Challenge, Trauma and Recovery in YA Fiction: Wendy Orr & Peeling the Onion

All writing is to some degree a blend of experience and imagination.

As authors, we have to respect the trauma that our readers may have experienced: "...if I was going to write about severe injuries, pain and ongoing physical problems, I couldn't insult other people who were going through it by trivialising the experience. Sanitising Anna's emotions so that she accepts her disabilities without rage or hate; depicting her as rational, calm and grateful for help, would be wrong and close to evil. I had a responsibility not to let the reader down by making them feel that they could have coped or recovered better; that their own bitterness, rage or despair was shameful or wrong.

If someone's recovering from any sort of trauma, they are by definition vulnerable. If they identify with a character who experiences a similar shattering of life and future, but breezes through it without wasting a second on despair, or who is cured by a handy miracle... at best the reader will be irritated. At worst they'll see it as 'proof' that they're inadequate: as well as their original disaster, they're failing to deal with their problems as well as the character in the story. This is not a message I want to impart. Glossing over the true emotions of trauma is like showing an airbrushed picture of a supermodel to an anorexic."

Using a miracle to close a realistic novel is as inappropriate as a magic wand. It's switching genres, and cheating your readers. The miracles I believe in, and would want every reader to believe in, are those of resilience and human beings' infinite capacity for adapting.

Emotional honesty is probably the most important quality in YA literature. Using your own story of trauma may be more difficult than pure fiction - but whatever you write draws on your own experience, and that's where the honesty comes in. The actual event doesn't need to be the same. Eg, kids and adults have written to say that Peeling the Onion has helped them to deal with anything from anorexia to sexual abuse to living with an injured parent.

Should fiction expose teens to the grim reality of life? Life exposes its grim realities to kids all the time. When it does, they may need a good dose of fantasy or frothy feel-good literature. But at some point they may need something that validates their own experience and allows them to explore it from a different angle.

What about kids who've never experienced any significant disaster? I get lots of letters from these kids too. The two most common themes are gratitude for their own health, and compassion for others. And, with a bit of luck, the vicarious experience will also help make them more resilient when they do face a life challenge.

However, no matter how grim the problem, I believe that a book on trauma should end in an open-ended message of hope: the suggestion that there are many ways to make a life, and even if you lose your chance at the life you planned, it's possible to find a way into a new one with its own joys, loves and successes.