

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Honors Theses

Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale
Honors College)

Spring 5-1-2021

Representation Matters: African American Female Readers' Perceptions of Young Adult Literature

Asia Harden

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#), and the [Marketing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harden, Asia, "Representation Matters: African American Female Readers' Perceptions of Young Adult Literature" (2021). *Honors Theses*. 1705.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_thesis/1705

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College (Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College) at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

**Representation Matters:
African American Female Readers' Perceptions of Young Adult Literature**

by
Asia Harden

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2021

Approved by

Advisor: Dr. Robert Magee

Reader: Dr. Marquita Smith

Reader: Professor Christina Sparks

© 2021

Asia Harden

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Abstract

In 2019, only 6% of U.S. children's books published were written by black authors. This portion of the publishing industry, and particularly the category of young adult literature (YA) has room for improvement when it comes to African American representation. To identify how this lack of representation affects readers, this study was broken into two parts which resulted in obtaining the African American female YA author perspective, as well as African American female readers. J. Elle and Kristina Forest were interviewed in the first portion of the study, and three focus groups were conducted in the second study with 13 African American female readers ages 18-25 to gauge their opinions on this matter. They spoke on the topics of inner conflicts as black readers, stereotypes perpetuated in YA, the need for people of color within publishing, black joy and black trauma, and the popularization of black voices in 2020. Ultimately, these readers found that representation in YA matters because it provided mirrors for black children; they only hope that black stories transcend the current trend.

Preface

This topic of study hits close to home for me because I have been a reader of young adult (YA) fiction for the majority of my life. However, despite the many captivating stories that I pored over as a teen, I never truly connected with a book, or felt seen by a narrative until I read *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas, during my sophomore year of college. It is set in Mississippi as Starr, the young black female protagonist, attends a predominantly white high school and faces the challenges of growing up in a world that is often unfair. In many ways, the narrative provided a mirror into my own life. From the setting to the code-switching to the ignorance of her white friends and classmates, Thomas made me feel seen in a new way. I grew up loving white characters in white stories - and as a 20-something I still do, but I now know that there's just as much value, if not more, in having the ability to read books featuring characters that look like me. Furthermore, in a world where I do not always feel seen or heard, Starr showed me and little black girls everywhere that we have a voice, too, and this recognition is something I wish for every reader.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Preface.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Research Question.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
What is Young Adult (YA) Literature?.....	6
Current Industry Landscape.....	7
Methods.....	11
Author Interviews.....	11
Focus Groups.....	12
Study 1: African American Female Authors.....	14
Study 2: African American Female Readers.....	20
Coming of Age and Gravitating Towards Black Authors.....	20
Sparks Fly: Discovering the Joys of Reading	24
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> and the Conflicting Nature of Being a Black Reader.....	26
Mirrors, Mirrors, Mirrors: Why Representation Matters	30
Is There an Ideal Black Character?	34
Oh, No: Identifying Black Stereotypes in YA	39
Black Joy: The More the Merrier.....	42
“Infiltrate Every Space”: The Demand for POC in Publishing	46
Want to Join My Book Club?: The Social Media Influence	49
Is This a Trend? Popularizing Black Stories	51
Discussion.....	54
Topics for Future Exploration	57
Bibliography	59
Appendices.....	66
Appendix 1: Author Interview Transcripts.....	66
Appendix 2: FG1 Transcript	75
Appendix 3: FG2 Transcript	90
Appendix 4: FG3 Transcript	111

Introduction

Research Question

How do African American Female Readers Experience Young Adult Literature?

Purpose of the Study

In the age of the Black Lives Matter movement, social media, and social awareness, it has become imperative for all people to see themselves justly reflected in the world around them, including print media. The publishing industry is known for its rocky history of exclusion though it has made strides in the past few years to identify its diversity standards (Tyner, 2019 and Low & Lee Books, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore how African-American female readers ages 18-25 interpret young adult literature, specifically in regards to representation.

Literature Review

What is Young Adult Literature?

Young Adult (YA) literature is a category of children's books intended for age 12-17 (Moses, 2020, 33). Literary agent Jim McCarthy noted, "I do not know that there's a real technical definition of what Y.A. is. Essentially, it's just literature for and about teens, there to bridge the gap between children's and adult's books. It can be subdivided into the same genres as adult books—romance, paranormal, mystery, horror, literary fiction" (Doll, 2013).

Although this category focuses on stories told from the lens of teenage protagonists, but 55-80% of young adult readers are adults (Hay, 4). "Older audiences are drawn in by the simpler and engaging writing of books that often center on coming-of-age stories. Although these books are targeted toward younger readers, they serve as a bridge to an older audience as parents refer them to their friends (Moses, 10)." More specifically, adult readers love YA literature for its fun, interesting content and fast-paced plots (Hay, 11).

The idea of YA literature began to take shape with the publication of *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton, in 1967, gained literary significance with Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (Campbell, 12) in 1974, and began to pick up mainstream traction with the 1997 publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling (Grady). According to former children's librarian Patty Campbell, *The Chocolate War* is "a book that shook us profoundly, a book that nobody could ignore... the universe of young adult publishing had been disturbed, and

would be forever after. And the door was opened for all the honest, fresh, stylistically daring, startling, terrifying, and wonderful fiction that has been our legacy ever since” (10).

As noted by the previously mentioned titles, the trend of female author dominance in the category continues with current YA titles (Hays 19). According to *The New York Times* Bestselling Young Adult Hardcover list, the most popular YA authors as of March 2021 were Angie Thomas (author of *The Hate U Give* and *Concrete Rose*) and Karen M. McManus (author of *One of Us is Lying* and *The Cousins*). “YA has become a place for women to read books by other women. Because YA is so female-driven, this has created a huge audience of not just teen girl readers, but adult women who’d like to read a story about fellow women. YA has, in a sense, embraced women, and is a place women are celebrated more than other genres (Hay 19).” This is particularly valid in comparison to popular adult fiction spaces, where women are often overlooked (Jensen).

Current Industry Landscape

The major publishers in children’s publishing include Scholastic and Penguin Random House, which make up 53% and 8.2% of market share respectively as of May 2020. Scholastic’s publications include *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Goosebumps*. Penguin Random House’s well-known titles include *The Fault In Our Stars* and *The Book Thief*. The third-largest publisher is HarperCollins Publishers LLC, which holds 2.2% of the market share (Moses, 25-7).

Young adult books have grown increasingly popular over the past two decades (Moses). One of the biggest catalysts for this growth is due to well-loved book-movie adaptations like *Harry*

Potter, *The Hunger Games*, and *Twilight* (Hay 15). “As *Harry Potter* became an unexpected crossover success, middle grade and YA novels became conflated in the cultural conversation. A voracious appetite arose for books aimed at children that adults could enjoy too, and the appetite quickly shorthanded itself into ‘books for teens.’” (Grady).

If a book-movie adaption is well received, as demonstrated by titles like *Harry Potter*, the sale of its source material and similar titles goes up. More recently, streaming services like Netflix have continued this trend with the release of a film based on Jenny Han’s 2014 novel, *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, and a series based on Jay Asher’s 2016 novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Moses, 13). Both cases resulted in a renewed interest in each book, as well as the release of a revamped movie-tie in cover. While this model is great for sales, “the proliferation of the blockbuster book-movie franchise model will continue to concentrate the industry’s resources... smaller children’s publishing houses that do not have the scale to release hit books will have a harder time staying afloat, causing the industry to continue consolidating (Moses, 13).”

