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# Combating Hate Through Young Adult Literature

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## ABSTRACT

Young adult literature can help readers look beyond tolerance toward a cosmopolitan ethics of difference as a more sophisticated position for combating hatred. In popular discourse, the ideal of tolerance is generally presented uncritically and deployed as the best response to a perceived difference in another. However, the ideal of tolerance presents many problems. Rather than discouraging hatred, tolerance merely asks us not to *act upon* related feelings. Additionally, tolerance is often deployed not only as an idealized set of behaviors, but also as a moral imperative. Thus tolerance encourages cultural relativism where we are expected to be tolerant of *all* views, no matter how troubling. This essay argues that to discourage hate and violence, we must criticize underlying values that evoke them. Young adult fiction that deals with white supremacist characters creates an interesting lens for evaluating how neo-Nazis can be seen as standing at the very limits of tolerance, as well as how texts with neo-Nazi characters can be used as tools to assess values that are *not* worth living by. Reading these fictional texts may help to discourage in young adults the development of hatred while fostering a cosmopolitan ethics of difference that stands in opposition to the presumed morality of tolerance.

*Keywords:* young adult literature, tolerance, hate, cultural relativism, values, ethics of difference

Tolerance is often deployed as the ideal response to a perceived difference in another or the best way to combat hatred. In popular discourse, tolerance is generally presented uncritically as it has assumed such a prominent position in contemporary theories of justice. However, as theorists such as Catriona McKinnon and Wendy Brown have argued, tolerance itself presumes a potentially powerful dislike, or even hatred, is already in place. Instead of acting to discourage hatred, the ideal of tolerance merely asks those who experience dislike or hatred not to act upon those feelings. Additionally, it is often deployed not only as an idealized set of behaviors, but also as a moral imperative. Assumptions about the morality of tolerance reinforce its association as *the* appropriate response to any perceived difference. I illustrate these problems because I firmly believe we can take steps beyond advocating for tolerance that have the potential for more transform-

ative ethical responses. Instead, I advocate for the power of a cosmopolitan ethics of difference, an argument that needs to be defined in opposition to the presumed morality of tolerance. In this essay, I look at how young adult literature can help readers look beyond tolerance to a more sophisticated position on discouraging and combating hatred, rather than tolerating an imagined “other.” Wendy Brown’s 2006 text *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* points out how tolerance is often accompanied by a sense of moral superiority. To be tolerant, asserts Brown, “conjures seemliness, propriety, forbearance, magnanimity, . . . universality, and the large view” (p. 178), all ideals that allow one to express some sense of superiority over those who cannot claim that same sort of tolerant worldview. It is perhaps this connection with viewing tolerance as the most enlightened way to deal with difference that encourages an overriding sense of cultural relativism where one is expected to be tolerant of *all* views, no matter how troubling.

Young adult fiction that deals with white supremacist characters creates an interesting lens for evaluating how neo-Nazis can be seen as the very limits of tolerance, and also how texts with neo-Nazi characters can be used as a tool to assess values that are *not* worth living by and therefore may discourage the development of hatred itself. The books in this essay illustrate problematic values largely in two ways. First, there are texts featuring neo-Nazi protagonists and the values they choose to embrace, which eventually lead to violence: Laura Williams’ *The Spider’s Web* (1999) and Han Nolan’s *If I Should Die Before I Wake* (1994). Second, there are books that discuss the impact of violence inflicted by neo-Nazis on other characters, such as Carol Matas’ *The Freak* (2007) and Mats Wahl’s *The Invisible* (2007). The idea that there are, in fact, values that are not worth living by is potentially unpopular, as relativism has been taught so heavily in conjunction with tolerance initiatives. While actively discouraging violence is generally admired or encouraged, criticizing underlying values that lead to hate and violence is not always so easy in a society that promotes relativism and tolerance. I recognize, too, what Brown (2006) reminds readers in her book: “that tolerance is preferable to violent civil conflict is inarguable”; yet it can also be a “discursive function” that can serve to legitimate “violent imperialism” (p. 202). For these reasons I think that we can do better in formulating ways to talk about and discourage hatred.

One of the fundamental problems behind making claims about values tends to be the way that cultural relativism, or moral relativism, can be deployed to defend all practices, even those that harm others. Philosophy professor Chris Gowans (2008) defined one facet of moral relativism in the following manner:

The term “moral relativism” is sometimes associated with a normative position concerning how we ought to think about, or behave towards, persons with whom we morally disagree. Usually the position is formulated in terms of tolerance. In particular, it is said that we should not interfere with the actions of persons that are based on moral judgments we reject, when the disagreement is not or cannot be rationally resolved. (2008, para. 16)<sup>1</sup>

The characters in this essay often exhibit values that are morally disagreeable—they are violent, destructive, and hateful. They also help readers see how sometimes interference, even in a moral judgment, is warranted. The challenge to relativism can also aid in the creation of a cosmopolitan ethic—a position that argues for the acceptance of values, but those values must be worth living by, according to philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah. Defining what that means, exactly, is perhaps easier than it seems, as it comes down to simply looking towards values that support human well-being. What these fictional texts have the potential to do is help readers reject moral judgments that limit human well-being. Ultimately, I wish to challenge the connection between tolerance and relativism, arguing that both are stumbling blocks to a world of cosmopolitan ethics that actively discourages hatred as an acceptable value.

