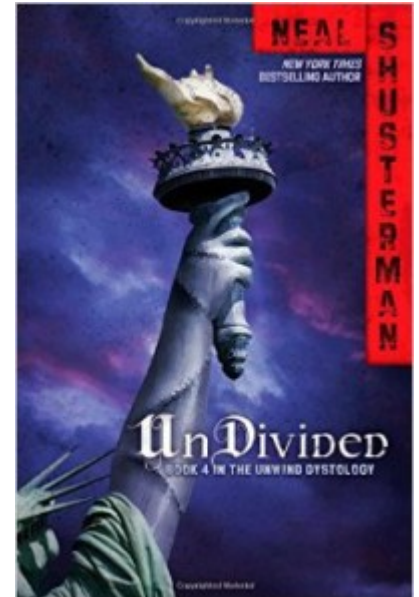


Neil Shusterman and the Unwinding of the World

If you aren't reading Neil Shusterman, you should be. His Unwind series may be one of the best current YA stories addressing significant moral and social issues in a way that leads readers toward the truth. This post will focus primarily on the final book, *Undivided*. If you are not familiar with the series, it may be helpful to read some observations about the previous books. Here are the links (along with a brief overview) for *Unwind*, *UnWholly*, and *UnSouled*.



Unwind

“Unwind is compelling. It’s disturbing. It makes the moral heart of our culture’s debate about the aforementioned issues unavoidable. It’s one thing to write academic papers about post-birth abortion; it’s quite another to vicariously experience the murder of innocent people deemed unworthy of life. The reader can’t help but cringe at the empty deception in defense of Unwinding while cheering those who fight to stop it. Though Shusterman [intended to take a neutral approach](#) by highlighting hypocrisy on all sides, the story sends a clear message about the value of human life.”

UnWholly

*“There was far more to *UnWholly* than its discussion of the soul and personal identity. Risa and Conner show maturity and respect in their relationship. An ongoing story about rescued Tithes gives plenty of opportunity to analyze both the proper use and improper abuse of religion. And there is an achingly beautiful moment of forgiveness between two teens who have been horribly damaged by life. It may have been the best moment in a great book. But as much as I like his*

series for all those things, I am more impressed with Shusterman's ability to starkly reveal the implications of living in a culture that has forgotten what it means to be human."

UnSouled

Once again, Mr. Shusterman has reminded us of a number of issues that are just too important to ignore. When does life begin? What does it mean to be human? What happens when we view people as property or things? Are we just parts, or is there a unifying soulfulness to our nature? Should scientists do things just because they can, or is there a should that needs to be part of the discussion? In a world that increasingly traffics in flesh (in areas such as [pornography](#), the [sex slave trade](#), [savior siblings](#), and [medical experiments on aborted babies](#)), any reminder of the value of humanity is a good one."

UnDivided

In UnDivided, Mr. Shusterman brings this series to a close. Once again, he addresses serious issues in a thought-provoking and accessible way.

- **Consequentialist Ethics.** There is a Greater Good Divisional Option promoting a law that allows the police to identify incorrigible youth and Unwind them against their will. Is Unwinding genuinely offering the greatest good for the greatest number? And even if it were, is there any possible way that killing children and youth could be justified?
- **Just War Theory.** Starkey keeps taking down Unwind camps, but public sentiment actually turns in favor of Unwinding because of the brutal nature of his campaign. He's hoping to draw public attention to their plight by freeing kids awaiting Unwinding. He gets the public's attention, but not in the way he wanted. He becomes so mercilessly brutal in his killing of the workers that public sentiment actually turns against him, and the push for more Unwinding escalates. I've written elsewhere about how Just War Theory helps us analyze whether or not violence on this scale is justified (["The Hunger Games and Just War Theory"](#)). In short, Starkey's approach is not, and Shusterman does a great job showing this.
- **Human Nature.** If people are Unwound they clearly die and lose their "self"; what would happen if they were Rewound? If all the separated parts were rejoined, would the original "self" be there or would it be

someone new? What is the conscience? The soul? Our sense of self? Is Connor fully human at the end of the story - and why or why not? The way in which Shusterman presents these issues points strongly toward a dualistic view of human nature.

