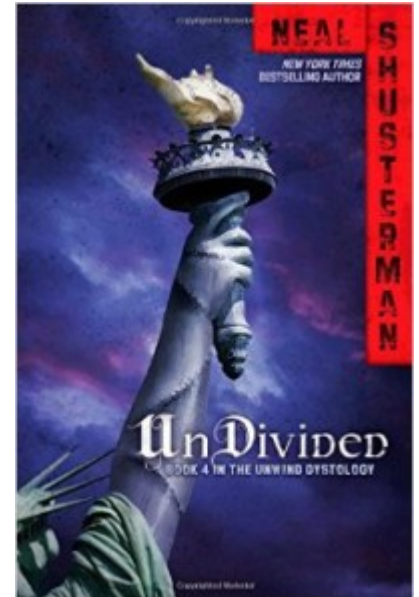


# Neil Shusterman and the Unwinding of the World

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.