I argue that adolescent literature featuring neo-Nazi characters has the potential to exemplify the problems with moral relativism in the ways in which the characters learn from their experiences with neo-Nazi violence. The texts in this essay show the possibility for an ethical framework that does not rely only on relativism. The books demonstrate the need to act in opposition to hatred, they emphasize the importance of human well-being, and they can help readers recognize more progressive decisions about lives other than their own. In this way, they help to discourage the development of hatred. Characters in *The Spider's Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake* both discover the ways in which neo-Nazi values are ultimately incompatible with their desires for friendship and a sense of belonging. *The Freak* and *The Invisible* both show the results of neo-Nazi violence as well as the importance of community responses to these events. I begin with a brief discussion of the connections between relativism and tolerance, and some arguments to counter the presumed usefulness of these two terms. This section is followed by an analysis of the fictional texts dealing with neo-Nazi characters illustrating how ethical frameworks that do not rely on moral relativism can be developed. All these texts highlight how sometimes one should and must interfere to make a judgment that promotes human well-being rather than maintains relativistic attitudes. In this way, literary engagement, rather than censorship, can be a powerful tool for discouraging hatred.

## I. WHY IT MAY NOT ALL BE RELATIVE

The framework for modern relativism lies in the characteristic split between the concept of facts and the concept of values. One common presumption is that facts and values occupy entirely different spectrums of human understanding, and therefore have no joint role in human behavior, and if one were to make the connection between facts, values, and corresponding behavior one would be committing the “naturalistic fallacy.”<sup>2</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), calls this notion Positivism, which he frames in terms of beliefs and desires. According to Appiah, beliefs are ideas that are based on evidence, and desires are feelings that “are satisfied or unsatisfied,” but there is no way to determine which desires are right or wrong (pp. 18-19). For Appiah, beliefs “are supposed to reflect how the world is” while desires “reflect how we’d like it to be” (pp. 18). So while beliefs are still connected to some level of experience or emotional resonance, they are also indicative of the world as it is, rather than the world that one would like to see. Throughout this essay, when I refer to beliefs or desires, I am using Appiah’s sense of the words. As a specific example, one might believe the events of the Holocaust are real because there is documented evidence that supports this belief. However, based on this Positivist approach, one would never be able to claim the desires leading to the Holocaust were either good or bad, because it is impossible to determine right or wrong desires as one can presumably desire any sort of world at all, entirely separate from judgments about what sort of world may be created through those desires. Yet to claim that values and facts occupy significantly different realms ignores the way that values and facts are both forged within existing systems of power and privilege. In this essay, I argue that texts for adolescent readers featuring neo-Nazi characters can help to challenge the idea that all values are equally worth acting upon. There are genuine connections between the facts of discrimination and oppression and the values these choices express. Young adult fiction can help draw attention to the connection between how the world is and what an individual ought to do when faced with difficult decisions.

The notions of cultural relativism and tolerance are deeply connected, and in popular opinion are often assumed to have some form of moral superiority or enlightenment over those who judge values on a scale other than relativism. As Appiah (2006) asserts,

People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativ-

ism of this sort isn't a way to encourage conversation; it's just a reason to fall silent. (p. 31)

If there is nothing to be said on the subject of values because all values are equal, then what is the point in consuming narratives dealing with anyone outside the limited "norm"? This is particularly important in terms of fiction and what it can offer young readers in terms of a conversation about hatred. We must conceive of ethical frameworks that do not rely strictly on a structure of relativism. Neo-Nazi characters, particularly those in *The Spider's Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, are excellent sites for evaluating how relativism is inapplicable when looking at certain values held by literary characters. This process, in turn, has the potential to encourage readers to assess the necessity of making solid value judgments. However, this is often an uphill battle in societies that have been encouraged to embrace tolerance as a value that offers both a sense of moral superiority and a notion that facts cannot impact values. While Catriona McKinnon (2006) acknowledges that in contemporary society tolerance is central to "liberal conceptions of justice," she notes that it is also problematic because "without further specification of what toleration demands and how it is to be understood, this commitment gives no practical guidance whatsoever" (p. 16). Tolerance, as a value, offers little guidance for how to behave when faced with discrimination and hatred. In fact, the combination of relativism and toleration often leads to arguments for why one should tolerate even the intolerable.

I suggest, along the lines of Sam Harris'<sup>3</sup> 2010 book *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, that what values worth living by have in common is a focus on improving human well-being. It is this notion of well-being that the books in this essay do an excellent job of highlighting as they show how various values held by the characters can negatively impact the well-being of others. Lexi and Hilary, of *The Spider's Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake* respectively, both initially embrace neo-Nazi values before they recognize the violence is too destructive for them. Jade and Hilmer, from *The Freak* and *The Invisible* respectively, both are on the receiving end of neo-Nazi violence. Their lives are clearly and negatively impacted by the values and actions of white supremacist characters. Harris' (2010) basic premise is that "it is good to avoid behaving in such a way as to produce the worst possible misery for everyone" (p. 39). For Harris, determining a scientific argument for human values can help individuals overcome the limitations of both relativism and rigid universalism. While we may not "personally care about the experience of all conscious beings," it stands to reason "that a universe in which all conscious beings suffer the worst possible misery is worse than a uni-

verse in which they experience well-being” (Harris, 2010, p. 39). Harris’ claims seem nearly impossible to disagree with, largely due to the generalized phrasing here, and may seem to merely state the obvious. However, it’s the further definition of what well-being is that’s worth emphasizing here. He defines well-being in part as safety, health, and intellectual engagement that allow for life to thrive. To find examples of Harris’ “worst possible misery” one could point directly back to the experiences of other characters in young adult literature, particularly in texts for younger readers that deal with the Holocaust. Characters in Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (1988), Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I and II* (1986, 1991), and Ruth Minsky Sender’s *The Cage* (1986) have their safety, health, and ability to live (let alone thrive) taken from them by a regime bent on their ultimate destruction. Without the acknowledgement that this sort of experience is inherently bad, there would be no reason for the cry “Never again!” Of course, creating a universe where everyone, with the possible exception of those promoting the misery, suffers the worst possible misery is to be discouraged.

