

Honest Portrayals of Teen Suffering and Triumph: An Interview with Elizabeth Scott

by Chris Wiegard

Young adult author Elizabeth Scott lives in northern Virginia. She grew up in southern Virginia with two schoolteachers for parents, and spent lots of time at her local public library. After having worked several jobs that did not satisfy her, she is living her dream of writing books for young adults that speak to their life experiences. She notes that it is wonderful to be young, but not at all easy. Scott is the author of *Bloom*, *Stealing Heaven*, and *Perfect You*. Her newest title, published in September 2008, is *Living Dead Girl*, a harrowing tale that received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*.

VL In a recent conversation, you expressed the thought that libraries are special to you because of your experience as a child and young adult reading the books of your local public library. Do you also see a special relationship between libraries and the people like yourself who create the books that go into them?

ES Well, I'm certainly grateful to librarians for all the sup-

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port they've shown me! And I do think that librarians and writers have something really important in common: a love of reading.

I have to say, however, that, for me at least, the heart of the library relationship lies between librarians and the communities they serve. They're out there figuring out what their readers want to read, and then doing their best to provide it. It's hard work, and in an age where budget cuts for libraries and schools are so common, it's made even harder.

VL In your novels you write in the first person, taking on the identity of a teen girl. How do you prepare yourself to become a young adult character? How do you work at researching the realities and concerns of current teens?

ES I don't really do anything special to prepare in terms of "becoming" a character because—for me at least—writing isn't about that. I'm ... hmm. It's like I'm just the person who tells the story. I'm not in it; I'm just the means by which the story comes out.

I do try to keep up with what's going on in the world, and with teens—not just because no one wants to read a painfully dated book, but also because no one wants to speak to someone who has no idea what's going on!

VL In your novel *Bloom*, the girl who narrates the story loves the school library, but hides this secret even from her best friend. Do you see negative peer pressure as a real obstacle to libraries becoming relevant to young adults? How can librarians and authors overcome young adult resistance to leisure reading?

ES I don't think it's negative peer pressure toward libraries so much as an overall lack of interest in reading. And, to be brutally honest, I think it doesn't help that schools tend to assign books that

kids/teens simply don't enjoy.

While I understand the value of reading the classics, and am certainly grateful to all my middle and high school teachers who got me reading Shakespeare, I do think that updating required reading lists to include modern books and books that touch on a wide variety of experiences is a good idea.

But more than that, I think the most important thing is just to encourage reading, period. I see so many people disparage certain kinds of popular books or authors, but you know what? Those books

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and authors appeal to readers. They *want* to read them. Shouldn't we encourage that without judging? Isn't the joy of reading about reading what you love? I hate to see readers put in a position where they are made to feel bad or "stupid" for what they enjoy reading.

VL In reading *Bloom* and *Stealing Heaven*, I sensed a common thread of young adults having to fight against adult expectations in order to become their true selves. I also felt that you portrayed growing up as potentially a really tough challenge for today's teens. Do you feel that these aspects of growing up are particularly difficult today, or no different from the past?

ES I think "growing up" is a difficult process that hasn't changed that much since I was a teen.

When you're a teenager, you're trapped in this strange world where

you're expected to make choices that will impact the rest of your life, but you're also subject to the whims of other people. It's a hard balancing act, and a frustrating one, too, because trying to figure out who you are is hard at any age. It's even harder when you have all these expectations placed on you.

VL In the back of each of your novels, you state that you "firmly believe you can never own too many books." Can we assume from this that you are resistant to the prospect of paper books being replaced by Amazon Kindle or other handheld devices?

ES I admit, I love books. I love the way they feel, the way they smell, and the solid weight of them. And I think that, at least for another generation or so, paper books will continue to be the norm. Past that ... I don't know. I actually do own a Kindle, and it's fantastic because you can store a lot of books on it, which means that instead of taking twenty books with me on vacation, I can just pack my Kindle, which weighs less than a mass-market paperback! And I don't find reading on it difficult at all.

Do I want paper books to vanish? No way! But do I think they might? Maybe. It depends, I think, on how younger readers take to the technology. If they embrace it, and clamor for it, I think it will happen.

VL *Bloom* is a story of first love and self-discovery. The lead character, Lauren, seems to experience a sexual milestone off-screen. Did realism compel you to write the story this way? In addressing the sexual selves of young adults, as you do here, is there ever external or internal pressure to moralize or to insert safe sex messages?

ES I feel really strongly about the way female sexuality is sometimes negatively portrayed

in young adult literature, as if the choice to have sex means a teen girl will automatically ruin her life, get a disease, get pregnant, die, see someone she loves die, etc. I think that it's not just unrealistic, but misogynistic. While I understand that some people want to wait until they are older or married to have sex, I think it's important to show that teenagers—of both sexes—can and do think responsibly about sex.

As far as pressure to moralize—that's not my place, and I know that when I was a teen, I greatly resented books/movies/people that told me how I should act/what I should do/think—and still do to this day. I write to tell stories, not to tell people how to think or live their lives.

VL I understand that you grew up in a very small community not far from Hopewell, Virginia. Do you think that literature, and particularly young adult literature, holds a special place in such rural communities?

ES Honestly? No. I knew so few readers growing up, in part

because the county I lived in had no public libraries of its own, and in part because the county itself didn't particularly encourage reading. (And the things we did read—well, they can be best described as ... antiquated.)

Having said that, I do think some rural areas do an excellent job of reaching young readers, and I applaud and envy those areas. Earlier this year, I had the privilege of meeting two librarians who work in very rural areas and was blown away by their dedication to getting kids and teens reading.

VL How do you relate to being a novelist? Do you sometimes feel, as other authors have said, that writing seems almost too fun to be something you get paid to do?

ES Sometimes it does feel like too much fun to be paid for! But then there are other times, like, say, when I'm rewriting a story for the fourth time; or trying to do two sets of edits because they're both due in the same week; or have finished a first draft, printed it out, and am facing the daunting task of

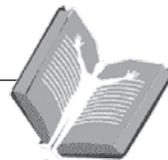
reading it over so I can rip it apart and try to make it better—well, those are the times when I'd much rather be cleaning my bathroom!

VL What is your mission as a writer?

ES I've never thought of having a mission in anything (though thinking back, having one might have come in handy during some of my previous jobs!), but I guess if I had to try and formulate something, it would be this: I'd like to write the very best stories I can.

VL Do you stay aware of what your "competition" in young adult literature is currently doing, or do you intentionally try to avoid knowing that?

ES Competition? I've never thought of it like that! I love all kinds of books, but young adult literature is my favorite and I definitely read it. I can't read it while I'm working on a project, but whenever I have some downtime, I'll grab a stack of young adult novels and indulge. ■



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