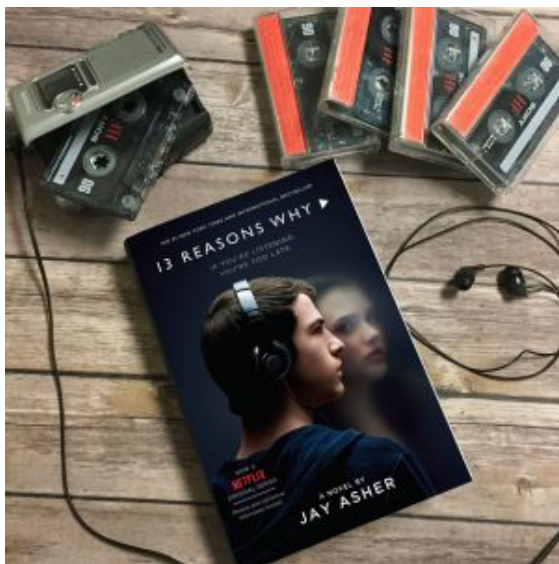


Figure 1: *13 Reasons Why* series tie-in cover



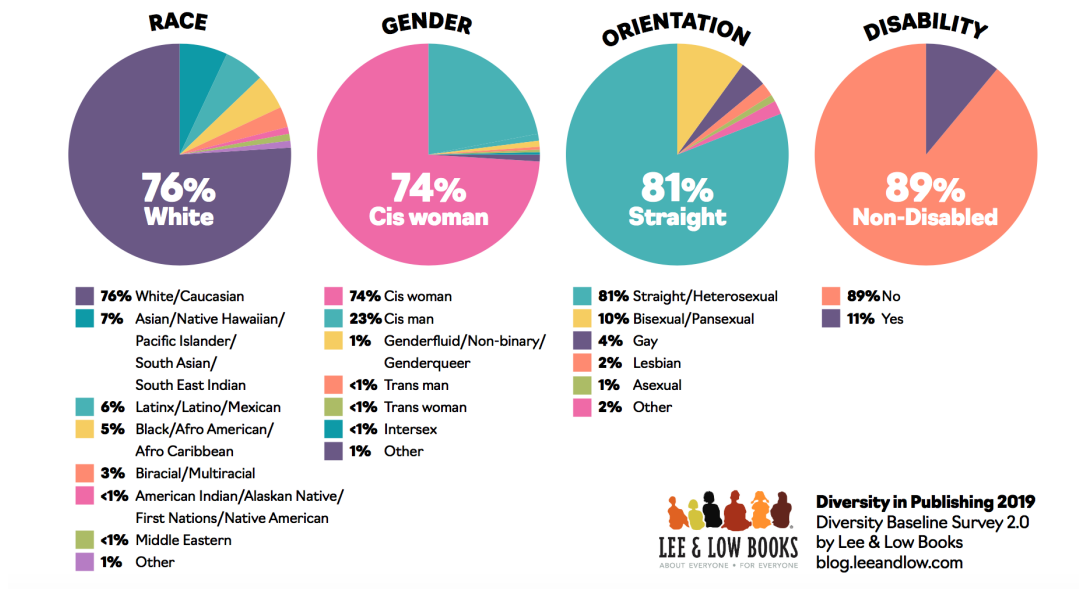
Figure 2: *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* movie tie-in cover

U.S. society, which seems obsessed with social media, has also made way for the book-loving community to connect in waves by sharing book-related content on online platforms like Youtube, Instagram, and Goodreads. According to a recent study, 88% of readers engage with social media, and often encounter book-related content (Hay 14). Communities on every major social media platform are dedicated to books, including Bookstagram and Booktube. “There are hundreds of BookTube channels, most focused on the Young Adult genre” (Hughes).

These YA communities are very active. A hashtag search for #yalit yields 1.4 million Instagram posts. To contrast this, a search for #literaryfiction yields 103k posts. Booktube (a community within Youtube) is no different. Christine Riccio, one of the biggest content creators within the community, now has over 850 videos and 413k subscribers. Her success helped her score a publishing deal with Wednesday Book, which resulted in her becoming a *New York Times* bestselling author (Hays 22).

While the YA category is stylistically and thematically diverse, there is not much diversity in terms of the racial background of authors and publishers. According to a 2019 Lee & Low Books survey, the publishing industry consists of 76% whites and 74% cis women. The editorial level, the individuals responsible for acquisitions, consists of 85% whites and only 1% black (Lee & Low 2019).

Industry Overall



To look at the current diversity within children’s books, I looked to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, a Wisconsin research library with expertise in the field of children’s and young adult literature, that has kept track of diverse reads within the category since 1985. Based on their 2019 research, only 6% of the 3,717 books they received from U.S. publishers were written by black authors. This figure is considerably lower compared to the 13.4% of black citizens living in the U.S., according to the 2019 United States Census Bureau.

Furthermore, while YA is becoming more popular, readers are taking notice of the lack of representation among publishing houses and debut authors. Organizations like We Need Diverse Books are demanding the publishing industry to hire and publish works by more members of marginalized groups (WNDB).

Methods

Author Interviews

After gaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I conducted interviews with African American female YA authors to get their perspective on writing black characters, their relationship with their audience, and their personal experience with YA literature. Initial contact with each author was made through their author website contact portal. They were selected based on meeting the previously established criteria of being an African American female YA author. One participant responded to questions via email, while the other met with me via Zoom. Her session was recorded to ensure accurate transcripts.

The author interview questions include the following:

1. Describe your own relationship with reading.
2. What are your favorite titles?
3. How do you pick up books? Do you gravitate toward literature written by black authors?
4. What types of books did you read growing up at home or in school?
5. Did you feel represented in what you were reading?
6. Can you recall the first time you truly connected with a book? What was that like?
7. What compelled you to write your first manuscript?
8. Why Young Adult literature?
9. What is your relationship with your audience/readers?
10. Do you keep your readers in mind while writing, how so?
11. How important is representation, especially African American representation in YA?

12. In your opinion, is the black community well-represented in YA literature?
13. Tell me about any changes or shifts you've seen in the YA category over the past few years?
14. What does the future of YA literature look like?
15. What changes would you like to see happen in YA, or the publishing industry as a whole?

Focus Groups

I also conducted three Zoom focus groups of 4-5 individuals in order to answer my research question. Focus groups were capped at five participants in order to create a more comfortable and opinion environment to express opinions. It was also important to allow each participant plenty of opportunities to speak without hosting a longer meeting. To be eligible, participants were African American females between the ages of 18-25 who were current or past readers of young adult literature.

Participants were selected with a snowball sampling method, a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects (Oregon State University). All Zoom sessions were recorded to ensure accurate transcripts. Transcripts are included as appendices. The identities of each participant will remain confidential. I have substituted fictitious names in the place of their real ones.

The focus group questions include the following:

1. Describe your own relationship with reading.
2. What are your favorite titles?

3. How do you pick up books? Do you gravitate toward literature written by black authors?
4. Are you aware of many black YA authors? Name a few.
5. How did you discover these authors?
6. What types of books did you read growing up at home or in school?
7. Was your school's library curated or censored? If yes, how so?
8. Did you feel represented in what you were reading?
9. Do you recall many black characters in the books of your childhood?
10. Can you recall the first time you truly connected with a book? What book was it and what was that like?
11. Does your childhood reading life influence your reading now?
12. Do you currently read Young Adult literature? Why or why not?
13. What's it like to read a book where the protagonist looks like you?
14. How important is representation, especially African American representation in YA?
15. In your opinion, is the black community well-represented in YA literature?
16. What do male authors get wrong about female black characters?
17. How do you want to see African American characters portrayed?
18. Are stereotypes often perpetuated in YA? Tokenization?
19. Tell me about any changes or shifts you've seen in the YA category over the past few years?
20. What are some of the positive aspects of YA literature?
21. What are some of the negative aspects of YA literature?
22. What are popular YA titles now?
23. What does the future of YA literature look like?

24. What changes would you like to see happen in YA, or the publishing industry as a whole?

After transcribing each interview, I coded the text to discover themes.

Study 1: African American Female Authors

Over the past few decades, African American women's literature has received increased attention as scholars establish the unique writing tradition of black women and how they can be used to examine "Black women's struggles and experiences, multiple identities, and ways of telling stories" (Davis 73). Moreover, in conducting a study focused on African American female readers, it was also important to gauge the opinion of African American female writers to further establish the context and current landscape of YA literature.

Kristina Forest, a young adult romance author, spoke with me briefly via email. She shared that did not feel represented in the books she read growing up, and required reading for school were always books like *Holes*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Things They Carried* (K4).

"It was hard to find books with Black main characters," she said. "Or specifically young Black girls" (K5).

She remembers the first time she connected with a novel, and it was not until her early twenties, years after the ages of the readers she now writes for.

“The first time that I wholeheartedly connected with a book was probably when I read *The Mothers* by Brit Bennet,” she said. “I think I was 23 or 24 at the time, so around the same age as the main characters. I think Brit Bennet did such a great job at capturing the African American experience for people in their twenties” (K6).