In terms of my argument in this essay, discouraging human misery comes in the form of recognizing existing systems of power and privilege and working to challenge those systems, rather than uphold them. I believe literature can help young adults begin to make connections between oppressive power structures that limit human well-being and their own capability to make progressive decisions about the lives of those other than themselves. Harris’ claims about a moral landscape where well-being is to be promoted above the worst possible misery for everyone also aligns with Judith Butler’s arguments in *Frames of War* (2010). The issues regarding cosmopolitanism and human rights from Butler, Harris, and Appiah are not merely theoretical and limited to metaphysical abstraction. Rather, Butler (2010) reminds us that life “is precarious [and] the possibility of being sustained relies fundamentally on social and political conditions and not only on a postulated internal drive to live” (p. 21). For human beings to thrive, the social and political conditions must be focused on well-being rather than human misery. The problem is that all too often the encouragement of tolerance as a near universal value allows for the continuation of practices that limit the social and political conditions that allow for human well-being. My argument, developed in conjunction with Harris and others, stands in opposition to relativism. It encourages individuals to view how facts and values can and must be connected in order to promote a future where well-being is encouraged. Literature, particularly literature that helps create memories for young adults, can help them connect the facts of oppression to a more cosmopolitan ethics regarding the acceptable treatment of those different from themselves. In order to encourage a world-view where values

are connected to the “well-being of conscious creatures,” it is important to look beyond the limitations of consigning values to particular populations or nation-states (Harris, 2010, p. 180). If individuals are to allow for recognized and publicly grieved populations, “the social cannot be separated from cosmopolitan principles” and “national interests have to be balanced with other kinds of interests” (Delanty, 2009, p. 7). These interests can and should incorporate notions of well-being—life sustained by political and social conditions that allow for safety, health, and care.

## II. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCES OF NEO-NAZI CHARACTERS

There are fewer books for young adults featuring neo-Nazis than there are on the topic of the Holocaust, or even books that explicitly feature Jewish or German characters as protagonists.<sup>4</sup> However, there are three<sup>5</sup> fairly popular and well-received texts featuring neo-Nazi main characters for adolescent readers, two of which I discuss in detail here. I have identified the audience of adolescent literature as roughly from the ages of 12 to 21, and these three texts are targeted toward more or less sophisticated readers within this spectrum. The first, Laura Williams’ *The Spider’s Web*, is targeted to the youngest readers with a message about the results of parental neglect that one reviewer calls “heavily overstated” but still acceptable for grades 7-9 (Rochman, 2011, para. 1). The second is Han Nolan’s *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, a narrative that intertwines the stories of its neo-Nazi protagonist and a young Polish Jew during the Holocaust itself. Interestingly, these texts also all feature characters that have lived in Nazi-occupied Europe, either former Nazis or Holocaust victims.<sup>6</sup> This combination serves to underscore the concept that some values are not worth living by, as the books illustrate both contemporary characters who are struggling with their problematic ideas about difference and the resulting violent behaviors.

The plot of Williams’ 1999 novel involves Lexi Jordan, a troubled young girl, and her brief friendship with a group of skinheads. While participating in minor acts of vandalism, she meets an elderly woman who was once in the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*). The interactions she has with Ursula help her realize some of the problems with her newfound friends. Eventually, Lexi turns away from the skinhead group as their actions escalate from vandalism to violence. The book begins as Lexi is frustrated with her broken home and neglectful mother and has found a new “family” instead—a group of local skinheads who adopt her as a new member of their group and whom Lexi comes to regard as family. Lexi implicitly trusts the Nazi skinheads with whom she has found herself involved. However, the book ultimately illustrates how violence fractures

the group and Nazi ideologies are ultimately not to be tolerated. Lexi's embracing of her newfound family comes from an insistent desire for friendship and attention. She truly believes the group cares about her and denies that they are in any way "hard and ruthless" (1999, p. 88). Her devotion to the group has led her to shave her head and adopt the classic accoutrements of a skinhead: heavy boots, black clothes, and pegged jeans. By getting a tattoo of a swastika on the side of her shaved head, Lexi has gone above and beyond the normal skinhead trappings. Lexi refers to it as her "spider" and considers it to be a "good luck charm" because "it keeps [her] safe" (1999, p. 10). While Lexi sees it as "just a pattern," it is definitely one that her new friends appreciate greatly, as "Mick and the others had praised her and said that getting it done showed her loyalty, and they had treated her like she was their sister, like family" (1999, p. 21). For Lexi, the swastika becomes a symbol for belonging, rather than a symbol of fear or hatred.<sup>7</sup> She embraces it without recognizing the symbolic nature of the mark, seeing only the sense of belonging and praise that it gets her from her newfound friends.

In fact, Lexi's knowledge regarding the facts and beliefs of the neo-Nazi movement are muddled at best. She refers to herself as a member of the "Aran race [*sic*]" which is "the white race. The strongest race. We're going to rule the world" (1999, p. 17). Yet when pressed as to *why* the white race is the strongest and has the potential to rule the world, her response is a weak: "We're smarter . . . and stuff like that" (1999, p. 18). Lexi's values have almost no basis in evidence or belief, as she has no idea why she is supposed to dislike the "bla—niggers and—spicks and kikes and people like that" (1999, p. 18). In fact, no-one in her gang seems to know much about the basis for their actions. When she asks Mick, the leader of the group, why "White is might! White is right!" he responds angrily with "Because it is!" (1999, p. 22). Her naïveté as to the basis of her actions potentially allows readers to be sympathetic towards her, as Williams heavily employs Lexi's poor home life as a blanket explanation for her behavior. *The Spider's Web* creates a portrait of neo-Nazism as a choice wildly divorced from any fact, with a bunch of inexperienced children acting out against their broken homes. Their values are based strictly around the desire to rebel, and therefore are easier for Lexi to turn her back on once things go too far. Her eventual rejection of the group is spurred on by the character Devon, a member of the group who Lexi discovers has a long-absent African American father. Upon this discovery, Lexi's only reaction is to say, "I don't care that you're part black. No one would really care" (1999, p. 95). She assumes the family dynamic that holds the band of skinheads together is stronger than the underlying ideology that they all purportedly follow.

