

NoCo Personalities

WE ARE YOUNG

Her books have been both best-sellers and banned—but that won't stop Fort Collins writer Lauren Myracle from channeling the inner selves of tween and teen girls. BY SANDRA HUME



“Getting into the head of a kid is not a problem for me.”

Dave, a Fort Collins UPS driver, wants me to know something about Lauren Myracle. “Best. Brownies. Ever. No joke.” And in case I don’t deem him credible, he adds, “And I’ve had a lot.”

“I’m a baking snob,” Myracle confesses later, without apology, from the Starbucks where she often works (in a chair, with a laptop, not behind the counter). “I’m a shitty cook, but I’m a great baker. I can taste a brownie made from a mix from the very first nibble.” She credits her Southern upbringing—she’s an Atlanta native—for not only having Crisco in her pantry, but also knowing how to use it.

The *New York Times* best-selling author is happy at the moment to be renowned for something as delightfully mundane as her baking skills or—one does beget the other—being the Mom of the house where all the neighborhood kids want to hang. That kind of attention, she’s down with. She’s been called the “Judy Blume of this generation,” due to her day job as best friend to squillions of tween- and teenaged girls, where part of the job description is talking about the kind of stuff no one wants to admit young kids are talking about—and raising a ruckus with their parents. Myracle has written sixteen books in half as many years, including three series aimed at three different age groups, and one more on the way.

Writing to multiple audiences isn’t easy. If it were, more writers would be doing it. But Myracle has a knack that few other writers have mastered: she can channel her inner ten-year-old as easily as she can her inner fourteen-year-old. It may seem subtle but, emotionally, those worlds are light-years apart. “Getting into the head of a kid is not a problem for me,” Myracle allows, but she doesn’t like the idea of taking credit for that; it’s just the way she’s wired. But she is diligent about the work—the sitting down and actually writing—and continually reminding herself to stay within the spectrum of her character’s mindset, particularly for her younger books. She works with her editor to always be cognizant of that spectrum and where it ends, for parents’ sake: “Parents want their kids to have a safe reading experience.”

Myracle cares about parents? In fact she does; she just cares about her readers more. And that’s the crux of why she’s something of a poster girl against censorship. Since the publication of her first novel, *Kissing Kate*, which dealt with the high-school emotional aftermath of a girl-on-girl kiss, Myracle’s dead-on, frank reflection of young girls’ lives has been courting controversy. Her “Internet Girls” series—whose first installment, *ttyl*, made history as the first book written entirely in instant messages—

has landed her on the American Library Association’s list of most-challenged books four times since 2007, earning the top spot twice. *Luv Ya Bunches*, from her “Flower Power” series aimed at fifth-graders, is her *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret*; only after an Internet outcry did Scholastic reverse its decision to ban the title from book fairs. But it’s available only in middle schools, not elementary—a shame, considering the main characters are in fifth grade. The book’s offense? Normalizing lesbian parents the way Blume normalized getting your period.

The objections to *ttyl* and its sequels are twofold: that Myracle with her IM-as-novel is single-handedly responsible for the dumbing-down of the English language, and that the content is too sexually explicit for young readers. Only the latter is grounds for book-banning. But the problem is that the book, from its hot pink cover festooned with cute emoticons to the irresistible draw of kids being spoken to in their language, is exactly what ten- and twelve-year-olds want. The fifteen-year-old main characters are engaging in (or at least talking about engaging in) sexual behaviors and using more adult language, well outside of the

tween world. “At least the creators of *Sex and the City* target their show to adults,” types one negative reviewer on Amazon.com. Says another: “I’m writing this as a warning to any parent of a tween that wants to read this and you are not prepared to deal with the questions this book will [raise].”

“Parents say to me, ‘Why does she feel the need to put that into a book being read by young readers?’” says Teen Services Librarian Sue-Ellen Jones of the Poudre River Public Library District. “There’s the whole idea of ‘if my kid reads this, will they do it?’”

