

# No to Age Banding

## Authors' and Illustrators' comments

... the neat sorting-out of books into age ranges, so dear to publishers, has only a very sketchy relation with the habits of any real readers. Those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us. No reader worth his salt trots along in obedience to a time-table.

*CS Lewis* (1952 essay On three ways of writing for children, collected in *Of Other Worlds* (latest edition, Harvest Books 2002)

Thanks to Madeline Wheatley who alerted us to this passage.

When I was a child I read books far too old for me and sometimes far too young for me. Every reading child is different. Introduce them to the love of reading, show them the way to the library and let them get on with it. The space between the young readers eyeballs and the printed page is a holy place and officialdom should trample all over it at their peril.

*Terry Pratchett*

Age banding is a practice that insults both book and reader, and attacks the root of literature.

*Alan Garner*

I think the idea of age banding is an insidious spin-off from the control-freak state. The only book I have ever disclosed an age in is *The Voices of Silence* where the Romanian heroine Flora becomes 13 in the story. Otherwise - never. I once went to a secondary school in East London to talk about my 'Kitty' stories. Why? Because 80 per cent of the kids had English as a second language and the ideas within my stories were not childish, even though the language was accessible to them. Imagine those great big 12-14 year olds picking up a book with 7+ branded on the front! It's a monstrous idea.

*Bel Mooney*

As a writer and a parent, I find this proposal unnecessary and potentially harmful. Biological categories for readership is a dumb idea which will potentially put various readers off books that they may find interesting.

*Andrew Morton*

When I sit down to write a book, I know several things about it: I know roughly how long it will be, I know some of the events in the story, I know a little about some of the characters, I know - without knowing quite how I'll get to it - what tone of voice I want the narrative to be cast in.

But there are several things I don't know, and one of those is who will read it. You simply can't decide who your readership will be. Nor do I want to, because declaring that it's for any group in particular means excluding every other group, and I don't want to exclude anybody. Every reader is welcome, and I want my books to say so. Like some other writers, I avoid giving the age of my characters for that reason. I want every child to feel they can befriend them.

*Philip Pullman, in [The Guardian](#)*

On the age banding, from what I can figure out, the subtext of all this seems to be, in the UK more and more books are being sold through supermarkets. People in supermarkets don't have to know anything about what they're selling. They just need to know where to put it on the shelves. If publishers put colour-coded age bands on the books, indicating which books are for 7+ and which for 9+ and which for 11+, then supermarkets will order more books because they won't have to

think about putting them out. And after all, the shelf-stackers don't need to know anything about dish-soap to sell that, so what makes books special?

*Neil Gaiman, in [his Journal](#)*

As a children's author, I've always been firmly opposed to this — I don't think it's necessary; I think it treats the public like morons; and I also think it's a move towards censorship, giving publishers and booksellers more power than I think it's healthy for them to have. I think the reading of a book is a very personal experience, and it should be the right of every reader (or every reader's parent or teacher or librarian) to choose a book that they believe is suitable for them on an individual level.

*Darren Shan (read the rest of [his statement](#))*

I myself have gone to considerable trouble never to put the age of a single child protagonist in any one of all my fifty books for children of all ages. I don't want a child not to feel he or she can identify because he's 'too young' or 'too old.' I know the age range of children who read each title because most of my books have been in print for years. It's far too wide a range for any useful stickering.

*Anne Fine*

As an illustrator of picture books my work already suffers from people thinking their children are too old for the books just because they have pictures in them. This ill-conceived proposal alarmed me at the time and I am so glad that others have raised a voice against it. It is a marketing ploy that is doomed to failure but may also damage the market.

*Jackie Morris*

The way to get children to read, to learn, to ENGAGE with the world, is to let them discover the delight of it in their own way, at their own pace, and to make the opportunities for that discovery as varied and pleasurable as possible. Age banding is just another way to drain the joy out of reading, another reason for a child to pick up a book and not read it - surely that isn't what we want?

*Nicola Davies*

Last month my latest book came out. There was a queue of people of all ages down the pavement and the bookshop was packed as soon as the doors were opened. I did a reading and saw children, teenagers, and people old enough to be their parents, grandparents and great grandparents. I loved this lack of barriers. And then I heard about age banding.

