release of Wintergirls, a novel about anorexia. One reviewer, Barbara Feinberg, states,

“While to my mind there is nothing in “Wintergirls” that glamorizes the illness, for some the mere mention of symptoms is problematic. ‘It's about competition,’ an anorexia sufferer once explained to me. ‘Sometimes all it takes to get triggered is to read about someone who weighs less than you do’ (FEINBERG, 2009).

While the message is exceptionally important here, I would definitely caution that this is not a novel for anyone suffering from anorexia that is not currently seeing a therapist or counselor. Though it is evident by the end that the author is very much revealing the

madness that the disease has brought, the beginning of the novel almost seems to encourage the behavior. It is a book I believe that prompts the public to at least address the issue of eating disorders, a topic typically ignored, but the value would have to be determined by those who have actually suffered from eating disorders.

Opponents of censorship have equally convincing arguments for using many of the novels in classroom, many from the students' responses themselves. According to Laurie Halse Anderson's website, she has had many letters from students who were deeply touched by her difficult novels. One reader writes,

"Your work is very true to heart. I don't know if you intend to or not, but you really help young people out there. Twisted really got to me. I've had 3 suicide attempts and the way you wrote the way he was feeling, and the hopelessness and complete unhappiness he had to deal with really hit home with me. You really nailed it... After finishing twisted I realized how much of a miracle life is, and how problems are only temporary. I could honestly bore you with a 3 page email explaining to you all I've learned and connected with from your writing. Basically I really appreciate and look up to you and your work"
(Anderson, 2009)

In this case then, the book was very instrumental in stopping a teen's suicide.

Another novel that is frequently challenged is Speak. To this, Laurie Halse Anderson's response is typically to quote the facts. According to her website,

- **"1 in 6 American women will be the victims of a completed or attempted rape in her lifetime.** (National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control & Prevention. Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women Survey. 1998.)
- **44% of those rape victims are under age 18.** (U.S. Department of Justice. 2004 National Crime Victimization Survey. 2004.)
- **17.7 million American women have been victims of attempted or completed rape.** (National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control &

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Prevention, Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women Survey, 1998.)

- **Victims of sexual assault are:**

- **3 times more likely to suffer from depression.**
- **6 times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.**
- **13 times more likely to abuse alcohol.**
- **26 times more likely to abuse drugs.**
- **4 times more likely to contemplate suicide.** (World Health Organization, 2002.)” (Anderson, 2009).

These startling statistics cause one to wonder, is the novel useful in actually talking about a subject typically avoided? It seems in this case that it is from the overwhelming response from readers [too]. According to Anderson, she has received tens of thousands of letters and emails from young readers, many who are finally sharing their own story of rape or abuse (Tobin, 2010).

Therefore, it seems that one must come to a decision point. Are there enough beneficial characteristics to warrant including a novel that parents might object to in a classroom library? Do the gritty details help the novel in its expansion and offer hope to young readers? For many of Laurie Halse Anderson's novels, the overwhelming response from the public is yes. However, that must be cautioned, by the fact that some material suitable for one student might not be suitable for someone of the same grade level with less maturity or who might be facing far deeper issues than the novel addresses. So then the conclusion that one comes to, is that the books should largely be available when age appropriate, but not as a mandatory part of the curriculum and not typically as a part of the classroom library, unless parent permission has been granted. Many of these novels highlight important themes about life, but they desperately need to be something students, parents, and teachers discuss.

*Very well thought
out arguments 47/50*

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of quotes*