Banned Books Week: Day Seven

Posted on September 27, 2014 by Emma Louise Backe
Today is the last day of Banned Books Week, and I intentionally left Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* for my final selection. That is because a lot of things begin and end and begin again with the series. It’s a story as grand and sweeping as John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), laden with history, poetic intent, theological agitation, and a thirst to reframe the grand narratives that have dictated our lives for centuries. When Pullman references Blake, Milton and parables from the Bible, he situates the reader within an ongoing conversation about faith and the nature of sin. Although the worlds that Lyra and Will explore have some real-world equivalents, Pullman is a master of world building. He crafts the universes so deftly and intricately, with such meticulous attention and believability, you can only truly appreciate the invention when you take a step back and allow the masterpiece to sink in. Like his literary precedents, Pullman wants to create a narrative with mythic, moral dimensions, motivated by grandiose, existential themes to unravel a new story about the universe, one as important and meaningful as other religious texts. He manages to achieve these goals with grace and dexterity.

*His Dark Materials* came to me just as I was undergoing my first in-depth study of the Bible. As a part of my Episcopalian upbringing, I had to undergo Confirmation classes before I reaffirmed my faith in Christ. I expected that this class would expose me to the other religious doctrines of the world, like Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, so that I could make an informed decision about my faith. I had already begun to question the principles upon which my parents’ religion was founded and had difficulty with the concept of faith without proof. As I began to read the Bible more thoroughly, the internal contradictions, hypocrisy and sexism became more and more evident. I became enraged when my pastor told me that I had been made from the rib of Adam and was born in original sin due to the fault of Eve. There were a multitude of other misgivings and questions that began to furrow my faith, especially as I became less and less convinced of the veracity of the stories and more and more assured that religion is a story we use to organize and make sense of the world. When I first picked up *The Golden Compass* (1995), all of these questions were swirling around my head, and while I was initially captivated by the magical landscape of Lyra’s imagination—the trepanned skulls, the reanimated bodies in the crypts of Jordan College, the stories of child abduction—the book also commenced to set Lyra’s adventure in motion with the question of Dust. The rumors of kidnapping by the Oblation Board were also circulating around real-world South Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe as well,
products of the black market organ trade, but Pullman uses the urban legends as an entre to discuss the horrors of the Catholic Church and introduce the pernicious character of Mrs. Coulter, Lyra’s mother. Science, speculation and faith converge around questions of innocence in children and the lengths to which the Church will go to cement their power in an age of premature technological advancement, when the world seems on the verge of change.

Lyra is a flawed, quick-tempered, imaginative child, and will always be one of my favorite female characters ever written. She is fiercely loyal, easily draws friends around her, and devilishly precocious. *The Golden Compass* is built around Lyra’s quest to save Roger from the Oblation Board, with the help of Serafina Pekkala and her witches, John Faa and the Gyptians, and Iorek Byrnison, an armored bear of the north. She discovers the hideous experiments conducted by her mother and the Church to sever the connection between child and daemon in the name of scientific inquiry and theological speculation. The connection between daemon and child is seen as sacred, and perhaps the most fascinating element of the narrative is the relationship between Lyra and Pantalaimon as they grow and mature, two halves of the same whole. Lyra discovers that her quest to discover the nature of Dust is shared with her father, Lord Asriel, who forms a bridge across worlds and hopes to lead a rebellion against the Church. Thus does Lyra transcend the permeable boundaries between worlds and search for answers amidst the panoply of universes, aided by her Alethiometer or truth finder.

Throughout the next two books, *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), the scale of the quest for answers expands greatly. Lyra encounters and teams up with Will Parry, a boy from contemporary London whose father disappeared inexplicably on an expedition North. Though intelligent, street-smart children, they find themselves outwitted by adults and attacked by the kids of Cittàgazze, a world that seems to intersect at Lyra and Will’s present. Will is entrusted with the Subtle Knife, a weapon that can slice windows between worlds, and Lyra befriends physicist Dr. Mary Malone. Malone and Lyra negotiate the differences between dark matter and angels, two theoretical principles that reference the same force of energy and, it turns out, consciousness. As I read Mary Malone’s conversation with angels in my middle school library, it felt as though I too had ripped through the fabric of my universe. That is the power of Pullman’s prose—his story seems unequivocally real, so real that the events of *The Amber Spyglass* have crucial resonances for the reader.
his revolution, Will and Lyra descend into the world of the dead. The books are full of moments of utter sorrow and grief, and the abandonment of the daemons on Charon’s dock is perhaps one of the most tragic. Through Lyra’s storytelling abilities and empathy, she is able to transform the nature of death into the most beautiful formulation of moving on I have ever read, fictional or otherwise. Previously imprisoned by Harpies, Lyra leads the dead to an impasse where Will cuts a window into the living world. The dead rejoice, saying, “Even if it means oblivion, friends, I’ll welcome it, because it won’t be nothing. We’ll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves; we’ll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze; we’ll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon out there in the physical world, which is our true home and always was” (Pullman 2000), noting how they will become a part of their daemons and loved ones again. Quite apart from becoming the girl who defeats, or rather improves death, Lyra joins Lord Asriel’s fight against the Authority, the first angel who has used his celestial power to oppress mankind and allow wickedness to spread in the name of justice. As Ruta Skadi, another witch pronounces, “For all of [the Church’s] history... it’s tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them, it cuts them out [...] That’s what the Church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling” (Pullman 1997:286). Pullman does not indict the Church for its belief system, but rather the way that its beliefs have been used to justify overt and covert forms of violence against humans, as well as the way that it does not allow for the celebration of alternative belief systems and ways of being in the world.

Mary Malone is one of the most sympathetic characters to the Church. Formerly a nun, she speaks to the sense of comfort and purpose her faith gave her, but also recognizes that you can find similar forms of celestial wonder and existential solace through different professional or spiritual avenues. Forced to escape from the Church for her research on dark matter, Malone travels to the world of the Mulefa, a species of sentient beings with a completely different physiological structure than anything we’ve seen on earth. I think the Mulefa are perhaps among the most important creatures in His Dark Materials. They are not anthropomorphized, as so many alternative, alien species are. Pullman does an excellent job of demonstrating how the creatures evolved in a symbiotic relationship with the environment. While Lyra’s polar ice caps are melting from global warming caused by the bridge across worlds, the Mulefa live in harmony with their ecological system. The Mulefa reconfigure what it means to be conscious or human, with a complex linguistic, cultural system Mary comes to love and respect. The strange looking creatures, that do not even
possess the same musculature for speech that humans do, have much to teach Mary, a physicist, highlighting the empathy and intention that must go into interactions across cultures and, potentially, across species.