- **The Nature of Heroism.** What do you call someone who hangs employees of Unwinding camps, or who executes the doctors who do the Unwinding? Is that person a hero or a monster? Considering the strong pro-life message in the series, it was a great way to show why pro-life advocates do not promote violence against abortion clinics or doctors.
- **Bioengineering.** Undivided features the [3-D printing of human organs](#) from adult pluripotent stem cells, not embryonic cells (the book is very clear on this point). Considering how the entire series has dealt with the horror of treating children as if they were simply something to be harvested for parts, there is no way they would use fetal stem cells.
- **The Soul/The Afterlife. (Spoiler alert!)** After Conner is Rewound, Lev asks him, "Did you go into the light? Did you see the face of God?" Conner replies, "I think you have to get through the door before you see that." After Lev thinks about it for a bit, he says, "Interesting. I believe the door would have opened if the master of the house knew you were there to stay."

The Unwind series is not without its flaws.* However, considering the way in which Mr. Shusterman develops a pretty complicated story with plenty of tie-ins to current events (all the books feature actual news stories), I highly recommend this series. It's disturbing and brutal at times, but it's also full of hope. Buy it. Read it. Then buy more for your friends. It's the kind of story that could change a culture's perspective on the value and nature of human life.

*In Undivided, one of the teenage couples sleeps together. Not only did it feel like an entirely unnecessary plot point, it felt...forced, as if it was included to satisfy reader expectations. There were other sexual situations that were integral to establishing the character of certain people (and placed in the proper perspective by Mr. Shusterman), but this incident felt different. I'm not commenting on this because I think it nullifies the overwhelmingly solid way in which the series addressed the many issues I mentioned above. I highly recommend all of the books. This is just a reminder that, as with all stories, you should be prepared to

add a different perspective on certain issues as needed.

[Entertainment and Worldviews: September and October, 2013](#)

For those who would like to be familiar with the worldviews and messages in the books, films, and TV shows effecting a primarily Young Adult audience, I offer the following excerpts from some recent reviews. Keep in mind that my main goal is to look at how the story reflects and shapes the readers' worldview. Click on the title links for the full reviews.

[Neil Shusterman's Unwind:](#)

"Unwind is compelling. It's disturbing. It makes the moral heart of our culture's debate about the aforementioned issues unavoidable. It's one thing to write academic papers about post-birth abortion; it's quite another to vicariously experience the murder of innocent people deemed unworthy of life. The reader can't help but cringe at the empty deception in defense of Unwinding while cheering those who fight to stop it.

Though Shusterman [intended to take a neutral approach](#) by highlighting hypocrisy on all sides, the story sends a clear message about the value of human life. I suspect that, deep inside, no one reading the story concludes that this is a tough issue that needs more philosophizing. We intuitively know that defending Unwinding with the promise of ongoing existence is a cruel lie. And if that's true....well, the debate about all the beginning of life issues mentioned earlier gets very interesting."

[Orson Scott Card's Ender's Game:](#)

"Ender is neither hero nor villain. He is manipulated child, hardened slave, brilliant prodigy, fighter for peace, savior of our civilization and destroyer of

other worlds. That's why Ender commands our attention. We long for him to rise above a legacy of unintended tragedy. If a killer of worlds can atone for his crimes, maybe a thief, addict or cheater can too."

["What If The Odds Are Against You?"](#) (from [The Hunger Games and Philosophy](#)):

"No matter how powerful (or impotent) a role luck plays in orchestrating the parts of our lives that are out of our control, most people agree: moral character is something that has relevance only if it is in our control. We want to know if Katniss, Peeta and Gale will be controlled by their circumstances or rise above it. There is agency there. Intent, will and choice matter."

["Dying To Be Entertained"](#) (from [The Hunger Games and Philosophy](#)):

"Is it any wonder that the Capital is saturated in violence? The citizens of the capital have no way to gauge what healthy, stabilizing moral community looks like. All that's left is power, and the ever present screen projects glittering, false stories to a steadily decaying culture."

[**Entertainment and Worldviews: July and August, 2013**](#)

For those who would like to be familiar with the worldviews and messages in the books, films, and TV shows effecting a primarily Young Adult audience, I offer the following excerpts from some recent reviews. Keep in mind that my main goal is to look at how the story reflects and shapes the readers' worldview. Click on the title links for the full reviews.

