CHAPTER 1

# CAPITALISM, HOLLYWOOD, AND ADULT APPROPRIATION OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

## *The Harry Potter Effect*

In November 2010, my then girlfriend now wife and I–while in Orlando for the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English–spent an evening in a packed IMAX movie theater and watched the penultimate film adaptation of the Harry Potter film series. The movie was dark and unsatisfying in that its complete narrative would not yet be released for some months. Walking out of the theater both noting the deviations and notable absences in translation from page to screen, my partner and I agreed to head back to the hotel early: we had a big day tomorrow. We had tickets to Hogwarts. Admission cost $88 each (Universal Studios, 2010).

The next day was spent primarily in lines. The Wizarding World of Harry Potter in Orlando lived up to the expectations of theme park spectacle. Hours were spent in lines. We waited to journey with Harry, Hermione and Ron through the castle that they and their millions of fans called home for more than a decade. We waited to try frozen butterbeer melting under the hot autumn sun ($10). We waited to take pictures in front of the Hogwarts Express and its cheerfully patient conductor. We waited in line to get into the gift shop. Actually, let me restate that: we waited nearly an hour to get into a shop to buy merchandise while in a park that we already paid to get into. And then, noticing that a separate store, Zonko's Joke Shop, sold one-of-a-kind products akin to the gags that Ron's older twin brothers (and fan favorites) Fred and George Weasley create in the books, we waited in line for a gift shop again. The day was a fitting tribute to the capitalistic machine that has pushed Harry Potter and an army of similarly franchise-focused texts into the laps and minds of teenagers and adults alike.

Harry Potter as a book franchise has sold more than 400 million copies globally. Subsequently (and sometimes concurrently depending on book and movie release dates), the eight film adaptations of the seven J.K. Rowling novels earned more than $7.7 billion in worldwide box office sales, making it the highest grossing franchise of all time (Box Office Mojo, 2013). The astronomical success of the Harry Potter franchise is unlike any book that has since followed in its publishing footsteps. *The Twilight* films have broken numerous box office records, but the sustained book, movie, and product sales of Harry Potter have yet to be surpassed. For myriad children growing up around the world during the years that the Rowling series was released, Harry Potter is beacon of exactly why we can fall in love with books. Though his world was mysterious and rife with danger and wonder, it was also

a humanizing world of pathos, anger, and learning to accept the world for what it is. From numerous critical lenses, there are valuable lessons to delve into with young people in the pages of the seven Potter novels. Harry Potter is much more than simply "the boy who lived." For many readers he is a vibrant symbol of the power of young adult literature. At the same time, the boy who lived also became the apotheosis of capitalism.

## CAPITALISM

Consumption is perhaps the only way of perceived living within schools today. From how youth are marketed to in their own social circles such as the clothes they wear or the music they listen to or the phones they display to friends, to the marketing of youth culture in the content students are given in classrooms: state-bought standardized tests, billionaire publishers' textbooks and–of course–the literature they read, young people's choices in schools are limited to what marketers and mass media producers deign for them to purchase. As such, the reason young adult literature is so widely recognized in today's classrooms, movie theaters, and airport bookstores is, in large part, because of its dominance in western markets. That is, the sheer number of YA books sold around the globe funnel interest and awareness into classrooms, guide filmmaking decisions, and shift which book titles are featured for passersby to entice sales. At the heart of YA prominence is the central role of capitalism in guiding sales and profit.

As much of this chapter contends with the relationship between YA and western capitalism, a brief description of what I mean by capitalism follows. In general, I am building and relying on a Marxist understanding of labor, surplus, and class structures within this definition. That being said, for a more in-depth description of Marx's influence on schools and markets, I encourage readers to look at Paula Allman's *On Marx* (2007) and Marx's *Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (2000).

The problem with the way capitalism drives society is that it doesn't leave young people with a lot of options. In a very basic sense, capitalism is a socioeconomic system that allows individual businesses or corporations to profit from the products they produce or the services they provide. This takes place in a *free market* system where government intervention does not take place. One of the main critiques of capitalist systems is that profit falls on the backs of a laboring, working class. Laborers depend on business owners for a living wage salary and businesses profit by maintaining a surplus between what is paid to laborers and the value their products receive within a market. While workers may feel like they are not being paid enough, there are few alternatives in the reality of free markets today: scant job opportunities and high unemployment mean that the power owners maintain in providing salaries allows them to dictate wages. From a Marxist perspective, capitalism drives large societal stratification between a minority class that maintains surplus and a majority of society that works as laborers.

For young people, free markets compete for their interests and money. Whoever creates a product that is of interest to young people will, in theory, receive money (and profit) for the services they provide. However, when very few publishers largely control the majority of the YA market, the choices made available to young people are limiting. If bookstores only display the prominent titles being released, it is difficult for young people to truly find the books that speak to them; instead they must bend to meet the garroting options of a modern capitalist market. This form of push marketing offers consumers little opportunity for exploration, personal inquiry, or choice in the book buying market.

From a theoretical stance, capitalism can be read and interpreted and is something that can be discussed and explored with young people in varied contexts. However, it is important to stress that capitalism is much more than a theoretical construct: since a world of profit, surplus, debt, and labor drive the actions and structures schools prepare children for, looking at how these structures play out in the books youth read is necessary. For example, because books and–to be more specific–young adult books cater to a specific market, surplus and labor are built around youth consumption of books. Though interest driven, this effort to profit on youth is how traditional capitalist markets thrive. Like summer blockbuster films yielding hundreds of millions of dollars in a matter of days, the proliferation of profit in the book market depends on content that is high-interest and marketing strategies that coerce a demographic to pay for a specific author's work.

Though we will later explore how young adult books are being produced and consumed, at times, differently in a digital age, this chapter focuses on how book consumption has evolved today. No longer are popular sales framed around specific plot-lines but around brands that may be based on authors, story tropes or cover design. The reading of books begins long before the spine of the latest YA title is cracked; glancing at the colors, placement of images, titles, pull-quotes, and authors clue readers in quickly as to whether they are the correct market for any given book. Like the movie posters that will now invariably follow the bestselling books–*City of Bones*, *I Am Number Four*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*–books are designed to engage a capitalist market and thrive based on marketing specific forms of youth interest.

Blockbuster films aren't a new thing. Neither are books that become the latest book-buying craze. The popularity of Harry Potter—at least in terms of book sales–has dampened since the final movie concluded the saga. Ostensibly, fewer children are currently reading Harry Potter books today than in the past. And while Chapter Six will look at how digital tools have helped proliferate adventures and ways to engage with the world of Hogwarts, the book and film series of Harry Potter have largely come and gone. So why is this anything worth educators considering? A couple of things have fundamentally changed in how books are marketed and the relationship between youth and non-youth pop culture as a result of Harry Potter. It is the way the monumental success of these books impacts popular culture across age lines that is so striking in the 21st century. Harry Potter, in particular has helped

propel youth culture as a key part of mainstream culture. It has also helped make the constantly promoted notion of life-long reading for young people a concurrent call for life long consumption and shapes the capitalistic practices of youth.