J. Elle, debut author of YA fantasy novel *Wings of Ebony*, cannot pinpoint a single book from her youth that made her feel seen.

“I don’t remember it with any sort of specificity but I do remember that it was in high school. I was always in AP English class and such, but the books that I had to remember for class were like pulling teeth, and the ones that I got from the bookstore on the weekends were devoured,” said Elle. “If you look at my grades, I got a D in my tenth grade English class... A friend of mine told me in high school that grades aren’t a reflection of intelligence, they are a reflection of work ethic. I think there are layers to that, but I feel that a lot of that is true, and I was not motivated in that class to work. I felt completely disconnected to the text” (JE10).

These experiences have molded Elle’s convictions regarding representation within publishing. She noted that representation is “life changing. And the absence of it is detrimental for so many reasons. I used to be a teacher, and first of all, just purely academically, literacy is a gateway into learning. Teachers work so hard to try to get kids to love to read, and you need to be able to read and analyze texts and think critically about what you’re reading to succeed in your upper high school classes and in college. We know that higher education is a cornerstone of upward mobility” (JE9).

“When I look at inner city communities and socioeconomic status, and I look at the things that impact the well being of my community and kids in my community... I see the importance of reading,” continued Elle. “It’s critical, and it’s very difficult when you hand a kid a book, and you force them to read it, but they can’t connect to it. It’s a disservice to those communities. There is no shortage of books not by black authors, right — by white authors and about white characters. So, white kids have these opportunities to engage with stories that make them feel seen, validate their lived experience, reflect things that are true to them, and take them to fantastical worlds grounded in eurocentric magic that feels a step removed from reality, like it could be their actual history... I mean, what exactly are educators wanting black kids to take away from books that we’re forced to read? It’s certainly not a love of learning because I’m not going to love reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I’m not going to love that in the same way that a white kid is going to love discovering magic in a *Harry Potter* world. There is a systemic issue here, and that systemic issue is only upheld by the lack of diversity in publishing, so it’s a huge problem” (JE9).

For Forest, the experience of writing for teens specifically, is something she finds worthwhile, also noting that like Elle, it was during her youth that she began to enjoy reading books outside of class.

“During high school was when I really started to read for pleasure and when I started reading YA. I really loved Sarah Dessen, and like most teens my age at the time, I was really into *Twilight*... I think there is something really special about writing for today's youth, and I love to

write about people who are experiencing things for the first time with so much life ahead of them” (K4).

Elle specifically wrote her first manuscript because she felt compelled to tell the story of her teen protagonist, Rue, and that maybe the publishing world was ready to hear it.

“I believed I had a shot,” said Elle. “I believed there was a chance publishing would be open to it, and I honestly felt very compelled to get the story out. Rue came to me in such a fury, and I felt like I had a duty and an obligation to tell her story for my community, for my actual neighborhood, for kids who look like me, grew up where I grew up, and my teenage sisters. Once the story was on my heart, I felt it would be wrong to keep it there. I had to let it out, so to speak” (JE6).

The author-reader relationship is something that has been strengthened over the last few years due to social media and school visits. Both Forest and Elle like to think they do a good job with connecting to her readers through these channels.

“Lately, our relationship only exists online via social media because in-person events are currently non-existent,” Forest said. “I’m very appreciative of my readers and always try my best to reply when they tag me in posts. I’m also very respectful of their online space and grateful that I even have readers who like my books” (K9).

Elle echoes this sentiment.

“I would like to think that I’m very accessible and engaged,” Elle said. “I try to be accessible on social media because it wasn’t something that I had as a kid. I didn’t understand or connect that I could be an author. It’s really important for me to do school visits. I try to do as many as I can because I want to interface with students and have them understand that what I do is something that they can do” (JE7).

From personal experience, Elle knows how difficult it is for some kids to see writing as a sustainable career option, and without that knowledge, it is harder to create a more diverse future within the publishing industry.

“When I discovered YA, I wasn’t a writer at the time nor did I aspire to be,” said Elle. “It just wasn’t on my radar. I knew I loved words but the connection between ‘this is cool’ and ‘I want to do this’ just wasn’t there. That’s a lack of representation as well. Had I been exposed to more as a kid, then perhaps, being an author would have been on my ‘things I want to do’ list for when I get older. I just didn’t know a lot about it. The schools I attended didn’t have author visits. It was a mysterious nebulous thing that I didn’t fully understand” (JE5).

Looking towards the future, Forest noted that the YA romance genre is one of the more inclusive YA spaces, and acknowledges that the category as a whole has room for improvement.

“I think representation is very important. It's important for readers to be able to see themselves reflected in literature... I think it's getting better, but books by and about Black people are still a very small portion of what's being published right now” (K11-12).

Elle would like to see the diversity within America reciprocated within the books being published each year.

“I would like to see books on shelves that are representative of the culture and diversity in America,” she said. “Bookshelves need to look like the people, and until that happens, I’ll be writing until my fingers fall off. I’ll be mentoring other aspiring writers and doing whatever I can to open doors for people in my community and other people of color who want to write. I’m going to continue to use my platform to uplift others and hopefully inspire them to pursue their dream of becoming an author because I firmly believe that if I can do it, anyone can. I’m not special, I just worked hard” (JE12).

Both authors are cautiously optimistic of what the future may hold.

Study 2: African American Female Readers

After conducting three focus groups with a total of 14 black female YA readers, I discovered 10 recurring themes to discuss on the following pages. Note that the names associated with each reader are fictitious to maintain confidentiality.

Coming of Age and Gravitating Towards Black Authors

Despite the narrative that is often associated with black readers, the majority of African Americans could be considered to be “readers” (Perrin). Many of the black female readers from this study noted their love for reading and how they make time for it within their lives. Beyond that, many participants are intentional about seeking out books written by black authors.

“For me, reading is a part of my daily routine...,” said graduate student Gwen. “Recently, instead of using my phone and social media to go to sleep, I try to plug my phone up across the room and find something short to read before I go to bed. I’ve just started doing that in the past few weeks and it’s really helped my health, sleep, and rest” (G1).

Gwen continued to describe how her relationship with reading has changed over the years, and she now hopes to seek out works by black writers, even attempting to read alongside her family members.

“Right now, I actively seek out reading books by black people, black women and people of color,” said Gwen. “Even last year when Toni Morrison died, I realized I’d never read a Toni

Morrison book. Who am I? So I went to go get some Toni Morrison books to start reading, and I tried to start a book club with my grandma. I said ‘We are going to read *the Bluest Eye* together.’ She never even read one page, but I tried. I think it goes a lot back to being socialized through books growing up that most books given to us were written by white people. Even in my high school reading of fantasy and fiction, I didn’t think that the book had to be by a black person” (G6).

Candace seconds this desire to read from black authors: “As far as black authors, I definitely started looking for those as I got older and understood supporting black people and things like that. I’ve been trying to make a conscious effort of doing so” (C3).

Another reader continued to echo this idea. “As I’ve gotten older, I’ve gravitated more towards black authors,” said Brenda (B3).

Though she does not have as much time to read as she once did in high school, it is something that she still values.

“I’ve always been a really big reader, especially elementary school, middle school and early high school, particularly fantasy books and other sort of fiction stories,” she said. “I’ve been trying to be more intentional about picking it back up” (B1).

Convicted by this same desire, Ashley felt it was important to make a commitment and stick to it, which is why she wove reading into her New Year's resolutions. She wants to find books that she can relate to.

“At the beginning of the year, I tried to make a resolution list that said I wanted to read more,” said Ashley. “I wanted to dive into more black authors, so I started looking it up on the internet ‘good books to read by black authors.’ I also try to pick a book that I can possibly relate to. One book I recently bought was by Damon Tweedy, and it's about his life as a black man going through medicine. Because I'm a pre-med student, I thought that'd be a good book to read since I'm going into that field. I always try to find things that relate to me somehow” (A3).

In contrast, Edith is currently a big reader of YA and middle grade books. She is always looking for books that display representation, even beyond the author's race.

“I read all the YA novels that are out now,” said Edith “I read all the very forefront people of color, outstanding novels. I've read all of Angie Thomas's books. I read everything right now. Once I got a little bit older, I started reading graphic novels because they are genuinely on a different level. Middle grade now is super different and the same stands for graphic novels. I find that a lot of graphic novels have queer representation in them, and there are a lot of books coming out definitely stand out. Tillie Walden came out with *Spinning*, and I love it” (E2).