The first sensation was shock. ... These stories are mine. To have someone, in a way, take possession of them and prevent them from being read (because that is what age banding will do) is heartbreaking. If age banding goes ahead, I don't feel I could write another book for young people. What is the point of working all hours if at the end of it one's publisher alienates certain people from reading it?

*MM*

It is all so confusing. I've just had (Title) published. The publisher's website says it's for the 9-12 age bracket, the catalogue puts it in Young Adults, and the next book in the series, it is proposed, will be 11+

*Author*

I have just seen a copy of (Author)'s new book and am struck by how prominent the TEEN label is on the back. MUCH more noticeable than the price or his website address - actually, it's FOUR TIMES as big as his website address, the same thickness as the bar code, written in thick

white block text on a black background so that you see it very clearly indeed. Not quite the teeny weeny unobtrusive thing that we were led to believe....

*Author*

Once, speaking some years ago, I referred to one of my books as being for 'younger children.' Afterwards, a girl of fourteen came up to me looking deeply embarrassed to say that she had read all my other 'older' books and just come across this one and read it and enjoyed it very much. She seemed to feel that there must be something wrong with her that she had. Of course I reassured her but it taught me a lesson: never to put restrictions on a book and try to dictate who should read it. It is one way to lose readers.

*JL*

A number of years ago, I was doing a talk to Year 6 children. I was describing some of my books and was foolish enough to age-band them. I held up my (Title) stories and stated, 'These are for children who are seven-plus.' I will never forget the look of horror on the children's faces, but I had no idea what I'd said. At the end of the session, the children's teacher came up to me and told me that she'd been using the books as class readers but there was no way any of her students would touch them after what I'd said. My session had barely finished before she was being asked why they were reading 'baby books'. It taught me a lesson. After that, I NEVER age-banded, or age-grouped my books when I did talks. I just talk about the stories and possibly the story length and leave it at that. It seems to me that age- grouping the books as 5+, 7+, 9+, 11+ and teen is going down the same ill-advised route.

*MB*

No self respecting child or young adult would ever be seen with something marked for someone younger under their arm - so great wealths of really brilliant books would be lost to them.

*Author*

This issue has appeared and disappeared several times over the years, and it is fair to consider it from time to time, but I have yet to find a single author in favour of it. Further, when I took a straw poll at my Hay Festival Event, 90% of the audience of readers, parents, schoolchildren and others were against it. ... Finally, on a personal note, half of the emails I receive are from adult fans. I don't want to lose these fans and publishers shouldn't want to lose the sales. Do they think a 29 year old would still buy my book carrying a 13+ label? I'm not so sure they would.

*Author*

I was doing a signing of my book (Title). My publishers' proposal about this book is to designate it 'YA'. (It is a fairly complex one and quite seriously philosophical). During the signing I was accosted by a mother with her nine-year-old son. The mother spent some minutes upbraiding me for writing such a difficult book. She had tried it herself, she said, and couldn't make head or tail of it. Eventually her nine-year-old interrupted her, saying, 'Take no notice of her. She doesn't use her brain.' He and I then went on to discuss the book, which he had understood perfectly and enjoyed enormously. He had enjoyed particularly, he said, 'having my mind stretched open'. It seems to me that, had this book been age banded then, this mother would never have bought it and her boy would have missed an experience he obviously needed. My objection to the whole silly business of age banding is that it leaves children even more powerless than they are already. They ought to be allowed to look at and into a book and choose it for THEMSELVES, since many adults - as witness that mother - are wholly incompetent to do so. The idea that age banding would 'help' adults to choose in fact entails the exact opposite. And I don't think it would help most children at all.

A further point about the matter was made by an American publisher friend of mine, who said that most of the books labelled as beyond the pale for children and therefore as YA were in fact read

by eleven and twelve year olds. Perhaps it is worth suggesting to the publishers making this mad proposal that their scheme could well deprive them of large sales to the upper age ranges of children.

