Our Stories Are Our Resistance

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In the days and weeks after the 2016 presidential election, I was overwhelmed by a nonstop cycle of shock, sadness, rage, and fear. My book *The Nowhere Girls* was in the copyediting stage, and I had a new book on contract, but I could not bring myself to write. Fiction felt impossible in a world where reality felt so scary. I felt hopeless. My work felt pointless and small. I felt small.

Then, around Thanksgiving, my agent sent me an email that basically said, “Want to be proactive?” She, too, was sick of feeling small. We wanted to do something. I asked myself, How can I be part of the solution? What is my power and how can I use it? How can I help?

My power is in writing, in words, in storytelling. Writers are magicians of empathy. Our superpower, when we’re at our best, is making people care.

My agent and I spent the next several days emailing back and forth, and the idea for the *Our Stories, Our Voices* anthology was born. Our response to the election would be a feminist anthology of personal essays by powerful and diverse female authors who write for a young adult audience, including at least one essay by an unpublished author from a marginalized community (I ended up choosing two because they were both so brilliant). We had no idea what this anthology would look like. All we knew was that one of the loudest voices in the world was now also a voice of sexism, racism, and intolerance and that our voices were needed to rise up against it.

A common refrain among young adult authors is that we write the books we needed as teens. For most of my career that has meant writing books about addiction and mental illness, about loneliness and trauma, about teens dealing with things they are not ready for and trying to survive in a world that often feels like too much to bear. For other authors in the anthology, this mission has meant writing books about Black girls, queer girls, Muslim girls, Asian girls, immigrant girls, fat girls, and so many other intersections of our identities that haven’t traditionally gotten responsible representation in mainstream media. The election intensified the need for these stories in new, critical ways. Teens from marginalized communities across the country had received the message loud and clear that they live in a nation full of people who, at best, are indifferent to their lives and needs, and at worse, hate them. In the years since the election, the hate-filled message has been getting louder.

I wanted to do something to fight this, to let young people know they are loved and valued, that the US president and his followers do not speak for me, nor do they speak for a large portion of the people in this country. I wanted the book to offer solidarity, courage, and comfort to young readers who may be feeling hopeless and scared, to show them that we are here and we are with them. My hope is that they will not only see themselves reflected in our pages, but will also learn to care for lives and experiences that are different from theirs, will see connections where they maybe didn’t see them before, will feel part of a greater inclusive community that has very different values than those they now see in practice in our halls of government.
As Julie Murphy says so eloquently in her essay, “My resistance is intersectional or it is not at all,” and it was essential to me that this anthology acknowledge that all forms of oppression are interconnected and must be examined as such. The stories in Our Stories, Our Voices are stories about being female in America, and they are also stories of being queer and female, of being Muslim and female, of being an immigrant and female, of being Black and female, of being a survivor of sexual trauma and female. Our stories show that there is no cookie-cutter way to be American or to be a woman, that the unique nuances of our experiences matter, and that we are all a vital part of the beautiful diversity that make up our country.

After my agent and I solidified the idea for the anthology, I spent the next several days emailing young adult writers—some of them good friends, some acquaintances I only knew online, some total strangers other writer friends recommended—asking if they’d be willing to write a personal essay for an anthology in response to the election. I was honestly shocked by the enthusiasm of the responses I got, so many women who jumped at the chance to use their voices and platforms for good. We had long group email threads in which we shared our ideas about what we wanted to write about and brainstormed what charities we wanted the royalties to go to. The love and energy of the group gave me so much hope. And that was before I even started reading their essays.

There were many things that surprised me as the book came together. I wasn’t prepared for how emotionally grueling editing this anthology would be. I cried a lot while working on it. My heart burst open for every one of these authors—with pride, with sadness, with compassion, with solidarity. It was my job to read through some of the most intimate and vulnerable moments in these women’s lives—sexual trauma, racist violence, abuse, and so many other deep pains—and then I was supposed to edit them, find a way to guide their words, to somehow critique the writing as something separate from the writer and her life. I am deeply honored and humbled by the trust the authors placed in me with their most tender memories, and I hope I did them justice.