Readers can discover themselves through the act of reading a book. This is one of the reasons Layla loves YA coming-of-age stories. As she develops her identity, she becomes more interested in reading books by black women.

“A lot here lately I have been [reading books by black authors], and that comes with developing my identity and learning more about history and who I am as a black woman— just getting more interested in reading more types of books in that way,” said Layla. “Other than that, I don’t really go directly towards a black author but I have been recently getting more into that the past couple of months, reading black authors and seeing how they write and how it’s different from mainstream books that you would read” (L4).

The relatable factor is a huge draw for black readers when it comes to reading books written by people of color.

“I realized that I deeply relate to and want to read stories by black people, particularly black women, I actively seek that out,” said Gwen (G6).

Clearly, black readers are intentionally gravitating towards black authors and want to participate in a shared experience through relatable narrative. This demand is something that the YA publishing industry should pay attention to.

Sparks Fly: Discovering the Joys of Reading

Benefits to reading include stress relief, mental stimulation, increased empathy, and improved memory (Moorhead). However, for these black readers, enhanced creativity, entertainment value, and shared experiences with friends make reading worthwhile.

For Ashley, one of the biggest benefits to her reading has been the spark of imagination and creativity that it brings her.

“Growing up, reading fiction books helped me with creativity, writing, and putting different thoughts and ideas in my head,” she said. “I always thought, ‘What type of life lesson can I get out of this fiction book?’ That kind of shaped my creativity” (A6).

Candace feels that same way. She finds that reading has brought her both creativity and a lot of joy.

“With the books that I did read growing up, they did help my creativity,” said Candace. “I was a pretty shy kid growing up and socializing with a lot of people... I had a hard time making friends. But reading always brought me joy, and I think it's the same now whenever I'm stressed out or need a break from reality. A good book really puts me back in the right headspace of where I need to be” (C7).

Just like when Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* at the age of 17, Danielle found that books made her inspired to write, even if she was only recording her dreams.

“When I was younger, I read a lot of books where the character would tell their story, like writing in a diary,” said Danielle. “As I got older, it made me want to write. Now anytime I’m feeling down, I write it out, even if it’s just in my notes. The author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, I think she was 17 when she wrote that so if I had a dream or something, I would write it down thinking that maybe this could be a famous book one day. It just made me want to write everything that I thought about down” (D9).

For Fantasia, one of the best parts of reading YA is getting to share the experience with a book-obsessed friend group.

“I would say growing up, we had challenge classes and a lot of my younger friends at the time were all actively reading,” said Fantasia. “Everyone was reading and I still have those friends now. They are some of my closest friends, so it’s never been a stigma of ‘Oh, you’re reading a book,’ because we’ve all been reading together. We’ve grown up reading the same kinds of books and enjoy the same kinds of books, so I wouldn’t say I sought them out in any kind of way. We just grew up together but I do think that the challenge classes, having a higher reading level, and being grouped together young did force us to become friends and like the same things” (F4).

Through high education, Gwen has found a well read group of friends similar to Fantasia’s but she still tries to convey her love of reading to her non-reader friends back home through quick

texts and recommendations. However, she cannot help but notice how educational and socioeconomic status plays a role in the different interests of her friend groups.

“My core friends group are all people from graduate school or MBA programs, so we all read,” said Gwen. “However, I do have a friend group from back home and none of them went to college so it’s different conversations. I’ll still tell them what I’m reading or send them a poem — which I just did last night. Saying “I read this poem, I think y’all would like it.” So it’s not like we don’t talk about reading or I don’t feel comfortable talking about books with them, but it’s not a conversation with my friends who didn’t go to college versus my friends who have been in college and are seeking a postgraduate degree” (G4).

She continues, “It does sort of speak to class status, education status, and socioeconomic status whether or not you read or have those sorts of open conversations about what books you’re reading. And that’s because of different things in life that you’re dealing with” (G4).

Despite the problems that plague society, each of these readers has found something joyous within YA literature.

***To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Conflicting Nature of Being a Black Reader**

To Kill a Mockingbird, by Harper Lee, is an American classic that was deemed revolutionary during its time of publication in 1960. However, for black readers today, there is a lot of baggage

and uncomfortable memories associated with this title. This conflict between societal expectations and genuine feeling is something that many of the participants have experienced.

“I think it’s interesting because as I got into high school, I started relating to the books I was reading more but it was also a bit strange because I’d be having discussions about it in predominantly white spaces,” said Brenda. “It was kind of multi-layered, so yes, I’m relating to more of the characters and the author for a particular book but maybe not always comfortable talking about my experiences or why I might relate to the things I’m reading about” (B7).

This is a multi-layered conversation, and for Gwen, the first time she realized the implications of how schools approach the topic of race in classrooms or through literature was during an assigned reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“I do remember getting to high school and reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in tenth grade, and I don’t know,” she said. “It was the first time I was in class and thinking about how the book impacted black students versus white students. And of course being taught by a white woman, it was the first time I started to connect the larger dots in the world and in society” (G7).

She also remembers the confusing thoughts she experienced when reading slave narratives in class. Should she feel represented? Should she feel uncomfortable?

“It was an early American literature class, and we read a lot of slave narratives and that was that was the first time I was thinking about reading on multiple meta levels not just ‘Oh, I feel

represented' but also thinking about society and the issues that plague us today," Gwen said. "But growing up I didn't feel represented in the books I read for school" (G8).

However, the conversation does not end there. Imani also had an awkward encounter with *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

"It's a really interesting thing that has been pointed out with *To Kill a Mockingbird*," she noted. "I remember reading that and until that point, I'd never read a book that used the N word. You know all the white kids in the class looked at me because I was the only black kid in the class, and it just kind of felt weird but then that was it. There wasn't any discussion about it. Everyone just moved on" (G7).

Edith is vocal about her feelings towards her desire to see current, authentic stories being portrayed for kids in the classroom and within YA. She was one of the first participants to broach the expectations placed on black readers.

"I enjoy people telling their stories and when the lines can be blurred," said Edith. "When you can be a reader and not just a black reader. The world wants you to think that the pronoun that exists within you is black and it is not. You have a name. You're whoever you want to be. People will ask, 'Oh, you're a black reader, do you read black books and I'm like no. My name is Edith and I read books.' That's it" (E9).

She goes on to speak about experiences she had in high school courses, including an Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) course where she felt uncomfortable being one of the only black students present. Of course, she is not alone in this uncomfortability; it is something that several participants mentioned throughout the focus groups.

“*Othello* by Shakespeare was the only other assigned reading book for school about a black person that I really enjoyed... I just liked that it was Shakespeare and about a black man, and I made it very clear in class that I thought it was important,” she laughed. “The only time I ever thought about race in class was... well, it was honestly something that I didn’t try to minimize but I knew that everyone knew that I was one of the only black girls within all the AP classes which was really annoying. The only time that bothered me and I felt agitated was when we would talk about slavery in APUSH.... I think black kids in public schools, and private schools too, need therapy after every class. And I’m being serious. It’s like an odd-one-out kind of thing which I think is strange” (E5).

Edith then reiterated the conflicting nature of feeling seen in a book when there are no characters that match your complexion. She feels somewhat of an obligation to only identify with black characters, even though she knows what’s on the inside matters just as much as physical appearance.

“But it [feels] conflicting, and of course I can’t speak for all black people but I feel that anytime when there’s a book that has no black people in it, but a person feels seen who is black, it feels conflicting because you think ‘Should I feel that way?’ said Edith (E6)

For other readers, like Melissa, instead of feeling conflicted when reading about white characters, she simply feels uncomfortable when she cannot find the representation that she is looking for.

“Honestly, it was kind of uncomfortable because my first experience [feeling represented] was probably when I read *The Hate U Give* for the first time,” she said. “I could truly relate to the character just because she was a black person or black girl, and I never experienced things like that so it was a really good feeling. [But reading books about white kids] was a really uncomfortable experience for the most part because you could never actually relate and get into the book, even if it was really interesting just because it wasn’t someone who looked like you. When I finally did read the Hate U Give, it was eye-opening because I really did relate to her. We had the same skin tone and it wasn’t hard to try to imagine myself in her shoes” (M5).

