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Defending the Knife

According to an informal survey of librarians, only 20.6% of challenges to books are reported to the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom (Houghton, 2011). Even Andy Woodworth, who worked in that office, believes that challenges are grossly underreported (Nelson, 2011). It is therefore important to be prepared to defend any book that is part of a collection without regard to the number of official complaints. Patrick Ness' *Knife of Never Letting Go* hits about half of the top ten reasons a book is challenged, as reported by the ALA (2012). However, based on a search of the *Newsletter for Intellectual Freedom* it has never been challenged officially. Librarians should know their libraries position on the Library Bill of Rights as well as think about how to defend potential challenges to controversial books. To that end, I have produced this defense.

As mentioned above *The Knife of Never Letting Go* includes characteristics that many adults use to challenge books. Adults may not respond well to a defense that results from the principle of intellectual freedom. The language, prevarication, violence, sex politics, and a bad representation of religion are just a few of the possible challenges for this novel. Literature should be for learning about the good and bad, and Ness' work is a good teaching device in many ways.

Concerns about language may arise from a couple of directions. Spelling and grammar are presented from Todd's perspective and Mayor Prentiss closed the school and stunted the boys' education. Ness presents Todd's words in a form of dialect that represents his poor education and upbringing. There is also some profanity in this book. Oddly, with all of the cursing done by

Todd, Ness does not print the word fuck but once. Rather, to show the level of control Todd has over his thoughts, his curses are always printed as “effing.” Ness will note afterwards when effing is, or more likely, when effing is not, literally, what Todd said. Ness spells out ‘fuck’ only once, and that is after an alien is murdered. Viola says it to emphasize the gravity of what just happened. This difference in how the cursing is handled allows the reader to read less vulgarity, but does not hide that course language is part of the culture.

Cultures built on lying may not be seen as being age appropriate for the young adult. However, discussions about the power of a lie can be very informative. Todd’s community raised him surrounded by lies. His guardians tell him his community is the last on the planet, and that the native aliens killed the rest of the colonists. However, the truth is that his settlement is isolated specifically because of their past. Under the authority of Mayor Prentiss, the settlement has built up a series of lies to contain their crime until the boys become men at the age of 14, and the elders coerce them until they partake of the crime. The settlement teaches the boys that every woman died of the same illness that allows men to hear each other’s thoughts. Even as he learns the truth bit by bit, he still has a hard time accepting the next truth. Viola finally asks, “How many times have you found out that what you’ve been told isn’t true?” (Ness, 2008, p. 276) This provides a bit of an awakening for Todd.

Overt violence and murder are the customary reasons for a book being challenged, and *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is a whirlwind of violence. Todd learns part of the truth when confronted by a living alien. When he is faced with the being he has been taught to believe killed both his parents with a bio-weapon, he releases this rage in murder. He has been under enormous stress while on the run from his village and under constant threat of attack. He believes the aliens used the “germ” that made the men able to hear each other’s thoughts as an attack. This is not to

excuse this violent act, but to provide context to the emotions at play in this incident. The discussion of this violence can help young people come to grips with other violence they may be seeing on their streets or on the news. Todd's reaction to seeing the alien might line up with how a young person would see gang violence. I do not think protecting young adults from violence is possible, and I believe discussing literary violence and the emotions involved openly can help a child form a vocabulary to process the violence they see around them.

Just as educators can use this book to discuss violence, it also has discussion starters for how societies can be set up. Prentisstown develops into a male dominated town that goes so far as to kill the women. Other towns have different structures. Farbranch is a Matriarchy, and the men stay out of the way. Carbonel Down is a male dominated society, and they dismiss women as less valuable than the men, but they have not devolved to matricide. Discussing the way gender lines are drawn can help provide ways to discuss women's role in society throughout the ages.

Adults could also challenge this book for its bad impression of religion. The planet is colonized by religious people wanting to start fresh and find a moral compass more directly connected with nature. That the men, seeking a natural morality, would become so corrupt as to commit matricide at this scale with no one able to stop it is not a positive theme. This would be a compelling argument if religious history was not littered with actual real life stories of religious people engaging in horrible deeds in God's name. Parents could use this story as a teaching point to explain how the preacher, Aaron, misunderstood the Bible.

With all the good discussion points buried in the book, it still suffers from poor balance. The talking animals are comic relief to the constant threatening energy. Occasionally a free animal will sweep by and Todd will note its banal search for food or home. A herd of "Creachers" acts

as a heavy rainfall drowning out all the Noise for a brief part of Todd's journey. Manchee, Todd's faithful dog, pipes up occasionally with comments about needing to poo, and smelling a squirrel to bring sparse levity. However, Part V ends with Manchee's sacrifice. A painful moment when Aaron forces Todd to choose between an unwanted dog that kept saving his life and the first girl he ever met. Ness, and by extension Todd, decides human life is more valuable than another species once again. That choice pulls Todd and Viola closer together, but Ness has sacrificed the brief respite from the tension that is always building in the story. Aaron, who has stalked this story like a bad dream, wins. He lives to hunt them another day.

My biggest complaint with this action packed novel is the constant danger faced by the protagonist; this is a danger that isn't even resolved at the conclusion of the book. This novel takes building tension to a new level. Each part ends in a crisis. Todd and Viola vanquish only one enemy throughout the whole novel. In addition, the preacher wanted Todd to kill him as a sacrifice in order to indoctrinate Todd into the crime of his community; therefore, Todd cannot kill him or the preacher wins. Ness does not distinguish between murder and killing someone in true self-defense. Viola must defeat the preacher, an act that shakes her morally as well. The novel presents all danger and provides no catharsis. Even a book that the author and publisher acknowledge as book one should provide some sort of ending. This one uses a television trope of a cliffhanger to force the reader into the next book. Stand plot structure should have a series of building tensions, peaking in an ultimate crisis and followed by a resolution and perhaps denouement. This story ends with the crisis. Even books that rearrange their parts through flashbacks and flash-forwards have the essential components of the story; they are simply presented out of order.

In conclusion, I believe this story is very rich in ideas, but could have used a better editor, and certainly should be read by those who choose to do so. In our modern go, go, go society perhaps this level of tension is what a young adult needs to pull them through the over 350 pages. I believe *The Knife of Never Letting Go* is worth reading, and to deny a young person the chance to read this story undermines their ability to reflect, in a safe environment, about difficult topics.

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