## ON CO-OPTING YOUTH CULTURE

It snuck up on all of us. At least I'd like to think so. On July 7, 2000, I met my mother at a local Barnes and Noble in east San Diego County at 11 at night. The place was packed. It was packed with *kids*. Not the teenagers I would work with as a teacher a few years down the road, but like *kid* kids. My mom, a middle school teacher at the time, smiled as the youngsters that would come up saying hello to "Mrs. Garcia" shyly got back into line, awaiting the release of the fourth book in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. I'd browsed the books displayed, but neither my own interest nor professional responsibility called for me to dive into the Harry Potter books. These were, I assumed, still books for kids and about kids. Many Potter fans will point to the way the books increase in plot, linguistic, and emotional complexity as the stories unfold, essentially growing into the kinds of books maturing readers would appreciate. Over time, Harry Potter's foibles became the fodder of a teenage audience less interested in troll boogers and more interested in the responsibilities of individuals, the labor rights of elves, and accepting loss and responsibility. In this gradual shift over the course of the seven books, J.K. Rowling helped sneak a strand of youth culture into mainstream acceptance. It was kind of cute in the early 2000s seeing my friends reading Harry Potter. Around the time the first Twilight film came out, you probably noticed other adults unabashedly enthralled with the comings and goings of the Cullens. This wasn't always the case.

While nostalgia may have driven some YA reading selections for adults, I am arguing that it was largely the transitional nature of the prose and content in J.K. Rowling's books that helped turn young adult literature into something that even adults openly embrace. In fact, the J.K. Rowling series is typically filed in the Juvenile Fiction section of public libraries based on the age of the protagonist in the book (at least at the start of the series). The mixture of narratives that were being written for an aging, teen audience and a budding film franchise helped Potter become a beacon for young adult literature being accepted by a mainstream and adult audience.

Fast forward more than a decade later, and the results of this work are staggering. A 2012 market research report, "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age" (Bowker Market Research) found that the majority of YA consumers are 18 years or older. Though some of this demographic may be purchasing YA titles for friends, siblings, and children, the report clarifies that 78 percent of this demographic are typically buying these books for their own reading. Again, in isolation, this statistic can be lead toward incorrect inference about book buyers: one could assume that book readers that only recently became adults or hit their 20s are continuing to draw on their youthful interests and reading the YA books that they grew up with. This isn't the case. The Bowker report indicates that the biggest

group of adults buying YA books in the 21st century are between the ages of 30 and 44. This demographic accounts for nearly 30 percent of all YA book buying, which is staggering. For a genre that–at least in name–claims to be for and about young adults, that much of its primary audience is older has significant ramifications on the future of the genre. The graphic depictions of sex and violence in blockbuster titles such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* (a book that the report notes makes up a large percentage of the adult readership) are often pointed to as reasons why *young adult* titles aren't necessarily suitable for a teenage readership (Gurdon, 2011).

If adults are the primary buyers of young adult novels, it is likely that publishers are going to focus on the needs and interests of this demographic. Which begs an important question: what happens to a genre as it slowly focuses on a paying clientele that its name belies? As a relatively recent trend, the shifts in YA literature are such that it isn't clear if the focus on post-apocalyptic or paranormal settings–for example–are responses to an adult readership, a teenage one, or a cultural emphasis on the bleak, the dead, the escapist setting of something and somewhere else. What is clear is that the YA genre is now being openly read by adults in far greater numbers than ever before. With this relatively new audience, authors and publishers need to make different decisions about the kinds of content they publish and how it is marketed. Though this may not dramatically shift what these books look like or how they depict teenage struggles, they shift the priorities for publishers. Teenagers cease to be the sole clientele to please in a post-Potter YA marketplace. The whims, trends, and interests of adults now act as a factor to be considered in publishing decisions. The mass popularity of the first three Harry Potter books in the late 1990s led to the New York Times adding a Children's Best Seller List to its weekly statistics on book sales in the U.S. (Smith, 2000). This addition was done just prior to the fourth installment in the Harry Potter series being released and in direct response to the fact that the first Harry Potter books spent more than 79 weeks on the adult bestseller lists.

All of this leads to an important and problematic question based on contemporary trends: what happens when youth culture becomes mainstream culture? As some of the biggest films being released are based on youth-oriented comic books and novels, the populist climate in western culture is driven more and more today by young adult literature. Though the historical precedent of YA as a genre comes from a place of writing to and expressing the feelings of teens, today's YA books are driven by the potential of profit that is not tied to specific age brackets. A lucrative book with a film option and sequel being demanded can function as important incentives to publishers and authors. Books for youth are now predominantly driven by market demand and not youth needs or responsive to them.

What does this mean for our classrooms? For educators, the discussion of market consequences of changes in the YA genre are tricky: it is not entirely clear where such discussions should fit. Even within the free-reading environments of classrooms such as those Donalyn Miller (2009) describes in *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*, the content of writing and discussion is on individual's relationships with texts. While I think meaningful discussions

of the role of capitalism and surplus are necessary at all grade levels, educators can feel pressed for the space of such discussions in the shifting landscape of education reform. However, guiding metacognitive discussion of how certain books are marketed to boys or girls, for example, can be a powerful entry point for analyzing symbolism, imagery, and authoritorial intent. Instead of shying away from discussions of marketing and youth, it is important for educators to be able to face capitalism head on within classrooms and align these discussions to the standards and evaluatory requirements teachers may be facing in their given school context.

## I AM NUMBER FOUR: A CASE STUDY IN YA CAPITALISM

Let's look at an example of how capitalism shapes YA today.

Over the next few pages, I will be discussing 2010's *I am Number Four*, the first in the Lorien Legacies books written by Pittacus Lore. Published in the summer of 2010 with each of the titles in the Lorien Legacies series arriving promptly each following summer, the book series was touted as a featured publication on Amazon's Best Books of the Month list, sold enough copies to be listed as number one on the New York Times children's bestseller's list for seven straight weeks. Only seven months after the book's release it was followed by a Hollywood film adaptation. If you're wondering, the rights to the film were acquired in June of 2009, more than a year before the general public could even purchase the book (Rich, 2009).

At first glance, *I am Number Four* looks and reads like a typical YA novel. A paranormal presence (aliens!), a high school love story, and villains that could possibly lead to the end of civilization as we know it. The usual. For all intents and purposes, there is nothing significantly outstanding about the book's premise, generic prose, or typical cliff-hanger ending that entices readers to pick up the next book and the next book. It is a fast-paced and intensely readable book, made thick (like many other YA books) partly by its wide margins and larger than *adult* book font.