Mirrors, Mirrors, Mirrors: Why Representation Matters

“Mirrors allow us to see ourselves. They show us what we look like, they let us examine ourselves, and they can give us a glimpse of our ancestry and heritage. Sometimes a mirror will show you a part of you that you did not notice before, and there is beauty in that,” said English & Language Arts teacher Terry Kawi in a PBS article.

“Seeing ourselves in literature is a gift. It is an empowering experience as a reader to see a protagonist who has a similar name to us and shares a similar background. It is uplifting to meet

a character who is like you in some way and relate to them, watch them develop and grow over time in a way that is not cliché,” Kawi continued. “It is inspiring to read an author’s work whose voice feels like that of a family member. It is special to be able to connect with a person you will never get to meet. These mirrors help us see ourselves in relation to the world and help us build connection and a sense of belonging. They also show readers what is possible” (Kawi).

For this reason, readers have been craving more representation within the YA community.

“Growing up, the things that we read at school, it’s interesting that every minority book was still written by a white person, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, that kind of thing,” said Fantasia. “It was looking into a black person’s life but it was still written by a white person. I feel that there were obviously plenty of other options that we could have read but it was the same kind of book by the same kind of 1800s white authors about black people but not by black people. That was not necessarily detrimental but it is something that you definitely take note of as you get older — that you’re reading about the perspective of black people from someone who didn’t experience it at all” (F6).

“At the time, I didn’t think anything of it because I still thought the world was sunshine and rainbows,” she continued. “[I thought] that was just a coincidence but growing up almost every single book that I read was by a white author, even the books that were available in my elementary school library. They never advertised any books written by people of color. It was always the same type of novel, the same general storyline and same kind of author” (F5).

While Fantasia recognized the lack of representation with the YA books she was reading growing up, she did not find it to be detrimental to her in any way. Brenda disagrees.

“We pick up a lot of messages in our childhood, whether it’s really in your face or hidden, so I think having folks who look like you being represented in literature sends a message about inclusivity, representation, and diversity,” said Brenda (B13).

Ashley seconds that thought and feels that children’s books have a unique opportunity to offer an example of representation because “everyone wants to see someone succeed that looks like them. If a child is reading a book, and they see that there is a black doctor, black lawyer, or just some monumental person who’s made an impact on many lives that’s black, I feel like that’s very inspiring at a younger age” (A9).

American Girl doll books and tv/movie adaptations were all the rage in the early 2000s (Schild), and Jordan remembers a particular experience with inclusivity that left an impact on her.

“I had one positive experience and that was getting this American girl doll series pack of books one year, and it was like white girl, white girl, white girl, then there was a black girl who was teaching about hygiene,” said Jordan. “I thought that was so cool because she kind of looked like me, though not really because she had super straight hair. She didn’t look exactly like me but it was the fact that she had my complexion that made me think it was pretty cool. It was surface level because I was too young to process that that was probably a lot of work for the publishers

to have to go through to even get that published. So, it was a good feeling but really all surface level” (J5).

Along those same lines, Harmony simply wants young black girls to know that their life experience is shared and important. She believed that literature gives people that gift, and it should be shared with them before high school or early college.

“When you’re younger, you don’t necessarily realize or think about what you’re being exposed to and that is really something that’s important as we move forward,” said Harmony. “It was talked about how a lot more black authors and black women are being put out there and that needs to be not only in bookstores and online but also emphasized in schools to start the exposure early so that we don’t have to wait until we’re late high school, early college, before realizing that there is a difference. We can play a part in helping the younger generation realize that there are black authors out there. There are people who understand what we’re going through. That’s really important” (H4).

This sentiment is echoed through Layla’s belief in reading #ownvoices stories, “a term coined by the writer Corinne Duyvis and refers to an author from a marginalized or under-represented group writing about their own experiences/from their own perspective, rather than someone from an outside perspective writing as a character from an underrepresented group” (Seattle Public Library). She finds that the richness black authors bring to their works cannot be imitated.

“Reading a book written by a black author about a black character, there’s a lot more description, feeling, and emotion of that character,” Layla said. “You get to see a lot more of their internal thoughts and feelings. Those things aren’t made up; they are something that strikes inside of you because you know you can feel that. Black authors portraying black characters have the ability to conjure words from their heart instead of their head. And I think that’s a big difference that I’ve noticed” (L11).

“Just like in TV shows and movies, we have a push for more black characters to be portrayed,” said Candace. “I feel like it’s just as important to be portrayed in literature because I know a lot of my friends, cousins, and especially my sister growing up don’t enjoy reading because they don’t feel like they can relate to a lot of the things they read. If there was more of a presence for black women especially in books, I think that could increase the amount of people who are actually reading books” (C9).

In agreement with Candace’s idea, Jordan is happy that today younger kids/teens have access to more diverse books than she had growing up. However, there is still room for improvement.

Is There an Ideal Black Character?

Now the question becomes: Is there an ideal way to portray a black character within YA? Many of the readers from this study do not think black people are well-represented within the community and shared a few thoughts as to why.

“I don’t think that black people are well represented,” said Harmony. “Well at least for me, I was never able to connect on a racial level but more of a girl-to-girl or woman-to-woman. It was more so gender as opposed to race, and moving forward I feel that it should be both gender and race that can elevate different forms of media as we forward into the future. But the short answer is no” (H6).

This rings true for many other black female readers, as they latched onto strong, white heroines in their youth because there was not a black equivalent.

A huge *Harry Potter* fan, Brenda notes, “like I said before, I was a big *Harry Potter* kid. She wasn’t a black character but I really identified with Hermione — just her personality really. I felt it was similar to my own, so I’ve always had a really special place for those books for that reason. I felt like it captured who I was and wanted to be at that young age. She was definitely a big part of my reading journey” (B9).

Fantasia shares this experience, and she always took her YA character-obsessions seriously.

“When I was growing up, even if they weren’t black, if it was a woman, or girl, as the main character, I connected immediately,” said Fantasia. “I read *The Hunger Games* and I thought Katniss was the coolest person ever and I asked for an arrow for Christmas. In *Harry Potter*, I thought Hermione was so cool, and I got a wand. In the *Legend* series, which was a little bit more lowkey, the main girl was a lead assassin and she threw knives so I thought, ‘God, I’ve got to learn how to throw knives’” (F8).

“Honestly at that age, it was very formative because I was reading those in years where I was still trying to figure out how I was as a person, so I’d adopt the traits of main characters that I even remotely connected with because I didn’t really feel represented in the media,” she continued. “But I could just take those books of people who I could envision looking however I wanted which I thought was pretty cool. I wanted to be like them but I never wanted to be like Hannah Montana because I didn’t look like her, I didn’t resonate with her, but in books, I could latch onto female lead characters — maybe even in an unhealthy way” (F8).

Not only do black female readers find themselves connecting to female characters outside of their race, but sometimes, they also dislike black characters, especially when they are written by white authors.

“I’m not a huge fan of Rue in *The Hunger Games*,” said Edith. “She’s unnecessarily unrealistic. It was very confusing to me why her cohort who was with her was dark skinned but she wasn’t and there are a lot of theories written about that. Though there needs to be no theory, we know why. It makes me uncomfortable. That’s weird” (E6).

Instead, Edith wants black characters that she can root for.

“And with television now, if I’m watching like a baking show and the black person gets voted out, I genuinely cannot sit through it anymore and I don’t know what it is. It’s like I can’t sit through something if I’m not represented at this point in my life. I will not stand for it. I don’t

care even the slightest bit, which has been a thing for the past couple of years. It's annoying but at some point mainstream marketers will learn" (E6).

Though Imani is a *Twilight* fan, she also has trouble with how a particular black character is portrayed in the books and film adaptation.

"Within the novels that I read, black people were the villain or a very minor role/supporting character so you didn't get much time to know about who they were," said Imani. "You didn't get to see them or read about them and if you did, they were probably the villain or the bad guy. If you read *Twilight*, in the first book, Laurent is the only black guy in the book and he's the bad guy. I mean, you have James and Victoria but Laurent's the bad guy. He gets killed in *New Moon*. Spoiler alert — sorry, but he dies. That's the worst part. He's the villain and you really don't see anymore black people for a minute until *Breaking Dawn* and even then, it's small minor roles. They have a blip in the radar then that's it... You just don't see [black characters] and if you do, it's not in the light that would resonate with me as a black woman" (I4).

