

INTRODUCTION

READING UNEASE

Just Who, Exactly, Is Young Adult Literature Made For?

I first felt the feeling of unease during one of those bright and elusive moments of engaged silence in my 11th grade classroom. Those few times I would cling to as a new teacher when the entire overcrowded classroom, including myself, decided to delve into a book and take part in school promoted “silent sustained reading.” In retrospect, I probably should have savored this moment. Here I was, a new teacher usually spending my time feeling out of my depths and the class was actually focused. But then something caught my eye. The smiling white face with even whiter teeth on the cover a student’s copy of *Gossip Girl* seemed curiously out-of-sync with the all black and brown faces of the students I worked with in South Central Los Angeles. One student was hooked on book five of the Harry Potter series—this was before the final volumes of the series were published. All around me I saw, for a fleeting moment, my students immersed in the *products* that were marketed for them. The deliberate depictions of fun and affluence on the covers of these books often looked nothing like the lived experiences of my students. A quick scan of authors’ names and I made an assumption that most of the students were reading works by white authors.

Reading the immersion of my students around the room that day did not fill me with the kind of pride I would previously get when the class was mutually engaged. Instead, I read the classroom with concern and unease. In some ways, these feelings actually mirrored many of my students’ attitudes toward to reading; I suspect that the resistance many of my students initially met reading in my classroom with was a response to the ways they were required to read about *someone else’s* culture in the young adult books they were offered. In the print-rich classroom environment I strived for, the lives, experiences, and challenges unique to the diverse and questioning students in my classroom were largely left unprinted and unacknowledged.

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I grew up in a print-rich household. The son of two educators, I learned books were kind of a big deal growing up. I remember polishing off *The Hobbit* early on in elementary school and by middle school being caught in whirlwind of Crichtons and Grishams and the fantasy of Piers Anthony and the flurry of comic books pulled from my local shop near-weekly. It was actually the required reading in my high school English classes that pulled me more fully into the realm of YA literature: *The Outsiders* and *The House on Mango Street* and Holden Caulfield and Gene from *A Separate Peace*

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were my guides into a world of literature that was written specifically for people my age. As a multiracial young man, I discovered my reading choices reflected diversity of characters. From early on I dove into Neruda and jazz biographies; books were a space of possibilities that reflected realities and lived experiences both similar and very different from my own. To be clear, if I wanted, I had the resources (and a patient mother that would drive me to a library or bookstore) to read about people and cultural practices I understood. These were largely not young adult books, though.

That morning, back in my classroom with my 11th graders, as an overwhelmed new teacher, was different from my childhood experiences. That morning served as a wake-up call for me: what exactly were my students reading? Perhaps more importantly, what kinds of lessons were they taking with them from these books.

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT?

This is a book that sets out to better illustrate what is being explored, defined, and conveyed in young adult literature today. In my own concern about how one of the fastest growing genres of books (even in this digital age) is impacting student identity, I have set out to identify some of the biggest challenges educators face with regard to young adult literature. Along the way I also hope to identify how to turn even problematic aspects of books into powerful opportunities for learning and engagement. This book is for educators, librarians, and others that may work closely with young people. Further, if you're interested in how the young adult literature section of your local library or bookstore is redefining society today, keep reading.

In an essay discussing race and positionality as a white male, William Ayers (1997) writes:

But race is unspeakable. "We don't talk that way." I'll say. We don't talk at all. And in silence a lens of distorted images, fears, misunderstandings, and cool calculatedness slips neatly into place. (p. 131)

Throughout this book, I prod and poke at the spaces of young adult literature that I feel are not under enough scrutiny. *Why* are certain characters typically white? Or heterosexual? Or able-bodied? And when they're not how do these books tokenize, appropriate, or make up the cultures of others? It may seem like I am unfairly picking on cherry-picked books here. However, the focus here is with voicing and revealing the "lens of distorted images, fears, [and] misunderstandings" that emerge in young adult literature. As the genre of YA continues to complexify in today's global economy, a discussion of what is and is not being represented within these books needs to take place for educators and librarians.

As much as this book is written as a resource for educators, I also want to note what this book is not. What this book *isn't*, is an annotated bibliography of YA books for the classroom. Other publications dedicated solely to the purpose of reader's

advisory are available. Likewise, I do not offer a comprehensive, decade-by-decade history of YA. Noted YA scholar Michael Cart's work, such as 2010's *Young Adult Literature from Romance to Realism* functions as a powerful background in this regard. Instead, I offer enough background to provide salient examples for readers to reconsider the challenges and pedagogical opportunities to be found within the genre. Additionally, this is not purely an instructional guide: though significant lesson ideas, discussion questions, and curricular ideas are shared in each chapter, this book does not seek to be used as a planning guide for teachers.

