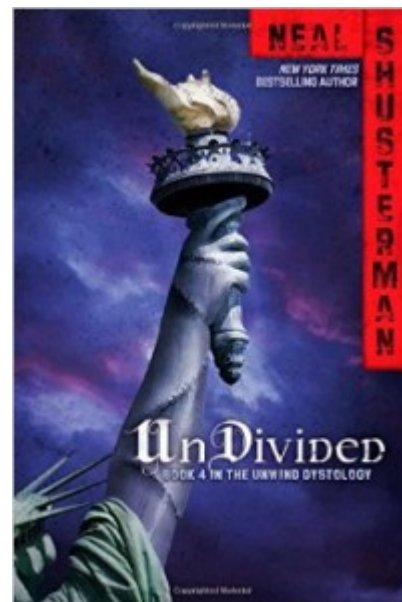


Neil Shusterman and the Unwinding of the World

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 \(Summer, 2014\)](#)

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 links for the full review. Your feedback is welcome!

[Dawn of the Planet of the Apes](#)

"In places like Northern Ireland and the Middle East, we see this allegory unfold in the real world. People on both sides have stories to tell that explain their fear and hatred. Peace seems like the obvious answer, but if the other side sees overtures of peace as a weakness that lets them wage war, those who seek peace bring destruction on themselves and everyone they love."

[True Detective](#)

"I've heard it said that the reason we can portray evil with such depth and nuance is that we understand it. We don't know how to portray goodness with the same clarity because we don't understand it. We know what it's like to give in to the worst angels of our nature; the better angels seem to hover just off our shoulder. True Detective understands evil both horrific and ordinary. What True Detective fails to provide is an equally compelling look at the goodness needed to counter it."

[Maleficent: A Fairy Tale for our Times](#)

“The closing narration describes Maleficent as both hero and villain. Isn’t that true of all of us? King David was an adulterer and a “man after God’s own heart”; Peter was Christ’s most blatant betrayer before he became one of his most ardent defenders. Paul killed Christians before he became one himself. Boromir gave his life to make up for his lust for the Ring. Is this not the human condition? Maleficent is neither an apostle nor a warrior of Rohan, but she is one in whom the battle between good and evil rages. She faltered, but she finished well.”

[X-Men:Days of Future Past](#)

“The war within the characters rages more intensely than the war around them. Magneto can choose a better path if he so desires. The goodness in Raven can overcome the anger in Mystique. The cavalier, young, self-centered Xavier can choose to become a better man. And the Wolverine we saw in Origins and First Class can, in fact, cage the animal. People may not choose their nature, but on any given day they can choose whom - or what - they will serve.”

[Edge of Tomorrow \(All You Need Is Kill\)](#)

“The movie is pretty good in it’s own right. However, the screenwriters should have stuck with the book when they wrote the ending. True, the book does not have a happy ending, but the sense of nobility, sacrifice and commitment is much deeper. And check out J.W. Wartick’s post on both the book and the movie: [‘Truth, Human Nature and Sacrifice.’](#)”

[Atheism: A Reader](#)

I recently I went to a local bookstore in search of a book that would give me a solid overview of the atheistic worldview. [Atheism: A Reader](#) happened to featured prominently. It is handily divided into eight sections that offer a broad

range of atheistic objections to Christianity with representations from various eras of history and areas of expertise. I will provide a very brief (and hopefully fair) summary of the sections and essays before offering some comments at the end.

“Some Overviews”

- Thomas Huxley notes that “The agnostic says, ‘I cannot find good evidence that so and so is true.’”
- Leslie Stephen basically agrees with the definition, because “there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence.”
- Emma Goldman writes that since all religions are based in fear and ignorance and developed by people who are not that bright, atheism is a boon to mankind, a “dissolution of the phantoms of the beyond; the light of reason has dispelled the theistic nightmare.”
- Carl Von Doren agrees that religions give no good reason for anyone to accept any of them.

“A Refutation of Deism”

- Percy Shelley claims that “design must be proved before a designer can be inferred.” Since this cannot be shown, positing a Creator is unwarranted.
- A.J. Ayer rejects the Argument from Design because it could allow for multiple creators, does not require an eternal deity, and needs a creator outside of time, which seems difficult at best.
- Robert Ingersoll’s refutation of Deism can be summarized in two key questions: Why did God apparently create so many defective things? And why did a good and wise God create so much evil?
- Bertrand Russell addresses a number of the arguments for God, but he focuses on the link between morality and God. He claims that Christians think they are the only ones who can be moral, then highlights bad Christians throughout history.

“The Immortality Myth”

- Lucretius claimed that a belief in the afterlife detracts from our ability to taking this life seriously.
- Mill noted there is no proof of an afterlife; he believes people have made

it up because they don't want to give up life.

