

March 2019

Adolescent Identities: The Untapped Power Of YA

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Recommended Citation

Ramdarshan Bold, Melanie and Phillips, Leah (2019) "Adolescent Identities: The Untapped Power Of YA," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss2/7>

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Can I see “me” in this book?

Can I see “you”?

Does it even matter?

(It Does.)

Young adult (YA) fiction is a vital resource for adolescent identity formation (Kokesh and Sternador; Thomas); in, at least, that YA can — and does — offer “frameworks for living and being” in this world (Phillips, “A Mapping Sensibility” 47). However, there is a lack of YA reflecting the increasingly plural and intersectional makeup of contemporary British society; for example, as Ramdarshan Bold discusses in “The Eight Percent Problem,” 90% of the best-selling YA titles from 2006 to 2016 (in the United Kingdom), featured White, nondisabled, cisgender, and heterosexual main characters, reflecting the makeup of the books’ authors.¹ Indeed, beyond the bestseller lists, the identities most frequently available in YA in both the United States and United Kingdom markets overwhelmingly depict this “norm” — implicitly refusing to acknowledge difference through the sheer weight of omission. What impact does this lack of diversity have on adolescents who do not align with those norms? Or on adolescents who do, as they exist with those who do not?

¹ It is worth noting that in March 2019, *The New York Times Best Seller List (Young Adult Hardcover)* included Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up*, and Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone*; they occupy the first, second, and tenth positions. Both authors are women of color and all of the books feature characters of color. Thomas’ *THUG*, as the novel is commonly known, has spent 104 weeks on the list, reclaiming the top spot around the release of the film adaptation starring Amandla Stenberg. Adeyemi’s *CoBaB* has spent 51 weeks on the list and Fox 2000 is currently developing the book for filmic release (“Children of Blood and Bone - What We Know so Far”), suggesting *CoBaB* may remain a bestseller for some time. John Green’s *Turtles All the Way Down*, a novel dealing with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and *What if It’s Us*, an LGBTQ+ novel by Becky Albertalli and Adam Silvera, spent 62 and 13 weeks on the list (respectively) before they came off the list in early 2019 (“Young Adult Hardcover”). These books suggest change is coming, but the ‘norm’ is not yet undone.

Adolescent Identities is a University College London funded pilot study that has sought to understand the effects of YA's homogeneity on tweens, teens, and other YA readers while quantifiably identifying the need for YA reflecting the plurality of contemporary Britain. Through a mixed method approach, including reading groups open to adolescents in London, Edinburgh, and Leeds, an online discussion with the global YA community, and an ethnographic study of the UK's largest YA convention, the project has sought to positively impact the lives of young people by challenging negative associations, demonstrating that youth voices of all kinds matter, and equipping young people with toolkits for meeting contemporary challenges while also developing their socio-political awareness. Commensurately, the project has a robust online presence — on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube — where we disseminate our research to a wider public and challenge readers and other invested groups to action.

We take our definition of diversity from We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a non-profit and grassroots organisation in the United States advocating for change in the global publishing industry, and BAME in Publishing, a network for people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds working in UK publishing. For WNDB and ourselves, diversity is: “all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.” In our concern with British identities, we would also include and highlight the experiences of BAME individuals. BAME is used as a collective term to group the ethnic minority population in the UK. Although this is a highly contested term, it is one that is used frequently in discussions about (ethnic) diversity in the UK, a topic Ramdarshan Bold discusses in her monograph (cf. Aspinall, Sandhu). *Adolescent Identities* has worked with YA readers across the UK to challenge those narrow and

limiting norms. In this article, we give a brief overview of why we believe that *Adolescent Identities* — a project focusing inclusive, representational, and “diverse” YA — is needed.

YA is “the metonymic moniker of a field comprising literature, media and culture” (Phillips, *Female Heroes*). As a field, the texts of YA exist between that which is “for” adults and “for” children, though those texts are read, viewed, and consumed more widely. As a pilot study, *Adolescent Identities* focused on the role of YA literature in the lives of young people in the United Kingdom, as we discuss this focus precipitated the decision to primarily work with — in reading groups and social media activities, including the *Adolescent Identities* vlog — texts featuring a diversity of representation as well as stories by British YA authors. These texts were Sophie Cameron’s *Out of the Blue* (2018), Alex Wheatle’s *Straight Outta Crongton* (2017), and *A Change is Gonna Come* (Bennett and Hawton, 2017), a short story anthology published by independent publisher Stripes.