It is in the world of the Mulefa that Lyra and Will also discover their sexuality. Under the sage advice of Dr. Malone, the couple finally has a chance to explore their love for one another and divest the secrets of one another’s bodies. Rather than a shameful, sinful act, sex is the source of salvation for the universe. The very trees of the Mulefa world are crying out for Dust, need it to maintain the vitality of their world. Sex and love create Dust, a substance that is inherently beneficial to the world. This principle is, perhaps, the most important part of *His Dark Materials*. Whether or not you find the anti-Christian sentiments abrasive, Pullman eliminates the self-hatred and misogyny endemic of Christianity. As a woman, reading *The Amber Spyglass*, I felt as though Pullman was absolving my gender of the sins we had historically been laden with and allowing us to celebrate life whole-bodied, eliminating the shame we had been saddled with for centuries. I wouldn't call *His Dark Materials* an atheist series, because there is such poignant wonder and enchantment throughout the worlds. I believe that Pullman, rather, is inviting his readers to acknowledge the alternative spiritualities the can foment in a world such as ours, and consider the ways that religious doctrines may hurt more than they help. He is a fierce opponent of corruption and oppression, but his every sentence blossoms with marvel at the natural world, and the beauty of creation. Just as you fall in love with the language of the Devil in *Paradise Lost*, you learn to see the world anew, from alternative perspectives, through Pullman.
According to the ALA, Pullman’s series was number two on the Top Ten Most Banned Books of 2008. Many of the critics and censors are religious organizations who indict His Dark Materials as anti-Christian, or find fault for his inclusion of witches. But as Pullman writes in The Amber Spyglass, “I came to believe that good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are. All we can say is that this is a good deed, because it helps someone or that’s an evil one because it hurts them. People are too complicated to have simple labels” (2000) and the author is tirelessly concerned with what it means to do the right thing. Lord Asriel’s efforts to overthrow the Authority are to depose a structure that willfully inflicts pain and tragedy upon people. At the end of the series, Will and Lyra are faced with a choice between their own romantic desires and the needs of universe, the health of the worlds they have flitted in and out of. The sacrifice that they make for the good of the universe is utterly heartbreaking and teaches the same lessons of charity and selflessness many homilies also preach. How can we live our lives so that they leave behind vivid bursts of happiness?

His Dark Materials is one of those series that lingers with you, even after you’ve closed the books. I can honestly say that the books radically shaped my outlook on the world, and remain a lasting influence in my life. It’s one of those series that lives in your bones. I am eternally grateful to Philip Pullman for crafting such an accessible yet magisterial narrative, one that has helped me to become the person I am today.

Works Cited


“Think about the word destroy. Do you know what it is? De-story. Destroy. Destory. You see. And restore. That’s re-story. Do you know that only two things have been proven to help survivors of the Holocaust? Massage is one. Telling their story is another. Being touched and touching. Telling your story is touching. It sets you free.”

— Francesca Lia Block, Baby Be-Bop (1995)

I was a Weetzie Bat and a Witch Baby. I felt stuck in the wrong time, the wrong place, enamored by the books and fantasies I retreated into when life seemed too harsh or judgmental. Transitioning from childhood to adolescence, I had difficulty connecting with my peers. I wanted to wear costumes and conduct faerie hunts and taste poetry on my tongue like honeysuckle and find a place where I felt at home and safe in my difference. Francesca Lia Block’s Weetzie Bat (1989) came to me at just the perfect time. I both knew who I was from a young age and was struggling to understand how to manifest my identity in a way I felt comfortable with; I recognized my difference, yet was still fearful of how those around me would react. Difference didn’t thrive well in my hometown—there was hardly the profusion of magic and wonder that seemed to populate the Los Angeles in Dangerous Angels (2010). Weetzie, too, felt lonely. She danced between punk and manic pixie dreamgirl, starlet and dusty rambler, completely assured of her identity, despite its efflorescent, dizzying qualities. She brandished her creativity openly, yet spends most of the first chapters of Weetzie Bat spinning through Los Angeles, lost in a shimmering haze, searching for a human connection that will ground her. She discovers Dirk, a slamming-jamming friend and partner to her eccentricity. Throughout Weetzie Bat, Witch Baby (1991), Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys (1993), Missing Angel Juan (1993), and Baby Be-Bop (1995), Block crafts a contemporary fairy tale, one with all the charm and enchantment of Anderson, and the darkness and brooding of Grimm’s Fairy Tales.
Dangerous Angels is a series that spirits you away with the language. That’s how I initially fell in love. The stories swirl and tinkle about like delicate ballerinas, twirling between an extravagance of description so lush you get lost in the language, copious metaphors, similes and analogies that spring like wildflowers throughout a sentence, and sheer joy at the miraculous heights that words can reach. This is a part of the magic of Dangerous Angels, the enchantment of the language simultaneously soothing and jarring in its specificity and grandeur. Dangerous Angels is deliberately overwritten, because you are meant to believe in the beauty and wonder the language evokes for the characters. Weetzie, My Secret-Agent Lover Man, Dirk, Duck, Cherokee, Witch Baby, Angel Juan and Raphael speak in a language specific to their dream-scape world, one that demands glitter and love and excess in all things, a spinning confectionary creation of characters rabid for life, eager for adventure and sometimes lost in the strangeness of their fantastic community. As a lover of poetry, a precocious reader who wanted to speak as eloquently and vibrantly as my favorite authors, Weetzie was my hero. Just as she wore taffeta ball gowns to art class, she did not force herself to reign in her speech or police the way she talks so she could fit in. The whimsy and sheer mayhem of description are all a part of the celestial dance Block performs, weaving fairy tale and fantasy elements into a narrative confronting more deeply disturbing, real-world issues and concerns.

Source, Rookie Mag: http://static.rookiemag.com/2012/06/1340743664weetziebatbooks.jpg
Dangerous Angels has been banned or censored because of its negotiation of sexuality, marriage, relationships, HIV/AIDS and childbirth. Throughout the series, all of the characters are searching for love and acceptance, struggling with feelings of abandonment, self-hate and shame. None of the relationships in Dangerous Angels are as simple as falling in love, but each is deeply compelling and sincerely human. There are a number of interracial relationships depicted in Dangerous Angels: Valentine JahLove, a Rastafarian, marries Ping Chong, a Chinese fashion designer. Witch Baby falls in love with Angel Juan, an illegal immigrant from Mexico. In Weetzie Bat, Weetzie dreams of meeting her soul mate, a secret-agent lover man who will perfectly complement her free spirit and artistry. Though My Secret-Agent Lover Man emerges from the ether of a genie’s wish, his relationship with Weetzie is fraught with the complications of adulthood. He feels that the world is too violent and dangerous to justify having a child, and runs away to have an affair with Vixanne Wigg, a Jayne Mansfield cult groupie. Weetzie’s own parents, Charlie Bat and Brandy-Lynn are emphatically a marriage gone awry, loaded with too many expectations and too much hurt.

Toward the beginning of Weetzie Bat, it is revealed that Dirk is gay, searching for the perfect “duck.” It was one of the first books I ever read that featured homosexual characters in such a matter of fact, accepting way. Block tackles homophobia and the stigma that has often been associated with queerness. Duck’s own parents, despite their hippie-vibe and supposed liberal personas, fail to accept his homosexuality or condone the loving relationship between Duck and Dirk. Baby Be-Bop delves more deeply into Dirk’s negotiation of his sexual orientation from a young age, chronicling the task of “passing” for straight until he came out of the closet. Dangerous Angels was perhaps my first introduction to the concept of sexuality as a fluid continuum, something I wouldn’t really come to experience or understand until attending Vassar College, a place that celebrated queerness and sexual exploration and understanding. Block’s representation of homosexual, queer characters both attends to the stigma and discrimination they have historically faced, as well as expresses the fact that society is full of difference, a difference we need to celebrate and embrace. Dirk and Duck even struggle with the dangers of HIV and AIDS, a disease that emerged around the same time as gay rights activism began to take purchase. The couple, each with their own previous sexual histories, is concerned about the dangers of intercourse:

“It’s so sick,” Duck said. “I nicked myself shaving that last night at home, and I saw my own blood and I thought, How could I live in a world where this exists—where love can become death? Even if the doctor says we’re okay, how could we go on watching people die?”