Edith agrees that it is hard to connect with many YA characters as a black woman because "the black person we know and live with on a day-to-day basis does not exist in most genres of book especially in young adult novels" (E7).

Danielle describes her ideal black female character as being vulnerable and well supported.

“I would like to see black women — a lot of time if they are in literature, they are a supporter or helping someone else — I’d like to see them being supported and shown with a more sensitive side, not just them being hard all the time,” she said (D15).

Because of this gap in relatability within children’s books, there are many missed opportunities to turn kids into readers, especially in schools. However, Gwen found that she could find herself in many of the books she read outside of the classroom.

“Did I feel represented in books I read in school? Even now I’m up here trying to think if I even read a book that was about black people or by a black person or person of color,” said Gwen.

“It’s been years since I’ve been in high school but I don’t remember at all. That’s crazy to think about in this day in age. I felt more represented in books that I read outside of school” (G8).

“*The Outsiders*... I read that super early in fourth or fifth grade. It was on my older brother’s fourth or fifth grade reading list. *The Outsiders* is about white kids, I think. Well, it’s definitely not about black kids but it does deal with different social classes,” she continued. “I also felt represented by *The Skin I’m In*. It’s about a young black girl who is very dark skin and while I’m not very dark skinned being a black woman in these spaces, I felt ostracized and othered and picked on. You know, all of those things that you go through as a young girl in school. I felt represented in reading *The Secret Life of Bees* because of her relationship with her friends and her family of women who made her who she was. Those are the books that were at the forefront of my mind but none of those were for class. I didn’t feel represented by books like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and that was the token black story, I guess” (G8).

Ultimately, black readers want to see characters they can root for in YA. Not token villains or martyrs. They want to see themselves portrayed as the Hermione Grangers and Katniss Everdeens of a narrative.

Oh, No: Identifying Black Stereotypes in YA

The push for a relatable black character stems from the numerous stereotypical characters present within literature. Some of the most common stereotypes are the mammy, matriarch, sexual siren, and welfare mother (Woodward). More simply put a black characters are usually a supporting role, superhuman, oversexualized, or poor. Of course, within the YA category, some stereotypes are used more frequently than others.

“The stereotypes bother me because we’re all taught that everyone has different experiences and if you’re going to set that into one character... I just want something different,” said Nora. “If I’m reading a book with a person of color, I want them to go through a different unique experience. Everyone goes through different things” (N4).

Edith also feels that black characters generally lack dimension in the books she’s read.

“With me, I can’t necessarily say that any book that tried to be inclusive ever felt inclusive to me because I’m convinced that the planet thinks that black people are a monolith,” said Edith. “They think that black people are all the same person. That they are one entity who all walk around being the same human every day and it just doesn’t work like that. There’s no depth to most

black characters in books. It's like he's black. That's his personality, and that's what makes him important in this book. And that sucks. It's the same thing with television. There's this quote about how we first told word of mouth stories, then stories through books, and now we tell stories through cinema" (E6).

The black best friend trope is often used in popular YA. Fantasia would love to see black characters take center stage.

"For the most part, if they aren't a minor character, they're the main character's best friend. You'll have the main white girl, then you'll have her funny, probably chunky, dark-skinned best friends. It's just for comedic relief. That's how it is most of the time unless you're watching or reading something Tyler Perry style, you're really only getting side character action from your average black character" (F9).

Additionally, women are often portrayed as overly emotional or realistically strong.

"I think that women are often characterized as being overly emotional, and I don't think that's true. I think that's a stereotype that I've seen persisting in certain books but not by female authors," said Brenda (B15).

Danielle has particularly not liked the way she generally sees black women portrayed.

“Usually if there’s a black character in literature, they are portrayed as fiesty or firey,” said Danielle. “They are always snapping. I’d love to see that change. I don’t think that should be the token personality trait for all black people” (D16).

“How [writers] portray black women as being able to take so much — they are putting so much on that black woman, and they aren’t being portrayed as being human too or that they need to process stuff,” continued Danielle. “It’s always ‘She’s a strong black woman, she can handle it.’ She was never given a chance to really process everything” (D14).

Black readers want white authors to look beyond stereotypes.

“I would advise the writer to try to see outside of your initial idea of describing a black person,” said Layla. “Not always extremely loud and here for your entertainment or always messing up or someone who’s very submissive to their white counterparts in the books, I’d like them to think of the opposites, so someone who is very strong, but also introverted and a bit intimidated by the world and other people. But it’s not so much about writing the perfect character as an African American but reevaluating the people who are writing these books and saying ‘Hey, step outside of your box and see us as we are, which is a variety of different things. You don’t have to stick to this one idea’” (L10).

Harmony wants to see these popular stereotypes evolve, noting that everyone has problems and flaws but that those things should not define an entire race within literature.

“Black people need to be represented more modernly,” said Harmony. “A lot of times, it’s made to seem we’ve always gone through these hard troubles back in the day and now there’s always trauma or psychological issues but that happens to everybody. That’s just not a racial thing, and by modernizing and evolving the black role, the roles of other races also need to be evaluated” (H7).

“Sometimes they are put up to appear to have a good life but everybody has problems,” she continued. “Everybody has things that they have to work through, and so I just think that coming to that middle ground by emphasizing the black people are just like everybody else. We go through things just like everybody else. It’s not just because we’re black. It’s because that’s life” (H7).

Black Joy: The More the Merrier

The Hate U Give, by Angie Thomas, was a breakout success, especially in regards to representation within the YA genre (Colyard). While many of the study’s participants love this book and other similar titles, they do not want to see black authors pigeon-holed into writing one kind of story.

“I think a lot of the time it’s only one kind of story,” said Brenda. “And it usually centers around black people struggling. There’s a place for reading those kinds of books but I also want to see black people falling in love. I also want to see black people getting the job of their dreams, ya know? I think there’s a need for happier stories in the way that other books have been able to do that while also featuring black people” (B14).

She continued by stating that she'd like to specifically see more black characters in fantastical stories.

"I would honestly like to see more black characters and black women in a lot of dystopian, sci-fi novels that I enjoy," said Brenda. "I'm trying to remember now and I don't think that I can pick out one character that was black in any of those types of novels. I love those types of stories. I'd definitely like to see more black people there" (B16).

Since Danielle is a reader of YA romance and a fan of Nicola Yoon, she'd like to see more from that genre as well. She wants to see "POCs fall in love without there being some type of barrier or struggle just focusing on their story with no struggle attached" (D19).

"I feel more attached to books and the authors like Nicola Yoon, I make sure if she writes another book I read it immediately because she writes about black characters and you feel seen through them. It's also refreshing when it's not just about them being black. They are actually just living a life and it's not talking about the struggles, just a story so that's nice" (D12).

Danielle and many other participants noted that some of the first books they read for school with black main characters usually centered around a traumatic experience or upbringing.

“The first black character I read about was something similar,” said Danielle. “It was about a girl growing up in the hood, or whatever, and she was trying to navigate it between going to school and not getting caught into gang violence. It was sixth or fifth grade” (D7).

A similar middle school experience was shared by Candace.

“The name of the book is slipping my mind but it was in seventh grade, and it was a book about a black guy raised in the projects,” she said. “He was destined to go to jail, but it was a book that we were required to read for class. That was the first story that I can remember that had a black lead character, and it kind of sucked to have it go that route but it was a black character” (C6).

For Ashley, in the past, she has felt inspired by reading stories featuring black characters experiencing hardships. It makes her feel proud of her ancestors for overcoming so much pain.

“Sometimes I was inspired by reading a book that had a black main character, or sometimes I felt down depending on the type of book,” Ashley said. “I remember my first book with a black main character was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, and I remember reading that when I was really young. They talked about the bomb in Birmingham and stuff, and I didn’t know it was true until I asked my mom about it. It kind of bothered me because I was a young child learning about how blacks got tried and how they are getting treated still to this day so I’ve always had mixed feelings about whether I was inspired or felt down, depending on the type of book” (A8).

The need for both windows and mirrors explains why it is critical to illustrate black joy, as well as black trauma (or hardships) to maintain an accurate portrayal of the black experience through literature (Kawi). Not to say that one topic is more valuable than the other but publishers marketing black trauma without black joy is not an accurate representation of life, and readers are calling for joyous black stories to be brought to the forefront.