- Antony Flew does not think a belief in the afterlife can overcome a “universally known universal truth: ‘All men are mortal.’” He dismisses three competing theories of the afterlife (Reconstructionist, Astral Body, and Platonic-Cartesian) because they fail to provide him with proof.

“The Natural History of Religious Belief”

- Hume contends that people have created the gods in their image.
- George Eliot offers twenty pages of an extended *ad hominem* attack on a Dr. Cummings, a representative of all people of faith, who is characterized by “small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity.”
- Charles Bradlaugh believes that history proves the sciences succeed “solely in measure of the rejection of the Christian theory.”
- Anatoles France clearly states that no evidence will be sufficient to prove a miracle.

“Religion and Science”

- Darwin begins the section by highlighting three issues that moved him to agnosticism: the unconvincing nature of the traditional arguments for God, the problem of pain, and the unreliability of the testimony of Scripture.
- Nietzsche suggests that Christianity hates science because science competes with the church for cultural domination. This morphs into, “Christianity has the rancor of the sick at its very core.”
- H.L. Mencken picks up Nietzsche's torch by declaring religious organizations to be “conspiracies of the inferior man against his betters...” with a “congenital hatred for knowledge.”
- Carl Sagan notes that religion, which is not proven by science, is a “delusion based on common brain wiring and chemistry.”

“Religion and Ethics”

This section makes basically the same argument in every essay: atheists can be moral and religious people can be immoral; therefore, one does not need religion to be moral. H.P. Lovecraft acknowledges that there are some good effects that

stem from Christianity, a favor that the other essayists do not extend.

“Religion and the State”

- Spinoza argues that religions are based on fear.
- W.E.H. Lecky makes a solid analysis of how the rise of a secular state is inevitable.
- Robert Ingersoll gives an extended argument that our founders did not intend religion to be part of our nation’s government. The people must declare right and wrong; their will must be supreme law.
- Clarence Darrow attacks by criticizing laws concerning observation of the Sabbath.
- Gore Vidal calls monotheism “the great unmentionable evil at the core of our culture,” then presents a conspiracy theory about a “sky-god totalitarian state” which would make Dan Brown proud.

“Religion and Society”

- Christianity degrades women (“The Christian Church and Women”).
- Christianity purposefully perpetuates ignorance through religious instruction (“The Priest and the Child”).
- Christianity taps into unused sexual energy to convince people they have touched the divine (“Religion and Sex”).

I was disappointed by this reader. I was expecting erudite, lucid, compelling arguments for atheism. I was looking forward to a robust intellectual challenge. What I got was a smorgasbord of informal fallacies and ferocious *ad hominem* attacks. I’ve had much more challenging (and enjoyable) conversations at the local microbrewery with my atheist friends.

The atheism presented in this book effectively points out the hypocrisy and shortcomings in religious people. That point is incontestable. However, I felt that it provided little in terms of a constructive argument *for* atheism. One should apparently be an atheist because religious people are stupid, evil, delusional and full of fear - which is supposed to lead us to the conclusion that not being religious will make one smart, good, entirely rational, and not full of fear.

This clearly does not follow. Atheist closets have skeletons in their closets too. Nietzsche, who railed on Christians as lunatics, wrote much of his work in an asylum. George Eliot, vociferous in her hatred of specific Christians, reaffirmed religion quite strongly by the end of her life. Antony Flew, hero of the atheistic crowd for decades and one of the few writers chosen who is still alive, became a Deist before his death. Carl Sagan, who mocks demon-haunted worlds, firmly believes in alien-populated universes. Madelyn Murray O'Hare is apparently the embarrassing secret of the movement due to her unrelenting racism and overall rudeness.

It turns out that while atheism is good at being critical of the failures in others, it has succumbed to many of the same failures itself. This neither proves Christianity nor disproves atheism. It does, however, highlight that people remain people no matter which worldview claims their allegiance. The argument is not about whether some people are delusional, or petty, or mean, or irrational, or hypocritical. I think that's a given. The question is if Christianity or atheism is true. "A Refutation of Deism" at least brought up some topics into which we can sink our philosophical teeth: the argument from design, the presence of evil and the nature and grounding of morality. Other than that, the engagement on the level of truth was frustratingly sparse.

If you are looking for a primer that confirms your feeling that religious people are idiots, this book will do it. For that matter, if you want a book that confirms your feeling that atheist arguments are shallow and petty, this book will do it. If you are a Christian or non-Christian who is not content with that kind of knee-jerk reaction - if you want to think about the worldviews and the people on both sides of this issue fairly - look for a different book, one that challenges with serious thought and rigorous scholarship.

[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.”