Duck buried his face against Dirk’s shoulder and the streetlamp light shone in through the window, lighting up Duck’s hair. Dirk stroked Duck’s head. “I don’t know. But we’ve got to be together,” he said.” (Block 1989).

Through Weetzie Bat, I was not only exposed to different kinds of relationships and formulations of love, but I was also drawn into the conversation...
about how sex can mean something both so gratifying and deadly. The people you love, and how you love, can be a dangerous thing in our society.

Dangerous Angels is also deeply concerned with the nature of family. When My Secret Agent Lover Man doesn’t want to bear a child, Weetzie decides to have sex with Dirk and Duck, celebrating the family she has created through her friends. It is an unconventional way of getting pregnant, one that has ruffled many libraries and schools, but one that also echoes the contemporary social conditions of parenthood. Cherokee Bat was conceived out of mutual love, affection and acceptance, rather than marital obligation, and Dirk and Duck prove to be incredible parents with Weetzie, further pushing the conservative boundaries of traditional, nuclear families. When Weetzie is asked what sexual preference she hopes Cherokee will have, she responds, “Happiness” (Block 1989). When My Secret Agent Lover Man returns to Weetzie, they discover that he impregnated Vixanne Wigg, who deposits Witch Baby at their doorstep. Rather than abandon Witch Baby, Weetzie incorporates the purple-haired baby into their ever-growing family, forgiving My Secret Agent Lover Man for his indiscretions.

As the children grow, they must wrestle with their own challenges and recklessness. Witch Baby feels the pain and injustice of the world as acutely as her father, and feels out of place amidst Weetzie and Cherokee. She channels her frustration and isolation into her drums and discovers love in Angel Juan. Despite their deep romantic connection, Angel Juan disappears, and Witch Baby must negotiate the dark underworld of Los Angeles, full of sex trafficking and exploitation of undocumented workers. Cherokee falls in love with Raphael, the son of Ping Chong and Valentine, but they fall prey to the world of drugs, parties and unprotected promiscuity. Block weaves narratives that probe into the tangled process of growing up, and all the difficult decisions that accompany it. Often times, you feel abandoned or alone, and have to find solace in your own difference or the friends you populate your life with. You find those who love you for who you are, but also challenge you to grow as a person, nurturing and supportive.

During the time when I was reading the series, I wanted to know that apple pie kisses could exist for girls like me, that I could spend days figuratively buried in the mud scratching at myself and still emerge to make music, that I could find friends to share hotdogs with and dance under spangled lights with me.

Dangerous Angels is problematic for its representation of Native American culture. This is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed and acknowledged. But Block’s novels have historically been banned for the “inappropriate content” I listed above. Dangerous Angels is a collection that would greatly benefit young readers, struggling with their sexual identities and searching for a place in the tumult of adolescence. It could be an enormous source of solace to queer readers, as well as readers that don’t fit the prescribed conventions of their hometowns. As Francesca Lia Block responded to the question “What do you hope librarians, teachers and school administrators in communities facing challenges to literature take away from these controversies?” in an interview with the National Coalition Against Censorship, “I hope that more understanding, tolerance and awareness arises out of all of this” (NCAC 2009). The books that promote tolerance and love across boundaries, creeds and sexualities are the most important to keep on the bookshelves.

Works Cited


The influence and importance of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) cannot be underestimated. Big Brother has become a ubiquitous symbol for tyrannical, hyper-surveillant government. Whenever a country’s government or emerging political party infringes upon the freedoms of its people or espouses an ideology crafted for conformity and built on corruption and violence, our immediate point of reference is always the Inner Party of Oceania. Since its publication, readers feared the emergence of the brutal authoritarian state depicted in the novel, considering the real-world equivalents of the conditions forecast and depicted. Some journalists have pushed against the sovereignty of *1984* as a public metaphor. Noah Berlatsky noted in a piece on the NSA wiretaps, "PEN also found that journalists used literary analogies to try to explain NSA surveillance. Or rather, they used one literary analogy. George Orwell’s *1984* was the only work referenced" (2014), a reference that "enslaves thought” rather than “liberates it” according to Berlatsky.
1984 became a touchstone for authoritarian, morally totalizing bureaucracy and control because the English Socialism of Oceania seems frighteningly plausible. Oceania is constantly at war, and the citizens of the superstate have abdicated any sense of independence or cognitive autonomy to fit seamlessly into the mechanics of the bureaucracy. The forthright narrative, while horrifying, does not stretch the limits of our credulity. The revisionism and manipulation of truth to substantiate and insulate the state has historical precedents, both domestically and abroad.

As a canny cultural critic, Orwell integrated preexisting systems and structures, and simply took them to their most extreme conclusions, crafting a highly structured, closely policed Benthamite society premised ostensibly on the greatest good. The character of Big Brother is a perfect personification of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, the theoretical prison structure that can observe every prisoner at any time and promulgates dispositions of self-policing and control among the incarcerated. If each individual knows that their actions are being monitored, they will act in a way that does not incur the wrath of the prison guards, thereby creating a space in which the enforcers are almost superfluous symbols of state power. The state has executed complete populace control and manipulation without ever having to lift a finger.
Although the torture and reprogramming of Winston Smith and Julia at the Ministry of Love is horrifying, and the ultimate conclusion of the novel a chilling reminder of the Party’s absolute power, I was most impacted by the role of language in the story. George Orwell was a pedantic and sometimes petulant literary critic and journalist, a man sincerely worried about the so-called degeneration of the English language. He has a somewhat old-fashioned, purist approach to language, one that clung to precision and almost didactic aestheticism in speech. His essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946) laid out clear instructions for how a good writer should and should not write. These dictums were not merely formulated to condemn slang, improper grammar and thoughtless, overly effusive speech, but also because Orwell recognized the political consequences of language. Rhetoric has consequences on thought and action, a contention upon which 1984 is based.

The totalitarian state of Oceania utilizes language to deploy their ideologies and ensure political, cognitive obedience among the populace. “Thought crime” includes any thoughts that question or undermine the legitimacy of the Party and its values. If, however, an individual is not equipped with the language with which to craft subservice, anti-State sentiments, then thought crime cannot exist. The same premise was used by Ayn Rand in Anthem (1938). To prevent State opposition before it even occurs, the residents of Oceania employ Newspeak, a language that limits freedom of thought and has eliminated potentially rebellious or subversive linguistic terms and discursive markers. With a limited vocabulary that can only be employed to praise or support the Party, Proles are stripped of the linguistic, and therefore the cognitive tools with which to craft dissent. Newspeak also reformulates concepts like peace, war and freedom into ironic distortions. Oceania’s mottos include, “War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength” (1949), while the Ministry of Love oversees torture, the Ministry of Truth rewrites history and distorts facts about the present, including the disappearance of “unpersons,” and the Ministry of Peace conducts war. These paradoxes represent Orwellian neologisms called “doublethink” or “blackwhite,” the ability to hold two contradictory terms at once and accept both as true. Doublethink also refers to an individual’s ability to accept and internalize State philosophies, even if they are not logically or factually sound. The Ministry of Love forces Smith to engage in State doublethink by reinforcing the precept that $2 + 2 = 5$. 

