

YA Meets the Real: Fiction and Nonfiction That Take On the World

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Marina Budhos

It began with hot summer nights.

It was on hot summer nights — when it was far too hot to go outside, when all I wanted to do was sit under the throttle of a noisy air conditioner — that I got my best reading done as a teenager.

There were two kinds of books I was most addicted to: young adult novels such as Paul Zindel's *My Darling, My Hamburger*, and those slightly racy, edgy dog-eared adult paperbacks that sat on the shelf in the dining room: *Up the Down Staircase*, *Down These Mean Streets*, *Black Boy*, anything by James Baldwin. I was looking for books that felt urgent, because I was growing up in urgent times — the Vietnam War, school integration battles, assassinations.

These conflicts did not feel far away. They felt as if they were right in my home. And they were. Not just through the TV and *Life* magazine but through books and the nighttime conversations in our living rooms, out on the concrete porches in our garden apartment complex in Queens. The war, for me, was my older brother's friends marching or getting arrested at a protest or getting in trouble at school for being too radical. Assassination threats breathed right through our nylon curtains, where I could see the windows of my neighbor, Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP, whose own life was threatened by radical black separatists. During the balmy days of autumn 1968 I went to school at a neighbor's apartment since the NYC teachers' strike, sparked by racial tensions, had shut down the schools.

The world was in tumult, with problems, particularly urban problems, festering and boiling over. My feed was the TV news and weekly newsmagazines but also the private space of reading and novels. This fluctuation — between journalism and imagination, nonfiction and fiction — would become my pulse, my muse as a writer.

Thus, even when I was writing and publishing in the adult world, there was a moment when I knew I wanted to try my hand at young adult literature. I wanted to recapture that earlier, purer reading experience. I wanted to shed some of the "adultisms" I'd picked up studying in my MFA program, which had made my style a touch too self-conscious and mannered. I wanted to reach back to the love of story, along with an urgent sense of what matters, out there. I was just waiting for the right YA story to come to me.



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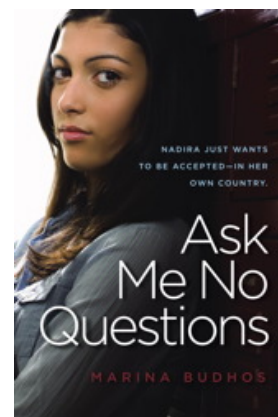
Not surprisingly, that story came to me through journalism. My first foray into writing for young adults was a nonfiction book called *Remix: Conversations with Immigrant Teenagers*, a series of profiles. Even then I knew I was interested in melding this intimate sense of teenagers themselves with the bigger story of which they were a part — in this case, immigration. How did coming of age feel to those who were coming to a brand-new country? What were the echoes across stories, between, for instance, a teenager from the Dominican Republic and one from the former Soviet Union? It was both variety and similarity that interested me. It was the first step, in my mind, of mixing it up in the YA world, showing the vast range of experience that young people can — and do — face. Like a lot of people who start to write YA, I wanted to write the books I did not see on shelves, to show characters and young lives that were not yet portrayed.

The idea for my first young adult novel, *Ask Me No Questions*, came out of a similar instinct. When 9/11 happened, I began to think about some of the young people I'd interviewed for *Remix*, especially Muslim girls who had been so affected by the Gulf War. So I began to track stories about the impact of 9/11 on Muslim

communities — the Patriot Act, the panic as undocumented families began to flee to the border. My first idea was to do a magazine profile of an undocumented teenager at this moment in time. Yet the more I spoke to people, and poked around, the more I knew I didn't want to do a journalism piece. I wanted to tell this story from the *inside*, to explore what such a quandary might be like for a young teenager. I wanted to fuse that external world situation with the internal dynamics of a family, with all of its own private dramas. That fusion between the outside and the inside is what most animates me as a YA writer. It harks back to my own growing up, stretched out with newspapers and *Life* and my paperbacks, trying to make sense of the tumult around me, both within my family and out there, in chaotic and angry times.

I've come to trust this dual instinct in myself, the confluence of nonfiction and fiction, journalism and imagination. It's a hunch, a gut feeling, using a journalist's eyes and ears to notice the stories of teenagers who are often not seen; young people confronted by something bigger than what they might be able to comprehend.

For me, what's so interesting about writing this type of fiction is that it's a kind of helix you're turning back and forth in order to reveal the private and the public — and where those two overlap. In the case of *Ask Me No Questions*, I had the chance to illuminate the circumstances of those who live in secret, undocumented. At the same time, I would turn the helix and dwell on a dynamic that is not culturally specific, that of two sisters who don't actually like each other. In doing so, I'm hoping to strike an emotional chord with readers on a personal level, then widen their perspective to strike an emotional chord on a more global level.



One of the characteristics of YA is that these are vulnerable young characters, getting buffeted with emotions and experiences, perhaps for the first time. The impact of politics, or an endangering situation, or the discomfort of class, hits these characters with a kind of raw and unfiltered punch. That doesn't necessarily mean the writing itself should be raw and unfiltered, but it does allow for a kind of directness that is more often muted in an adult novel.