Karen K., who blogs at Books and Chocolate (karensbooksandchocolate.blogspot.com), read and reviewed *ttyl* as part of Banned Books Week in 2009. She likes Myracle’s work (her young daughters read her “Winnie Years” series), but she admitted that some of *ttyl*’s raunchy talk “did make me pretty uncomfortable.” Ultimately, she concluded that she’d “recommend this book for parents of teenagers to read—they really need to be aware of what’s going on with high schoolers, and talk with them about it. ... I’d like to pretend that my twelve-year-old daughter won’t want to read books like this, but she probably will.”

But seeing Myracle through a controversial lens refracts the picture somewhat. “She is the most charming, soft-spoken, polite Southern girl whose biggest strength as a writer is her uncanny ability to speak with that teen voice,” says Jones. “And that’s what pisses parents off so

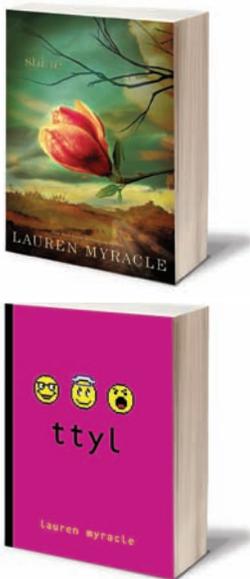
much: they don’t want to believe that their kids talk about this stuff or use that language.” But they do. They see themselves in her stories, their embarrassing, gleeful, messy selves, open and recognizable enough to claim as their own.

If you were to invent an adult designed to get into young girls’ heads, you may well end up with Myracle. Her ringtone is fun’s “We Are Young.” She’s tiny and wiry with a penchant for retro T-shirts and tube socks. She makes gifts of digital mix tapes and sings happily each week in her church choir. If you let it slip that you’re not happy with your upper arms, you might find yourself a member of her “pull-up club.” Virginia MacKinnon, a childhood friend of Myracle’s who often recognizes scenes from their shared youth in her books, remembers seeing her speak when she was a writing instructor at CSU. “The person introducing her said ‘Lauren is like Snow White, and her students are all the animals around her.’” But as Disney has taught us, princesses have their trials. Starting with *Kissing Kate*, each book Myracle wrote in the 2000s seemed to stack the parental ammunition against her. For someone who had wanted to write books for and about kids since she was a kid herself, becoming the target of vitriol was startling. She’s been called a pedophile and a Satanist. Libraries have recanted speaking invitations. One creative mother, quite literally, threw a copy of *ttyl* into a lake after her daughter came to her wondering what a “queef” was. “Hey, queefs happen,” Myracle said, blogging about the incident on *The Huffington Post*.

Folding her legs up into her chair like the ten-year-olds she writes about, the author says in her distinctive yet barely there Southern accent that it was hard, at first, to handle the criticism. Over the ensuing years, she reluctantly admits, she’s had to adapt, to harden herself a little bit into the kind of person who can detach.

“My skills at brushing off the nasty things people say have, by no choice of my own, grown exponentially. Now I’m like, whatever.” Her characters wrestle with issues of class, race, social status, and religion in both her series books and stand-alones, and she takes their stories seriously. “When someone says ‘This book is a piece of crap,’ that sinks my pride. But what hurts my soul is when somebody says, ‘She is such a phony, she is just trying to milk the youth of America for money, all she cares about is the book.’ And I’m like, oh come on, you don’t know me. And then I remember: yeah, they *don’t* know me.”

Keeping it real for young girls trumps any desire to prevent people from talking smack about her. Readers—whose messages number ten times the quantity of angry parents’—write via Myracle’s cartoony, flower-pocked website telling her she’s saved their lives, or that she’s the only person who understands them, or she’s the big sister they never had. For years she’s answered as many emails as she could. But on the day of our conversation, she hasn’t read any of her fan mail in six months. For the moment, her website is nothing more than a holding page.



Myracle’s books have made publishing history—*Shine* for its mistaken-identity award nomination, and *ttyl* for being the first written in text messages.

“I had too much to deal with,” she says of the hiatus. Her marriage recently ended, and carving a new path for her family in the wake of that has left her emotionally drained. “I was in a cave for a good six months, not reaching out to anyone. I had to focus on my family and myself.” Her inability to answer email or even keep the site updated “was just one more thing to make me feel guilty.”