The book *is* different, however. It is different because it is one of the best examples of the ways capitalism and adult, profit-driven decisions affect the reader's experience.

Let's take the book's paratext first. Described by Genette (1997), "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (p. 1). Paratext includes a book's design, its pagination, table of contents, headers, and all of the book *stuff* that makes a book function as a reading experience. Genette explains,

> text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations…they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. (p. 1)

With this in mind, *I Am Number Four's* paratext helps market the book and convey its value for an enthusiastic youth-driven market. The book's cover and title work as a teaser of the content and general cliff-hanging style of writing that runs throughout the book: above the title, the following is embossed: "THREE ARE DEAD," and then the title: *I Am Number Four*. The intrigue of the title, the ominous explosive colors and smoky hues invite readers into the book. Likewise, if the edition being examined is a cover featuring the film adaptation, a pensive and rugged white boy looks confidently from the book. It's an image that suggests the handsome desirability of a young, white man to female readers and the aggressive confidence of masculinity for male readers.

Before cracking the book open, there is an additional paratextual feature on the outside of the book that draws potential buyers' attention. On the edge of the book, printed across the pages are the words "Lorien Legacies" in a futuristic, blocky font. The printed text effectively makes the book double-spined, with text on two spines, creating ads branding four of the book's six sides. No matter if the book is placed on a bookshelf correctly or not, its branding is readily seen. As a teacher, this additional branding was a minor nuisance–I typically wrote my name on my class library books in this location and it had been intruded upon as a clever marketing strategy.

Flipping through the pages of the book, cryptic rune-like symbols (perhaps indicating meaning from the planet of Lorien) are interspersed throughout the book and at the beginning of chapters. The later editions of the book (as well as the sequels that followed) included additional pages following the narrative's conclusion with content from spinoff text's like *I Am Number Four: The Lost Files*. In fact, the book's design is littered with access to additional content. A QR code and a text message number on the back of the book direct readers to online material. Likewise, a URL (www.iamnumberfourfans.com) and the final page of the book serves as an additional advertisement to go online and engage with Lorien Legacies-related content. Nearly every feature of the book's design is geared toward increasing reader consumption. It is not enough to simply read *I Am Number Four*. The first novel functions as a prolonged advertisement (including a cliffhanger ending) for buying into the book's sequel, the spin-off texts, the film adaptation, and other Lorien Legacies paraphernalia.

At over 400 pages and larger print, the book looks hefty. Like the plot of the book falling in line with traditional YA, the book's size and design signal to readers the book as a commendable title within the YA genre. This, too, is likely a trend that followed the lengthy *Harry Potter* books that slowly extended their length beyond 200 and 300 page lengths, bursting into longer, "adult" length books.

The net effect of all of these paratextual features is a highly desirable book. The inviting title, the unique printing on the page edges, the free bonus material, and the visibility of the book's movie tie-in all compel potential readers to pick up and *want* to purchase *I am Number Four*. All of these feature do little to push the narrative forward. The cryptic symbols are never explained. The QR code leads to pages that essentially function as advertisements for additional installments in the book's series. All of these paratextual features identify a target audience and directly market to it.

Even the purported authorship of the book functions as a marketing feature. The book's author, Lore, is described on the book's jacket as "Lorien's ruling Elder. He has been on Earth for the last twelve years, preparing for the war that will decide Earth's fate. His whereabouts are unknown." Instead of the typical author headshot, a silhouette of a figure, genderless and shot on asphalt on what looks like a sunny day, is pictured next to the bio. For potential readers, this bio–something typically disregarded as superfluous information for many readers–functions as a source of intrigue also inviting browsers to purchase the book.

In an online interview, Lore writes,

> I have always taken great care to conceal my identity. I change my appearance regularly. I do not speak or correspond with many people. No one has ever suspected me of being what I am, which is an alien military leader with superpowers. If anyone ever does, it will be a bad day for me. (Amazon, 2010)

The ruse of this alien author is continued within the paratextual disclaimer the preludes the text: "The events in this book are real. Names and places have been changed to protect the Lorien Six, who remain in hiding. Take this as your first warning. Other civilizations do exist. Some of them seek to destroy you." In terms of world-building and creating reader enthusiasm, the antics of the book's publisher in playing with the identity of the author and the fiction that these events are *real* help immerse youth in the rich setting of Paradise, OH and the tenuous grasp on the ledge of safety that the Loriens hold. And while common sense helps guide readers to understand the fiction they are presented with in the author biography, the implied faux-documentary flavor of the book allows readers to feel strongly connected to the book's actions. Unfortunately, because of the lack of depth within the book, little pathos is developed between reader, narrator, or protagonist. The premise of false-realism collapses under even cursory scrutiny.

However, assuming that alien life has not yet got the YA book market cornered, the biography begs the question: who, exactly, wrote *I am Number Four*.

## A QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

Figuring out who wrote the Lorien Legacies books (of which *I am Number Four* is the first), like nearly all YA titles today, is a much more complicated project than simply figuring out who owns the nom de plume of Pittacus Lore. To put it directly, the question of authorship of YA novels is not a simple one. Particularly when looking at how books like *I am Number Four* are marketed, the content that consumers received is never just created by one author. How readers foster relationships with their books is something that is intentionally crafted and honed in books through design, marketing, and online engagement. A successful book franchise will foster a relationship with its book buying audience over years. With such high value placed on reader engagement, the editorial decisions of YA books are anything but singular. A book, is a product. It is produced. In addition to a book's writer (or writers),

designers and editors and artists and copy-editors and a litany of other employed individuals have a say in the content and presentation of the books that are marketed to young adults.

The paratextual features I've described within the *I Am Number Four* book all contribute greatly to a reader's interest and engagement with a book. The spine's "Lorien Legacies" text, the biography of Lore, and the disclaimer that indicates the events within the story are real all function as important authoritorial decisions. A reader's knowledge of the content of *I Am Number Four* is bolstered by all of the content on the outside of the book and in the pages immediately preceding when the story actually begins. In this sense, a novel includes all of the paratextual material that precedes the words of the novel and that are interwoven throughout. The layout and design within the novel, for instance, are additional components that impact a reader's interpretation. It becomes quickly apparent that here, a small army of designers, artists, editors, writers, PR agents, web designers, programmers, and typesetters have all helped contribute to how a book like *I Am Number Four* is interpreted.

For any book, this careful inquiry into a book's editorial and design decisions is one that leads to a rather difficult question: who is the author of this book? For teachers: the role of authorship plays into ways to teach and discuss these books with students. Reader Response Theory becomes a more complicated venture: Who *else* is intentionally brought into discussion when looking more critically at the collective process of authoring, designing, editing, publishing, reviewing a work? As so much of the experience of consuming *I Am Number Four* is contingent on the design, advertising, and paratextual features, it is important for readers to recognize that the role of the author needs to be understood as a collaborative endeavor involving a large team of marketing strategists. Even titles with a prominent "name" as an author, such as the YA series by James Patterson, *A Maximum Ride*, are largely a conglomeration of branding, strategic marketing, and formulaic storytelling.