"Political language...is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

- George Orwell

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From 1984, the movie. Source: http://watchingthedeniers.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/1984-john-hurt.jpg

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The supposition that language can be a tool of war and a mechanism for State power has never been more adeptly or alarmingly demonstrated than in 1984. As an undergraduate student, I crafted my college experience around explorations of the role of the language and the influence of metaphors, discourse and rhetoric on the ways we think and act within the world. My academic study relied upon Michel Foucault and his theories on the relationship between knowledge, truth and power; linguists mapping the possible correlation between speech and thought; indigenous scholars who utilize language and traditional storytelling as a form of native resistance and strength; and medical anthropologists and critics like Susan Sontag (Illness as Metaphor [1978]), Arthur Kleinman, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Laurence Kirmayer noting the power of language in clinical settings and understandings of the body, the ways in which particular metaphors inhere in experiences of illness. Yet I always return to 1984. Like so many great works of fiction, 1984 speaks to the human condition so persuasively and convincingly that it transcends the realm of literature. 1984 is an exemplary text to discuss and critically think about philosophical principles, politics, human history and morality. Similar to Anthony Burgess's A Clockwork Orange (1962), 1984 also forces us to engage with language, urging us to consider the consequences of speech and the impact of each word. According to Time, 1984 is among the top 10 most challenged books of all time (2008) and R. Wolf Baldassarro has noted, "Between 1965 and 1982, the book ranked 5th on the list of most challenged titles for being "immoral and pro communist." It is currently 9th on the ALA’s list of banned classics" (2011). In a truly Orwellian twist, the book has also been accused of being anti-government and politically incendiary.
If nothing else, the fact that *1984* continues to be banned and censored speaks to the continued salience and applicability of the sinister narrative, the dangers of censorship. To ban *1984* is to execute the same kind of totalitarian control Oceania enacts, for fear of the book spurring thought crime in young readers. *1984* taught me to attend to language, be critical of institutions and the meaning behind the carefully crafted messages, and engage with texts intentionally. *1984* gave me the language with which to become a thought criminal and imbued in me the political consequences of these crimes. The banning of books would have fit perfectly into the slickly controlled world of Oceania and *1984* is a doubleplus good book to think with for that very reason.

Works Cited


“A book, too, can be a star, ‘explosive material, capable of stirring up fresh life endlessly,’ a living fire to lighten the darkness, leading out into the expanding universe.” - Madeleine K. L’Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*

Madeleine K. L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) was among the top 100 Most Challenged Books 1990-2000, which I believe stands as a testament to its narrative integrity and resonance. The first part of a stunning quintet, *A Wrinkle in Time* is one of those "YA" novels that deals with the heavier issues of existence—life and death, good and evil, health and illness, sacrifice and self-protection. L’Engle does not deal in dualities, but rather confronts the palette of finely tinged grays that make up human life. She also does not shy away from tackling deeply complicated philosophical, spiritual and scientific questions, rendering hugely complex issues like the tesseract accessible where need be, while leaving other considerations conscientiously ambiguous, forcing the reader to suss out what they believe to be the truth of the situation. L’Engle integrates physics and quantum theory into a fantastical narrative that includes witches, winged creatures, mystics, sages and consciousness verging on singularity. The story centers on Meg Murry and her younger brother Charles Wallace. Meg is depicted as a precocious, yet troubled girl with brown hair and glasses, a character I almost immediately identified with. Meg’s mother is a brilliant scientist—one of the rare occurrences of a mother characterized for qualities other than maternal warmth. Meg and Charles Wallace, gifted with certain psychic powers, team up with Calvin O’Keefe, a fellow classmate, to investigate the disappearance of their father with the help of Mrs Whatsit, Mrs Which and Mrs Who. The strangeness and silliness integrated throughout the text mirrors the sentiment L’Engle herself writes: "The only way to cope with something deadly serious is to try to treat it a little lightly" (1962).
The book becomes deadly serious when the children learn that a malignant force, The Black Thing, is beginning to engulf the universe with evil. Earth itself has become obscured by The Black Thing, and some planets have become entirely subsumed by its draconian presence, the planet of Camazotz—where Meg and Charles Wallace’s father is imprisoned—included. When the trio arrive at Camazotz, they discover that the planet is ruled by a singular, telepathic presence referred to as “IT.” The consciousness demands conformity in all things. The passage where the children walk by identical house after house, watching as a young boy bounces a ball robotically—mechanical and joyless—is a haunting depiction of the abdication of freedom and joy for order. The planet’s central headquarters is run by a man with red eyes, a telepathic conduit for IT who maintains order throughout the globe and has imprisoned Mr. Murry. Charles Wallace becomes hypnotized by the man and Meg must become the savior of her brother’s soul. Although she rails against her father for abandoning them and failing to protect them from the darker elements of life, while lamenting her own shortcomings, the witches help to convince Meg of her own strengths. Meg uses her special connection with Charles Wallace, as well as her knowledge of his arrogance and the dangers of mindless conformity, to radiate IT with love, a love that ultimately banishes The Black Thing from the universe. Throughout the novel, Meg is irked by her difference, and feels ostracized for not fitting in with the other kids at school, but the climax demonstrates a moment of self-acceptance and the redemptive powers of love and forgiveness.

The text is populated with references to great works of fiction, philosophical tenants, scientific and mathematical principles, Bible verses, as well as aphorisms from cultures and belief systems around the world. Some of the advice given by the witches, or the Happy Medium, or Aunt Beast read like Buddhist koans, determinedly opaque yet introspective. Although there are many references to God and Jesus, the book is not about Christianity, but rather a homily on morality, intention and impact. There are many moments in the story when it seems that all the characters have reached the point of despair, when they are about to give up in the face of so much enduring, pervasive darkness. And yet the propulsive force that drives the narrative coalesces around love and a single person’s ability to make the world good, despite the enormous odds. The witches tell the children that the great artists of Earth have fought for centuries against The Black Thing, using their creativity as a manifestation for benevolence and peace. Many of the heroes and helpers in the book are also strong females—flawed and warped by the trials of the cosmic battle, yet complicated and nurturing to Meg, Charles Wallace and Calvin. Although it may seem trite, the pronouncement that love can keep the darkness out—no matter how huge or mundane that darkness may be—is essential and eternally moving. The home lives of the Murrys and Calvin O’Keefe are filled with their own struggles, and the children look to the adults for shelter. But the book also shows, most importantly, that children can be as wise and brave as adults, and often bring a different kind of strength to the most trying of situations.

“Do you think things always have an explanation?”
“Yes. I believe they do. But I think that with our human limitations we’re not always able to understand the explanations. But you see, Meg, just because we don’t understand doesn’t mean that the explanation doesn’t exist.”
“I like to understand things,” Meg said.
“We all do. But it isn’t always possible.”


The book, interestingly enough, has often been banned by religious groups who claim that it is offensive to Christianity. Others have condemned the
book as Satanic, noting the presence of the witches, while others felt that it was too adult for children (Baldassarro 2011). The argument that children should not be exposed to “adult themes” has been deployed time and time again, one that tends to ignore the sheer violence of childhood and adolescence. As Madeleine L’Engle notes on her website, “You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.” A Wrinkle in Time acknowledges the intelligence of children and the everyday warfare between good and evil that accompanies the process of growing up. I cannot tell you how gratifying it felt as a young reader not to be spoken down to by the author, to finally feel like I was reading a book that wanted to delve into the complex existential issues I began to grapple with from a young age. The rest of the books in the series—A Wind in the Door (1973), A Swiftly Tilting Planet (1978), and Many Waters (1986)—are equally rewarding and thought-provoking. The books teach readers about empathy, but also remind young readers of their own resilience. They attend to the darkness without allowing the reader to become consumed by them. They provide glimmers, like stars, amidst the swath of darkness, a small warmth that can be slowly bred into a lasting flame.

