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Focus on Middle Grade: A CBC Panel

BY MATIA BURNETT | JUL 19, 2016



(From l.,) Francesco Sedita, Susan Marston, Lauren Tarshis, and Angela Ungaro.

Books for middle graders was the topic du jour at a July 12 Children’s Book Council panel discussion held at Penguin Random House’s headquarters in Manhattan. The speakers conversed about what makes middle grade a distinctive category, its growth in recent years, as well as current and future trends. Panelists were Susan Marston, editorial director, Junior Library Guild; Lauren Tarshis, editor of Scholastic’s Storyworks and author of the *I Survived* series; and Angela Ungaro, librarian at Brooklyn Friends School. Francesco Sedita, president and

publisher, Grosset Group, Penguin Young Readers, served as moderator.

Sedita began by asking the panelists to name some of the distinguishing characteristics of middle grade books. For Ungaro, it’s complicated. In some senses, she said, it can be defined in terms of age range; she personally tends to define the range as grades 4–7, though even that is subject to interpretation. She added that middle grade books tend to be more focused on “self discovery and identity” than YA or adult titles. Marston suggested

that middle grade stories have an element of “hopefulness” that distinguishes them from other categories. She added that it’s often adults that seek this quality in books for their children and not always, necessarily, what children require.

For Tarshis, defining middle grade really “boils down to world view,” and she agrees that a degree of hopefulness is certainly a part of the middle grade perspective. “I write about upsetting, horrible topics for very young children,” she joked. But the seriousness of these topics is leavened by a sense that mistakes can be learned from and that the world is inherently good. Tarshis also believes that middle grade has the capacity to “allow children to remain children for a while longer.”

Arriving at a precise definition of middle grade is also challenging because readers within the middle grade age range are highly diverse in terms of their maturity levels and “their readiness to explore and take on more adult themes,” said Tarshis. For each child, it must be “an individualized question,” she believes. Which is why librarians and their ability to “curate child by child,” are so essential, she added. While librarians can serve as knowledgeable gatekeepers, it’s often up to the child to determine what he or she is ready to read. “Kids can censor themselves,” Ungaro said. If kids are going to “read up,” as the expression goes, that’s a child’s prerogative, and they will naturally miss some things and retain others. It’s a familiar coming-of-age experience had by the panelists when they were kids themselves—reading a book that conventional wisdom suggested wasn’t age-appropriate. Tarshis recalled when a fellow student in her elementary school brought in a copy of *The Exorcist* that was then covertly passed among students. Judy Blume’s *Forever*, Marston mentioned, was a taboo book that wound its way through classrooms when she was a kid.

So are there specific types of material that remain

taboo in middle grade today? Sedita asked the group. And what are some differences between middle grade books and its older sibling, YA?

“Sexy stuff” is definitely more prevalent and to be expected in YA, said Ungaro, while Marston suggested that there is often more of a snarky tone in YA. While sexuality, violence, and world issues may be dealt with a somewhat lighter touch, the panelists agreed that difficult content is still very much a part of many middle grade books—and that middle grade readers not only need to read books that might mirror and explain certain current events, but often have an intense curiosity about such things.

Tarshis frequently receives emails from readers with suggestions for topics she might write about in her *I Survived* series. In the aftermath of an event like the terrorist bombing in Brussels, there will invariably be a spike in emails or letters from concerned kids. “It’s really shaped my work—needing to help children understand in a safe way,” she said. But while middle grade novels can and do grapple with these weighty historical or contemporary issues, Marston has noticed an increasing degree of polarity in terms of what different parents find acceptable for their children to read, perhaps mirroring some of the polarity within the country as a whole. “It’s more extreme on both sides,” she said. She believes that today parents have an increased awareness and concern about the content in their kids’ books, in a way that parents did not in the past: “My mother didn’t scrutinize what I read,” she said.

Other topics of discussion included the issue of “boy and girl books,” and whether books are becoming less gendered in the arena of middle grade. Ungaro has observed that in middle school, kids are less concerned about whether a book might be intended for “girls” or “boys” because she senses that kids at that time are more generally focused on “figuring themselves out” and are open to different sorts of reading experiences. Marston feels that

boys are a harder sell and are often less willing to pick up a book that might be seen as intended for girl readers. They also tend to be generally “more particular” in their reading selections. But again, it comes down to picking the right book for the right kid: “It’s a case by case basis,” said Marston. “When you choose a book, it just has to be great. It’s not about the topic, but about the quality.”

Graphic novels are a category that have equal appeal across genders, said Ungaro, and as the depth and quality of graphic novels (such as Victoria Jamieson’s *Roller Girl* and Cece Bell’s *El Deafo*) for kids increases, they are finally being given the credence they deserve as works of literature – but certainly not universally. Many teachers continue to be resistant to having kids check graphic novels out of the library, Ungaro reported. On numerous occasions, she has had teachers reject books that she has suggested for particular readers. To teachers and any gatekeepers resistant to recommend graphic novels like *Roller Girl* to a reader, she suggests: “You have to read it!”

Marston believes in the power of peer recommendations, saying: “If you can prove to a kid that another kid had an amazing experience with a book, you’re in.” Ungaro echoed that, saying that direct peer-to-peer recommendations are instrumental in terms of getting kids to pick up books they otherwise would not.

In conclusion, the panelists agreed that the future is bright for middle grade, with books of increasingly exceptional writing quality coming down the pike. They also discussed what they hope to see happening in middle grade in coming years. For Ungaro, she hopes that books will cease to have token diverse characters, instead offering more diverse representation in gender, ability, race, and socioeconomic status. Tarshis is anticipating an increase in the amount of narrative middle grade nonfiction, which she calls “a big gift to the non-readers,” and she also hopes for more and more work that “teaches kids it’s OK to not have contempt for people with different opinions.” For Marston, she’s hoping to see more “fun, funny books with diverse characters.

Finally, Sedita asked the speakers to attempt to sum up how they feel about the world of middle grade in a single word. Ungaro piped in with “amazing,” while Tarshis chose “optimistic.” For Marston, she believes that the category is truly reaching its “peak.”