In the case of *I am Number Four*, it is actually helpful for the book that an actual human author is shrouded beneath a fiction and a team of designers. The writing and character development within the book is bland. The main character's name is all but irrelevant. Vacillating between his numerical identity as number four of the nine Lori children in hiding on earth and his temporary, fake identity as "John Smith." The protagonist of *I am Number Four*, like his name is a shell of caricature youth angst and heroism. Likewise, the girl that functions as the love interest within the book, Sarah, also offers strikingly little in terms of depth. She is described as pretty and the reader gets a sketch of profundity: she used to be cheerleader and dated the high school quarterback, but that's all changed: she likes photography now. Deep.

In the beginning of the book, Four makes it clear that his purpose on earth is to survive long enough to develop his "legacies" in order to defeat the Mogodorian nemesis that obliterated his home planet; Four's sole purpose is perseverance and resilience on behalf of a fallen race. And while Four's actions when acting as "John" demonstrate the occasional baffling decisions of adolescent (human) teens, often the

decisions made by Four throughout the book make little sense: postponing checking-in with the father figure, Henry, who trains and guides Four, for instance, takes a backseat to a home-cooked meal with Sarah's family. Blatant displays of strength and dexterity continually place Four's cover into jeopardy. It is difficult to discern what kinds of motives drive many of these actions. In looking for a rationale, there are two main points to keep in mind. First, many of these strange plot decisions seem "cool": superhuman strength, explosions, and a lengthy reconnaissance mission to rescue Henry are all parts of the book that read quickly and could be easily translated onto the screen in impressive fashion. Secondly, in digging into the intent behind the creation of *I Am Number Four*, sensical character decisions are secondary to the underlying goal of creating a book that will sell in abundance.

If the book's plot, style, and flat characters all seem a bit formulaic, it is because they largely are. Intentionally so.

*I Am Number Four* is an experiment in production. It was overseen and co-authored by James Frey, who came to infamous notoriety in 2006 when online journal *The Smoking Gun* pointed out that his Oprah-approved memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, featured factual inaccuracies (2006). While I do not try to make a direct comparison between these fabrications and the kinds of practices he employs in publishing the *I Am Number Four* texts, Frey's view of publishing, authorship, and capturing the public's interest is noteworthy. Before a word of *I am Number Four* was written, Frey was already identifying trends in YA and fomenting strategies to capture the zeitgeist of YA interest. Creating his own publishing house, Full Fathom Press, Frey took his cues in producing *I Am Number Four* from the factory-like assemblage of modern artists.

Warhol's assembly-line approach to art production and Damien Hirst's complex hierarchy of staff members involved in his work have defined a mode of art production that finds these acclaimed artists much more in the role of director than necessarily hand-sculpting or painting a masterpiece. Dictating ideas and seeing them become instantiated to his exact expectations, Hirst's artwork is known for the controversy that often supersedes it. For example, there is his work titled "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living" (1991) which consists of a dead shark placed in a tank of formaldehyde. That doesn't suit your fancy? How about "Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything" (1996), which is a series of glass cases each featuring cross-sections of a butchered cow? These complex, perverse works were envisioned by Hirst and actualized by myriad employees. It is this model that Frey has copied and inserted into the Young Adult book market.

To begin with, Frey looked at the trends of the early part of the 21st century in YA book sales. Wizards and vampires were big. Rowling's Harry Potter and Meyer's Bella Swan had ushered in a plethora of knock-off titles that cashed in on the ravenous book-buying interest in the spell-slinging and the undead. Frey, attempting to jump ahead of the curve guessed the next trend would be … aliens.. He quickly culled together the components for a YA novel focused on aliens that would be user

friendly for readers weaned on the bolt-scarred wizard and the clumsily stubborn vampire lover. *I am Number Four*'s basic components are boilerplate YA:

- a protagonist that feels out of place
- a protagonist with special powers
- a giant, globe-threatening villain
- a heterosexual love interest.

On the back of the book, Michael Bay, the director of the *Transformers* series and other explosion-filled blockbusters, writes, "Number Four is a hero for this generation."

To pull off this book, Frey looked for eager writers to dive into generating text for the books. It is important to note that I use the word "generate" deliberately: there is little to indicate individual authors in the hybrid writing, marketing, and production process of Full Fathom Five's lucrative process. As noted in a profile of the company, writers received minimal compensation for the text they generated:

> In exchange for delivering a finished book within a set number of months, the writer would receive $250 (some contracts allowed for another $250 upon completion), along with a percentage of all revenue generated by the project, including television, film, and merchandise rights—30 percent if the idea was originally Frey's, 40 percent if it was originally the writer's… The writer would not have approval over his or her publicity, pictures, or biographical materials. There was a $50,000 penalty if the writer publicly admitted to working with Full Fathom Five without permission. (Mozes, 2010)

As problematic as these figures may be for writers, the publishing model clearly worked. Before the books were ever in print, a bidding war between Hollywood's top producers including J. J. Abrams, Steven Spielberg, and Michael Bay ensued. The enthusiasm then "sparked publishing interest, and HarperCollins won the book rights. Together, Frey and [co-author Jobie] Hughes signed a four-book deal. Rights to *I Am Number Four* have since been sold in 44 countries, and, at last count, has been translated into 21 languages" (Mozes, 2010).

In and of themselves, these developments are not a problem. Frey identified the ways the market system for YA functions for books and films and succeeded within the expectations of this market. However, the problem is that, when drawing upon standard stereotypes and formulaic narrative development, dangerous implications for readers arise throughout the book. In a lead up to a tense confrontation between Four and high school bully, Mark, the ex-boyfriend of Sarah effectively enlists his football teammates in kidnapping Sarah to confront her about their breakup. Though the scene allows readers to see Four jump in to save the day, demonstrate some unnatural strength, and highlight his unrelenting devotion to a girl he has known for a handful of weeks, the confrontation is also terrifying when explored critically.

The school bully, a character that Sarah shows mercy for by telling Four not to harm him, verges on behavior that is leading to rape. Though his actions are condemnable,

they are not the focus here and are largely discarded. The authoritorial team behind the book use emotional and sexualized violence against women not to make a statement about these behaviors and not to elicit terror or rancor in readers but merely because they are the easiest means of propelling a story forward. And what about the inevitable redemption of Mark by the novel's conclusion? Because he aids Four in the final pages of the book are we, as readers, to assume that the lesson is that misogynistic violence against women is forgivable? Rape as water under the bridge? Because these flat characters act out not because of rationale, human behavior but because they function as part of a marketable plot, readers are subjected to actions that not only do not make sense but imply behaviors that are deplorable. If young adults are gleaning adult ways of being from this book, they are learning that mistreatment of women, though it is wrong–and might result in getting beat up by an alien–is forgivable and an understandable means of trying to get the attention of a lady.