*Author*

Most of my work has been known as being for young children. My graphic novel (Title) was intended for an older audience. But, it has been banded for a young audience by the publisher, thinking that is my only audience. Many adults continue to collect even my children's books. The graphic novel has had a good reception but has met with some reviewers stating it is too old for the age given, and I fear it has been overlooked for the young adult audience due to the age appropriate tag put on it by the publisher. So many ages have bought the book at my book signings - from 8 to adult - and I hate that the publisher is determining who it should be marketed to, rather than letting the readers decide what they want to read. Trying to approach a broader audience cannot help but introduce the work to more types and ages of people. It would seem to make sense that limiting the target group also limits the possibilities of sales.

*MH*

I have just submitted a ms to (Editor) and if age banding goes ahead there will be no more. Sad, but as a parent, ex-teacher and writer I am so deeply against this policy. All my titles straddle about three of the age bands, and with most teenagers finding out about me through school I'll be 'banned' from many classrooms currently using my books. (My editor) and I have often discussed how books should just be books - there for anyone to read - so it was gutting to read in black and white that she is so in favour of the 'research'.

*Author*

During my school visit, one of the boys brought up the subject of age banding and asked my opinion. I said I thought it was disrespectful to young people and asked him for his opinion. 'I'm against it,' he said. There was a murmur of agreement from the other boys. So I suggested we put it to the vote, and since there were obviously so many of them against age banding I suggested that those in favour raise their arms. Three voted for it and one of them said, 'I'm only putting my hand up because I want to ask you another question.' I relayed this incident to my editor/director at (Publisher) and told her I thought her original scepticism had been spot on. I have received no reply.

I have been staggered to find how few teachers know what's going on. When I have told them they have been horrified.

*Author*

My concern is that their research with children appears to always take place in groups. I am surprised that they aren't aware of the peer pressure children are under when they are in public.

*Author*

It doesn't really make me want to write another book for young people if 75% of my readers are going to be dissuaded from even picking it up.

*Author*

I am exactly the kind of author whom this will affect most. I write a lot of early reader material and in quite a few cases my series written for six/seven year olds are used in lower secondary. Much of the discussion so far has focussed on average readers where the issue is slightly less critical, but for the large numbers of struggling readers it has the potential to be a much more damaging exercise.

*RI*

The fact that the marketing end of publishing has such little respect for both reader and author is quite shocking.

*JM*

I pointed out that in the previous 10 days I had spoken to readers of 10/11 years, 14 years and 16/17 years... about the SAME books. I haven't yet met a single teacher or librarian in favour of age-banding so who are these marketing experts?

*BN*

It is a walk away situation for me, this age banding - no way will I agree to it.

*Author*

My editor is ambitious. She's not going to forfeit her upward climb within a large corporation. Books are about sales, not children. I feel I'm fumbling now - not sure where I'll land up - but with a hunch that my days with (Publisher) are almost over.

*Author*

Sigh. The feeling that they all need a good kicking is neither charitable nor great-souled, but seems, frankly, quite appropriate.

*NG*

I think any intelligent person knows how easy it is to slant a survey. Also I still maintain that the whole thing shows the low respect in which publishers hold their authors. I think this whole thing may be more damaging to the author and publisher relationship than I had imagined. I already hate my publishers. Well, maybe hate is too strong a word, but am frustrated that they are so led by the marketing dept.

*Author*

I don't think they care if we live or die.

*Author*

We have never had any consultation, let alone full consultation regarding any book we have written or illustrated ... We have had an agent speak regarding our concern with a most recent book...They ignored our concern and did what their committee thought best.

*Joint authors*

I am shocked to hear how few people were used in this research and how they were questioned and I think it is vital that this information is made public because until your email I was still under the impression that it involved thousands of people and over a period of years. In fact, I wonder if all the publishers know this information themselves. Could it be possible that some of them have had the wool pulled over their eyes too?

And as for the remark from (Publisher) complaining about the time it was taking her to cope with the protests from authors! How on earth does she expect her authors to work on a new book with the thought hanging over their heads that the very story they might be researching, writing, re-writing etc is about to have 75% of its readership alienated? What is the point of going without sleep etc to write a story if people are going to be prevented from reading it!

*Author*

I've just been working with year 8 children in Wales, kids who are in the bottom set and falling by the wayside educationally. I used my (named series) books in my workshops to help them

with creative non fiction writing. They responded really well to the books, and used them to model their own writing. I'll have to put sticking plaster on the back if they get age-banded. These are the kids who need the most support and encouragement to read, who stand to lose the most from not reading and gain the most from becoming readers. These are the kids who will be discouraged and humiliated by the age banding on the very books that could start them on the road to a more successful education, and a more intellectually fulfilled life.