If their friendship were stronger than their neo-Nazi ideals, then the book would seem to support the notion that hatred spawned by white supremacy is merely another set of values worth living by. Of course, this is not the case, as Mick, Serge, and the rest of the gang attempt to kill Devon when they discover his family background. When Lexi finds Devon in the woods, she finally has an epiphany about her friends:

Tears spilled onto her cheeks, and she brushed them away. How could they have hurt their friend? Why? So what if he was part black? Did it really matter?

The knot in her stomach told her that yes, it did really matter. To them. Being a Nazi skinhead wasn't just a place to go to hang out with friends. They weren't a big happy family with relatives all over the country, all over the world. It wasn't a game to them. (1999, p. 120)

The attack on Devon finally helps Lexi to realize that the friendship she so desired is based on shared values that she ultimately does not have. The larger message reminds readers that what Lexi ultimately values is friendship, a concept that would generally promote well-being in a variety of ways. When she faces the reality of her friends' actions (taunting the blind, threatening old women, beating up Devon, and burning down a synagogue), she is forced to recognize that their actions only promote human misery. In this way, the text clearly illustrates how Lexi's white supremacist values are *not* worth living by. The book ends with one of the gang's leaders blinded by the fire he started in the synagogue and a tearful reunion between Lexi, her mother, and her younger sister Shelby.<sup>8</sup> Williams asks readers to reflect on the events of the novel as Lexi questions the idea she overhears: "Blame the parents. Kids are kids, and they don't know what they're doing" (1999, p. 134). However, Lexi wonders about the veracity of this statement: "*Did* they know what they were doing? Serge did. And Mick. What about Karen and Billy and Devon? And what about herself and Shelby? What did they really know about what they were doing? Who was to blame?" (1999, p. 134). While these are somewhat complex questions with which to end the narrative, the text is incredibly straightforward and didactic, including a tidy resolution. Lexi has learned her lesson, and the only ones permanently harmed are the blinded Serge and another arsonist who may not survive her smoke-inhalation injuries. The blame in the situation is ultimately placed in the hands of the kids who committed the white supremacist acts, and took their rebellion too far. The blame can also be assigned to those who have violent behaviors based on fabricated desires. This final resolution in the novel underscores that although broken homes may garner the compassion of readers, if characters maintain their focus on promoting human misery, they will be punished. Lexi's story shows how simplistic

misunderstandings of the “Other” ultimately lead to poor choices. By engaging with Lexi’s character, readers may see the dangers in oversimplifying identity itself. This, in turn, can ideally ask readers to learn how to engage with and appreciate difference, rather than misname, ignore, or merely tolerate it.

Han Nolan’s 1994 *If I Should Die Before I Wake* provides a more complex portrait of the internal processes of a young neo-Nazi. The main character, Hilary, is in a coma throughout the book, meaning all of the neo-Nazi representations are directly filtered through Hilary’s thoughts. She is involved with a local group of skinheads, whom she sought out because of her loneliness and anger. These emotions are her response to her father’s accidental death and mother’s alternating neglect and religious outbursts.<sup>9</sup> Hilary’s coma has been caused by a motorcycle accident involving her neo-Nazi boyfriend, Brad. While Brad comes away unscathed, Hilary is trapped in a liminal space between life and death throughout the story. She views this development as troubling in part because she recognizes she is being treated in a Jewish hospital. Hilary finds this ironic: “What a joke on me, huh? Having a motorcycle accident in some Hebe town and coming here to the freakin’ Jew Hospital” (1994, p. 2). Hilary’s character early in the book is defined by this passage. She is angry, at both herself and the external world, and is comfortable expressing that anger in antisemitic slurs. During this time, a vision of an old, silent Jewish woman comes to her, and through seemingly supernatural abilities causes Hilary to go back in time by 50 years to inhabit the body of a young Polish Jew named Chana.<sup>10</sup> When Hilary inhabits Chana’s body, she experiences the worst possible misery of Nazi Era Europe, including deportation, ghettos, and concentration camps. However, when Hilary is trapped in her own immobile body, she continually expresses vitriolic antisemitism and idolizes her white supremacist friends.

Much like Lexi in *The Spider’s Web*, Hilary comes from a broken family with an often-intoxicated single mother as the only family support structure. Hilary holds a great degree of hatred for her mother, who left her “all alone for three freakin’ days when [she] was only five years old” (1994, p. 22). Her mother experienced some sort of breakdown after Hilary’s father was killed in an accident. Hilary, in accordance with her beliefs, blames her father’s Jewish boss for his death. She views him as a “greedy Jew boss” who is probably “living in some fancy mansion, bought with his blood money” (1994, p. 92). As with Lexi, readers are encouraged to be somewhat forgiving of Hilary’s antisemitic sentiments because of her broken home. However, the book gives the overall impression that no matter who caused her father’s work accident, her subsequent actions are not worth living by. Initially, her acts are limited to verbally attacking the vision of

the older woman who appears during her coma and telling stories of how she interacts with her newfound family of neo-Nazis. After relaying her fascination with Brad and the rest of his white supremacist friends, she addresses the silent woman: “Only a Jew would stand here like a dummy and listen to someone insult them and then look at the person like she’s the one to be pitied. Only a Jew would do that. Only a dumb Jew” (1994, p. 9). Hilary’s interaction here with her elderly Jewish visitor is immediately followed by her first experience of living in Chana’s body. The narrative encourages the interpretation that her Jewish friend pities Hilary and is attempting to use the experience of the greatest possible misery to challenge Hilary’s hatred.