## I AM POSTMODERN

It helps to look at the post-modern interpretation of the Full Fathom Five process of production for *I Am Number Four*. Troublingly, it is also helpful to look at the ways this post-modernist approach is largely left out of the view of readers. It is a subterfuge played on a broad demographic of teens and readers of teen-marketed literature. A main component of postmodernism is the concept of deconstruction. Leggo (1998) discusses using this lens in teaching poetry in high school settings. He frames deconstruction as "a practice of reading that begins with the assumption that meaning is a textual construction" (p. 187). He expands this by noting that deconstruction "aims to make meaning from a text by focusing on how the text works rhetorically, and how a text is connected to other texts as well as the historical, cultural, social, and political contexts in which texts are written, read, published, reviewed, rewarded, and distributed" (p. 187).

Appleman (2000) suggests that many English educators shy away from deconstructionist readings of texts because it is seen as an impenetrable and dense theory. I'd add that foundational work in this area such as Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* are complex and dizzyingly difficult texts and probably not a place to send young readers in search of utilizing postmodern approaches to literature for transformative purposes. That being said, when acknowledging that deconstruction is a means of assembling new meaning and *owning* that meaning from an individual perspective, postmodernism can help liberate existing power dynamics within texts. Leggo (1998) explains the potent opportunities of utilizing this theory within the classroom stating:

> readers, especially young readers in classrooms, do not have to be unnerved by self-deprecating fears that their responses to a poem are wrong. Instead of right and wrong answers, deconstruction encourages plural responses. Instead of a hidden meaning that must be revealed, the poetic text is a site where the

> reader's imagination, experience, understanding, and emotions come into play in unique performances. (pp.187–188)

Like Leggo, Appleman's approach to utilizing deconstruction in the English classroom emphasizes the ways this theory can help make sense of a "bewildering and confusing world" (p. 103). And while her approach, as that of much of deconstructionist readings, focuses on the texts presented to readers, I would argue that the process of creation can be seen as a deconstructionist act.

Going back to the factory models of art production for Warhol and Hirst, these processes reveal that art is not simply individuals channeling genius through pain and canvas (or tanks and dead sharks in the case of Hirst). Instead the work that is presented to audiences is assembled along a long line of input and feedback from others. The factory model is *everywhere* in mass media production; Warhol and Hirst simply make this process transparent by revealing the power dynamics of art creation. They intentionally point to the marketing of products as part of their art. In doing so these artists reflect the process back on the spectator/consumer of the art. When we buy a print or (if we're exceptionally wealthy) an original of a Warhol soup can painting, we are acknowledging our duplicity or even appreciation of this process. A Warhol soup can is an ironic endorsement of the capitalist structures that created it. The process, viewing and cultural acquisition of these works helps viewers *de*-construct the binary relationships between creator/consumer and the capitalism implied in consumption of any work. This is *not* the intent of Full Fathom Five. However, a reading of this deconstructionist process can help empower readers when engaging with these texts. Frey's Full Fathom Five, at least in the ways he talks about his company, is up to the same theoretical conceptualizations of art production. The product's process is an art form in this vision. Discussing the production process of *I Am Number Four*, Mozes (2010) notes that Frey

> encouraged me to start imagining product placement—"think Happy Meals"—because merchandise is where you make money in these deals. He mentioned the Mogadorian swords in *I Am Number Four*, which were described with unusual specificity. "We added that after Spielberg told us he needed stuff to sell."

However, that process isn't revealed to readers and online information is relatively scant (much of the information about Frey's model is derived from a singular and widely circulated article). This brings us back to Hirst and his stuffed shark and dead cows. For Hirst's work, critics tend to grapple with the question: Yes, but is it art? And, in seeing this artistic model being enacted in the publishing world, we must question the conglomeration of writing and design and marketing and product placement is still literature.

Specifically, is *I Am Number Four* literature? Is it a postmodern attack on youth consumption or a savvy exploitation of how young people buy books today? I would argue that it doesn't matter so much. If we can empower young people to be critical of and understand the mechanisms of publishing at work, this is a step toward critical conscious building. However, more problematically, if this is what counts as

young adult literature today, it is a powerful statement on how a production machine governs the psyches and interests of millions of young people today. While Full Fathom Five can be interpreted as an elaborate, shaky form of performance art, it is one that is executed at the expense of millions of dollars spent by teens.

If we are to unhinge capitalistic grasps on reading choices I would argue for a pragmatic approach to doing so. Instead of simply resisting the lack of freedom in the YA market, part of this resistance comes in the ways young people interact with and understand the text before them. For a book like *I Am Number Four* understanding the duplicitous authoritorial relationship and pushing beyond it is a necessary step forward.

## LIFE-LONG READING AS LIFE-LONG CONSUMING

Full Fathom Five and the Lorien Legacies are exemplary of how effectively books are products marketed specifically for young adults and mass consumption. Every component of *I Am Number Four*, from its formulaic plot and dull character development to the book's physical design and online presence, are established for the sole purpose of selling more books.

To recognize the fact that there is a *market* for this specific kind of literature is to also recognize another seemingly obvious but very problematic fact: YA readers are being marketed to. This may sounds like a simple restatement, but the reversion is telling: it illuminates how the YA book market operates. It is not that an author haphazardly finds an audience because he or she has written a book that happens to be aligned with a young person's interests. Instead, what we find, is that books are carefully marketed to specific demographics: fast-paced and paranormal novels featuring romance in the case of *I Am Number Four*; dystopian thrillers with themes of adults suppressing youth agency in the case of *Divergent*, *Legend*, and *The Maze Runner*; high school drama over guys and popularity in *Gossip Girl*; books about athletes for boys. In varying contexts, many of these titles are explored elsewhere in this book.

It is important to recognize that contemporary novels do not get sorted into these popular genres: they are written for the specific markets that young people are sorted into. This isn't something new. Young people are marketed to with regard to the clothes they wear, the foods they eat, the phones they accessorize, and any number of other youth cultural components. What *is* different, however, is that the shifts in YA production mean that the machinations of capitalism are seeping into the academic lives of young people more and more. The choices they make with regard to the books they feel they should read are guided by deliberate commercial decisions well beyond the purview of youth agency.