There's another aspect of YA that I find exciting: the cleanness of the form, the clarity with which you need to see and speak of the world. Writing YA is often about pace, about moving forward through the use of voice and story, perhaps a bit more quickly and straightforwardly than one might do in adult books. It's almost cinematic for me. Voice brings you into the interiority of the character, while the more visual, cinematic part propels you forward with a rhythm that is true to a teenager's experience.

And yet here's the dilemma when writing about "the world" for YA: unlike an adult reader, a teen reader does not necessarily come to a book — fiction or nonfiction — wanting to know about that book's specific subject. How, then, to excite them, pull them in? Again, I believe it comes down to crafting a clean and pure voice, one that is naturally saturated with those details that start to fill in the world.



When I was writing my second YA novel, *Tell Us We're Home*, about three daughters of maids and nannies in a contemporary suburban town, I wanted to move away from the first person, even though I knew the "go-to" voice in YA is usually first-person or limited third-person. I wanted to do a touch of omniscience since, for me, the town is a character in the novel; a place these girls ache to feel as their home. But how to do omniscience that is also true to YA?

So I tried to employ a narrative voice that hovers, lightly, around my characters, affecting their mood, their acute sense of outsider-ness. To bring it back to the movies, the voice functioned as a kind of pan shot — nannies trundling up the hill with their Dunkin' Donuts coffees, day-laborers lining up in a parking lot and other people grumbling about them. Then I would zoom in on the things that a teenager would pick up on, such as what my character Maria notices when she steps into an upper-middle-class home for the first time.

It's the small details — the posed, pseudo-moody black-and-white photographs of a boy, placed staggered up a wall, symbolized the feeling that their son was so important that his parents had given him a narrative of himself, his childhood, through these pictures. That was true entitlement—far more powerful than an expensive knapsack or other conventional symbols of affluence.

There again I found the fluctuation between the reader and the story: what I wanted to show the teenage reader, expanding his or her view and sense of the world, while also paying close attention to how a teenage *character* might experience those very same tensions. Whether I succeeded or not, I'm proud of my impulse to try — to open up some of the more limiting narrative methods that are commonly used in young adult literature; to suggest that teenagers are imbedded in a social context that goes beyond and outside the voice and frame of what they'd normally find in a YA novel. It's this challenge that excites me — pushing the edges of YA and our expectations of the teen reader.

There are real hazards, of course, in writing fiction that is topic-based. For one thing, there's nothing more boring than an inert fictional narrative that's torn from today's headlines. We will sense its hastiness, its impermanence on the page. One way to caution against this, for any writer, is to strip away the dilemma and headline moment and see if the characters still exist in your mind as vividly as they did before. Can you imagine these characters *not* in this crisis or situation? If you can, if you are as interested in them as you had been, then you know you may have a real seed; the world does not define your characters, but rather the world and its events are organic parts of who they are.

Another hazard is the imposition of the adult agenda, which, while well-meaning, might stifle the teenage character, how he or she sees events. Teenagers love nothing better than to poke fun at the piety of adult concerns about them. That's what I try to keep in mind as I craft my forthcoming young adult novel, *Watched*, a follow-up to *Ask Me No Questions*, about a Muslim boy who becomes an informant on his community. My character is anything but a victim or an angel — he's a slacker, a liar, a yearning wannabe, and he has few articulated thoughts about Islam or politics or terrorism. Yet he's smack in the middle of those issues, like it or not.

Real-life teenagers are notoriously solipsistic. And in some ways, I would fault the YA world for too long dwelling on characters that were defined by what we think of as "typical" problems for a teenager. For one teenager — such as my own son, for instance — that life experience consists of being ferried to and from his activities and sports. For another teenager it might mean translating for her mother when she interviews for a cleaning job, or coming home and doing the housework for all her relatives. It's thrilling to expand the notion of what makes up a teenager's experiences, or to try and give teens a wider context for their own lives.

Teenagers can be subversive, rash, unformed, unpredictable. They can be dreamy and spacey. In one moment they're screaming like four-year-olds, and in the next they have all the wisdom of a grandparent. They're pointy and rough. That's what makes them so interesting as protagonists. Don't shave that away or sand them down in the interest of a larger point you're trying to make. Teenage characters are not wish fulfillments of our adult concerns; they're not there to correct the crimes and misdemeanors of a prior generation.

What we're talking about is a mutability of perspective. The world, its events, may be unnamed, inarticulate, half understood by your characters. Whatever it is you wish to communicate, make sure it is in tune with the character. Don't put words in her mouth; don't make him more composed and formed than he could ever be.

The world — its urgencies — are being worked out by teenagers. Allow that *working out* to be part of the story. Allow them to discover what they make of the world, and your reader — young and adult — will come along for the ride.

From the [September/October 2015](#) issue of The Horn Book Magazine.