“Definitely more accurate representation and more of a chance for black people to see themselves portrayed normally not necessarily focusing on our trauma which is something that you see a lot of white authors do,” said Imani. “If they have black characters, they are going to talk about black trauma, and if you’re repetitively exposed to that as being the only thing associated with a black story, the public, it’s overkill. I just want to see black people represented normally, like if you watch ‘Insecure,’ that’s a show that doesn’t capitalize off of black trauma. It’s just black people being black people — being normal. And I feel like that’s a big issue right now. I can’t pick up a book without reading about a black character and seeing something like gang violence, and okay write about the representation of most black Americans” (15).

Now the only question is: Why are stories featuring black trauma more popular than those that do not? Where is the next black *Harry Potter* or *Twilight*, or will *The Hate U Give* always remain the biggest black YA title?

“Infiltrate Every Space”: The Demand for POC in Publishing

Black readers would like to see more black people working behind the scenes to bring more diverse books into the world. As previously mentioned, black people make up only 4% of the publishing industry (Low & Lee Books).

According to Brenda, “A precedent should be set — well, it’s starting to be set — when telling stories about people of color, having people of color working on it, like on the team. I think books are starting to do that more but it’s something that really needs to be stressed” (B20).

There are many instances of the publishing industry making missteps when it comes to representation. Gwen mentions a recent controversy involving adult title, *American Dirt*, by Jeanine Cummins (Martin).

“For the changes I’d like to see in the publishing industry is seeing more value given to black writers and black stories,” said Gwen. “I’m thinking most recently — well, this example is about Latinos — but I’m thinking about *American Dirt*. It was billed as the Hispanic book of the year but it was written by a white woman. There are so many Hispanic writers and authors who could write from that experience, so many immigrants, undocumented and the ones who live in this country who could write about that experience to where white people don’t have to swoop in and be the white savior to everything. Though that’s the way the publishing industry and society as a whole operated” (G10).

She also mentions some of the pay discrepancies that have come to light recently involving what POC authors are paid versus their white counterparts. Throughout summer 2020, #PublishingPaidMe on Twitter made a lot of these instances known (Kelly).



Figure 3: Black YA author Dhonielle Clayton #PublishingPaidMe example

“It was heartbreaking hearing Jesmyn Ward talk about winning the National Book Award and still being paid X amount compared to other writers. We’re talking about a brilliant writer still being underpaid,” Gwen said. “I think merit, value, financial support, and the belief that the audience is there... I think industries by and large need to realize that there are audience’s for black stories and stories that center people of color” (G10).



Figure 4: Jesmyn Ward #PublishingPaidMe example

Melissa points out an obvious reason to hire more black employees within the publishing industry: when working on a book, they can draw from experience to edit and promote.

“When you’re a black person talking to another black person, you can speak from experience. As a white person, you can speak from what you’ve heard but not necessarily experience,” said Melissa. “You’ll have never experienced the life of a black person. You’ll never truly understand what they’ve done or gone through” (M6).

On the other hand, Edith believes that it is simply time for black people to be given an equal share within the literary space — to be recognized for what we bring to the table.

“Black people should be weaved into society the way we’re meant to be,” said Edith. “There’s a lot of getting stepped on. Our ancestors went through a lot, and we just need our rightful place in publishing houses, as editor, as librarians, as writers, as friends of writers. We have to infiltrate every space. There’s no other choice. It has to be done. I believe it will be hard to do but not impossible. There should be a seat at every table for a black person, and right now, there’s not.

And our generation is not going to take it for much longer, which I'm fine with. Do what you gotta do... Black people are going to have to — I don't know, shake it up in a new way. And people are going to have to understand that we will infiltrate every space because it's our rightful place in this world that we built essentially. Well, not essentially, very forefront" (E9).

To sum it all up, Layla simply said, "Hire black authors and publishers" (L12).

Want to Join My Book Club?: The Social Media Influence

The power of social media is something that affects many aspects of our lives but for many of the study's participants, it also affects their reading lives. More specifically, it can function as a source of book recommendations.

Nora searches Google or asks a friend for recommendations on what she should read next. While Layla finds herself in a lot of book-related Facebook groups.

"I'm in a lot of book Facebook groups that do a genre of the week where people will comment on the books that they like and have been reading recently," she said. "That's a big why with social media and asking my friends to see what people are reading" (L3).

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Gwen has noticed a rise in online book club interest. She also pays attention to a few Instagram accounts for book recommendations.

“I noticed that during the pandemic, people were starting friends book clubs,” she said. “I know that NoName has a bookclub. I’m not actively a part of her book club but I do browse through her titles and see what she’s recommending and reading. I’m also a part of this prison abolition book club right now that started as a direct result of quarantine, so I guess I’m always seeking out different books to read” (G5).

Another popular book club is Reese Witherspoon’s, which recently began a monthly YA pick.

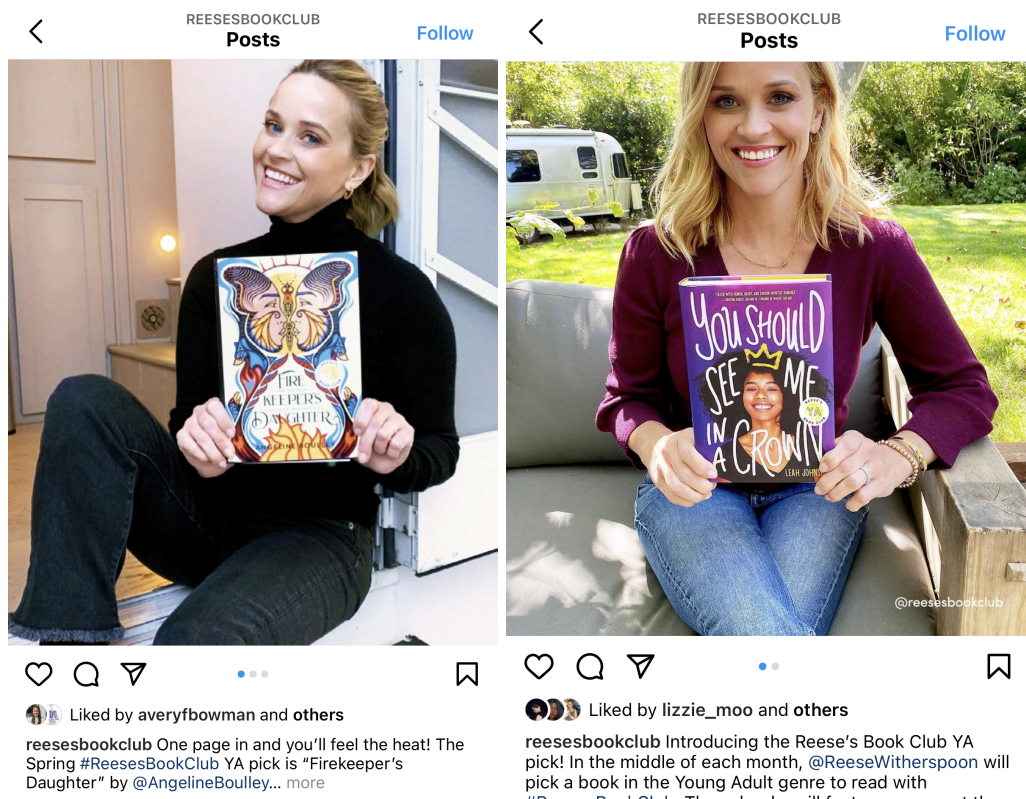


Figure 5 & 6: Reese Witherspoon’s YA book club picks

Another form of popular bookish social media is Youtube (or Booktube). Edith and Kyra often find herself excited to read a book if it has been recommended on this platform.

“I can’t focus on podcasts but I can focus on YouTube videos, so Booktube is where I always get recommendations,” said Edith. “I think ‘Wow, this person is really excited about this, I want to be excited too’” (E3).

Is This a Trend?: Popularizing Black Stories

“I’m not going to lie to you. I think that 2020 was the year that black authors genuinely started taking off,” said Edith. “I mean that in the most marketing way possible. [Publishers] thought, ‘We can profit off of them now, so we have to market it. We have to put it at the forefront.’ Every bookstore that I go into, the first twenty books on the shelves are Angie Thomas... When I was younger I’d want to read Obama’s book or Malcolm X’s book, but that was because it was what my mother instilled in me but now, it’s definitely a lot more mainstream” (E4).