Because the books command complex emotional reactions, a close look at the concept of compassion is essential for understanding these two stories. Regardless of the situation, the main characters may provoke compassionate responses in readers. The interaction between Hilary and the old woman calls attention to an interesting facet of both *The Spider’s Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake*: the ways in which compassion is required for both the victims of antisemitism and the lost girls trying to recover from broken homes. In both of these cases, as Lauren Berlant (2004) suggests, compassion “is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*” (p. 4). In Nolan’s narrative, Hilary is defined as “over there” both by her appearance as a shaved-headed neo-Nazi and as a girl trapped in a coma. However, Berlant notes the compassionate person also has “a resource that would alleviate someone else’s suffering,” often the resources of power and privilege that could be used to create political and social conditions that promote human well-being (2004, p. 4). It is also important to recognize that compassion should require individuals to take steps that promote action, rather than merely assuming an attitude of tolerance. Compassion must be more than a sense of moral superiority directed at the suffering of others as

the obligation to recognize and alleviate suffering is more than a demand on consciousness—more than a demand to *feel right* as Harriet Beecher Stowe exhorted of her white readers—then it is crucial to appreciate the multitude of conventions around the relation of feeling to practice where compassion is concerned. (Berlant, 2004, p. 4)

Berlant’s connection between feeling and practice is similar to the cosmopolitan ideas of challenging the fact/value separation. Merely responding to oppression by “feeling right” in terms of the sympathetic responses evoked by a sense of compassion does nothing to challenge systems that allocate the social and political conditions for well-being differently. Instead of “feeling right” in regard to Hilary’s situation, readers can and should recog-

nize this situation as warranting action and interfering with hateful moral values. Actions, in both *The Spider's Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, are attached to the values of the characters. These values need to be recognized as not worth living by and possible to change. This can happen even while perhaps having compassionate responses to the broken homes of the main characters.

In terms of *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the actions of Hilary's friends quickly escalate from vandalism and insults to actual violence. She and her group of neo-Nazi friends, particularly her boyfriend Brad, have intensified their white supremacist behavior and kidnapped one of the area's Jewish adolescents:

[Vandalizing a Jewish graveyard is] nothing compared to what Brad and Billy H. and Chucky B. did last night or yesterday or whenever the hell this accident happened. Hey, picture it. They dress up like Bozo the Clown, all three of them, and kidnap this Jew boy . . . . So, they stuffed him in one of the big orange lockers they got in the boys' locker room at school. He's pint-sized anyway, just like all Jews. Tiny little monkeys, what they are. Tiny little crooks . . . . Even if we are on spring break, Brad said, he was screaming loud enough to wake the dead. (1994, pp. 3-5)

The group has trapped Simon in the school for at least a week with no food or water and most likely no access to anyone who will hear him call for help. It is Hilary's concern for Simon throughout the book that marks her gradual shift away from promoting human misery to expressing concern for well-being. Her hesitance is evident even in this first passage, where she notes that "even if we are on spring break" there should be a way out for Simon (1994, p. 5). While Brad's statement merely implies that Simon was screaming loudly enough that he may have been heard outside the school, Hilary's reflection on this piece of information is readers' first clue that she might not want Simon stuck in that locker for the entirety of spring break. She wonders repeatedly about Simon's status: "Do they leave the heat on over vacation? . . . . How long can a person live without food? . . . . Get Simon out, Brad. Okay? I never expected it to go this far. I never wanted it to go this far" (1994, pp. 28, 93, 119). Hilary's hatred is mediated by her (supernatural) experiences as a Holocaust-era Jewish girl, and she gradually becomes more and more concerned for Simon's well-being.

After Hilary lives Chana's life during the Holocaust, including the humiliations the Germans forced the Jews to face, the forced deportations and endless starvation and illness of the ghettos, and the horrors of living in a concentration camp, she is forced to face her former values armed with a new set of facts. Hilary, seeing the world through Chana's eyes, has faced

the worst possible misery, as defined by Sam Harris (2010) in the *Moral Landscape*. However, having faced that historical experience, Hilary is unwilling to maintain the values that promote suffering for others. She instead has to look towards a life where human well-being outweighs human suffering, and embracing this value requires not only a change of mind, but also a course of action. Hilary could have learned merely to tolerate the “Other” during her time in Chana’s head. However, as she begins to come out of her coma, the silent older woman finally speaks. Hilary realizes that the “dumb Jew” she has been insulting throughout the book is the much older version of the same Chana whose life Hilary lived alongside during the Holocaust. The elderly Chana encourages Hilary to “use what you know to change things. You can change the world, Hilary” (1994, p. 281). Although Hilary says, “I can change me, but nothing else,” Chana disagrees:

“You were an Aryan Warrior, a neo-Nazi. People will listen. Students will listen. Your past will be your gift.”

“I’m afraid. I don’t think I can do what you ask of me. I can’t go back.”

“You have to. You are part of the chain, Hilary. We are connected now. In hearing me, in understanding me, you have given my past new meaning. It will change the meaning of your past as well, and someday your life as an angry child who has turned her hate to love will change still another life. You’re part of the chain, one you cannot break.” (1994, p. 282)

Hilary’s first action after regaining consciousness is to tell her mother where to find the Jewish boy, Simon, whom Brad and the others had locked in the school. Hilary is forced, through her rather supernatural experience of the Holocaust, not only to question her values, but also to take action in a way that promotes Simon’s well-being. While Hilary has certainly worked at changing herself, she also has changed Simon’s life, and perhaps saved an innocent life. Her life as an “angry child” is forgiven as she sees the neo-Nazi values as desires that only promote human misery and are therefore not worth embracing any longer.