One of the themes common throughout the essays that most moved and inspired me was the authors’ resilience. Whether it was Sandhya Menon’s experience immigrating to the United States from India as a teen; Anna-Marie McLemore’s path to finding peace with her identity as a queer Christian Latinx woman; Christine Day’s embracing of her creativity and finding a home in the indigenous diaspora; Brandy Colbert’s reflections on her hometown’s history of racist violence and the hypocrisies of white feminism; Julie Murphy’s proud reclaiming of her body; Nina LaCour’s poignant homage to a childhood friend and the effect of homophobic legislation on her own family; Ellen Hopkins’s path from privilege to activism; Aisha Saeed’s experiences with Islamophobia and the courage it takes to keep caring; so many stories of sexual harassment and trauma, microaggressions and overt racism, gaslighting and silence and shame—despite all of these struggles and wounds and hardships, what the authors in the anthology have in common is that we have all survived. We have found the inner strength to keep going, to value our own lives. We have emerged and we are emerging, and we will keep doing so because of our resilience, because of our hope.

In a time of such insecurity and fear, I have to actively cultivate hope. It does not always come naturally, so I have to remind myself of all the things I have to be grateful for, of all the many beacons of light in the darkness. Near the top of my list is the young adult literature community and the groundbreaking and life-changing books they are writing. Young readers (and adults) have so many diverse stories available to them now; they have books about social justice issues, about teens claiming their power and fighting oppression, whether it’s in fantasy worlds like Tomi Adeyemi’s Children of Blood and Bone and Cindy Pon’s Want series or the very real worlds of Angie Thomas’s The Hate U Give, Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely’s All American Boys, and Samira Ahmed’s Love, Hate and Other Filters. It gives me hope that young people are growing up reading these stories, and it is a great honor to know Our Stories, Our Voices is a part of this growing library, that teachers and librarians will be able to recommend the anthology to their students and use the essays to start discussions about important issues affecting our communities—discussions about sexism and rape culture; about racism, implicit bias, and white privilege; about LGBTQ+ rights; about immigration; about inclusion and equity; about our responsibilities as both members of this country and of this planet, and our responsibility to use our voices to fight for ourselves, for each other, and for those whose voices are being silenced and need us to use ours to amplify theirs.

I believe in the power of vulnerability. I believe in the power of storytelling. I believe that the act of sharing the most personal parts of ourselves is in itself a political act.
the most personal parts of ourselves is in itself a political act. It is what connects us, binds us, makes us a power so much more formidable than we could ever be alone in our silence. Telling our stories tells the world that we matter. It tells people like us, people who aren’t ready or in places safe enough to speak out, that they matter. Most importantly, it helps us remind ourselves that we matter. Sharing these deep parts of ourselves helps us to not feel alone. And that connection is what gives us strength in our fear, gives us peace in our anger. It is what gives us hope.

My wish is that young readers will see themselves in the pages of Our Stories, Our Voices and know they are not alone, that we believe in them, that there is hope. Because without hope, there is apathy. There is cynicism. There is nobody bothering to make things better. And that is not a world I want to live in. That is not the world I want for my daughter, for your daughters and sons and students, for every child who might pick up a book and need to be taken to a world that includes and honors and loves them.

In simply choosing to educate or write for children, we are saying we care, and that in itself is an act of courage and love in a world that so desperately needs both of those things. In the rare moments when I catch myself being my best self, that is all that matters—connecting with my readers, the kids out there who are like I was, who desperately need to see themselves in the pages of a book because they feel so alone.

I hope that in telling our stories, we inspire young readers to tell their own, to use their voices to start important discussions in their schools and families and communities about social justice, activism, and what it means to be American and human and a citizen of this world, and that through these discussions, we will continue to tip the scales a little further on the side of empathy and justice.

2018 NCTE Children’s Book Awards

Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children

Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster by Jonathan Auxier (Amulet)

HONOR BOOKS: Can I Touch Your Hair? by Irene Latham, Charles Waters, Sean Qualls, and Selina Alko (Carolrhoda Books); Everything Else in the Universe by Tracy Holczer (G.P. Putnam’s Sons); Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes (Little, Brown and Company); Merci Suárez Changes Gear by Meg Medina (Candlewick Press); The Day War Came by Rebecca Cobb (Candlewick Press)

Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children

Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery by Sandra Neil Wallace, illustrated by Bryan Collier (Simon & Schuster)

HONOR BOOKS: Champion: The Comeback Tale of the American Chestnut Tree by Sally M. Walker (Henry Holt and Company); Pass Go and Collect $200: The Story of How Monopoly Was Invented by Tanya Lee Stone, illustrated by Stephen Salerno (Henry Holt and Company); The Secret Kingdom: Nek Chand, a Changing India, and a Hidden World of Art by Barb Rosenstock, illustrated by Claire Nivola (Candlewick Press); Thirty Minutes Over Oregon: A Japanese Pilot’s World War II Story by Marc Tyler Nobleman, illustrated by Melissa Iwai (Clarion Books), We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frané Lessac (Charlesbridge Publishing)

Both awards were presented at the Children’s Book Awards Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, TX.


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