And here is where I struggle with the marketing. As an English teacher, one of the main goals in my classroom was to instill a sense of passion in my students. I wanted my most resistant readers to, by the end of the school year, fall in love with books and reading. I am confident that I was not alone in having this goal be the centerpiece

of my classroom and my annual syllabi. I was striving to create lifelong readers by hook or by crook. However, lifelong reading is dependent on a steady stream of books always being at the ready. Simply put, to be a lifelong reader also means to commit to being a lifelong consumer.

In an urban community like my high school in South Central Los Angeles, this was even more apparent: the nearest public library closed a year after I began teaching. Two years later, due to remodeling and lack of funding to actually finish remodeling the high school library was closed for an entire academic year. Effectively, the school and surrounding community had cut off my students from access to books. With no bookstores or libraries nearby, the only regular location for students to get books was my own self-funded, classroom library. For better or worse, I regularly spent thousands of dollars annually to provide up-to-date, high-interest books for the students in my classroom and the former students that would funnel back to my shelves of books during lunch and after school. But what happened after that? Though social media has helped me stay in touch with students and occasionally help students with resumes, college applications, and homework, it hasn't helped me lend them books in any kind of sustainable way. With few reading options outside of school, what happened to my non-college bound students after they left the school? Books are a luxury in the urban spaces of large cities like Los Angeles. What's more, they are *difficult* luxuries to acquire. If libraries are not an option, how are students expected to gain access to books other than by spending money on them?

The more problematic component to this question is: what happens to youth literacy when a child cannot afford to buy books? If I wasn't able to provide books for my students and essentially cover their cost of consumption, would they still be able to read? Or is the market of YA shutting students of financial hardship out of lifelong reading?

Young adult book culture is one that hinges on privilege. It requires skill, interest, access, and resources to participate as a passionate and avid book consumer. For many of the teens I've worked with, these are simply not skills urban schools have fostered: they are not seen as quantified in any meaningful way on standardized tests. Of course, there is a litany of research on how passionate reading leads to academic success; Stephen Krashen's *The Power of Reading* (2004), for instance, focuses on academic growth based on getting high interest books in young people's hands. However, investing time, resources, and teacher knowledge in high interest literature in urban spaces is a difficult sell in the continuing epoch of reform. If lifelong reading is also an implicit endorsement of lifelong spending and consuming, it is difficult to imagine that the ways public schools advocate for the development of readers in urban space is anything other than lip service. How concerned should our education system be about allowing market forces to dictate the reading habits of children today?

All of this brings us back to the improbable figure of Damien Hirst, his dead shark, and the recurring question: but is it art? The subjective question is one that's explored in documentaries like *My Kid Could Paint That* (Bar-Lev, 2007) and in

books about the fluctuating art industry like *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* (Thompson, 2010). In seeing this model being enacted in the publishing world, the question is if the conglomeration of writing and design and marketing and product placement can be suitably considered literature. In terms of the art world, Warhol's factory model which Hirst's productions can be seen as based upon, ushered in a new art movement. Pop art is a genre that embraces or reflects the mass production of twentieth century mass production and proliferation of media. There's a reason that Warhol's Cambell's soup can is such an iconic image: it was screen printed in the factory ceaselessly.

The overall effect of pop art is of mild, ironic amusement and of somewhat cold detachment. This is art that isn't meant to build an emotional connection. It is art that is largely winking at its viewers as if they are in on an elaborate joke. And maybe they are. Irony, cleverness and detachment are powerful and necessary components of a robust art landscape. They are less necessary feelings when we are talking about the intentions and efforts within the book publishing industry aimed at children. The problem is how this affects young adults when this art model is displaced on the publishing industry. As Frey constructs lackluster book series through Full Fathom Five, one could argue that the "art" involved here is the way Frey manipulates the writing and publishing chain of the twenty-first century to perhaps parody the YA market. His YA book is merely a Campbell's Soup Can-like reflection of the market. If Frey is winking at anyone, it's a very select few. The problem is that this is art done at the expense of young readers. While marketing and capitalism are driving the way Frey produces his work, it ultimately most directly influences the reading experiences of the individuals that pick up Pittacus Lore's novel.

More problematically, if this is what counts as young adult literature today, it is a powerful statement on how a production machine governs the psyches and interests of millions of young people.

Frey's interpretation of the pop art factory is flawed. While the indifferent coolness of inverting media and marketing in the art world as conscious reflection and critique was a key component of pop art, Frey's interpretation is basically one of driving up profit in whatever ways are most accessible. For instance, not enough to simply market and publish a successful book, Frey also negotiated a film option for the work. He imagined the many spin-off texts that have since been published and even envisioned the product and toy marketing that could possibly come about as a result of the book's success.

Let's step back for a second: we essentially have a book functioning as a tool for mass marketing of products. *I am Number Four* is not merely a poorly written book. It is a capitalist gateway. The design and deliberate production related to the book strongly suggest that readers even remotely interested in Lore's tale buy all related books, buy a copy of the film (and its soundtrack, of course), and if there are any other products related to the work currently available then buy them too. Whereas Warhol and the artists he influenced attempt to negotiate the fine line between capitalist greed and artistic critique, Frey's Full Fathom Five disregards any of the

artistic tenets of the model he adapts and whole-hog dives into the process of selling and marketing. There is no nuance here, only advertising and tepid content.

Full Fathom Five represent a true danger to the future of the YA genre. The heavy marketing and lack of quality products means that the quality of reading experiences for young people are diminished. When meeting the latest trends in literature with quickly churned out texts becomes the premise for publishing, the readers are the ones that are going to miss out. This is not to say that marketability is unimportant. On the contrary, I realize that publishers want their books to make money (and lots of it). However, this can be done in ways that still encourage a diversity of styles, narratives, and authors producing work.

And as problematic as Full Fathom Five's business strategy appears, it is important to recognize a basic fact about YA: this publisher's business practices are ones that *every publisher*, to an extent, engage in. The formulaic YA novels that flood today's market are anything but original. These publishers define a market audience and push books toward these readers. It doesn't matter if a reader may be interested in stories about horse riding and steampunk, the options that are published are the options young readers encounter. Granted, the YA genre is more abundant than ever. However, the same politics of representation severely limit the kinds of books available to readers today. Instead, these publishers reinforce hackneyed storytelling techniques with salacious details about hair, makeup, clothing brands, and ideological values. The fancy covers of these books cater to a mainly white and mainly upper-middle class, heteronormative audience. These books scream the violence and sex that make readers pick them up. The problem with publishers marketing toward a specified market is the loss of diversity and voice that accompanies this decision. When Full Fathom Five or Scholastic or Harper publish a book with this assumed audience, they essentially castigate the hundreds of students I've worked closely with in South Central Los Angeles.