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M.T. Anderson is a linguistic genius. Before he broke into the more popular YA scene with *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* (2006), Anderson made a name for himself with the cult classic *Feed* (2002). *Feed* was one of the first dystopian novels I ever read, far more accessible than *Brave New World* (1932) or *Animal Farm* (1945), yet nonetheless prescient within the new millennium. *Feed* was published as technology was slowly beginning to insinuate itself into our daily lives, becoming something we relied upon and simply couldn’t live without. Computers and the internet were still relatively new, and novel cyber social platforms like Instant Messaging, MySpace and Second Life were just being launched. My social life, from a young age, was intimately wedded to digital connection, and we were only just starting to consider what this meant for my generation, and how this technological interface would affect issues like identity, personal privacy and interpersonal interactions.
Told in a futuristic cyber-punk lingo, *Feed* initially follows Titus and his group of friends—like a Bret Easton Ellis cast transplanted into speculative fiction—cavorting around the Moon, seeking the thrills only privilege, entitlement and technological super-saturation can bring. The world Titus and his friends inhabit has been ravaged by climate change and humans have become radically integrated into the web through the installation of feeds—cyber chips implanted directly into the brain that bring about constant, immediate interface with the digital world. These feeds allow users to tap into virtual realities, communicate cyber-telepathically with friends and family, and engage with the world mediated with digital knowledge and databases. But the feeds are also corporate tools that companies use to track and promote consumerism; users are constantly barraged with advertisements selling items that fit the data mined by organizations directly from feed-laced minds. As disaffected adolescents, Titus and his friends strive to follow the latest trends digitally culled for them, purchasing items on a whim and judging each others’ worth by fashion and bodily modification. The teenagers even download viruses that hijack their system and function like futuristic, digital drugs. The group eventually gets hacked by an organization against the use of feeds, and have to be rushed to the hospital. Titus forms a relationship with a girl they met on the moon, Violet, who seems to be more damaged by the hack than the others. As their relationship progresses, you witness the struggle Titus and his parents undergo to communicate vocally or forge any kind of substantive relationship that isn’t premised around consumerism. The stratified class system is also geographically mapped out for the reader, as Titus must travel from his gated community through the ecological wasteland to visit Violet in her own version of run-down suburbia. Violet’s feed, it turns out, was installed later on in life, using an outmoded model for fiscal thrift. The hack causes her feed to deteriorate, and, along with it, her body. She begins to experience paralysis and eventually loses control over her body, victim to a technological innovation gone awry.

Violet and Titus present alternative perspectives on *Feed’s* alternate reality. Raised by a scholarly father, Violet feels restless in a society so technologically mediated and discomfited by corporations constantly striving to qualify and quantify her personality into the ideal consumer. She speaks in a different linguistic register than Titus, who employs the clipped style of his peers, interspersed with localized lingo. While Titus is essentially a willing and happy pawn to the system in which he lives, Violet keeps up to date with the latest news and is horrified by international crises and environmental disasters. She broods upon the injustices that riddle her society and asks Titus to really think about whether the system works. She is horrified by the lesions Titus’s friends get, literal festering wounds they use to anoint their bodies; the bodily modifications are monstrous to her, just as they are to the reader. Titus struggles to cognitively keep up with Violet, as he is rarely asked to think critically about the world around him, or the capitalist system he is complicit with. His friends squawk materialist advertising willingly, sometimes with brand speech tattoos. Titus also begins to disengage from Violet as her condition worsens, seemingly unable to deal with the emotional connection she asks of him in her dying days. We see that Titus has almost been programmed to possess a shallow emotional and cognitive life, one that expects and needs immediate gratification from material things and is constantly searching for more thrills reproduced by the corporate-technical system. It is a sobering story that delves into a society that has allowed technology and corporate culture to hijack our consciousness and perhaps reprogram our conscience. From a linguistic perspective, *Feed* is also desperately concerned about language. As M.T. Anderson states, “I went to a librarian’s luncheon and I said to them, ‘Well, look, I’m going to be writing this book, which is specifically about the degeneration of language in this country and the way the language is falling apart and it’s going to use a lot of profanity for that reason’” (AdLit.org 2014). Anderson skillfully uses language and profanity to punctuate his larger political points, emphasizing the gradient between sacred and profane when it comes to all aspects of human existence and communication.
Feed was a National Book Award Finalist and “challenged at the William Monroe High School in Green County (VA) because the book is ‘trash’ and ‘covered with the F-word’” (Marshall Libraries 2013). Feed has been banned or challenged at numerous other schools as well. Those that condemned the book as “trash” may not have considered that the medium is part of the message, and that the style in which it is told is perhaps more jarring than the content itself. The language of the book demonstrates how deeply that characters of Feed have been inculcated into a community insulated from environmental stress through materialism and continuous, hyper-connected captivation. Feed, like so many great, revolutionary science fiction novels, warns us of the world we could create if we log in a little too far.

Works Cited


Banned Books Week: Day Two

Posted on September 22, 2014 by Emma Louise Backe
As a young female reader, it wasn’t overly difficult to find protagonists or characters that I identified with. Even when the main character was a different gender or inhabited a fantastical world, their life experiences and emotional states tended to mirror or parallel my own enough that I felt connected to them. Walter Dean Myer’s *Monster* (1999) was one of the first books I ever read that deviated from first or third person, straightforward chronological narrative and presented a protagonist far beyond my adolescent experience or life world at the time. *Monster* is told by Steve Harmon, a 16 year-old African American boy on trial for a robbery and murder. A few years older than I was when I first read the book, Harmon expresses an interest in storytelling and cinema, so he decides to relate the story of his trial through a screenplay, interspersed with diaries and personal journal entries of the legal proceedings. The book’s narrative structure simultaneously distances the reader from the main character, as if they were jurors overseeing the trial, and brings the reader closer to Harmon, eliciting sympathy and understanding for a young man framed by the legal and penal system as a degenerate and a danger. Filtered through the eyes of Harmon, the narrative is a testament to his creativity, as well as his intense intelligence and insight, qualities that challenge his characterization as a “monster.” Apart from exposing me to alternative narrative structures a story could take, the screenplay-diary format also taught me about new ways of engaging with a text and getting to know a protagonist. The precision, and dispassionate way that Harmon is able to craft his experience into a screenplay was astounding to me as a young reader, and provided another mechanism for creative empathy I never would have been able to imagine.
Monster also provided a window into a life I only knew indirectly. Although I lived outside of Philadelphia, issues of race, crime and discrimination only existed on the periphery of my consciousness, proof of my own privilege. Monster was one of the first books that asked me to identify with a young, African American male, a task I had never been given before. It was an extremely important one for me to undergo at the time, as the book also deals with very adult institutional concepts. The book was one of my first exposures to the penal system, and provided a (fictionalized) insider perspective on experiences of incarceration for youth. The complicated legal proceedings, replete with polemical rhetoric and thinly veiled prejudices also highlighted negative attitudes and stereotypes about race and class that hadn’t been emphasized to me before. I came to see how Harmon may have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time, a victim of structural violence and an environment of discrimination that often forces people to make decisions they wouldn’t have made under other circumstances. The book made me question the racial assumptions we are steeped in, and realize the degree to which already dispossessed people can be failed by the very institutions that are supposed to protect us. There was very little sympathy to be had by Steve Harmon in the prison or courtroom, because society, it seemed, had already decided what kind of person Harmon was, without ever truly getting to know his story.

