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The Importance of Providing Challenging Materials to Students

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During my very first school visit as an author, a teacher nervously shoved a thick stack of papers across a table at me. He gave a terse smile and then explained that he had not given his students *Anger Is a Gift* to read. Not only that, he had not brought any of them to the event, either. Instead, he made a photocopy of the scene in which Moss asks his mother, Wanda, if he can go on his very first date with another boy. “I asked my students whether or not it was realistic for a mother to let her son do this,” he said, tapping the stack of copies. “Their thoughts are written on the back.” He then handed me another set of pages. “And these are all the mistakes in grammar and spelling I found [in your book]. You should probably have your publisher check for these.”

I was struck instantly by how far from home I was—my publisher

had graciously sent me to a pre-publication event where I got to meet with students who had luckily been able to read *Anger Is a Gift* as an advance reader copy. I didn’t know a single person in that room. So I thanked him and moved on as quickly as I could.

Later, I read through the essays, and most of his students recognized the biased framing of the assignment. I particularly enjoyed the student who wrote that they knew their teacher wasn’t going to read this, so they instead crafted an essay on why Bulbasaur was such a good starter Pokémon. Still, the moment shook me. If this was my first school visit, what would the others be like? Just two weeks prior, at my very first appearance at a librarian conference, a librarian derailed the LGBTQ YA panel I was on to publicly deride me for writing a book that wasn’t

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pro-metal detectors. She had not even read *Anger Is a Gift*, but still felt compelled to challenge my book, to call it dangerous and thoughtless. She later followed me around the conference to the point where I had to hide in the restroom.

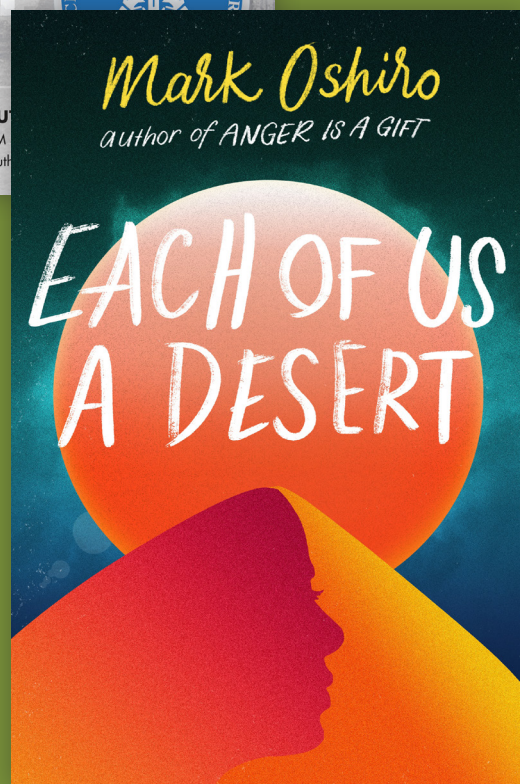
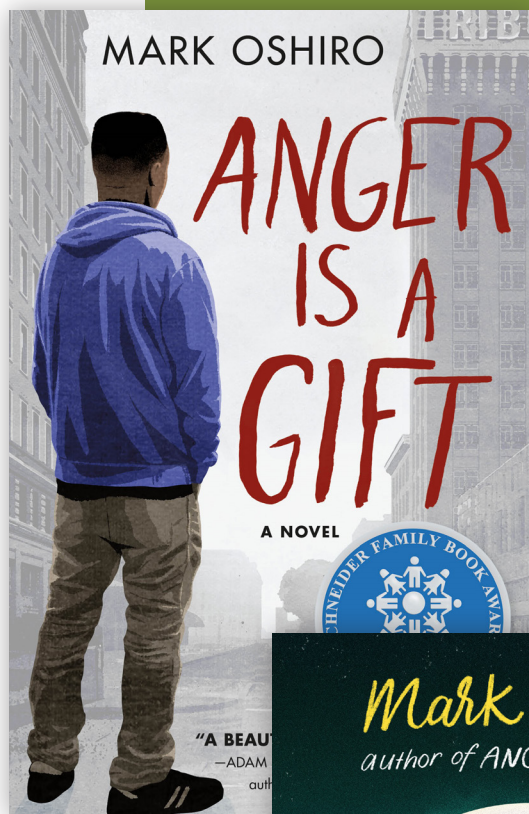
Anger has been out for over two years, and I’ve lost count of how many visits I’ve done. And with just one exception—oddly not far from where

my first visit took place—I have never had pushback from a student on my book. Kids will ask insightful, difficult questions, make no mistake. They have challenged me time and time again about what I wrote, and I welcome that. Why? Because unlike the man at my first school visit, they ask *questions*. Often, something in the book made them uncomfortable, and they're struggling to find out *why* that is.

Take the kid who truly did push back against it. He thought the book was unfair against police officers. I asked him if there was someone in the service in his family; he said his father. I did my best to explain my intentions in writing a book about police brutality that is unflinching, that does not turn away from some of the uglier parts. When I was done, he said something I haven't forgotten: that while he may not ever like my book, he finally understood why I wrote it. "I don't think I've ever heard your side of the story before," he said.

As a creator, can you really ask for anything more?

We underestimate our youth. We hear this all the time: that giving them "challenging" stories is not good for them. Students should not be uncomfortable when they read, and they certainly shouldn't be exposed to the darker parts of the human condition. Exposure to these ideas is dangerous, unfair, and—I've heard this, too—immoral. Any material, though, can be taught with care, with compassion, with love, with empathy. The problem I see with this logic, though, is how many *students* it leaves in the dark. What about the kids who are dealing with racism? With police brutality? Who are struggling with the effects of PTSD, like Moss does in *Anger*? What about teens dealing with depression? When adults tell students that they shouldn't read about "challenging" topics, it sends



a disturbing message: If your *life* is a “challenging” topic, you shouldn’t share that either.

I have sympathy for anyone who bristles at teaching disturbing or challenging content because it hits too close to home, and I’ve come across kids who struggled to get through *Anger* for that reason. Fiction that is crafted from a traumatic place will always toe that line, but when I think about the teacher at that event? Or that librarian? Or the countless adults who have pushed back against kids reading my work or the work of anyone who writes about challenging subject matter? None of those adults were talking about protecting kids *already* traumatized. Those kind of students were afterthoughts at *best*.

What I fear is that some educators wish these topics—and the students

actually affected by them—to remain afterthoughts, both out of sight and out of mind. If they can ignore them, so will their students. As an author I can take the hit to my ego if someone does not like my work. What I resent is at the heart of the two examples above. Do these educators truly have such a low perception of their students? Do they believe that children cannot think for themselves? Or perhaps it is more that they wish an insidious thing upon them: the desire to control what they believe, especially if that belief might challenge the current system the *adults* are in charge of.

We need to believe in the brilliance of youth rather than assume the worst. They’ll soon get the message if we don’t: that we don’t think they are capable at all. And I would like to imagine a much less cynical future.

Mark Oshiro is the Hugo-nominated writer of the online *Mark Does Stuff* universe (*Mark Reads* and *Mark Watches*), where they analyze books and TV series. Their debut novel, *Anger Is a Gift*, won the 2019 Schneider Family Book Award and was nominated for a 2019 Lammy Award. Their forthcoming novel *Each of Us a Desert* will be published in September 2020. When they are not working they engage in social activism online and offline. Their lifelong goal is to pet every dog in the world. Please visit them online at www.MarkOshiro.com and follow them on social @markdoesstuff.



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