[“The Day Miley Couldn’t Stop”:](#)

“The people in the audience bought her music, so clearly the worldview in the song was not an issue. The VMA’s were even giving a nod of approval to the song by having it performed live. For better or worse, Miley took the song seriously. She lived out on the stage what was apparently “the good life.” She was being liberated! And then all the people who helped to put her on the stage judged her when the very song they love specifically said only God could do that. I think I know why: it was painfully obvious to everyone that what she embodied in those two songs was not a good life at all.”

Neil Gaiman’s [The Ocean at the End of the Lane](#):

“The [Ocean at the End of the Lane](#) lingers with me. There is something here that taps into our deepest hopes and fears. At the heart of Gaiman’s mythic world a conflict rages between destruction and creation, between hope and fear, between the rapidly receding innocence of childhood and the encroaching reality of life.”

Stephen King’s [Under The Dome: A Mid-Season Perspective](#):

“[Under The Dome](#) takes yet another look at what happens when people are given a chance to be themselves. Societal structures keep our collective evil in check; what happens when we are released from the obligation to conform to the moral expectations of those around us? Though the current series is not as good as the book (published in 2009), King’s stories are good enough to translate onto the screen, and the series is [crushing the summer competition](#).”

[The Wolverine: Of Dark Roads, Monsters, and Men](#):

“There’s a lot I like about Wolverine. He can’t seem to walk away from injustice, and nothing deters him. He’s Jack Reacher with claws and virtual immortality. I just wish his moral compass was more encompassing, his newly acquired sense of purpose had a deeper foundation than a fleeting romantic fling, and a light other than the gleam of berserker rage could shine into the the darkness of his soul.”

[Elysium: Fighting For Paradise](#):

“Though Blomkamp uses clear Christian imagery (Max’s enemies pierce his side and his

hands; blood flows over his fingertips as he stumbles down his own Via Dolorosa, his own way of suffering on the way to his death), Max is less a savior and more a tragic hero akin to Tolkien's Boromir : noble in the end in spite of his flaws; selfless when it really matters; ultimately committed to doing what he was made to do even if it kills him."

A review of [Joseph Finder's YA novel-now-movie Paranoia](#):

"When I saw previews for the movie version of Paranoia a couple weeks ago, I thought, 'I believe I read that book last winter. Something about a self-centered jerk who got caught in the middle of corporate espionage between even bigger self-centered jerks, and I didn't really care what happened to him or anyone else at the end.' Yep, that was the one."

Entertainment and Worldviews: **6/9/13**

For those who would like to be familiar with the worldviews and messages in the books, films, and TV shows effecting a primarily Young Adult audience, I offer the following excerpts from some of my recent reviews. Keep in mind that my main goal is to look at how the story reflects and shapes the readers' worldview. Click on the title links for the full reviews.

[Star Trek Into Darkness](#):

Star Trek Into Darkness seems to give a nod to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness not only in its title but in the journey through the moral murkiness that lurks in even the best of us. The book is primarily about the twilight of souls unable to see the light of morality, goodness and virtue. The movie highlights the fact that it's not the galactic space around us that is the true final frontier of undiscovered country. It's the moral space within us.

[Django Unchained:](#)

Whenever people pursue revenge rather than justice, they cannot help but enter into darkness. Yes, the world is full of ethical dilemmas, but both the ends and the means matter. When a clever, talented director makes a film that inclines us to cheer for blood-splattered revenge, even the audience enters into a darkness that goes beyond the dimming of theater lights. By the time the credits rolled, the only light that shone into the midnight of moral nihilism was the light flickering from a burning mansion.