In particular, I hope to suggest the reading of this book as a provocation: it is a challenge to the status quo acceptance of how YA has crept into mainstream popular culture. Beyond the picket-fence boundaries of yester-year, the genre today presents a capitalistic force that needs to be confronted, challenged, and revealed within classrooms and out-of-school learning spaces like libraries.

A GENRE IN MOTION

In recent years, the role that young adult fiction plays in particular strands of adult society has shifted significantly. More than a pastime for the demographic for which it is named, young adult fiction drives cultural engagement for a large portion of literate America. Additionally, as more young adult authors work toward bleak and post-apocalyptic world-building, the novels that are consumed profitably by the book-buying audience are acting as a zeitgeist of the current climate in America, politically, civically, and culturally. Recent best selling series like the *Hunger Games*, *Uglies*, *Chaos Walking*, and the *Maze Runner* are not necessarily exceptional in that they point to a radically different and violent future. The ways dystopian novels function for teens is discussed in Chapter Three.

As numerous young adult texts are transformed into lucrative Hollywood franchises, the potential of young adult literature to guide hegemonic understanding of society increases exponentially. Depicting traditional, rags-to-riches visions of success in wizardly schools, being rescued as damsels in undead distress, and the meek inheriting the "colonies" of *The Hunger Games* are ways to placate American audiences and ensure a lack of criticality is fostered in both text and adaptation.

At the same time that these novels point to a post-apocalyptic collapse of society, the form of these texts drives young people and the middle-class and affluent book-buying audience toward further understandings of consumption and commodity. A look at how capitalism affects publishing models and the books our students are reading continues in the next chapter.

Indeed, unlike almost any other sector of the entertainment world, the shift in book buying seems to move away from the kinds of DIY-practices that are enabled by what Jenkins (2008) calls a "convergence culture" (p. 2). While record sales have declined rapidly as a result of file sharing and film companies take extraneous measures to attempt to thwart pirating of commercial material, book sales have shown

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sharp increases in recent years (Goodnow, 2007). In particular, these increases often point to the fact that YA sells not simply to a youth market but speaks to the interests of myriad generations of American youth. These sales, however, are not necessarily fostering communities of readers in the same way that book clubs and local libraries might; they funnel interest toward specific serialized texts. Independent booksellers and publishers are facing increasing challenges in this context. The corporate systematic closures of Borders bookstores, for instance speaks to the ways that spending habits of book buyers has shifted.

What does this mean in our classrooms? Well, for one thing, the ways that young people encounter and interact with young adult literature is significantly different. The likelihood that these texts will speak to heteronormative, white protagonists is substantially increased; in a recent article two authors claimed that publishers would not print their YA books unless they “straightened” gay characters (Flood, 2011). Additionally, other publishers are blatantly attempting to incorporate product-placement within their texts.

Violence, misogyny, and exploitive sex are rampant in some texts. A controversial recent article from the *Wall Street Journal*, “Darkness Too Visible” condemned the genre and its popularity particularly because of these recurring tropes in a genre aimed at maturing youth (Gurdon, 2011). And while the article itself is problematic, the depictions in many YA texts of graphic imagery are often read by students without opportunities for critical discussion or classroom community support. While I am a strong proponent of life-long reading, these changes in how books are authored, published, and consumed speak to fundamental changes in how young people are reading and understanding their role in the world around them.

As books are serialized by mainstream publishers, YA literature is—in general—forcing readers to consume books in ways that orient them towards hegemony, encourage their consumption of specific forms of publishing, and—ultimately—redefine what it means to be a reader in the 21st Century.

There are, of course, several positive changes in the ways that the YA genre is changing. While corporate book publishers largely have a strong grasp on the market of popular books, several authors have developed strong followings that critique various aspects of hegemonic definitions of identity. Similarly, several authors and fan communities have utilized the affordances of digital media to foster activism as a form of fandom. Popular novelist, John Green, for example, leverages digital media to engage directly with fans, share ideas with them and bridge this relationship into a civic-focused online community called Don’t Forget to Be Awesome (DFTBA). Green’s work and that of groups like the Harry Potter Alliance will be discussed at length in Chapter Six.