When I have discussed book publishing with my college students, members of the class often point out that it is the publishers that make the decisions of what young people have access too. Likewise, they point out that authors need to make money – they need to write something that people will pay money for. At least within the current free market society we are immersed in. They are, of course, absolutely right, the books that are bought are largely bought because they are popular. Whether this popularity is due to complex marketing, the merit and ingenuity of authors, or other factors such as cultural trends within the book-buying world is beyond the point. In all likelihood, publishers (at least of the kinds of widely popular young adult literature that this book focuses on) will only publish books that will make them money. Other niches within the publishing industry may operate under different kinds of rules. For a more focused look at the market for academic book publishers, for example, see Thompson's *Books in the Digital Age* (2005).

Another key tension that arose from my classes when discussing publishing is the *feeling* or intent or *passion* of the writers. For example, upon hearing about the ways that *I Am Number Four* was produced many of my students recoiled from the book.

That the production of the text does not match their image of the impassioned writer slaving away at producing the book felt disingenuous to my students. In contrast, looking at the deliberate ways author John Green attempted to share his writing process with his readers (as discussed in Chapter Six), my students approved of the "love of the craft" of writing that Green demonstrates. "It's tricky," one student said during our discussion. She pointed out that, on the one hand Green and Frey are both focused on a similar goal: selling lots of books. However, on the other hand, their efforts in doing so and the implied sense of meaning behind the book creation process appears to differ in ways that make young people embrace Green's approach and recoil from Frey's. But is one *better* than another? Should the *intentions* of either act as deterrents from approaching a book?

As educators, part of our task is to illuminate pathways for young people to participate in larger civic life. Doing so, however, is about more than simply equipping kids with literacies that encourage making an income to sustain themselves. It also means being able to act upon the world in ways that can be personally and socially transformative. With this being recognized, it is not enough to get a student passionate about a book that was produced purely for profit; a book that—when exploring the labor forces that produced it like low wages—contributes little to the betterment of anyone but its top producers. Part of the critical civic lessons we can instill as educators are to build understanding of these processes of consumption even when they are tailored for teens.

## SERIALIZATION

Another major component of YA literature that is more focused on profit and limits the experiences of readers is the YA model of serialization. An overwhelming number of the popular texts at the time that I'm writing this are ongoing series. Let's take *I am Number Four* again: The first in (at least) a four book series not counting the spin off, supplemental texts, *I am Number Four* and its three other currently published sequels all end on significant cliffhangers. Instead of getting a sense of resolution at the end of a 300+ page reading excursion, the readers that eagerly plunked down $17.99 dollars to engage with this book are compelled to wait and buy the next in the long series of books.

In fact, looking at Amazon's literature blog *Omnivoracious*, 13 of the 20 best teen books of 2012 are part of an ongoing series (Wilson, 2012). The blog points to the books curated, to an extent, by Amazon, one of the fastest growing book retailers. The list is also not that far off from other year end lists. This makes sense: if you are one of the major sellers of teen literature your list of "best" books probably relates closely with market trends for book readership.

Serialization is nothing new, obviously. Dickens and Dumas were masters at the form of serializing a story over time. Comic books today rely on readers feeling compelled to pick up the next issue of a series each month. However, what's different about serialization in YA texts is that this is done in ways that places profit before

satisfaction. As readers seeking resolution, endings of books feel pushed less toward completing narrative arcs than toward helping ensure readers will be strung along for another profitable journey. The final pages of books like *I am Number Four, Divergent,* and *The Maze Runner* all position the books as entry points which readers have already invested time and money. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* started with a strong narrative in a somewhat hackneyed post-apocalyptic world, only to have the trilogy conclude with few questions answered and little sense of resolution. Discussing the book with students and other readers, the general consensus seemed to be that Dashner had no idea how his books would end and tried to tie haphazard pieces together as best as possible.

– Ditto Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy.
– Ditto Scott Westerfield's *The Uglies* series.
– Ditto Cassandra Clare's The Mortal Instruments.
– Ditto Patrick Ness' Chaos Walking Trilogy.
– And of course, ditto *I Am Number Four* and the rest of the Lorien Legacies.

It would be one thing if the end of YA book series actually seemed to be moving toward some sort of conclusion. However, even reaching the ending of these series feels like there was never a clear roadmap for the narratives to begin with. *The Maze Runner*'s conclusion, *The Death Cure* felt like few plot points were resolved. A prequel, *The Kill Order*, was published shortly after the trilogy's conclusion, but it, too, did little to answer questions. A review on Amazon is appropriately titled, "Prequel to what?" (the reviewer's name is listed as "not happy").

And though sequels and connected tales are a large component of adult genre fiction like mystery and horror series, the rapid proliferation of sequels and sprawling series seemed to take off once the profits of the Harry Potter series became clear. However, whereas J.K. Rowling's book series seems to have always been intended to be a seven-book story arc (Lussier, 2010), the books in more recent series seem to be half-cooked attempts at gaining readers and profit. In fact, of the many YA book series I've read that have been published since Harry Potter completed his final duel with Voldermort, I cannot think of one series that did not seriously disappoint me with its diminished quality over time.

Though YA sequels were published in the past, the narratives did not rely on readers completing an entire series in order to gain resolution. Robert Cormier's *The Return to the Chocolate War* and Paul Zindel's three *Pigman* texts functioned as strong individual narratives that reflected consistent world views and thoughtful character development. For readers that appreciated and were immersed in the world of these books, these authors offer the opportunity to revisit beloved characters and ideas once more. The difference in the post-Potter publishing market, however, is that this sense of readers' agency is nowhere to be found. In some sense, if a reader wants to resolve a storyline they are left with little choice but to continue to consume the texts provided by serialized authors. And when the concluding pages of these books are read and the ending of the book is disappointing, what message

are YA publishers leave readers left with? In terms of dignity for their readers and responsibility for crafting texts, YA readers are left with dismal options.

In 2007, YA Author Neil Shusterman wrote a compelling dystopian YA novel. In it, he provided readers with provocative questions about human rights, the current pro-life and pro-choice abortion debate, and the role of religion within one's individual agency. He relied on familiar archetypes and played with point of view throughout the novel to craft a book that read quickly and gave readers a strong depth in their understanding of the nuances of the novel's futuristic society. *Unwind*–the story about kids whose parents have opted for them to be medically torn apart and for their remains to be used by others–is a thrilling novel that many of my students have appreciated and shared via word-of-mouth. And best of all (in my opinion), the book was a stand-alone novel. There is only one problem: as a result of the book's success, Shusterman has revisited the world he crafted in *Unwind* and has now crafted the book as the first in a trilogy.

To be clear, this is different from the choices authors like Cormier and Zindel made. Whereas these books were invitations to extend a narrative if a reader wanted to make the literary trek back to Trinity school or *The Pigman*'s Franklin High School, Shusterman's decision indicates to readers that *Unwind* is an incomplete text without consumption of its follow-up novels. Sure enough, though the sequel, *UnWholly* adds interesting dynamics to the ethical questions established in *Unwind* the book ends on a steep cliffhanger with resolution dependent on Shusterman's ability to imaginatively provide a fulfilling end to a trilogy that was never meant to be. The jury's still out on this one: at the time that I wrote this book, the third in the *Unwind* trilogy, *UnSouled*, was not yet published.