This makes me so cross! As if there weren't enough struggles with kids education as it is.

*ND*

I was visualising a group of marketing people and publishers sitting at a long table all earnestly discussing age banding on humorous books for children, and separating them into compartments of visual and verbal humour. I could hear one of them saying, 'Should the content of the visual humour in this book be age banded for 5+ or 9+? Should the verbal humour in this book be be 7+ or 11+? Does slapstick come under 8+? And dry humour and puns come under 10+?'

*Author*

I have a fair degree of standing as an author and illustrator of picture books, but not so much with regards to fiction. My second short illustrated novel for children has just recently been to press. A few days before it did I received a letter outlining the age-banding plans. I immediately voiced my opinion that I was not comfortable with the idea. My editors basically commiserated, implying that it was out of their hands, which is, I believe, exactly how many editors are feeling. ... I was particularly uncomfortable since these titles have a very hazy approach regarding age range, straddling not only different levels of complexity in theme, but also the boundaries between picture book and novel. It has considerably coloured my reaction to seeing the first copies in print... I don't want it! The covers of my books invite a wide range of readers. If a sixteen year old were to pick it up and see the 9+ they might put it down again thinking it's for younger readers.

*Author*

I had a fast one pulled on me. My editor rang up and told me that in future all books were to be age banded - it was a new rule with all publishers, and that I had no choice except to decide which age group each of my books were to be placed in. I was then sent a list of my books with suggested age groups for each. I was multiply unhappy because the bandings were gross and went up in stages of two years; very few of my books fitted the proposed age bands; I was well aware that the age any child could read and appreciate a given book varied widely from child to child and from book to book; I saw that adults would ignorantly buy books on the age banding advice, which would mean that most children would be given books too young for them and not be allowed, and would never read, books for which they were quite ready; I found the proposal unpleasantly coercive; I was currently working on a book with two point-of-view characters, one of whom was middle aged and the other a child. To age band this struck me, and still strikes me, as impossible.

I made mild protests, tried suggesting all my books should be banded 7+, then realised that this would result in nobody wanting to read them and was not sure what to do. I was rescued from this unhappiness by my agent, who phoned to ask me why I was submitting to this bullying.

*Author*

I was appalled at how amateur the 'research' process was for such a huge decision.

*Author*

I've been against age banding from the start but was still surprised at how strongly I disliked seeing my book branded in this way. (The publisher) has been very apologetic about not consulting me and assured me the age will be removed on a second printing.

*Author/Illustrator*

Their research immediately reminded me of a story that an American friend told me about how US newspapers conducted their war 'research'. They would ask the readers: 'Are you in favour of invading Iraq in: 1) six days, 2) six weeks or 3) six months?'

Since there is no option to answer 'never', the papers can happily report that 65% of the public favours invasion in six months.

*Author*

My publishers, front-runners on this whole age-banding madness, have finally agreed not to age-band my books - but only after I said I would leave (publisher) thereafter. But I'm still not delighted because it isn't about me and my books: as a special needs teacher I work hard to instill a love for reading in every child I teach. How can I be part of an establishment that, if it has its way, will force me to present one of my most dyslexic pupils, a ferociously bright 14 year old with terribly low self-esteem, with a book that says 6+ on the cover?

*Author*

What gets me is how very LITTLE they seem to know about their own authors' lives and concerns.

*Author*

It's just the big boys and girls isn't it? But publishing houses take their tone from the top. I'm sure relationships between writers and publishers in general have never been so bad, even though personal relations with editors might be good.

*Author*

"Consultation" is a word that continues to be put forward by the Publishers' Association. If this is their idea of consultation, then we should be very wary.

*Author*

I was particularly saddened to hear some arguments that have been put forward during the past weeks as being described as "hysterical". "Passionate" is a word I would prefer to have used and what's wrong with being passionate about an issue that matters greatly? And remember, despite some alternative voices, the majority of UK children's authors are against age banding.

Will the issue go away? I don't think so.

*Author*

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