Throughout this book, I offer a critical examination of the role that the young adult book genre plays in fomenting public opinion, cultural understandings of race, class, and power, and ways to engage in American civic life. To this end, I begin this book with a general introduction about what is considered “young adult literature” and how this definition has shifted in recent years.

TROUBLING QUESTIONS: WHAT IS YA AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

What do I mean by Young Adult literature? The definitions of young adult (YA) literature tend to revolve, unsurprisingly, around the name itself. These are genre books that—at first—tended to be written about and for adolescents. That’s partly it. However, even this definition and the assumptions of what counts as YA need to be parsed more critically. In particular, this book is concerned with who YA is directed at.

The Young Adult genre is a staunchly American tradition. Though there has been a long tradition of books for children, Cart (2010) argues that the first book deliberately marketed for young adults was Maureen Daly’s only novel, *Seventeenth Summer* (1942). Cart explains:

The merchandising of and to “the juvenile” had begun in the late 1930s, coincident with the emergence of the new youth culture. The movement picked up steam in the 1940s as marketers realized that these kids—whom they called, variously, teens, teensters, and finally (in 1941) teenagers—were “an attractive new market in the making” (Palladino 1996, 52). That market wouldn’t fully ripen until post-World War II prosperity put money into the kids’ own pockets, money that had previously gone to support the entire family. (p. 11)

It is important to recognize the commercial origins of YA literature. A market emerged around new American wealth and teens were catered to in ways that U.S. Society had not previously. This commercial beginning parallels other emerging publishing genres including comics and graphic novels (Thomas, 2010).

More specific than simply *teenagers*, a large portion of YA is focused on the interest of white, affluent teenagers. It depicts the culture and life choices of America’s affluent even in controversial texts that are seen as challenging, provocative, difficult. What’s more, in *depicting* a specific set of cultural practices, YA—in general—*defines and reinforces* these practices over time. Let’s explore the implications of this a bit more closely: for the black and Latino students I spent the majority of my teaching career working with, it means that the high-interest YA that my bookshelves were filled with often did not reflect my students’ life experiences. It negated them.

Of course there are numerous popular YA authors that help bridge a multicultural scope within the genre. The names are a mantra for many teachers and librarians because this handful of authors are the easy *go to* writers when looking for youth of color: The Walter Dean Myers and the Gary Sotos and the Sherman Alexies and Sandra Cisneros and Sharon Drapers. This multicultural canon is discussed at length in Chapter Two. These are authors that write important texts that need to be read and recognized. However, think about what it means that the writers of and about youth of color that are validated by the publishing industry can be easily listed in a single sentence. There is a clear gap in name recognition of multicultural writers and all the rest of ‘em.

Through reading YA literature, nuanced definitions of what it means to be a teenager in western society are reified. Youth culture is in part constructed through

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the ways society reads, interprets and reflects the books of young adult literature. And if authors of color are not at the heart of this effort, troubling implications about whom has power in defining culture are at work in our classrooms and libraries today.

Several questions follow from this broad look at how YA produces culture. For one, *who* is constructing this culture? Authors of these books come to mind, but they are only a small part of what Thompson (2010) calls the “value chain” that goes into producing a book. Implicit here is the next question: for whom is this culture constructed? As a consumer of YA texts long after my formative adolescent years, I am reasonably convinced that the stories in YA novels are not written with me in mind. However, the language, the actions, and depictions of *normalcy* within the novels all exert force on me, guiding me to understand what youth behavior looks like and what are *normal* feelings. Of course, I don’t always agree with these depictions of youth. They do not always align with my own experiences when I was a young adult.

All of this leads us to another question: if YA books are directed toward building culture for the readers that encounter them, exactly *whose* culture are we talking about? However, the audience (intended and actual) of YA literature is contested; there is not a defined age group that is specified within YA. The sharp rise in popularity of YA books amongst adults is a topic that will be significantly discussed later in this book.

ON THE BOOK INDUSTRY

John Thompson’s 2010 book exploring the nature of book publishing is fittingly titled *Merchants of Culture*. Apropos of the preceding questions about the role of YA, it is interesting to see the growth of YA within the history of how books have been consumed. As Thompson’s book described an “industry in transition” YA is only one facet of how book distribution and cultural consumption is taking place.