[Horns \(a YA novel by Joe Hill, son of Stephen King\):](#)

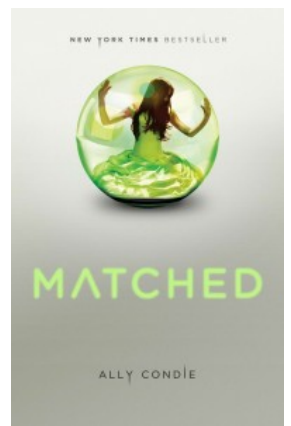
The inner front and back covers of the book quote a line from a Rolling Stones song about the devil: "Pleased to meet you; hope you guess my name." It wasn't too difficult. In Horns, says the LA Times, "we watch a devil learn how to be one" in a story that shows "respect for the tradition of Satan as anti-hero, tale-teller and trickster...fire and brimstone have never looked this good."

[Oblivion:](#)

Salon.com's review noted that "Oblivion is a technical triumph rather than a philosophical breakthrough." Indeed. We are more than our biology. We are also more than our memories. Even combining those two things perfectly would not mean the original had been restored. There is something about who we are that transcends biology and bytes. We have compelling reasons to believe that our personal identity cannot be reduced to inexplicable complexity arising from biological and chemical machinery.

Entertainment and Worldviews: 3/16/13

For those who would like to be familiar with the [worldviews](#) and [messages](#) in the [books](#), [films](#), and [TV shows](#) effecting a primarily Young Adult audience, I offer the following excerpts from some of my recent reviews. Keep in mind that my main goal is to look at how the story reflects and shapes the readers' worldview. Click on the title links for the full reviews.



#1. Ally Condie's Matched Trilogy

“There is a lot to like about this series. Mrs. Condie honors family, tradition, integrity, imagination, creativity, loyalty, bravery, friendship, commitment... It’s quite a list. I do find it interesting, however, that when she writes a story without religion, she also writes a story that is quite bleak. Close to the end of the series, Cassia concludes: ‘But I also know we can’t plan on anyone else rescuing us. We have to do it ourselves. There can be no one Pilot. We have to be strong enough to go without the belief that someone can sweep down and save us.’

It’s all up to us. We must save ourselves. That sounds noble, but the story’s conclusion shows the barren hope that humanity has to offer. In the end, the Rising will become the society, much like the rebellion in [The Hunger Games](#). Sure, Ky and Cassia have each other, but their love is one small candle in an sweeping darkness. It may warm their hearts, but not the world.”

#2. [Beautiful Creatures](#) (This review focuses on the book, not the film.)

“The beginning of [Beautiful Creatures](#) quotes Martin Luther King Jr.: ‘Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.’ Lena has brought on a storm because of her power, but she may yet blow the darkness away as the series unfolds. As of now, the clouds don’t look like they will be going away any time soon. [Beautiful Creatures](#) does offer some light, but I’m not sure it shines brightly enough for those who need to be truly set free from the darkness that lurks inside us all.”

#3. [The Paperboy](#) (It’s not geared toward a YA audience, but I guarantee you a lot of them are watching it.)

“I’ve seen movies and read stories with a lot of darkness before. When done well, they simply set up the brilliance of the light. This story has a wealth of redemptive potential. When that many people have that many dark sins, a gold mine of hope awaits. It’s too bad nobody knew how dig for that kind of treasure. I kept waiting for someone to change for the better, for someone to embrace a new kind of life, for someone to find light, life and hope.

But then the credits rolled as the final scene took the movie home: Jack driving a boat out of a swamp, accompanied by the dead bodies of two people he tried to save but couldn’t. [The Paperboy](#) may have peeled back a facade of evil, but I’m not sure that what we see underneath is any different.”

#4. [Warm Bodies](#) (both the book and the movie)

“I think it’s the best a strongly humanist story has to offer. Isaac Marion is not a fan of religion, and his book reflects a world that relies on people to save themselves. I liked that he wasn’t naïve about the ugly side of human nature. I was impressed by his critique of our shallow culture. And if I had to choose something that people do to change the world, I would vote for genuine love and compassion too.

Having said that, I was frustrated by an ending that could have brilliantly pointed to a much bigger Savior, but settled for an emergent force that somehow resurrects us from our own nihilistic path. That’s the dead part in a story that otherwise felt oddly alive. Perhaps that a place where those of us who believe in Resurrection can explain what a different ending looks like.”

If you are looking for more websites that offer good resources on entertainment, I recommend [Cinemagogue](#), [Plugged In](#), [Always Have a Reason](#), [Another Ascending Lark](#), and [The Poached Egg](#).