### III. RESPONSES TO NEO-NAZI VIOLENCE

Beyond books that deal with neo-Nazi protagonists and their eventual transformations, there are several other stories that offer accounts of suffering at the hands of white supremacists and the importance of community response to such violence. Both Carol Matas’ *The Freak* (2007) and Mats Wahl’s *The Invisible* (2007) deal with characters impacted by neo-Nazi vio-

lence. *The Freak* uses a plot device similar to the one that initiates the events of a story like Stephen King's 1982 novella "Apt Pupil." Jade and her family discover there is a war criminal living in their suburban Winnipeg neighborhood. Jade's Jewish and Indian family would like to see the criminal extradited for "the murder of an entire town of Jews during the war" (2007, p. 51). Her aunt's partner, Sahjit, is a lawyer currently working with the B'nai Brith to deport the man, and this job has brought Sahjit to the attention of local hate groups. Jade, the "freak" of the story's title, has recently recovered from a case of meningitis that nearly killed her. While Jade is happy to be back in the land of the living, she has come back with psychic powers that often lead to her intervention in antisemitic attacks.<sup>11</sup> Jade gets a distinct sense of forthcoming dangers to her friends' and family's well-being, which in turn helps illustrate how terrifying neo-Nazi violence can be not only to those who directly experience it, but also for the larger community. No one ever directly attacks Jade, but the antisemitic threats and violence against her family show how hatred of this sort becomes a form of terrorism for those involved. Looking at the ways in which white power literature functions to terrorize characters such as Jade and her family can help encourage an understanding of how even those actions that ostensibly are separate from one's activities are signs that values have impact—and no-one's best interest is served by hate speech.

After Jade's newfound crush is beaten up on the way home from a poetry reading, rashes of hate-speech leaflets begin appearing at her high school. The first follows the common threat of Holocaust denial:

*The Jewish Conspiracy is not over.  
Who really caused WWII?  
Hitler was a great Leader!  
Did the Holocaust really happen?  
No. It is,  
Propaganda from the Jews to make Hitler look bad.  
Jews who kill little Christian babies and bake them into their bread.*  
(2007, p. 64)

This troubling flier incorporates classic antisemitic claims about Jews stealing Christian babies and eating them, as well as Holocaust denial and Hitler worship. The school, to its credit, responds by declaring Holocaust Awareness Week and gets students to read a variety of Holocaust literature, including *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Jade reacts by feeling "really sick inside" and pays close attention to her peers:

I feel all these pitying looks all day. There are quite a few Jewish kids at Kelvin, but we certainly aren't the majority. I can feel that everyone

feels sorry for us, and kind of embarrassed. Unless they agree with it. I get some of that, too. A kind of gloating. (2007, p. 67)

Jade unpacks the various reactions of her peers with the help of her new-found psychic abilities. The embarrassment and pity that she senses in others point back to problems in tolerating difference rather than engaging with it. Students react with pity and embarrassment because the antisemitic fliers have called attention to difference in a way that they are not comfortable with. They react less with anger and more with bewilderment due in part to the problems with tolerance discourse. Teaching tolerance, coupled with cultural relativism, results in the inability for many of the students to act against the antisemitism in any sustained manner. Rather, they react by reinforcing the most problematic aspects of tolerance and compassion: They *feel right*, as Berlant puts it, but they are able to go only that far (2004, p. 4). Although readers come away from the encounter with the sense that for the most part Jade's fellow students have their hearts in the right place, their compassion ultimately gives them very little guidance on action. Since Jade can literally sense their feelings, she knows that largely her fellow students are "feeling right." Although the students know that the antisemitic discourse is wrong, they are unable to take those feelings any further. As McKinnon notes in her evaluation of tolerance, the ideal often "gives no practical guidance whatsoever" to what sorts of action one must take in reaction to intolerant behaviors (2006, p. 16). For the most part, the bulk of the school feels sympathy for all the Jewish kids faced with the accusation that they will "kill little Christian babies and bake them into bread," yet they have no idea what else to do besides feel right (2007, p. 64).

The most important aspect of *The Freak* is in the actions of the larger community. Instead of tolerating the white supremacists in their community, town members join together to interfere with neo-Nazi behavior. The dispersal of hate mail in the book continues, the next time arriving at students' homes. Again, the letters involve classic claims of Jewish barbarism: "*Jews kill little babies so they can drink their blood on the Sabbath. For centuries this practice has been going on unchallenged but it is time for civilized people everywhere to put a stop to it*" (2007, p. 93). However, violence in *The Freak* extends beyond the threatening letters sent to members of one high school. Sahjit's son and Jade's crush, Jon, is beaten up by "skinhead types" (2007, p. 59). Then Jade begins having premonitions that Sahjit is in danger, and eventually saves him from a car bombing (2007, p. 78). It appears that the Nazi war criminal has been attracting followers who are willing to defend him against deportation by murdering those against him. Like the characters of Lexi and Hilary, the Nazi war criminal attracts

troubled youth like Roger, who Jade knows comes from a broken home and has moved in with an uncle who is a “bad influence” on him (2007, p. 83). Unlike Lexi’s and Hilary’s stories, however, the violence in *The Freak* is better directed and more sophisticated. It all culminates in an attack on Jade’s synagogue on Yom Kippur, an incident she has been having nightmares about for months. Because of those dreams, Jade is able to spot the bomb that has been brought to the synagogue and dispose of it in the river before it has a chance to explode in range of anyone. She is particularly horrified by the way the attack happened because “it wasn’t enough for them to leave the bomb in the fridge so it would go off there. After all, with an empty kitchen maybe no one would die. They brought it to a room full of children. Children! Every time I think about it I feel sick” (2007, p. 156). Jade saves the day, and is fortunately backed up by a law enforcement system that tracks down the source of the hate mail and the bombings. Although the students’ response is lacking, Matas creates a portrait of a larger community of teachers, parents, and law enforcement willing to stand up against the neo-Nazi menace in their community.