Looking at the 20th century of book sales, Thompson (2010) describes books as an “elite” market through the late ‘60s. Though books influenced culture, they were not consumed regularly by most middle and working class families. However, the ‘70s and ‘80s were the rise of the mall bookstores that helped usher in book buying practices for the masses. The B. Daltons and Waldenbooks that proliferated in malls made buying books, easy, affordable and something that was visible and accepted. I would add that—as someone who grew up during this era—these were stores that became safe havens to seek refuge during marathon mall-shopping trips. As I grew out of the toy stores of my youth, I found I could wander the bookstores of malls and find things of interest. These public, commercial spaces, helped guide lessons of identity as I perused the shifting covers from month to month.

By the 1990s, a new form of commercial book selling space emerged: the big bookstores. Barnes and Noble and Borders helped redefine the shopping space even further. Instead of merely wandering, these spaces encouraged lounging and engaging in these spaces. The local big bookstore had comfortable seats and maybe

even a Starbucks. Hey, grab a seat, dive in, maybe buy something while you're at it. It's not a surprise that many libraries today are shifting to a bookstore model of organization: these were stores that offered the resources of libraries without the whispering and no-food policies that I was met with in my school library spaces.

By the late '90s, book selling started moving online. As I write this, the buying of books online is a regular, common practice, though it may have sounded outlandish just 15 or 20 years ago. Further, that books can be bought *digitally* and that such a notion can feel *normal* is also something that would be alien not long ago.

Throughout all of these shifts within a relatively short period of time, waves of opening and closing emerged: the big bookstores signaled a death knell for the Waldenbooks for the most part. Likewise, online markets are largely overcoming the big bookstore model of the '90s. And more importantly, consumers are reading and buying different books in different ways. Though waiting for books to be printed in paperback used to make the most economic sense, the undercutting of retailers like Amazon make hardcover books much more cost effective. As mall bookstores, according to Thompson, relied on the sale of paperback books and word-of-mouth backlisted, non-current titles, today's market is much more focused on recent publications.

So where does YA fit into all of this change? In general the Young Adult genre really came to fruition during the quickly spreading popularizing book industry of the '70s and beyond. As the rise of mall bookstores came and went, so too did the kinds of books marketed to teens. Today the YA section is flush with hardback books, marked at lower costs than hardcover adult works. These are books that replicate adult books in both form and size. The lengths of these books often equal if not surpass typical adult novels, even if the word count may be less. Increased font size and widened margins stretch shorter YA novels into 300 and 400 page books.

Through all of these changes an interesting trend emerges: YA is not a back-list genre. As the Harry Potter and Twilight crazes came and went, the interests in these books in my classroom subsided. *New* books are the lingua franca of YA. Though there are enduring classics that teachers cling to, if a book isn't new—as signaled by timely design and marketing—its moment has already passed. I would argue this is a major reason for the serialization of books in the post-Potter era of YA. Authors need to stay relevant in an era of many options for young people.

ARCHETYPES AND TROPES

As I stated earlier, this book is not a census of YA titles. It looks broadly at the ways young adult novels tend to depict the world in very similar ways. While each chapter of this book will focus on a handful of published books, these are shared to elucidate my arguments about how YA texts help reify cultural assumptions and viewpoints about power and representation; for example, one chapter focuses on how YA novels reinforce gender stereotypes. The texts I've chosen are books I've seen my students regularly engage with, books I see most prominently featured in

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brick and mortar bookstores, and books that I noted on bestseller lists. As such, this is a book that is focused on the contemporary young adult novels that are easily accessible to the students in our schools and libraries today. Throughout this book I look at some historical antecedents to contemporary works and also explore YA novels that have continued to find an audience decades after they were first published (e.g. *Go Ask Alice*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Chocolate War*). However, though a book like John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It better be worth the trip* (1969) is a historically significant YA novel—it is regarded as one of the first teen books to feature a homosexual protagonist (Cart and Jenkins, 2004); it is not a book that is widely read or most representative of LGBTQI topics in YA.

This populist approach to books in the YA genre is understandably problematic. However, I am attempting, here, to look closely at whose voices are most represented within the genre and how such voices contribute to young people's understanding of the world around them. Yes, there are numerous books that cater to challenging dominant ideologies and some of these will be shared as examples and corollaries throughout this text. However, for the most part, these books are often difficult books to acquire for teachers and young people. More importantly, in *challenging* the YA genre as this book's title suggests, I am not seeking to guide educators and readers to solely read alternatives. Instead, through reading and exploring best selling titles through various literary lenses, I am hoping to guide readers to feelings of empowerment regardless of the text before them.

