

## Coe Booth, the Protector

An Interview with L. M. Quraishi  
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*Going through is the way out. Ya gotta get the Haagen Daz and go through the whole thing.*  
— Coe Booth

Author Coe Booth’s latest novel, *Caprice*, has been described as a healing novel about childhood sexual abuse, written with “extreme sensitivity and honesty.” Her degree in psychology and background working with teens and families in crisis, as well as her experience as a Professor of Creative Writing in Hamline University’s MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults, made me eager to get her thoughts on the alchemy of pain in children’s literature. She spoke to me over Zoom from her hometown of the Bronx about how people resist processing trauma: “People are feeling like they are going to lose themselves to overwhelming grief or sorrow. They feel like they are going to die if they let themselves feel the full effect of what has happened to them. It’s like a death of self that they fear.” Reminded of the Western story beat named the “whiff of death” by *Save the Cat!* author Blake Snyder—a moment when the threat or reality of death reminds readers of the story stakes—we immediately turned to the ways story can help people metabolize trauma.

Trauma is an adaptive response that helps us survive extreme and horrible experiences of powerlessness. Once we’ve escaped traumatizing circumstances, however, trauma does damage on the other side when we hang onto those responses because we think we still need them. Gaining control of our healing can be tricky, because our brains encode trauma responses without marking them as historic, causing them to be easily triggered by everyday events and

relationships. Booth's advice? "You gotta let yourself go, knowing that you are in capable hands who can help you back to being who you are or the new version of who you are." Whose capable hands? Your own, your therapist's, or perhaps the capable hands of an author who can take you through the story again, allowing you to re-code your experience of those events. She continues: "You have to actually bring yourself back to that time in your life, you have to go back there and feel what you should have been feeling the first time and [that] you're preventing yourself from feeling." Fortunately, this is something that good storytelling makes possible.

For readers recovering from childhood sexual abuse, *Caprice* offers a template for healing. For Booth, it was important that the book show "a reader that there is a way out, there is hope." If you haven't read it yet, this tender coming-of-age story starts with an exciting opportunity for the eponymous main character to attend the school of her dreams. When she gets back home from summer camp, she's wrestling with lots of things—worry about her parents who have been struggling in their marriage and family business, her estranged grandmother's illness, confusion over new feelings about her buddy Jarrett, whether or not to tell her bestie Nicole about the offer to go away to an exclusive boarding school—and realizing that "I used to be able to keep to it together. But more and more, I can't. I'm losing it." (34). Poems and memories interspersed with the narrative mimic the intrusive thoughts and feelings of post-traumatic stress, and gradually reveal that Caprice was sexually abused by her uncle as a very young child. Now that she's entering puberty, Caprice is coming to understand those experiences in a new way. This accurately represents the dynamic nature of resilience, as "transitions across developmental periods bring about new opportunities (and risks) that play a major role in how an individual will function," according to "A Review of Developmental Research on Resilience in Maltreated Children" by J. Bart Klika and Todd I. Herrenkohl.

One thing that Booth struggled with in writing this novel was how to deal with the fact that Caprice so far had not told anyone about her abuse. “I thought it would be more realistic...if she didn’t reveal to everyone what happened but just came to understand it for herself.” In fact, she includes a beautiful poem on page 140 demonstrating why Caprice has never told: “i knew / mom would get angry / or become really sad / i knew / it was her brother / and she loved him / i knew / when i told her / she would believe me.” When talking about “telling,” we shared a moment of reverence for the power and love children wield when making these decisions, protecting the people they love in ways those people may not be protecting them in return. In Booth’s experience, “kids don’t want to hurt their parents or the family or their siblings. They’re analyzing how much can they bear—is it worth it because everything will fall apart?” Ultimately, Booth asked her editor if “in the middle grade world, would there be a place for a book about sexual abuse where the character doesn’t tell anybody?” and got a resounding “No!” for an answer. Although in real life it can take many years for people to be ready to tell others about their experience—and some never do—Booth acknowledged that “there is that shape of a book where getting help or healing is part of the structure.”

When I asked Booth what solace and strength she draws upon to write such difficult material, she responded emphatically that “you probably shouldn’t write about it until after you’ve healed. If you’re not in a good place, you might re-traumatize yourself, and I don’t know how much good you’re gonna be to the people reading it. When you’re on an airplane, put your own mask on first.” For her, that meant waiting many years to write the story, and lots of therapy. It occurred to me as I listened to Booth describe her healing and writing process what a gift authors offer to their readers when they do this work of healing. As Booth puts it: “You gotta be the rock, you gotta be the healed person.”

Fresh from Booth's MFAC lecture on book banning, I wanted to touch on the ways that books about sensitive topic like abuse can be subject to challenges, especially these days. In *Caprice*, the main character's flashback memories to times with her uncle in his basement bedroom paint a clear picture of how grooming works. These episodes show how he manipulated the young Caprice, how he got her to agree to go along with him, how he got away with it, and even how others who knew what was going on failed to act in decisive ways to protect her. Admiring the clarity of this example as a warning to young readers, I also wondered out loud if it had led to any challenges from book banners. I immediately got a glimpse of Coe Booth, protector of injured children. She sat up and responded like a prosecutor: "A lot of times adults want to stop kids from reading about things that they know kids are actually experiencing. It's like they're upset [to be] reading about the thing, but they're not so upset about the fact that children are actually living it." We sadly speculated how much safer the world would be for our children if book banners put half the energy spent on challenging books into actually protecting children. That change may be a long time coming. But thankfully, in the meantime, we've got Coe Booth doing the work of healing and doing the work of writing for children, "because it's my truth and it's true and it happens."

#### Works Cited

Booth, Coe. *Caprice*. Scholastic Press, 2022.

Klika, J. Bart and Todd I. Herrenkohl. "A Review of Developmental Research on Resilience in Maltreated Children." *National Institute of Health: Trauma, Violence, Abuse*, vol. 14, no. 3, July 2013, pp. 222-234. Accessed October 10, 2024.  
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