Mats Wahl’s *The Invisible*<sup>12</sup> (2007) shows how a refusal to deter behaviors that promote human misery can lead to terrible results. As the characters value profit and the image of “normalcy” above all else, the book illustrates how human misery and violence are supported by a larger community. In contrast with a cooperative system that works to solve the antisemitic attacks that Jade experiences in *The Freak*, the ways in which neo-Nazism is dealt with by those with power and privilege in *The Invisible* are much more troubling. The title’s namesake, Hilmer Eriksson, awakes one morning to find that no one can see him. He tries to discover what happened to make him invisible and follows Harald Fors, the detective assigned to his missing person’s case. The investigation delves into the troubling neo-Nazi presence in their small Swedish town. It also demonstrates the frustrating reticence of anyone to cooperate with Fors, as locals fear the town’s image will be tarnished by accusations of neo-Nazism. Fors eventually tracks down the visible Hilmer, who has been beaten to death for standing up for the rights of the immigrant Muslim population. Wahl hints at the terrible things that have happened to Hilmer throughout, such as when he finds himself “upset that he had such a hard time breathing. Something was bubbling in his throat. *Blood*” (2007, p. 57). Later, the author poses the question of what one can know “about the person who lies bleeding, whose mouth is stuffed with rotting, wet leaves” (2007, p. 84). The implication that Hilmer is lying somewhere bleeding and choked with rotten leaves encourages readers to feel frustrated by the slow pace of the investigation, as it is continually hampered by those only looking out for their own best interests. Ultimately, those with power and privilege in the

town of Vallen prove the ways in which their values distance them from concern for human well-being.

It is the neo-Nazi youth who are causing the trouble in Vallen, a problem that has been going on for some time, leading to the murder of Hilmer. The group targeted by the Swedish supremacists is the immigrant Muslim population. Marked as “Other” by their language, skin tone, and religion, they are easy targets for the neo-Nazi youth and the disdain of the Swedish citizens. Repeatedly, they are referred to in terms of their failings. Mahmud, one of Hilmer’s fellow students, is described by the soccer coach as speaking horrible Swedish, “even though he’s lived in this country for an eternity. In a few years he’ll be unemployed. Then the rest of us will have to support him” (2007, p. 25). Thoughts like these on the minds of average townspeople do nothing to discourage attacks on the immigrant areas of town, including cross burning and regular threats to students like Mahmud (2007, p. 37). Some of the town’s youth have picked up on these attitudes and taken them further, dressing in traditional neo-Nazi boots and threatening black, and referring to the Muslims as “migrant scum” (2007, p. 3). The sense of hatred for anyone different is palpable throughout the town, even though many of the immigrants are there seeking asylum, running from one persecution to another. The neo-Nazis in Hilmer’s school have been painting swastikas and participating in minor acts of violence and vandalism for a while, but it is when Hilmer steps in to speak up on behalf of the immigrants that they become incensed. When three of the most notoriously violent kids in town find Hilmer alone, they attack him, screaming about how “he was a traitor and he sided with the immigrants and that he shouldn’t give a damn about them,” and they want to know “why the hell Hilmer was defending the darkies.” This is followed immediately by the attack that kills Hilmer: “Both Anneli and Bulterman kicked him. They yelled the whole time that he was a traitor” (2007, pp. 164-165). The skinheads’ anger is taken out on Hilmer, one of the few people in the town who would stand up for the immigrant population. In Vallen, hatred and fear of the migrant population are normalized to such an extent that kids like Anneli and Bulterman are shocked and angered to the point of murder when someone stands in opposition to their behavior. Their actions are only underscored by the town’s larger reluctance to do anything about the racism in their community.

The local population turns away from concerns about human well-being in favor of selfish concerns about their own individual success. In contrast to the reactions of authority figures in *The Freak* when neo-Nazi literature shows up in the school, officials in *The Invisible* refuse to even acknowledge that the skinheads, the swastikas, or the threats add up to anything other than kid stuff; as the principal claims,

We don't have any neo-Nazis here. We have some troublemakers who do what they can to scare adults. No one gets anywhere by calling them neo-Nazis . . . . If I start labeling kids as neo-Nazis based on a few tussles they've had with other students, things will go to hell in a hurry. (2007, p. 67)

There is no real indication of what the principal means by things going to hell, as he gets distracted and his conversation with Detective Fors ends. However, local councilman Berg makes it a bit clearer:

"This thing with the swastikas is sensitive business," said Berg.

"What do you mean?"

"It can be misunderstood." . . .

Berg leaned towards Fors again and drove his hands into his jacket pockets. "You don't think Fritz and Hans from Berlin will want to come here and fish with their kids if the place gets known as a hangout for Nordic Nazis, do you?"

"Is that what this is?"

Berg shook his head. "Of course not. See you." (2007, p. 50)

Berg has been counting on German tourist revenue to carry the town through difficult economic times and is terrified that any bad press will discourage tourism. He actually goes so far as to tell Fors, "I think it would be best if you didn't find [Hilmer]" (2007, p. 94). It is only when Fors reminds Berg, "What will happen if it gets out that a council chairman hindered the investigation of a child's disappearance—a disappearance that could very well be criminal?" that he finally caves and gives the detective key information that leads to the arrest of Anneli and Bulterman (2007, p. 94). Berg and the Vallen elders hold values that maintain their power and privilege; they are never concerned for the well-being of others, whether they are kids like Hilmer or the people attempting to take asylum in Sweden.