As a former high school teacher that constantly attempted to stay current with the available YA texts for my students, I admire the work that librarians do, staying on top of the latest publications in a now flooded YA marketplace. These herculean efforts by librarians are synthesized in periodicals like the *School Library Journal*. If you are looking for non-critical resources that detail the abundant YA titles available, I encourage you to look at this title. Even better, I'd encourage you to become friends with the local teen librarian and ask lots and lots of questions. I will not be trying to share an objective representation of YA titles. Instead, I reject the notion of an objectivity when reading or selecting the publications for a book such as this.

However the books I've selected throughout this book for analysis are representative of the kinds of recurring archetypes and tropes that I've seen most common in my reading of YA during my formative (and awkward) adolescent years and the decade I have spent working in the classroom and with preservice English educators.

Archetypes and tropes help illuminate the blueprint inherent in many YA texts. The familiarity of stock characters and plot devices make these spaces familiar even as they differ somewhat from book to book. Further, familiarity of the books within YA subgenres such as dystopian and paranormal novels (described in Chapters Three and Five) help readers navigate the stories while also engraining the messages the books provide about living and acting within the *real* world. Bakhtin's (1981) exploration of discourses finds polyphonic voices echoing across novels. The heteroglossia of texts reveals a rich cacophony of ideas and experiences in the words our students encounter.

A BOOK ABOUT THEORY

In each chapter of this book, key critical theoretical lenses are used to analyze a component of YA literature.

- In Chapter One we look at Marxist critiques of capitalism.
- In Chapter Two we engage YA novels through action and reflection known as Critical Race Theory.
- Chapter Three utilizes Post-Colonial Theory and Post-Structuralism to look at popular books like *Gossip Girl*.
- A feminist lens and application of queer theory help explore gender and sexuality construction in YA in Chapter Four.
- Chapter Five revolves around educating with YA through the use of critical pedagogy.
- Chapter Six explore how technology shifts YA literature in a participatory culture.

Asserting the role of critical literary theory in English classrooms, Appleman (2000) begins her book, *Critical Encounters in High School English* by describing what is gained by this approach. She writes that “the direct teaching of literary theory in secondary English classes will better prepare adolescent readers to respond reflectively and analytically to literary texts, both ‘canonical’ and multicultural” (p. 2). She extends this shortly after by noting the transformative ways theory can expand learning beyond the literary page: “contemporary literary theory provides a useful way for all students to read and interpret not only literary texts but their lives—both in and out of school” (p. 2).

This book also takes a theory-driven approach to understanding the nature of books adolescents are frequently exposed to. However, while Appleman’s (2000) text tends to focus on literary theories or on literary applications of theories such as feminism and Marxism, this work looks to extend these even more deliberately. When discussing feminist readings of a text like *Gossip Girl*, for instance, this book offers such analysis as a launching point for larger inquiry into social critique. As literature can act as a doorway toward larger reflections on sociocultural practices, the intention here and in the classes I taught while working with teens in South Central Los Angeles was to use theory as a transformative process. As such, a theory such as Critical Race Theory (discussed in Chapter Two) challenges existing assumptions of race and its intersectionality with other forms of marginalization. Not typically a theory for reading and interpreting literary texts, the central tenets of this theory help offer blueprints for action. Theory, in this book, strives to be something to act upon and to incite practice and social transformation.

This is not purely an intellectual exercise. Instead, in wielding these various lenses as a means of parsing the complicated, layered challenges of YA, I offer strategies for discussing books with young people. Each chapter is rooted in key questions to apply to a secondary classroom practice.

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Though this book focuses on utilizing theory as a means of unpacking, problematizing, and expanding on YA novels, it is important to recognize that this is a text that is focused on teachers, librarians, and teacher educators. The shifting vocational nature of the teaching labor force is pushing teachers to be seen less as intellectual contributors and more as curriculum distributors. However, as a former high school teacher and current teacher educator, I write this book with the sense of continued hope in teachers as intellectuals. I see educators and individuals who are working directly with young people as experts that need to contribute to and be challenged by educational and literacy theories. That being said, I see theory—understanding it, responding to it, building it anew—as an essential gateway that can hold back or provide a sense of empowerment for educators and students. Teaching *with* theory not simply *about* theory is an important resource for educators to better reflect and challenge the lived experiences and expectations of young adults today.

