

I'm not a librarian, but my sense is that when we talk about teenagers, witchcraft, horror we mean it all in fun – or, at most, with a nod to wicca and other teenaged obsessions with dark power. We want to show teenagers we accept them, we understand their interests, we can provide reading they enjoy, we can provide reading that matches their world and worldview. But right now there is another much more powerful sense in which evil figures in the lives of teenagers, and I believe we also have an obligation to provide reading that can help them deal with it.

Many, probably most, of us here came of age in the Vietnam era. We pride ourselves on having met the moral challenge of our day – whether it was the fight for civil rights, or against the war, for women's rights, or, even, for greater sexual freedom, or just for the music we liked. Teenagers now have their own deep moral challenge, and we must offer reading that can help them meet it. That challenge is not obvious, simple, and political – it is not a matter of being for or against the war in Iraq. I don't care what your personal position is, and I am not urging anyone to proselytize for any one point of view. But since 9/11, since America experienced a direct terrorist attack, since we went to war in Iraq, we have entered uncertain moral territory that is directly relevant to teenagers.

We have good reason to feel more suspicious, more on-guard. As a result, we have agreed to hold people in detention in Guantanamo where they are in a legal limbo; we have agreed that it is acceptable to torture Al Qaeda suspects, or turn them over to countries in which torture is legal; we have agreed to deport illegal aliens whose immigration infractions we previously ignored. Notice what all three have in common – we have changed the rules, without ever agreeing that we should, or on what is fair now.

How should we feel about all this – there is no clear answer – we as adults are at sea, justifiably needing more security, but having the gnawing sense that the fundamental rights that define us as Americans are being eroded. That is what I feel, and, I suspect, many of you experience that same vertigo – yearning for security, queasy about what we are numbing ourselves to, and growing to accept. Well if that is true for us, how much more so for teenagers – teenagers who in two years, one year, a matter of months have to decide if they want to join the military, go to war, be in a position where they have to execute laws none of us are sure we accept.

This is all fine and abstract, but it is also terribly concrete. How do we know about the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison? We know because one soldier, Joseph M. Darby, decided he could not abide being silent. He had to tell his superior officer. The lives, the well-being, the sanity of hundreds, thousands of Iraqis rested on the conscience of one man. That man, Joseph Darby, is the teenager who comes into a library. Refining his or her moral conscience, helping him or her to make the hard choice to talk, to speak up, to face evil and do good, is the single most important task any of us, all of us, face.

Again, I want to stress that this is not simple. It is not about a blanket resistance to war. Unless you truly are a Quaker, a pacifist, it is not that clear cut. The truth is that for the rest of our lives America will be a target, and will, from time to time, be an aggressor. We simply are the only superpower in the world, so some will try to destroy us, and we will do our best to project our power. That is the fact of our time. Our challenge as adults is to give young people, especially teenagers, tools to help cope with, think about, what role they will play in this difficult period.

I suspect that many of you already have good lists of books on Iraq, or Islam, or tolerance. But what teenagers need are books that refine a sense of moral choice. We owe it to them to find books to help them face the very uncertain decisions between good and evil that await them. And defining the nature of that kind of book is not straightforward. After all, you could argue that the best book of this sort to come out of the Vietnam period had nothing to do with Vietnam, it was *The Chocolate War*. Arguably the best nonfiction book on moral choice is *Profiles in Courage*, which again is not directly about the Cold War during which it was written.

The more I think about what sorts of books might help teenagers cope with the moral choices of our time, the less certain I am. After all, I have argued, forcefully, that books do not change lives, or not in any predictable fashion. A very soft and intimate poem that a reader comes upon by accident may help her to recognize her own emotions, and that may give her more of a moral compass than any sermon on responsibility. A character in fantasy novel could well offer a young man more inspiration to make heroic choices than one in the most sensitive, interior novel. And since we have no draft, so many of the young people who will become soldiers are drawn from those who seldom read anything at all. Graphic Novels such as *Pedro and Me*, or Stan Mack's new memoir about Janet Bode's death, are directly about difficult topics. But sometimes it may just be that reading an exceptionally well crafted story in a comic book gives a person on a front line, in terrible situation, a sense that art, that another life, that creativity exists somewhere, and that he need not be defined by his circumstances. Studies of people like Joseph Darby show that they are much more able to speak up when they realize they are not alone with their terrible knowledge.

People who, as Herman Melville urged, “tell the truth to the face of falsehood,” are those who feel they control their own destiny. A recent article in the New York Times said that people like specialist Darby are not defined by what others are doing, or what their superiors insist they do, but by a sense of themselves. It seems to me that poetry, fiction, graphic novels can help young people to have that sense, even when they are not directly about moral choice. But what about nonfiction?

When I started writing Witch-Hunt, my book on the Salem witch trials, it was all pretty easy. As we knew from The Crucible, the McCarthy period echoed the Salem trials, and by getting young people to recognize the foul power of gossip, rumor, and cliques, we could sensitize them not only to the seventeenth century but the middle twentieth. But as I wrote, I was breathing the air of the destroyed world trade center towers, my wife was bicycling down the length of Manhattan, hoping to find some place where she could volunteer to help, only to find there were too few injured to need aid, too many dead. Suddenly being in a state of fear where every stranger loomed as potential enemy was my daily life, not some weird hysteria that Puritans or McCarthyites fell into. I came to realize the power of fear, because I was living it.

