

the verb "to touch"

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Several years ago I wrote a book that remains one of my favorites: THE SILENT BOY. It is set in the early 1900's and is about a boy who doesn't speak, and today would likely be called autistic. But in those days, there were no such terms, and the boy is referred to as "touched"...meaning "touched in the head," a phrase used commonly at that time. The young child narrating the story, who cares about the boy and understands him better than most other people, always thinks of him - affectionately - as "the touched boy."

So the title, when I finished writing the book and turned it in to the publisher, was "The Touched Boy."

But I was asked by the publisher to change it. It was at the height of the Catholic Church scandal in Boston, and the word "touch" had taken on a nasty little life of its own.

This year a new book of mine has been recently published, and its title, too, had to be changed, and for the same reason. The small sweet creature who is the central character of the book, is one of the "dream-givers"...those elfin spirits who creep silently about at night, gathering fragments of people's lives, extracting them from human belongings while they sleep.

Here's a quote from the book:

Their task is both simple and at the same time immensely difficult.

Through touching, they gather material: memories, colors, words once spoken, hints of scents and the tiniest fragments of forgotten sound. They collect pieces of the past, of long ago and of yesterday. They combine these things carefully, creating dreams. Then they insert the dreams as the humans (and sometimes animals, for occasionally they give dreams to pets, as well)

sleep.

The act of dream insertion is called bestowal. It is very delicate.

The small creature...her name is Littlest...is only learning the art, but she is good at it, caring and delicate and careful. Here's another passage:

"Well, there's one I especially like. I'll show you when we're inside. It shows a man in a uniform, smiling. He has a very pleasant face."

"All right. And so you touch his picture—how?"

"Like this." Littlest raised one small hand and touched Thin Elderly very gently. She let her fingers flutter and linger but the touch was barely perceptible.

Thin Elderly smiled. "Good!" he told her. "You have a gossamer touch."

Littlest looked at her own fingers and smiled proudly.

When I finished writing the book, and delivered it to the publisher, it was called GOSSAMER TOUCH. But again, the title had to be changed. The buying public, the publisher felt, would be uncomfortable with the T-word. So the book is called, simply, GOSSAMER.

Yesterday I got an e-mail from a student, a girl who had read - and enjoyed - THE GIVER. But:

"Was Jonas touching Gabe inappropriately?" she asked.

I shuddered. The book portrays a boy who is learning for the first time to experience feelings of love, the deep bonds of feeling that make us human and that make our lives worth living. He leans over a crib to soothe the infant named Gabe, a baby he has come to love, and who is sleeping restlessly.

Inappropriate touching, a student suggests suspiciously.

My heart breaks for this generation of children who have been taught to mistrust affection. And how I loathe the always-out-there predators, because of whom our language has become tainted and diminished.

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