

Toasting *The Animorphs*

After sunset, Isla Vista turned against me. Cold nights are an expected but unwelcome reality in my college town. And as always the wind seemed to sharpen on the palm trees, stabbing my legs as I dug into my pockets, praying to find my keys. My head was throbbing as I walked into my apartment.

Leslie sat on our sofa's armrest as two of my other housemates, Helen and Delenn, graced the floor. The four of us bounced between topics, until, somehow, Leslie brought up *The Animorphs*.

"Did you guys ever read them?" We shook our heads, Leslie dipped hers to the side—feigning shock.

"It's just... Oh my gawd... you guys. They're so good," Leslie's words were a strained whisper that made us lean in closer.

"They're about WAR CRIMES!" Leslie exclaimed. Within moments she had pulled up the books' infamous covers on her phone.

At first glance, *The Animorphs* look like a joke. Their holographic covers root them in the era of neon, scrunchies, and Nickelodeon's more "out there" television shows. However, as a verified "throwback," and scholastic book fair staple, most 90s and early 2000s kids can recognize them by sight (even if, like me, they never opened one). Each displays a character morphing from their human selves to one of their animal forms. And as of Fall 2020 they're being re-released as graphic novels after being out of print for years.

Although Leslie recommended them to college juniors, they're actually meant for first through fourth graders. *The Animorphs* shatter stereotypes that children's literature is "simplistic." It exposes its readers to PTSD, body horror, and has them question the morality of

war crimes. K.A. Applegate, along with her husband Michael Grant and a team of ghostwriters, laid their cards on the table. Applegate created a series that prepared its readers for life's moral ambiguities, introducing children to bitterness in a way they could digest. Built with characters burdened with gray morals and differing opinions, the series encourages critical thinking skills that many adults still lack. But I wouldn't know that until later.

The series' unlikely heroes arose from the least likely of places—One day, while walking home from McDonalds a group of friends witness Prince Elfangor crash to earth. Near death, Prince Elfangor warns the group that Earth is under attack by Yeerks (a species of body snatching slugs) and does the unthinkable—grants them the ability to absorb the DNA of any creature they touch and transform into it.

But now with the original books out of print, excluding the first book's new graphic novel, most fans of the series are in their early to late twenties. And while they may have missed the series' darker themes as child readers, many seem shocked to realize that their political beliefs stem from them.

Frankie Thomas, who wrote the article [‘What was it about Animorphs’](#) in *The Paris Review*, argued, “The mystery of *Animorphs* is not why it's been forgotten, but how it managed to be so good in the first place.” I gather the same question from other fans, now looking back at the series they're discovering all the layers beyond the “cool” transformations.

Cove, an anonymous user on [Doggobooks.com](#), can't overstate the books' importance for their development when they review the first Animorphs book, *The Invasion*: “I think this series is what made me the person I am today... This series won't just entertain you; it will make you grow as a person.”

The books showed readers how anyone can lose themselves in morality's mazes, however, "To be an *Animorphs* fan today," Thomas muses, "is to witness a cult religion that will never gain another convert."

Fortunately, Leslie's zeal proved Thomas wrong. On a whim, she sent us pdfs of the books. I went to bed that night expecting to read them in the distant future or forget them all together, but Helen dove right in. She read six books in a day and couldn't contain her excitement as she screamed around our apartment, "Leslie!!! You're right, they fuckkkk." Delenn ended up reading almost a book a day. *The Animorphs* were an escape for my friends, but it was one that I couldn't reach.

As my flatmates fell into chaos, I did my best to sidestep it. They were excited, I was swamped. I let myself fall behind. Other than basic schoolwork my mind wasn't equipped for additional topics. I had lost my object permanence; In my mind, my resume was full of lies. I was simply in the present, but in the present I was doing nothing and therefore "wasting my education."

That quarter, I took the Santa Barbara Air Bus home for Thanksgiving. Due to fires, a yearly concern for any Santa Barbara citizen, classes had been cancelled and I was headed home early— for the second of what would be three large-scale evacuations during my college career. As the smoke fanned us, my chunky backpack took up the aisle seat to prevent unwanted conversations. Out of ideas, I reached for my phone and decided to give in to *The Animorphs*. Midterm season had just ended, I had a final project due, I had a portfolio update due, but I had stopped caring. I started the ride on book five and ended it on book twelve.

The Animorphs surprised me. I didn't expect to like or most surprisingly, see myself in them. But there I was.

I understood these fourteen year olds. Like them, I also carried unshareable secrets, in only three months my Mom had become an alcoholic, I almost lost my closest friend... So, I guess I held multiple secrets actually. Their shadows singed my thoughts in lecture halls. Whenever friends tried to ask me what was wrong, I already reacted like the Animorphs tended to. I would tell them some details, but never the full truth. Like them, nothing I had gone through, or watched people go through, felt I like my story to tell. So, I only shared everything in therapy, where I knew my thoughts could safely run loose.