These three examples of YA books by British authors portray diversity in its broadest sense. Cameron’s *Out of the Blue* (2018) includes persons of color, LGBTQIA+ relationships, disability, and the loss of a parent, though none takes center stage. The story concerns angels falling from the sky and how much Jaya’s life changes as a result. This sort of “incidental” diversity is key to fully inclusive representation. Indeed, as one reading group participant noted, “to have a book where, whether she’s homosexual or not, the plot wouldn’t change. You know, if it was a boy on the other side of [the relationship], it wouldn’t have made a difference” (*Edinburgh Reading Group*). Set in Crongton, a fictional recreation of South London, Wheatle’s *Straight Outta Crongton* (2017) follows the “sistrens” Mo, Elaine, and Naomi as they navigate life in the face of school, a children’s home (for Naomi), gangs (for Elaine), and Mo’s mother’s

new boyfriend. Giving voice to the working class and ethnic minorities of London, Wheatle's novel covers a range of topics as does *A Change is Gonna Come* (Bennett and Hawton, 2017). This anthology of short stories and poetry, known as #ChangeBook on social media platforms, features original stories across a range of genres on the topic of "change" written by both new and established authors from BAME backgrounds.

These examples are not representative of mainstream YA by British or American authors, where bestsellers² overwhelmingly reflect and contribute to the "norms" of contemporary Western culture.³ "Norms" is a concept and a regulating discourse. In her concern with fat-positive representation in YA, Lindsey Averill notes "norm" is "defined by that which is afforded regular representation and affirmed with positive feedback in terms of acceptability" (30). In YA, as a reflection of contemporary Western culture, White, nondisabled, cisgender and heterosexual characters receive regular representation and affirmation, at the expense of others — another function of the "norm." As Averill further suggests, the concept "implies a determined social construct, boundary, or othering" (30). For there to be a "norm," there must also be that which does not conform to those standards, a logic that extends to both representations within YA as well as to perceptions of YA itself.

Given increasing multiculturalism and recent spikes in hate crimes and anti-immigration rhetoric in the UK and the US, YA novels — like our three reading group books — reflecting the complex nature of British society are crucial. However, as Ramdarshan Bold outlines in "The

² The bestselling YA titles in the UK (2006-2016) include the *Twilight* series/Stephenie Meyer and the *Hunger Games* series/Suzanne Collins. The best-selling British author was Zoe Suggs (Zoella) with *Girl Online*.

³ Dr. Ramdarshan Bold's monograph *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction* discusses "norms" through the lens of race and ethnicity, while Dr. Erica Gillingham's work frequently considers the place of LGBTQIA+ YA. In a 2014 interview with *The Bookseller*, Gillingham gives statistics on LGBTQIA+ novels in both the US and UK markets (see Eyre.) For a consideration of weight, see Averill. Phillips considers representations of gender in YA; see, for example, "A Mapping Sensibility."

Eight Percent Problem,” the British YA market is infused with titles by American authors, and thus books by British YA authors are far less visible: 75% of the bestselling YA books, published in the UK between 2006-2016, were by American authors. This can result in confusion amongst British readers, particularly if the authorial voice does not feel authentic. As a reading group participant noted of a book they had recently read set in Britain but written by an American author, “It was really odd to look at it and be like, ‘This is not how anyone in this ... no one speaks like that so why would you’” (*London Reading Group*). Indeed, most of us — the cultural intermediaries of YA — do not think about books by British YA authors as a distinct, but related, market, and this lack of recognition is reflected in how we critically engage with texts (cf. Cart). When bestselling YA (often written by White American authors) implicitly perpetuates cultural hegemony, however, a power imbalance occurs that contributes to and reflects the marginalization of identities and selves not aligning with the “norm.”

One reading group participant summarised the impact of stereotypes and dominant cultural “norms”: “Because lots of people just assume what people would generally be, but then, for example, if we were to write a different character in a story that’s not the norm, people would naturally question what is he or what is she, and say, ‘Well that’s not normal.’” (*London Reading Group*). Going back to the notion of authenticity, seeing recognisable characters and places in the books they consume can help readers feel more engaged, as one Edinburgh reading group member highlighted: “I feel very positive towards *Out of the Blue*, because there’s a bit where they literally drive through my neighbourhood, that’s very exciting.” Furthermore, the participant “identified with Jaya because basically the entire awkward fancying girls thing was just so close to home” (*Edinburgh Reading Group*).

Exposing young people to diverse and inclusive narratives is important because this generation of YA readers has the potential to be, and already are, activists — as Marley Dias (founder of #1000BlackGirlBooks), Emma González (Parkland school shooting survivor and gun control activist), Malala Yousafzai (Nobel Peace Prize winner), and hundreds of others demonstrate.⁴ Indeed, Musgrave argues that the “imaginary forms of activism depicted in literature can prompt young people to contemplate their real-world choices and take action as digital citizens” (xi). We contend that subverting norms in YA, that is books written by authors from diverse backgrounds and/or featuring inclusive and representative characters is a form of “imaginary” activism that can, and does inspire, real-world change. Consequently, *Adolescent Identities* is a call to action — issued to the YA community (readers, writers, publishers, reviewers, scholars, educators, librarians, anyone with a vested interest in YA) — to publish, write, and read inclusive YA. Activism, enacting positive change, can happen only when we all work together to ensure representations of and for everyone in the literature we produce and consume.

⁴ For examples of other student and youth activists see Pires and Pimentel, and for a history of student activism in the US, see Barrett.

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