Fors reflects on the ways in which the townspeople's attitude is in some ways less forgivable than the actual actions of the young adults involved. Many of the neo-Nazis, again, come from broken homes and unhappy backgrounds. When Fors meets with the mother of Marcus, one of the ringleaders of the Vallen skinheads, he finds himself contemplating his feet, thinking, "*You tiptoe respectfully at the victim's home but not around the possible culprit's mother. Do you think one of these two mothers is less a victim than the other?*" (2007, p. 87). Both women have "lost" sons—one to violent death and one to committing violent acts. This draws attention to the wide effects of spreading human misery and ignoring values and actions that express only hatred and violence. Wahl's book makes it clear that

there is something fundamentally broken in the ways that values are expressed in Vallen, and that has trickled down to Marcus, Anneli, and others in ways that tear families apart and ultimately kill Hilmer. There is no attempt on the part of school officials or town leaders to quell or discourage the activities of the neo-Nazi kids in town. Vandalism is concealed, threats and bullying are overlooked as minor troublemaking, and public perceptions of the town's non-white population are nearly always discriminatory. Hilmer's death is caused by years of looking the other way and the community's failure to intervene when hatred and violence are expressed. His death therefore illustrates the importance of having a larger culture that is willing and able to stand up to hate speech and oppose the promotion of human misery.

#### CONCLUSION

Books for young adults that feature neo-Nazi characters are potentially powerful sites for illustrating values not worth living by. In texts like *The Spider's Web* and *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the protagonists clearly learn that their participation in skinhead organizations often clashes with the very values they were hoping to find: Friendship and love both evaporate in favor of hatred and violence. Lexi and Hilary, at the end of the novels, have learned valuable lessons about what actually feels like to promote human misery over human well-being. Finally, *The Freak* and *The Invisible* both illustrate the importance of community reaction to neo-Nazi behavior. Both books illustrate how values that promote human suffering can be dealt with in ways that either limit or exacerbate violence.

Harris (2010) asks readers in *The Moral Landscape* to consider how "in practice, relativism almost always amounts to the claim that we should be tolerant of moral difference because no moral truth can supersede any other" (p. 45). Yet all of these books for young adults illustrate how there are moral truths that can supersede others. These moral truths must also involve intervention and challenges to hatred and violence, particularly when done in service to a set of values like the neo-Nazis' discussed here. These books not only help readers engage with those that may be different from themselves, but also evoke responses that go beyond cultural relativism or tolerance. In showing that certain behaviors are, in fact, not to be tolerated, these books can help promote an ethical foundation that demands action in the light of persecution. This is one of the powerful ways in which literature, and young adult literature in particular, can help intervene in and discourage practices of hatred.

## NOTES

1. Gowans also explains that philosophers often reject this definition, as it is quite simplistic. For the sake of my argument regarding tolerance and toleration, however, this definition holds true.

2. One explanation of this fallacy comes from 20th century British philosopher G. E. Moore, who

accused anyone who infers that X is good from any proposition about X's natural properties of having committed the naturalistic fallacy. Assuming that being pleasant is a natural property, for example, someone who infers that drinking beer is good from the premise that drinking beer is pleasant is supposed to have committed the naturalistic fallacy. The intuitive idea is that evaluative conclusions require at least one evaluative premise—purely factual premises about the naturalistic features of things do not entail or even support evaluative conclusions. (Ridge, 2008, para. 8)

3. I maintain Harris' language of basic values here because I find it interesting and accessible. However, this does not indicate that I condone his recent encouragement of racial profiling found on his blog in April 2012: <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/in-defense-of-profiling>. For an excellent challenge to Harris' problematic claims on profiling I recommend Chris Stedman's *Huffington Post* article "Sam Harris, Will You Visit a Mosque With Me?" [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-stedman/sam-harris-racial-profiling\\_b\\_1472360.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/chris-stedman/sam-harris-racial-profiling_b_1472360.html).

4. There are a good number of films that feature neo-Nazi characters, often featuring very well-known actors. Some examples are Edward Norton in *American History X*, Russell Crowe in *Romper Stomper*, Ryan Gosling in *The Believer*, Will Farrell in *The Producers*, and Brad Renfro in *Apt Pupil*.

5. Stephen King's novella "Apt Pupil" is another text that is well-suited to the sort of analysis I create here, although I do not cover it in detail in this essay.

6. These characters deserve close attention as well; however, since they are secondary to the neo-Nazi characters in the book, I do not cover them in great detail here.

7. For another text that covers the connections between belonging, symbols, and fascism see Todd Strasser's 1981 book *The Wave*. Strasser's novel covers a high school history experiment illustrating to students how fascism emerges and eventually leads to violence. The book was also made into an early-1980s *Afterschool Special* and a 2008 film in Germany.

8. The book highlights how ironic it is that Serge ends up blinded after

the arson attempt. Earlier in the text he had encouraged the gang to harass a blind kid in the neighborhood, brushing aside Lexi's logical concern that "Maybe he wasn't born blind. Maybe he got it from an accident or something" (p. 70). Serge's violence has left him outside the circle of his own ideals, a now "impure" person (p. 70).

9. Hilary actually sees her mother's relationship with religion as similar to her relationship with the skinheads: "Mother found religion and I found Brad. We're both looking for something to fill us up" (p. 55).

10. Chana's story in Nolan's book is actually a quite accurate representation of the events of the Holocaust for Polish Jews. Again, because I am focused on Neo-Nazi characters here, I will not delve too deeply into this half of the narrative.

11. A number of texts in this study deal with a variant of inherited Jewish mysticism. Nolan's text and Matas' text both involve the psychic abilities transmitted through Jewish families.

12. *The Invisible* was originally published in Sweden in 2000 and was produced as a Swedish film in 2002. It was translated to English in 2007 and shortly after that made into a Hollywood adaptation.

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