According to the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression, “Parents of the Blue Valley School District in Kansas are currently petitioning for this [Monster] and thirteen other books to be removed from all high school classrooms in the district due to ‘vulgar language, sexual explicitness, or violent imagery that is gratuitously employed’” (2014). Many of Myers’s other books have been banned, and Myers has been a vocal advocate against censorship, especially for children and/or teen literature. As a young reader, Monster was an inevitably heavy story, one that was emotionally draining to read but nonetheless transformative and powerful. It told a story from a perspective I might not have known otherwise, one that forced me to reflect on my own life, assumptions and potential biases. Since reading the book, I have worked in violent, crime-ridden parts of Philadelphia and South Africa, volunteered in prisons with women and youth, and conducted research on the secondary victimization and discrimination that often occurs during legal proceedings. I am reminded how Monster reformulated the preexisting narratives that had suffused my life, and enjoined me to consider the way that our society works. Institutions like the court or the police could be the monsters; certain parts of the American population aren’t quite seen as human as others. Myers also gives voice to a portion of the population that doesn’t often get represented in young-adult fiction, which is important for other young readers who struggle to find stories or characters they identify with. The book also deals with ideas about truth—which truth is taken as fact and replicated enough until it becomes a reality? Who has the discursive power to determine the truth of a situation? I want Monster to remain on the bookshelves so that it can teach those same lessons to children for generations, so that they too may carry the story of Steve Harmon into their adult, professional lives.

Works Cited


Posted in Banned Books Week | Tagged Banned Books Week, books, censorship, Monster, representation, Walter Dean Myers, young adult literature | Leave a reply

Banned Books Week: Day One

Posted on September 21, 2014 by Emma Louise Backe
Today is the first day of Banned Books Week, a week that draws critical attention to book censorship in schools and libraries across the country. Sadly enough, Banned Books Week is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, a sobering reminder of the fact that hundreds of books every year are removed from classroom bookshelves and libraries, preventing students and interested readers from accessing them. Many of the books that are banned or challenged play an important role in our cultural consciousness and conscience. Books such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Color Purple*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Black Boy* have drawn attention to issues of racism in American society, subtly and overtly condemning historically prejudicial institutions and moral discourses that dispossess huge swaths of the African American population. Other books, such as *Slaughterhouse-Five* make us consider the horrors of war and the psychological damage wrought by such violence. Science fiction novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Brave New World* challenge us to consider the speculative futures our society could be crafting, warning us about the costs to freedom our social, reproductive, economic and technological innovations may bring about. Ray Bradbury’s classic *Fahrenheit 451* represents a world so terrified by the ideas that books elicit, that the revolutionaries are those who have committed Shakespeare and Poe to memory—it’s a chilling story I am reminded of every time this year.

I would not be the person I am today without having read widely and deeply, perusing my local library to discover books that were often irreverent, disturbing, difficult and emotionally befuddling. But the process of reading books that contested normative ideas about the world; presented protagonists whose minds I would never otherwise inhabit; and portrayed cultural worlds that made me think differently about my own community and identity has positively shaped who I am. I would not be the person I am today without having read many of the books often banned or challenged, because these books, every one of them, *make us think in new ways*, ways that impart a wider, more inclusive sense of humanity and the world, make us critical, creative citizens, and bring about a sense of empathy. As a part of Banned Books Week, I will spotlight one book every week that has been banned or challenged, to talk about why the book mattered to me. I take this opportunity not only to draw attention to the ways that book save lives and shape who we are, but also to celebrate those authors daring enough to tell the stories we perhaps don’t always want to hear.
When I first picked up Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002) in the Young Adult section of my local library, I remember thinking to myself, “This will be a very frightening book.” This thought excited me, as it often does around that teen-age when you begin to actively seek out the things that frighten you. *Coraline* seemed to me a darker retelling of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, with the perfect balance of whimsy and darkness only Gaiman can execute so effortlessly. I have never thought of *Coraline* as a young-adult novel, because Coraline, like so many of her YA protagonist counterparts, must face challenges that would defeat most adults. Though she is a young child, Coraline is far more mature and self-aware than most of the adults in the novel, and yet she’s still able to bring joy and silliness to the most horrifying of situations. Within the twisted, fantastical world of the Other Mother, Coraline is given the option of remaining within the dreamscape, constantly refabricated to suit Coraline’s desires and dreams—she can remain, as it were, in the rabbit hole. At a price, that is. Yet Coraline chooses not to be blinded by her own selfish desires, no matter how fluorescent and enamoring they may be. She cares too deeply about her parents, and the other children that have been exploited by the Other Mother, and her friend the Cat. She even possesses sympathy for the Other Father, an amorphous phantasm of her father the Other Mother discards once he’s served his purpose. At the climax of the story, when Coraline has the option to end the nightmarish pursuit of the Other Mother and give into the fantasy, Coraline sagely remarks, “I don’t want whatever I want. Nobody does. Not really. What kind of fun would it be if I just got everything I ever wanted, just like that, and it didn’t mean anything? What then?” (Gaiman 2002). It’s a simple sentiment the book slowly builds around, one that resonates with life-long ethics of gratitude, hard work and not expecting that the world necessarily owes you something.

*Coraline* also has one of the most profound passages about bravery that I’ve ever read. She tells the Cat a story about when she and her father went exploring in an old rubbish dump and accidentally stumble across a wasp’s nest. Coraline’s father scoops her up and carries her to safety, though he gets stung by many wasps in the process. During the escape, her father loses his glasses and has to return to the wasp’s nest to retrieve them. Coraline says, “It wasn’t brave because he wasn’t scared: it was the only thing he could do. But going back again to get his glasses, when he knew the wasps were there, when he was really scared. That was brave.” ‘Because,’ she said, ‘when you’re scared but you still do it anyway, that’s brave’ (Gaiman 2002). Being fearless doesn’t make you brave, but rather acknowledging the fear and not letting it own you demonstrates courage. As a reader, the novel is truly terrifying, for the trials that Coraline has to undergo are the stuff of nightmares. Even after it seems that Coraline has escaped the clutches of the Other Mother and saved the souls of the forgotten children, she is still called upon to be brave, though no one within her
own world understands or acknowledges her courage. The invisible acts of bravery and charity our lives are built around.

*Coraline* remains one of my favorite books, enduring for its charm, sly sense of humor and candor about the night-side of life. The frightening elements of *Coraline* are what make it so mesmerizing, as they teach us how misunderstood the darkness truly is and how much we can cope with and overcome. As Gaiman prefaces the book, dragons, darkness, violence and fear are all very real and necessary parts of our world, whether adult or otherwise. But dragons can also be vanquished, doors closed on the scuttling, malicious things that populate our nightmares and waking reality. That is a lesson worth learning, and one I continue to learn every day since I first finished the book.

**Works Cited**


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**Homes and Health: The Intimacies of International Development**

Posted on September 17, 2014 by Emma Louise Backe

Within the world of international development and global aid, there is a lot of discussion and debate about how to make the most impactful, sustainable change. Do you focus on capacity building at a grass-roots level, in the hopes that installing one well in an impoverished village will have ripple effects throughout a larger country or community? Or do you pay more attention to governmental and structural factors to empower a populace? When it comes to building institutional capacity and local support, politicians and humanitarians often telescope between macrocosmic and microcosmic perspectives. The two can obviously occur contemporaneously, but when you have limited resources and time, how do you decide where to focus your energy? Do you hope for the trickle-down effect, which supposes that efforts to revamp bureaucratic and institutional systems, like legal and economic policies in a developing country, will have the most impact on the day to day lives of a population? Or do you attend to the personal lives of individuals, upon whose bodies suffering and hardship are writ, in the hopes that a single person or community can bring about the groundswell of effectual, long-lasting change?