That changed how I wrote my book – I wrote it not to teach kids the obvious pieties – accusing witches is bad, accusing Communists is bad – but rather, to show that when you are attacked and in a state of fear it is much harder to listen to your conscience, and much easier to blame.

Take the matter of torture. Before 9/11 no historian could explain why the courts used both physical and mental torture in Salem, when in previous witch trials people detested the idea. Since then we, the United States, has begun torturing the enemies it

captures. I am not sure what I think of this. I do want to know what a terrorist knows. I do want to save lives. I do think we may be justified in using any means to get such suspects to speak. We praise Malcolm X for his “by any mean necessary,” doesn’t that apply to the security of our nation? And yet I hate the idea. I feel there is some fundamental moral line we cross once we do the abominable, even to those planning abominable acts. We lose our humanity in treating people with inhuman schemes inhumanely.

When I was a teenager we discussed these matters in the abstract – we knew that the Nazis performed grotesque experiments on people in the concentration camps, and debated whether it was acceptable to treat the information they gathered as science. If the results of Nazi experiments would now save lives, was that acceptable even if the answers were obtained through the most foul, inhumane means? Then, I thought not. Then I, and I assume all of you, thought the Tuskegee Experiment in which black men where left to suffer with treatable syphilis so that science could know more about the disease, was an abomination, a blot on the conscience of our nation.

But what the hell should we do now? And what the hell should an eighteen year old do if she is guarding prisoners in Iraq, in Afghanistan, next year in Sudan, or North Korea, or Iran, and she hears screams coming from a locked room where the most dangerous suspects are held? What tools can we give her to help think about situations that I, at least, cannot resolve? That is a real nightmare, that is real horror. And I feel in my bones that we, as elders of the tribe, must offer insight, help, condolence to our young people who are certain to be thrust into those situations.

As we now know, the president himself consulted with lawyers to find out what was or was not legal once it became clear that some prisoners would be tortured. He had

the very best legal advice in the country to help define his choices. The teenager in your library has you.

What I've decided to do is to make the question of torture in Salem the center of how I present my book to kids. I hired a teacher to write a lesson plan on moral choice based on Salem, and I'm posting it on my site, marcaronson.com so that any teacher can use it. And during Teen Read Week I'm going to visit kids to present them with this challenge: easy to see why torture was wrong in 1692, is it wrong now? If it isn't – and, I think that in some cases it is not – then how can we be so sure it was wrong then? It was wrong because witches did not exist, but that does not mean people knew that. I, for one, believed there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Talking to kids about torture is not a disguised way to make them anti-war, rather it is a responsible way to help them to think in a period where we are likely to face wars, terror, impossible choices, and they are going to be on the front lines. I felt that a book about Salem could no longer be about the past, it had to deal with the present, and I hope that is how librarians and teachers will use it.

Let me give you another example of the moral choices of our time – the choices your young people must face. I was recently given a diary that was kept by an Israeli girl from fifth to seventh grade. Her writing is thoughtful, observant, full of yearning for peace. She was moved by the hope of peace after the Oslo accords, and devastated when Isaac Rabin, the Israeli prime minister who signed that peace treaty, was killed by a right wing extremist. Bat-Chen was her name, and she was killed by a terrorist attack in the center of Tel-Aviv. After her death, her parents faced a particularly intense version of the moral choices that our times thrust upon us. How should they react to the loss of their

daughter? They chose to respond by devoting their lives to encouraging other young people to keep diaries, and to working with Palestinian parents who have also lost children to the endless conflict. As Bat-Chen's mother explained to me, if she and the mother of a dead Palestinian can make peace, anyone can, and everyone must.

The example of Joseph Darby, of Bat-Chen's parents, shows that even now, even in a period of war, a period in which children are killed, even in a time of mindless murder, it is possible to make moral choices. It is possible to resist evil and choose good. As authors we must create, as librarians you must offer, books that will help young people to make those choices.

I can philosophize about these matters. But for young people, for teenagers, they are the moral axes of their lives. They are living their Vietnam now. If we have learned anything from our fervent youth, from our years of living and reading, we must pass it on to them, so they can face their moral challenges. So I urge all of you, when you think of teen read week, when you think of witchcraft, and horror, and evil— of course, give kids the fun they want, the escape they need, the fantasy they crave – but also offer them books that help them to face real evil. Books that lend insight into moral choices in uncertain times. Those may not be the books teenagers know they want, but they may well be the books they need.

And now, to that end, I want to call on your wisdom – can we, here today – come up with a reading list that sharpens a sense of moral choice? Can we think of books that will help the next Joseph Darby to do the right thing, the next relative of a person killed in battle or in a terror attack to fight for reconciliation, not vengeance? That would be, I think, the very best gift to give our teenagers.