

A few years ago, I visited a high school English class that had read my YA novel, *Stranded in Harmony*. A spirited discussion about whether or not characters in books for young people should have sexual relationships ensued. Some said, yes—it would be dishonest not to, considering that so many teenagers are sexually active. Others said, no—to acknowledge such relationships is to encourage and condone them, and that’s not right. One said, *maybe* it would be okay for characters to have sexual relationships, but only if they were punished for them in some way, like social ruination or pregnancy. The discussion went back and forth for some time. Then at the very end of the period, when kids were starting to gather their belongings in anticipation of the bell, a girl in the back, one who hadn’t participated in the conversation, raised her hand.

“I’m pregnant,” she said. “This book really helped me understand why my boyfriend acted the way he did when I told him.”

The bell rang, and she was gone—before I could thank her and tell her that what she had said was spot-on, not to mention the reason why I read and write fiction.

A good novel, one that presents life in all of its complexities, opens a door through which you enter the mind of someone who is not you. It makes you privy to the “whys” behind the faces characters present to the world, which brings insight to the why the people in your real life behave the way they do—as it did for the girl in that class.

A good novel can also help you understand yourself. It can help you see the difference between the person you know you are inside and the person people perceive you to be because of the way you behave. It can make you braver, more willing to take a chance on someone. It can make you feel less lonely, knowing there are others out there, struggling to make sense of life, as you are.

Best of all, reading good novels makes you curious about the human condition. You become less likely to make instant judgments about people, more likely to figure out why people do what they do. Curiosity almost invariably begets compassion—and, together, they trump hate every single time.

Sadly, these are the kind of novels so often censored by “gatekeepers” who feel that their subject matter is inappropriate for young people. Can’t they see that if we all read, thought about, and talked about novels that told the truth about life the world would be a kinder, better place for everyone?

Or is that what they’re afraid of?

Barbara Shoup is the author of seven novels and the co-author of two books about the creative process. Her young adult novels *Wish You Were Here* and *Stranded in Harmony* were American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults. *Vermeer’s Daughter* was a School Library Journal Best Book for High School Students. She was winner of the 2006 PEN Phyllis Reynolds Naylor Working Writer Fellowship for *Everything You Want*, published by FLUX in 2008. *Stranded in Harmony* appeared on numerous lists of censored books, and *Wish You Were Here* was on the 1995 list of 100 Most Censored Books in America. Her most recent novel, *An American Tune*, was published by Breakaway Books in September, 2012.