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Interview with Author Jane Breskin Zalben

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Jane Breskin Zalben is a well-known author and illustrator who has published more than forty-five books for young readers. She is the author of the well-known Pearl books as well as the critically acclaimed novel *Unfinished Dreams*. In this interview, she speaks with The Kids' Right to Read Project about the effects of censorship on her work.

Interview with Jane Breskin Zalben

Kids' Right to Read Project: What are your experiences with censorship?

Jane Breskin Zalben: Several of my books have been censored or restricted at schools, including *Leap*, *Maybe It Will Rain Tomorrow*, *The Fortune Teller in 5-B*, and *Unfinished Dreams*.

I was excited about the publication of *Leap*, my recent book for "twens" (10-14 year olds), a favorite tween pick at Chapters.Indigo and a Bank Street College of Education Best Books List selection. I was scheduled to speak at an affluent religious school in New Jersey, and the librarian called me and said the principal was having second thoughts. She read the first chapter of *Leap*, which concluded with a Top Ten List: "No. 7 Kiss a boy on the lips (Spin the Bottle at camp doesn't count)," disregarding other kinds of goals on this list, and was uncertain about the idea of my doing an author visit at the school to discuss the book. Then, pressured by parents, she allowed me to come on the condition that I not discuss *Leap*. I brought a few copies to sell to parents upon request, but the school would not order *Leap*, which is basically about a girl who helps her friend – a disabled boy – mend his body, mind, and heart, and in doing so, mends hers.

Another school had a problem with the boys' health session with their Coach that is warm and funny and takes place in the school gym. I had called up my local middle school while I was writing the novel to use the mandated health program as a backdrop of what is discussed at age twelve with boys and girls – and then using those facts, created a humorous scenario. By and large, *Leap* has been widely accepted, but I find teachers are uncomfortable with anything remotely heading into that area of discussion if it takes place within the context of a book. I think it is a great springboard in the classroom.

I also wrote a series for younger children with a bear named Beni. Some of the orthodox religious schools objected to the fact that the little girl and boy bears sit together! On the other hand, public schools in Jewish areas did not want me discussing the Jewish books because it was a public school and they didn't want books with a religious overtone. I actually only experienced that in the New York area, mainly on Long Island where I live.

Unfinished Dreams, a finalist for the William Allen White Award, got great reviews and was very well received. It is about a principal who has AIDS, and how he inspires a young boy who is turning twelve to become a violinist through small, compassionate acts. But it's really about how an adult is there to support a child in a crisis and inspire another human being through music. It did not get printed in paperback due to the subject matter. I'm surprised *Unfinished Dreams* went into a second printing and got foreign sales due to the fact that in schools, some teachers and principals would say, "This is a great book, I loved reading it and it made me cry, but we just can't have you talk about it in the school."

I often find that there can be a tiny part of a book that people find objectionable, and even if the book is done with humor and taste, the educator can get upset about it, or the potential of that one parent complaining, and they pre-censor or pull the book ahead of the action. It happened over and over again, particularly with *Unfinished Dreams*. What was most fascinating to me was that the teacher would purchase a copy for themselves to read in private! I went to speak in Forest Hills, New York, but I couldn't talk about it, even though the New York City public schools have health education classes that discuss AIDS, and the book was a complement to the curriculum. The school nurse told me they had these programs in place, but they would not allow me to speak about *Unfinished Dreams*, and admitted they rarely discussed it in the classroom because it made the individual teachers uncomfortable with the subject matter.

Kids' Right to Read Project: How do you respond in those situations?

Jane Breskin Zalben: In most of these cases, I have felt very on my own in any of these instances, but I try and help the school librarians and support their efforts because I do realize they often feel "caught" worrying about their jobs, but at the same time, this too is how I earn my living, and I feel passionate about what I do. If you write honestly and truthfully within the context of good story-telling, it can be a wonderful shared experience. The saddest part of any censoring is fear on the adult's part of sharing all the experiences that life has to offer. Children I find are so open, and open-hearted, and it is terrible to see an uptight person close that mind to the possibilities out there.

Kids' Right to Read Project: Have you ever censored yourself in your writing?

Jane Breskin Zalben: If you're a best-selling author you can write or say anything you want. You know your work will be marketed and sell regardless. I'm a bit more careful now – in my language – but I still stay true to my convictions. My husband says to me I

should write adult books so I can talk like I do at home, but I love writing for children. That seems to be "my voice." In *Maybe It Will Rain*, the girl and the boy go to bed together, but they don't end up together. The hardback publisher had no problem with that, but the paperback one said they would not offer it in the book club because of that. I was told specifically that it would not sell in the Bible Belt. And where exactly is that?

Another one of my novels for young adults, *The Fortune Teller in 5B*, was also risky, although I didn't know at the time it was. The book is about two eleven-year-old girls who live on the Upper West Side of New York City and think the Romanian woman living upstairs is a fortune teller. They find out that the woman is a Holocaust survivor who had been persecuted because she was a gypsy and lost her parents at age 11. One of the girls in the book lost her father at the same age; a connection ensues. The book is really about healing after a trauma and finding inner strength – not becoming a victim. A teacher in Texas told me he was taking a chance with the book in the classroom and he was doing the book because he loved the greater theme of tolerance. But in Westchester, they were worried about Satanism and witch craft because the word "fortune teller" was in the title. What century is this?

Again, fairly recently, this time in Chappaqua, I was invited to speak, but informed by the parent representative that I should not talk about *The Fortune Teller in 5B* because one of the girls gets her period in it (even though the parent admitted that girls are menstruating earlier and earlier). A girl in the audience asked me a question about that book, which I answered, simply and directly. I didn't want to be rude, but I wanted to be strong, too. The parent rep quickly changed the subject, deflecting my discomfort of being placed in such a touchy position as an invited author/artist.

Kids' Right to Read Project: What do you hope people take away from these controversies?

Jane Breskin Zalben: Controversial books often push our minds to think about the world, relationships, ourselves. Ultimately, these books can also be educational because they stretch us emotionally and leave us open to people who might be different. If children are ultimately exposed to lives other than their own, or exposed to a character they can identify with, then they want to pass that book around to other kids. I like to do books that are not safe; it's what I feel comfortable with, because "safe" doesn't necessarily mean easier or better. It doesn't make you change and grow. Safe is stagnant.

Recently, I've been writing more middle-grade fiction fused with borderline young adult. I think the lines have blurred and each child develops at a different pace. A lot of parents let their kids watch violent movies, but when it comes to reading and literature, they infantilize them. It's OK to see meanness or humiliation on TV or in film, but sex is off limits in books. That I never and will never understand. I don't speak to children like they are kids. They have complex thoughts, and those are the things I like to write about. I like to tackle things that are important. I think you can do all those things with humor and with really, really good, strong writing. I had crushes in first grade. In fourth grade. And high school. When I stop having feelings I will be dead and as long as I am a thinking person I want to write for children. They never censor. Because their world is still open. It is sad when an adult chooses to close it.