In 2012, videogame fans created a digital outcry over the shoddy ending of a series millions had invested in. *Mass Effect 3* was released with the over promise of its developers that the conclusion of the massively popular game would provide answers and satisfying resolution for characters. Based on the opinions of many of its players, it failed. *Really failed*. Fans created a Facebook group called "Demand A Better Ending to Mass Effect 3" with over 60,000 members. In the description of the group's page and echoed by fans in reviews across the Internet, the main argument of these gamers is: "This is a horribly unfulfilling ending to what should have been the masterpiece of the trilogy. We need to show Bioware that we are unhappy with the way they handled this. Fans of the Mass Effect trilogy have put far too much time, effort, and money into the game to be abandoned with such a fate." Mass Effect players wanted the series to have a satisfying ending. After spending countless fulfilling (and sometimes frustrating) hours mashing buttons in front of a television screen, these fans have connected with and expect resolution for the characters they've guided through numerous encounters with peril. As fan complaints gained significant media coverage, the game's executive producer, Casey Hudson responded to concerns: "We have reprioritized our post-launch development efforts to provide the fans who want more closure with even more context and clarity to the ending of the game, in a way that will feel more personalized for each player" (Newman, 2012).

Though we'll explore the potential of organizing and fan communities in Chapter Six, the statement here explores how content producers may or may not consider content consumers when creating products for consumption. In many ways, the complaints of the Mass Effect audience voice essentially the same frustrations you read from readers of YA books in online reviews such as Goodreads and Amazon. However, with hundreds of millions of dollars funneled toward a lucrative gaming series, fans are actively moved toward action. However, the frustrations that authors would leave their plots "abandoned to such a fate" to quote the Mass Effect organization is felt throughout online reviews. Look at a few examples:

On *Insurgent*, Veronica Roth's sequel to *Divergent*:

> It took me 12 days to finish this book. *12 days*. That's probably the longest time I've ever taken to finish a book. I loved Divergent, don't get me wrong. I thought that it was one of the most exciting books I've read all year, and I was sooooooooo excited for this book, but now it's like... I'm just, I don't even know. My hopes were pretty much crushed. (fяσzєη, 2012)

And

> GOD! I hate it when authors make you wait for the sequel. I know it's not really their fault that readers are so excited for the next book. But still...I hope the long wait would be worth it! I mean stop making sequels that are not good! Sequels are supposed to be better than the book that they followed and not the other way around!!! Make us wait but satisfy us too!!! (Carstairs, 2012)

Likewise a review on Amazon of *The Death Cure* clearly identifies plot holes within the text. This author is knowledgeable of the world and likely a fan of the previous works. Further, the reviewer's name, "katniss" is an obvious nod to her or his fandom of similarly published YA titles. Titled "Don't Read this Book" the reviewer goes into depth of her or his thesis regarding disappointment with Dashner's book:

> Ok so this was one of the most disappointing endings to any series i've ever read. First of all their were so many plot holes you couldn't tell what was happening half the time. Also in the second book....Brenda. I mean, who really gives a crap about her? She is really only their to fill in plot holes and make the book longer so they can charge you more for it. In the last book she is only their to complete the "love story" part of the book. When Teresa died in the last book, i just about lost it. How could Dashner just kill her like that? And Thomas didnt really care at all about it. I mean I know he is mad at her and all,but just forgive her. She was just doing what she thought would save his life, and he seemed so heartless about it.Then their was the way they talked. If you had everything in your mind erased except your name, you wouldn't be able to talk. The author seams to think that somhow the never forget how to talk.A lot of the review's that say the book was good, say that it is perfectly clear how the flare started. People who say this, please tell me……HOW THE HE** DID

> IT? I?!!!!?!?!!????!The author never ever ever ever ever ever ever says how it did, and is probably never going to. They also never explain why WICKED hd to go through all that sh** to find a cure for the flare. Why couldn't thay just study people's brains to figure it out.The book was a really big disappointment, and most fans of the series will think so too. But i guess if you just finished the second one, and wnt an ending, read the last book. (even if the author did a poor jod with it). (katniss, 2012)

I quote at length the entirety of this review as the author makes clear several of the reasons serialization functions problematically within many popular YA series. In many ways it feels like a lazy avenue for publishing: authors can begin with a strong idea and not necessarily completely furnish the details of resolution. Further, it allows writers to extend salient tropes of YA genres. As katniss points out, there is the "'love story' part of the book" and the longer narrative because the publisher "can charge you more" for each new volume. However, despite these many arguments, what is striking is the resignment at the end that, even though the book is "a really big disappointment," readers should purchase this book if they want an ending. This is a capitalist lesson: the producers that are empowered to decide what content is released can put out shoddy content when they have essentially cornered a market through serialization. As popular a series as *The Maze Runner* franchise may have been it does not drive sales figures akin to *Mass Effect 3*. Serialization removes components of youth choice or freedom within avenues of reading. If a student has committed to the first and second volume of a series it is likely that he or she will then, too, invest time and dollars in a lackluster ending.

## A HOGWARTS OF ONE'S OWN

Discussing "the Harry Potter effect" on YA with my college students, one student described how the book prodded into her interpretation of the world around her. When she turned ten, she described how disappointed she was not to receive a formal invitation to enroll at Hogwarts. She wasn't chosen by the wizards that be for the honor to follow in Harry & Co.'s footsteps. As she shared this sense of rejection, several of my student's classmates nodded their heads; they too had felt the bitter taste of rejection. I'll admit I was surprised to see so many of my students share the sentiment. These were students that grew up with Harry Potter aging parallel to them: the challenges and feelings described in Rowling's books spoke to my students in ways so meaningful they felt or thought or hoped the books moved beyond the realm of fiction. And–though my students did not get their Hogwarts invitations–the books have come to life. The world of capitalism has made Potter's adventures nearly tangible in the eight hugely profitable films. Likewise, Universal Studio's Wizarding World of Harry Potter has made the books a physical reality: if you are willing to pay for a ticket and wait in the dauntingly long lines, you too can have a wand specially picked out for you at Ollivander's Wand Shop, enjoy a chilly cup

of frozen butterbeer, and embark on a tour-turned adventure, "Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey."

The relationship between passionate reading and money–consumerism and profit–is clearly problematic. The Harry Potter effect is one that brings youth's hunger for stories and entertainment directly into the eye of lifelong capitalism. It is a model that is so hugely successful it is copied ad naseum by publishers and authors. And as we'll see in the next chapter, the marketing decisions often limit audiences in ways that leave youth of color feeling like outsiders.