Then there was the award fiasco. Last fall, her novel *Shine*, about the aftermath of a gay hate crime in rural North Carolina, was short-listed for the National Book Award. Wait—no it wasn’t. In what was said to be a case of mistaken identity with a similarly named book, Myracle was then informed that *Shine* would remain in the running for the award, even though it wasn’t really supposed to be there; a day later, she was asked to officially withdraw from consideration. Um, AWKWARD.

“I felt gutted,” she told *Vanity Fair’s VF Daily* when they reached her in Fort Collins. “I felt embarrassed, and ashamed that I had the gall to believe that this book was worthy.” She realized she had a choice: to accept the decision with class and grace—or not. She agreed to withdraw.

“It was the saddest I’d ever seen her,” remembers Jennifer Taylor, a close friend of Myracle’s who is a microbiologist at CSU. “I was so impressed with how she handled it. It took a lot of confidence and courage to hold her head high. She never said anything negative about anybody.”

“I owe it all to my Mama,” Myracle says now. “She was the one who said, ‘Lauren, be gracious. There’s no way around it but to be gracious.’”

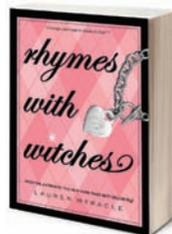
As wrenching as the situation was, something positive emerged. On her suggestion, the National Book Foundation ameliorated their screwup by donating \$5,000 in Myracle’s name to the Matthew Shepard Foundation—a fitting way to use the book’s premise, and her unfortunate experience, for good. As a Fort Collins resident who remembers vividly the impact of Shepard’s horrific death on the community where he died, the cause means a lot to her personally. And this year, *Shine* did garner genuine critical acclaim when the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents chose the book for its annual Amelia Elizabeth Walden Book Award for Young Adult Fiction.

As for her divorce, she’s coming out on the other side of that, too. “It’s all positive change and positive growth,” she says. “Getting divorced is a stressful, hard thing, and it wasn’t anything I wanted for myself. But I did realize that I can change my life, and I can make it better. Humans are resilient. I tell my kids this all the time: We do have some agency in our lives—even though it may not be as much as we think we do—and if you can change your situation for the better and you choose not to, then you’re doing the world, and yourself, and your family, a disservice.” 

Sandra Hume (sandrahume.com) is a professional writer and editor who lives with her family (including one tween girl) in Fort Collins.

Reader’s Guide to Lauren Myracle’s books

Age Group	Series	Titles	Synopsis
Tweens	Flower Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Luv Ya Bunches</i> • <i>Violet in Bloom</i> • <i>Oopsy Daisy</i> and the forthcoming • <i>Awesome Blossom</i> 	A foursome of friends navigates fifth-grade life; Scholastic briefly pulled <i>Luv Ya Bunches</i> from book fairs due to it featuring lesbian parents
Tweens/ Middle Schoolers	The Winnie Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Eleven</i> • <i>Twelve</i> • <i>Thirteen</i> • <i>Thirteen Plus One</i> and the latest prequel, • <i>Ten</i> 	Chronicles complete years in the life of Winnie Perry, a chapter per month, as she moves through adolescence to her teen years.
Teens and up	The Internet Girls Series (aka <i>ttyl</i> books)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ttyl</i> • <i>ttyl</i> • <i>l8r, g8r</i> 	Each book written entirely in instant messages; twice made it to number one in ALA’s Banned Books list

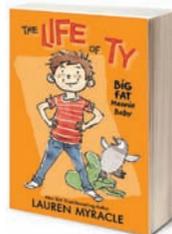


Also for teens

- *Shine*
- *Peace, Love, and Baby Ducks*
- *Rhymes with Witches*
- *Bliss* (prequel)

For middle graders

The Fashion Disaster That Changed My Life



First ever boy book

The Life of Ty Big Fat Meanie Baby
About a seven-year-old boy who “rescues” a baby penguin from the Atlanta Aquarium as a way of dealing with the jealousy he feels over having a new human baby in his house. And it comes out summer of 2013