I spent the last nine months as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji, a developing country with significant economic and health care issues. As a representative of the United States government partnered with the Fijian Ministry of Health, I straddled the macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions of international development. Unlike other aid organizations, Peace Corps focuses on building people and relationships—the organization and its volunteers are acutely focused on how grassroots activism can make enormous changes for communities in need. I spent a lot of
my time talking to small groups of women, school children and Church communities, hoping that our community health outreach programs touched just one individual in the group. If I had helped one person at my local health center realize the connection between water contamination and illness, sanitation practices and health, then it was a successful day. Part of working on a grassroots level of international development and health advocacy means readjusting your standards of success. Behavioral change happens one person at a time, and the hope is that that one person will then become an advocate for the cause themselves, forming a multitude of tiny ripples that would eventually spread out over a farther distance.

But as a community health empowerment volunteer, I couldn’t help but think about my own health and the health of my family back at home. For an aid program to be sustainable, it also has to be sustainable for the volunteers as well. And I, among other PCV’s in the country, did not feel emotionally or professionally sustained. I was sick for the majority of my time in Fiji and continually called to question the true impact of my service. Back at home, my father was caring for his ailing parents, each of whom required specialized attention. Both my younger sister and younger brother were dealing with their own, sometimes debilitating, health problems, conditions that impacted the welfare of my parents as well. I have always felt like the caretaker of my family, and I couldn’t help but feel like I belonged at home, focusing my efforts on the most microcosmic of communities—my own family.

There are no awards or accolades given to caregivers or to the individuals that devote their time to the health and happiness of their own families. Yet every day that I was home, I felt myself getting stronger and healthier, and I watched the impact my presence had on my family. I felt as though I was siphoning off some of my brother’s pain, and thereby alleviating some of my parents’ anxiety and stress. I gave myself permission to allow myself to heal and attend to my own physical and emotional well being. These are the mundane, private efforts of personal development that are not often acknowledged or discussed as valuable or necessary. And yet, as we export more and more resources abroad, imposing Western ideals and reproducing dependence on foreign aid, we neglect to look at our own homes, our own lives. Perhaps the most impact we can make in our lives are the personal relationships we develop in our own extended families. Perhaps we have to think about what is ailing us as a country and a people.
The GamerGate controversy has driven increased attention to the video game industry, while also highlighting the violent misogyny that can pervade geek culture. For those just getting up to speed, GamerGate circulates around two specific women within games: Anita Sarkeesian of Feminist Frequency, and Zoe Quinn, who recently developed the (non)Fiction interactive game Depression Quest. After launching Part II of the webseries “Women as Background Decoration,” Sarkeesian was harassed online and received threats against her and her family. The onslaught of antimony directed at Sarkeesian included a barrage of sexual slurs that condemned Sarkeesian for her cultural commentary on the objectification and abuse of women in video games and other forms of geek media, blaming her and her ilk for “ruining” the gaming industry. Although celebrities like William Gibson

Disease Is Not a Trend

For the past several weeks, our Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and Google + accounts have been populated with videos of friends, acquaintances and celebrities dumping buckets of ice over their heads to raise awareness and money for ALS, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, otherwise known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease. While the ALS Association estimates that “as many as 30,000 Americans may have the disease at any given time” (2010) and the Ice Bucket Challenge has raised over $88.5 million in funds (Goldberg 2014), the campaign has drawn criticism for its actual impact on ALS research and treatment. The Ice Bucket Challenge capitalizes on the social ascendency of selfie culture, which celebrates the ego and encourages a culture of narcissism (Lasch 1979). While individuals who participate in the Ice Bucket Challenge are ostensibly performing the role of activist, the videos truly invite another opportunity for people to draw attention to themselves in a way that does not come off as directly self-congratulatory, but rather philanthropic. I would argue that the Ice Bucket Challenge has gone viral because of its ability to tap into the selfie culture of social media under the veneer of humanitarianism, doubly reinforcing the ego. The campaign demonstrates the power of savvy marketing, but also speaks to the phenomenon of disease trends and the larger social milieu in which illness and health are constructed and treated.

Amidst the Ice Bucket Backlash, critics have labeled the campaign as another manifestation of “slacktivism.” Ben Kosinski writes, “Slacktivism is a relatively new term with only negative connotations being associated with it as of recently. The whole thinking is that instead of actually donating money, you’re attributing your time and a social post in place of that donation. Basically, instead of donating $10 to Charity XYZ, slacktivism would have you create a Facebook Post about how much you care about Charity XYZ- generating immediate and heightened awareness but lacking any actual donations and long term impact” (2014). The phenomena could also be referred to as armchair activism, in that people feel that their participation in social media constitutes sustainable, impactful philanthropic work. The role of marketing and advertising in the digital age of humanitarianism is a contentious one. Dan Pallota has made a compelling argument for the necessity of effective marketing campaigns for charitable work. While marketing can create a more direct interface with interested communities and individuals, and encourages increased inclusion and visibility for important issues, the superficiality of social media may not adequately translate into a ground swell of change.
Will Oremas over at Slate wrote about taking the "No Ice Bucket Challenge," encouraging readers to dispense with the video showboating to simply donate money to research. Others, such as Water.org founder Matt Damon, have talked about the material and economic waste of the campaign. Still others have indicated the counterintuitiveness of donating to a disease-specific charity (Goldberg 2014), as the money donated may not go to the research or technology truly needed to effect change or clinical progress in treatment. William MacAskill has discussed "moral licensing," "the idea that doing one good action leads one to compensate by doing fewer good actions in the future" (Goldberg 2014), while Kosinski wrote, "Instead of donating, we are posting. By creating such awareness, this awareness has a cap; a ceiling of sorts, that if reached can then become cannibalistic in nature. The viral nature of this almost hurts ALS due to the substitution of potential donations with a social post; internally, people think they have donated when in turn they've only posted" (2014). These authors argue that the Ice Bucket Challenge distracts from the real resources and funds needed to address ALS. We may also reach a marketing threshold for such campaigns. After the Ice Bucket Challenge has faded in popularity, ALS will continue to debilitate countless of Americans, yet many of those who participated in the challenge may feel that they've been sufficiently charitable for the year.