Critical theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) describes theory as a “set of knowledges” (p. xxv). In looking at the role of theory in relation to women of color, Anzaldúa describes the importance of direct interaction with theory for disenfranchised individuals broadly:

Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space. (p. xxv)

I would argue that Anzaldúa’s framework of working from and occupying a “theorizing space” is a necessary stance with which to approach YA literature in both classrooms and library spaces. Intellectualizing the reading experience for young people is an actionable process of social transformation and one that is collaborative. As I describe below, my work on this book was done in collaboration and solidarity with the students I’ve worked with as an educator.

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

In Chapter Six, I will look at the ways digital tools have shifted cultural assumptions about production and consumption of young adult texts. In doing so, I will explore the online writing and social community, *Figment*. It is one of several online spaces focused on young people writing, sharing, and discussing young adult literature. And though the site and the way it helps challenge traditional understandings of the YA genre are discussed in that chapter, it is important to acknowledge, here, *Figment*’s implicit contribution to this book. In early 2012, I was preparing to teach my first Adolescent Literature course at Colorado State University. I felt that, though I was an avid YA reader, I would prefer to have the book selections in the course

guided by the appreciation and enthusiasm of actual adolescents engaged in reading adolescents' literature. I posted on *Figment* asking for book suggestions for the class. The numerous responses I received over a month-long period varied widely from advice on what books *not* to teach to suggestions of activities I should include to well-argued rationales for certain books to be taught. Though I augmented the student recommendations with slightly older books (*The Chocolate War*, *The Pigman*, and *Go Ask Alice*) I felt helped illustrate classical YA tropes, the syllabus for my first Adolescents' Literature class reflected the selections and voices of passionate YA reading teenagers. These books aside, immersing myself within this select group's textual choices helped me identify trends, outliers, and various ways the YA genre is in a state of flux. The books most discussed throughout my inquiry into the YA genre are reflective of the books that *Figment* members selected. The digital fingerprints of young people's personal reading recommendations helped shape and gather the analysis in this book.

In a class I teach for future teachers, "Teaching Reading," my students read Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* (2009). The flood of books she describes handing out to her students sweeps away some of my students with enthusiasm and terrifies others. "I don't have the time to read enough books to make recommendations to my students," my students comment (not to mention questioning the cost of building a classroom library as a new teacher). Over my years as a teacher, I've made it a habit to read *lots* of YA books. I'll admit it's a fun genre to dive into (though getting glares when reading a book like *Gossip Girl* in public is always interesting). However, while I may have numerous ideas of books to point my students to, youth recommendations, in my eyes, always trump what a crotchety adult is going to say. If I can get students to recommend books to each other or get other teen-recommendations from sites like *Figment* it goes a long way toward building strong readers over time.

A NOTE ON CONTRADICTION AND PASSION

Before ending this introduction, I want to note that, while the chapters of this book point to myriad YA texts, there is a plethora of YA books that are not addressed that may run counter to the thesis of each chapter. To be clear, there are, indeed, numerous YA books that challenge typical conceptions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and power. Readers may feel the examples shared here are not inclusive of these. However, as I stated earlier, my goal in this book is not to provide a sweeping look at every instantiation of every YA topic, but to look at general trends prevalent in twenty-first century YA as a marketed genre.

I want to recognize that the statements in this book are often generalized in ways that can be seen as problematic: for every statement I make decrying portrayals of race, class, gender, and sexuality in popular YA, I am sure that avid readers can quickly point to exceptions. Of course there are *some* powerful and honest depictions of gay teenagers in YA. And of course there are powerful representations of youth of color in YA that do not simply depict an urban ghetto. There are even sensitive and

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empowering paranormal male and female heartthrobs out there! When appropriate, I attempt to share the counter-narratives to problematic and stereotypical politics of representation. However, when I focus much of a chapter on a single, problematic text, I don't do this to pinpoint one single book's shortcomings but as a depiction of continuing trends in Young Adult literature.

Finally, I also need to make clear that I write this book from a place of reserved love for the genre. Reading drew me into my constant orbit around bookstores (and the subsequent toll my passion for reading has had on my wallet). While the majority of the text that follows often looks critically at the current state of young adult literature I do so not as a despised take-down of books that 'kids are reading these days' but because this is a genre that is important to me as an avid reader, an educator of young people, and a participant in the society that is being shaped by and through youth readings of these texts.