When I was a kid, I thought heroes felt happy all the time. I thought that to save the world, you had to have yourself figured out, but I was wrong. As a college junior, my battles took place in bed, walking from class to class, or whenever I stared at my course lists and wondered why I was qualified to be in charge of my life. Everyday anxiety, rather than aliens, keeps me on my toes, hunched over, back sore, and buried under layers of blankets.

So while the Animorphs deal with heavy topics, I appreciated that they didn't demand anything except for me except my attention. Since kids use the books they read as the backbones to their personalities, I was stunned that Applegate utilized her platform to present children with honest heroes, heroes that suffer.

Most children's books don't allow its readers to see the fallout of war. Books like *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* or *Percy Jackson and The Last Olympian*, which I still love, either skip to the future, where nightmares and PTSD symptoms have been tempered by years of distance, or don't dig into each character's traumas in the same detailed, accurate, way Applegate does in *The Animorphs*.

As the ocean peeked out from the bus' window, I silently watched as *The Animorphs* displayed the horrors of war and the way children's minds are molded by it.

By the end of the series the Animorphs have killed thousands, leaving all of the main characters with various forms of PTSD.

In fact, when I was in the seventh grade, my personality still in limbo, I learned that there are open shopping malls less than twenty miles away from active war zones. Before this my picture of war was just blood. I wondered, “How could life occur alongside atrocities?” Of course. I hadn’t read *The Animorphs* yet... I didn’t realize that even in war normal life goes on. Today I know that even in quarantine life goes on. That in fact normal problems like school and grocery lists maintain sanity.

Applegate presents this balance of needing normalcy to endure trauma through *The Animorphs*’ tonal shifts. It transitions from lines like, “see, people can snap. People can lose it. I know” to “I cruised through the morning classes. No big deal” (*The Predator*, Animorphs book 5). While such extreme contrasts create levity, I laughed out loud when I first read these lines back to back, they also represent the characters’ need to separate their traumas from their normal lives. Over email, Leslie remarks that this is one of the series strongest points. “[What’s] striking about the Animorphs is not just the inclusion of these issues--it is their perpetuity,” she wrote me “...the Animorphs have to bleed for every inch of ground that they win.” By equating worries about classes, crushes, and the fear that they might be committing genocide, *The Animorphs* are not consumed by the war. These kids are fighting aliens, but if that’s their whole lives, then how are they supposed to study? These emotional 180s were a way to prevent cognitive drowning---and according to the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*, a book used by psychiatrists and psychologists to treat their patients, it’s a recorded way that trauma is dealt with. Though I was reading *The Animorphs* as an adult, seeing

trauma and mental illness portrayed correctly, I hoped that some child, with an anxious brain like mine, had read these books and found solace.

Or to quote Leslie—

“Sometimes things are, to put it frankly, horrible...and you get scared that they might not be okay, but *The Animorphs* makes a good point--it’s not about the darkness. It’s about persevering, about doing what you can, despite it.”

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Many of the characters’ experiences follow the *DSM-V*’s descriptions of Depression, Acute-Stress Disorder, and PTSD to the letter. At the end of the series Jake, the Animorphs’ de-facto leader, is depicted as having environmentally-caused depression. The rapid onset of events, combined with the number of triggers he gained during this three-year war, have left him with nightmares, episodes of depersonalization where he feels out of his body and his control, and withdrawing from society after the war, “My life was divided into three parts: before, during, and after the war. And that middle section was so overwhelming, so big, so intense, it made the other two portions seem dim and dark and dull” (*The Beginning*, Animorphs book 54). In fact, his spirit only lightens when the possibility for more conflict appears at the end of the last book.

Many characters also show signs of Acute Stress Disorder, which acts, in some cases, as the precursor to PTSD. Unlike the latter disorder, Acute Stress Disorder is restricted to a 3 day-1-month period following the initial traumatic incident with symptoms such as *depersonalization*, a detached sense of oneself, and *derealization*, having a distorted view of reality itself surrounding triggers (DSM-V). Normally the person suffering has recurrent/intrusive thoughts of the event with sensory, emotional, and even physiological

reactions to triggering stimuli (DSM-V). While Tobias, unlike other Acute Stress patients, does have memories of the traumatic event, his evolution from having Acute Stress to PTSD related thoughts can be seen through books 33 and onwards, showing how single moments can have lasting effects. Marco describes this well when he talks about the effect every battle had on Jake, “I tried to talk to him about things. But some guys shake off a war and move on, and other guys don't” (*The Answer*, Aniorphs book 54).