You can see the same kind of marketing fatigue for disease-specific issues in the recent rise and fall of breast cancer awareness. Throughout the early 2000’s, the Susan G. Komen Foundation led a marketing blitz to raise awareness about breast cancer and funds for research. Many companies and organizations got involved in the pinking campaign; it seemed as though every city was hosting their own 5K for the cause. Yet people began to notice that the companies aligned with Komen were unhealthy and potentially dangerous, while benefitting from the positive press ("Breast Cancer Awareness Month" 2012). The “pinkwashing” of products and events for breast cancer saturated the market, potentially producing a public exhaustion for the cause. Breast cancer activists disagreed with the marketing pursuits of the Susan G. Komen foundation, noting, "We used to march in the streets. Now you're supposed to run for a cure. Walk for a cure, or jump for a cure," breast cancer survivor Barbara Ehrenreich says in the documentary "Pink Ribbon, Inc.," which examines Komen’s corporate partnerships. "The effect of the whole pink-ribbon culture was to drain and deflect the kind of militancy we had as women were appalled to have a disease that was epidemic, yet we didn’t know the cause of" ("Breast Cancer Awareness Month" 2012). Due to a combination of market fatigue and controversy surrounding Susan G. Komen’s political ideologies and use of funds, you rarely see breast cancer awareness discussed at the same national level or integrated into as many consumer products. Much of the Komen Foundation’s marketing strategy relied on activism through consumerism, encouraging consumers to purchase products with the intention of the profits going toward breast cancer research.Nancy G. Brinker, CEO of Komen for the Cure, argued, “America is built on consumerism [...] To say we shouldn’t use it to solve the social ills that confront us doesn’t make sense to me” (Singer 2011). Yet the market and the public imagination became so inundated with pink that the breast cancer “trend” has waned, despite the fact that 1 in every 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in their lifetime and 40,000 women in the US alone died of breast cancer in 2014 (National Cancer Institute).
This phenomena I will refer to as “disease trends” also speaks to the social construction and reproduction of illness. While diseases are based on biological realities experienced by the body, diseases are also produced within social, cultural, historical, economic and environmental conditions, ones that determine how the disease is understood and treated. As Arthur Kleinman and Adriana Petryna have indicated, “health is seen as not simply originating in individuals themselves or deriving strictly from social forces, but as being engendered in complex interactions between individuals and their social contexts” (2001: 4-5), while Peter Conrad and Kristin K. Barker note, “Illnesses have both biomedical and experiential dimensions. Although often unnoticed or taken for granted, certain illnesses have particular social or cultural meaning attributed to them. These meanings adhere to the illness and may have independent consequences on patients and health care” (2010: 69). As Sarah Klein over at Huffington Post pointed out, there is a discrepancy between the illnesses that gain social critical attention and those that actually claim the lives of most people around the world. The social context and cultural understandings of illness very much affect which illnesses effectively gain public concern and research traction.

The social production and contingency of illness can be no better demonstrated than in the recent Ebola outbreak, which has killed over 1,550 people in Africa so far (Smith-Spark 2014). Although Ebola outbreaks have occurred in the past, the current one occurring in West Africa has been complicated, and, to a certain extent, exacerbated by the social aspects of the disease. Tara Smith, an epidemiologist at Kent State who wrote Deadly Diseases and Epidemics: Ebola (2009), recently spoke on the podcast Inquiring Minds about the cultural practices of communities in West Africa that can potentially serve as dangerous vectors for disease transmission. Some communities in West Africa practice mourning rituals that involve contact or increased exposure after death with deceased, infected relatives or kin, Smith said, which complicates containment of the virus. Although health workers have been sent to treat and contain the virus, cultural attitudes toward biomedicine have engendered a sense of dis-ease and mistrust amongst many West African communities. As Adam Nossiter reports, communities in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia have begun to impede health workers from entering their villages or towns, in some instances even demolishing temporary health facilities for the Ebola outbreak. “We don’t want them in there at all,” said Wabengou’s chief, Marcel Dambadounou. “We don’t accept their presence at all. They are the transporters of the virus in these communities” (Nossiter 2014). These attitudes of suspicion and fear do not occur in a vacuum, and have to be contextualized within the history of colonization in Africa, including biomedicine’s role in the imperial project. Indigenous communities around the world understand health in a variety of ways, employing multiple explanatory models and causes for illness that may not always be analogous to biomedical explanations or interventions.
Barry Hewlett, a medical anthropologist out of Washington State University, has been working with health workers throughout the Ebola outbreak in an effort to find culturally appropriate forms of treatment and containment for the virus that don’t alienate West African communities or undermine important cultural practices. "The anger and bad feelings about not being informed were directed toward health care workers in the isolation unit," he noted. "This fear could have been averted by allowing family members to see the body in the bag and allowing family members to escort the body to the burial ground" (Poon 2014). Medical anthropologists have been employed in other public health scenarios to ensure cultural sensitivity and medical intervention efficacy, and yet the public response and paranoia surrounding the Ebola outbreak make obvious the social conditions that inflict and influence illness.

Fear about the virus spreading to the United States are reified in a legacy of fear of “the dark continent,” and the “contamination” rendered by outside immigrants. Laura Seay and Kim Yi Dionne took Newsweek to task for their cover article “A Backdoor for Ebola: Smuggled Bushmeat Could Spark a U.S. Epidemic,” observing, “the authors of the piece and the editorial decision to use chimpanzee imagery on the cover have placed Newsweek squarely in the center of a long and ugly tradition of treating Africans as savage animals and the African continent as a dirty, diseased place to be feared” (2014). Seay and Dionne’s piece not only outlines the draconian history of using medical discourse as a tool for genocide, institutionalized racism and geographic dispossession. They also highlight the journalistic “Otherization” of the West Africans implicated in the crisis, reproducing exoticified, animalistic stereotypes of the infected communities. Seay and Dionne’s piece not only outlines the connection between understandings of illness and social attitudes toward different race groups, but also considers the possibility of these negative representations potentially amplifying “negative reactions to people heuristically associated with the disease — in this case, the many African migrants living in the Bronx (and potentially elsewhere in the United States) [...] and engender[ing] support for more restrictive immigration attitudes” (2014). Individuals with certain illnesses have been historically stigmatized, and the stigma can be compounded by xenophobia or racism, which also impacts public motivation to advocate or donate to medical conditions like Ebola.

The Ebola Outbreak has also emerged in a part of the world that does not have access to the same public health services other First World, developed countries do. Indeed, “how we get sick and with what illnesses is not merely a question of chance but has to do with the way society is organised — and particularly with structures of inequality” (Ross 2010: 168). Incidences of illness and disease outbreaks, as Paul Farmer (1992, 1999, 2003) and other anthropologists have elucidated, are distributed unevenly around the world due to inequality. As Chris Mooney writes for Mother Jones, “Ebola’s high mortality rate does not mean that it can spread easily in a country with a strong health care system, where doctors know how to handle it (and are adequately equipped to do so). In fact, despite the scary death rates in Africa, Smith explains, ‘in the United States, even if you had an Ebola outbreak, odds are the death rate would be much lower’” (2014). The diseases we should be worried about? Tara Smith believes we should be more focused on health concerns like influenza, which can kill 20,000 to 30,000 Americans per year (Mooney 2014). And yet there’s no “viral” social marketing campaign for flu vaccination or immunization.

We don’t post photos on Instagram wearing diapers to raise awareness about obstetric fistulas, which, if untreated, leads to debilitating vaginal and anal leakage among women. Such a campaign would not feed into the sex appeal of selfies, nor are obstetric fistulas a concern most developed countries have to contend with. We have to remind ourselves that illness occurs and is experienced in and under particular social conditions around the world. The way we react to and advocate for (or against) certain illnesses also matters and is influenced by our cultural context. When we treat disease like a trend, with a flashy hashtag and motto, we risk diminishing or trivializing the disease and those who suffer from it. When we get swept up in a marketing or social media craze that is directly or indirectly related to a devastating medical condition, we must also consider the most effective and impactful ways that we can use our time, money or celebrity. I am not arguing that the Ice Bucket Challenge has not been beneficial to ALS. And I do not want to make comparisons between the suffering that afflicts millions around the world; each disease and illness presents its own challenges and pain. But I do want to draw my readers’ attention to social media trends that ignore public culpability for health care concerns or reproduce uneven power structures that create and permit illness. You cannot eschew with consequential activism for virility on the Internet. Remember: after you share that video of an icy shower with your followers, you may leave the important foundations of activism out in the cold.
Works Cited


Susan G. Komen http://ww5.komen.org/
Classes began in September: a full complement of those admitted to the Faculty of Philosophy, at last, got together, so I could meet my fellow students. Who were they? The “nucleus” of our 1st-year student body consisted of the so-called “rabfak” (workers’ faculty).