Through accurately depicting these mental states, Applegate is speaking to the teenagers shown in Dr. Jessica Hamblen’s (PhD) study of Teen PTSD. Hamblen’s [national study](#) on the effects of PTSD on children, notes that while teen PTSD may resemble adult PTSD in a number of ways, there are a few noticeable differences. First, teens are more likely to get trapped in traumatic reenactment and exhibit impulsive or aggressive behaviors (Hamblen). While all *Animorphs* characters, excluding Cassie, show this trait, it’s especially apparent in Rachel, who goes from being a ditzy mall rat to a killing machine. As a gymnast Rachel had always been a competitive person, wanting the best hair, the best clothes, but after fighting with the Animorphs she realizes that her brain wasn’t made for shopping but for annihilating enemies. At first she questioned if her favorite morph, the grizzly bear, was manipulating her, but after twenty books Rachel stops caring about “why” she loves war and accepts that she has no moral limits. Her behavior even leads to Jake describing Rachel as a “goddess of war... Sixteen years old and a veteran of more battles than a World War II veteran. So was I, but Rachel loved it in a way I didn't. She needed it.” (*The Answer*, Animorphs book 53) Whenever someone something bad had to be done Rachel was the person the group that was the person turned to.

“Maybe when he was lying on the ground in ten pieces he would figure out I hadn't been fooling around. I wanted blood. I could smell it. I could taste it. Was it the grizzly in me

that wanted to kill? Or was it the me in me? I didn't know, and I didn't want to know. I just wanted to take his face off.” (*The Return*, Animorphs book 48)

Rachel was a fighter, but she was always afraid. And after years of fighting what scared her the most was that, if the war ever finished, that she would always love war more than civilian life. Who would she be if she didn't have to kill? If she had to face all of her actions? In Hamblen's research the importance of Applegate's work is clear. While most teenagers will never be child soldiers, sadly many could have PTSD and see themselves, and their pain, in Applegate's characters. While she's not normalizing trauma, she normalizes its effects.

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I didn't want to return for my junior year college for two reasons 1. My mom's drinking combined with 2. the weight of a separate friend's issues. As I moved from hotel to hotel and my mom from rehab to rehab my friend was disintegrating. They had made many mistakes and were losing everyone. Maybe if I was in a better place I might have left too. But they were at least moving forward, going to therapy, and I was stuck. I didn't forgive them but accepted that they were working on themselves. Meanwhile, I realized that my mom had become an alcoholic after 20 years of stability.

Like with The Animorphs team, events just kept being thrown at me and I had to let myself get hit. I kept being hurt by stories it wasn't my right to expose.

The trouble was how could I move past everything that had happened, including almost breaking up with my boyfriend, when people kept asking me why. Why didn't you tell us? How did this happen?

I think that's why I connect with Jake. Like him everyone thinks I'm their point person, but I don't want to be. I have a right to not talk about trauma. Some stories are not meant to

share, and my therapist agrees that feeling forced to explain my issues, outside of counseling, doesn't help anyone. Is it strange that I think I'd have K.A. Applegate's support on this?

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Applegate's books don't provide the answers to war or mental illness; no one has the qualifications to do that. Rather, she makes conflict tangible. Statistically 15 to 43% of girls and 14 to 43% of boys will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, and 3 to 15% of girls and 1 to 6% of boys will be [diagnosed with PTSD](#); where are their stories? Applegate shows her third-grade readers how every trauma has its root cause and helps many others feel less alone.

When it comes to complex topics, kids don't need to be shielded. But it's common to find adults shielding their children from sexuality, mental health, politics, and war because they want their children to stay innocent. Avoiding these topics at an early age, rather than addressing them, is a losing battle; children can't be protected from everything.

According to [PBS's website](#) about navigating the news with your children, "It's not just about turning off the TV news when your kindergartner is in the room. Kids watch us respond to events, they hear kids talking at recess, and they peek over our shoulder and see headlines... And they have questions. The trick for parents is knowing what to do next."

PBS' answer aligns with Applegate's series: children need to be guided into hard topics. The way to protect them is to talk to them, to be reassuring, and to give them critical thinking tools that they can use for the rest of their lives. It's why propaganda is dangerous, why representation for queer individuals, people of color, and religiously diverse characters and backgrounds is so important, and why the FCC, Federal Communications Commission, created

COPPA, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act to regulate what children can see online. Works geared towards children have the ability to shape them.

If children are given sufficient information at the right age it affects the way they see the world. Non-declarative memory, the unconscious habits a person forms, yields its biggest harvest when we're small.

As the world hoards toilet paper, attributes an international disease to one nation, and allows fake news to clog our elections, the next generation must wade through mountains of facts just to survive.

Children's literature has two purposes, to entertain and to educate. Books like *The Animorphs* don't have a specific message but prepare kids for the info-tsunami ahead. Applegate, in her own words hoped to, "challenged [her] readers to think about what they were reading." *The Animorphs* succeeded because she took her audience seriously. So much so that I, as an adult, had to think and argue with myself about which characters and their multiple perspectives of war I sided with. Applegate is a bold writer. She didn't talk down to her audience because they were younger.

Applegate looked her readers in the eyes and showed them the truth—even if it took them years to see it.