“I often wonder as black people, how does that feel that basically for the first time since the Harlem Renaissance that black voices have been everywhere and also been given credit?” She continued, “How does that feel for [black writers] to just be a marketing pitch for the rest of America?” (E4)

Readers particularly noted the sudden ease with which they can find books by black authors.

“I’ve always wanted to look for black authors but until recently, it’s kind of hard to find black authors... but it’s also the general trend of the United States right now, which makes things a little easier but I feel that in the past it was harder to find black authors,” said Jordan (J3).

“We are just breaking the surface,” Jordan continued. “*The Hate U Give* was a very groundbreaking novel for many reasons and it’s showing that this is profitable and that people want to see [black stories] and here about them. It’s going to be a lot more popular going forward because black voices are being brought to the forefront and it’s important that we give the youth of the next generation examples of what they can do that aren’t stereotypical paths they can take” (J8).

Though not everyone has bought into the hype. Echoing author J.Elle’s cautiously optimistic tone, Melissa looks at things through a realistic lens.

“Personally, I feel like it's more of a trend,” said Melissa. “I haven’t met people who are so hellbent on finding black authors or finding books about black people in general until here recently because of recent events so I feel like it's a trend that everyone wants to hop on to seem woke or know what’s going on” (M3).

The recent event she is referring to are the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in mid-2020. This caused a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement as well as a racial reckoning like the U.S. has never seen before (Schonfeld and Winter-Levy).

Whether or not the newfound trend of uplifting black voices is here to stay, people are reaching towards black books to provide both those windows and mirrors that the world so desperately needs.

“I feel like it’s almost a curiosity thing for people now,” said Layla. “Like ‘Oh, I’m so curious of this culture that’s so foreign to me but I’m also familiar with it because I’m around it all the time.’ That goes for people of color and non-POC as well. Everyone is gravitating towards that because race is the center of the nation right now. I’ve seen many people reading books on mass incarceration, white supremacy, and things like that. I think people want to know more about our culture without downright asking someone. And so, a lot of the time, people go directly to books because they rely on the information that books give us” (L5).

Of course there is always hope that this spark builds beyond a trend.

“2020 was the year for black authors, and 2021 is definitely going to be that year as well where we see a lot more voices on black authors and people of color,” said Imani (I3). And beyond that, no one knows what’s in store but these readers hope that the future includes a more solidified place for representation with the YA community.

Discussion

The publishing industry has a lot of work to do when it comes to increasing accurate representation of African Americans within YA literature. Again, only 6% of newly released children's books each year are written by black authors, and only 5% of the publishing industry is made up of black employees, which is significantly lower than the 13.4% of black citizens living in the U.S. Black female readers and authors are calling for this to change.

Black female readers are engaged and intentional with their reading. They have experienced a lack of representation within the YA category in the past and they are hopeful that the genre will become more inclusive. While some readers want to see more black characters and stories, they also recognize how often black characters are stereotyped, which is not the desired outcome. Are black female readers asking for too much when they request accurate representation in YA books, or mainstream media? Is the issue more complex due to the variety of stereotypes that plague the black community versus their white counterparts? Is the publishing industry able to popularize novels that feature black characters who are more than a caricature?

There must be a balance between increasing visibility, without reinforcing harmful stereotypes such as that portray black characters as angry, strong without emotion, or the comedic sidekick. There must be room for complex and authentic black characters who are center stage in their own narrative. Maybe this authenticity comes with not only an increase in black characters within the YA category but also an increase of YA books written by black versus white authors. It is overdue for people of color to be able to share their stories without any red tape.

Reiterating Layla's previous point: "Reading a book written by a black author about a black character, there's a lot more description, feeling, and emotion of that character," she said. "You get to see a lot more of their internal thoughts and feelings. Those things aren't made up; they are something that strikes inside of you because you know you can feel that. Black authors portraying black characters have the ability to conjure words from their heart instead of their head. And I think that's a big difference that I've noticed" (L11).

This is important not only for the sake of author's creative expression but also because a generation of young readers need to be able to see themselves reflect through literature. It is an experience that should be easily accessible to them. As so many of my participants noted, deeply connecting with a character and a narrative brings a level of understanding and acceptance to young people that cannot be fabricated, and the effects of such an experience can be life-changing. For me, it surely was.

Furthermore, African American female readers are crying out for more diversity within the publishing industry. We won't see significant change in diversity within YA until POCs have a significantly greater number of seats at the table. The approximately 5% of black publishing industry employees is not good enough. The question now is how do we further elicit change? Readers want change that goes beyond the latest trend. They fear that publishers are only using black voices for financial gain, and will discard the 2020-2021 momentum as soon as the latest trend takes shape. Again, this fear is valid because POCs are not currently represented within the publishing industry, we do not have a substantial voice in these discussions.

On the other hand, some black female readers simply want to enjoy YA stories without being burdened by conversations of race that they experience in their daily lives. They prefer for reading to be a true escape. However, would readers feel burdened by racial politics if YA books were more diverse? Has American society made whiteness such a standard that some readers prefer to read about white characters? Is it inherently bad if black readers don't feel inclined to read books about black characters? Ideally, we should be able to see a bit of ourselves in any character, regardless of race, though that doesn't mean there is anything wrong with black readers wanting to see a character matching their complexion or life experience reflected back to them through literature.

Additionally, black female authors in the YA space understand the conflicting feelings that their young readers experience. As discussed with Kristina Forest and J. Elle, authors do their best to connect with their readers, and social media makes that task easy. They recognize readers' fears and write their stories to give the black community a voice. These authors relate to the struggle of growing up with literature featuring all white characters and many want to be a part of the change. However, it's unfortunate that these authors must bear the weight of creating black works because they are lacking. Most white authors have the privilege of writing only for the sake of the art, not to give a voice to black kids everywhere.

Forest and Elle are perfect examples of the direction that the YA genre could be headed if it continues to uplift black voices. Forest's romance novels and Elle's debut fantasy embody the black joy that black female readers are craving. Readers want to see joyous black stories full of

strong black heroines that defy stereotypes. Hopefully 2020's surge in popularizing black voices is simply not the latest trend.

Social media is a key factor in a lot of the momentum being seen within the publishing industry. Not only is a tool that connects readers across multiple platforms through Facebook book clubs, Booktube, and Bookstagram but it has also birthed organizations like We Need Diverse Books. Additionally, it helps drive the popularity of various YA titles. Readers have a bigger role within the sales and promotion of books now more than ever, and if this study is any indication, the future is bright.

Topics for Future Exploration

There were several other interesting topics covered within the focus groups, and while I did not collect enough information to cover them here, I feel that they may be noteworthy to consider in future studies. Below you will find each topic accompanied by a participant quote.

- Hope for the future of YA

Brenda: "I have, and I say that tentatively, there have been more stories that I've been able to read in the YA category that feature more black characters... *Children of Blood of Bone* was great... stories like that are coming out now so I think that's a positive shift" (B17).

- Censorship

Ashley: “My high school, it was predominately black but our librarian was white, so she kind of censored a lot of stuff. It wasn’t relatable to any of the student body but my mom always tried to introduce us to different literature. She had us read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and other really classic books like that. Also *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Then the principal had an issue with it, so they took out those two books during my senior year. They kind of censored everything after I left” (A4).

- Allyship

Candace: “My senior year of high school, we got a new librarian and she was really big on making sure there was material in the library for everyone. She actually sent out a survey where everyone could submit two books or genres of books that they liked to read and by the end of the year, she did a good job of making sure that the library was diverse and had variety to it. But before that I do feel like we had that list of banned books, so I didn’t go to our library to find books, I’d go to the bookstore to see things that I was interested in” (C4).

- Colorism within YA

Jordan: “I had one positive experience and that was getting this American girl doll series pack of books one year, and it was like white girl, white girl, white girl, then there was a black girl who was teaching about hygiene. I thought that was so cool because she kind of looked like me, though not really because she had super straight hair. She didn’t look exactly like me but it was the fact that she had my complexion that made me think it was pretty cool. It was surface level because I was too young to process that that was probably a lot of work for the publishers to

have to go through to even get that published. So, it was a good feeling but really all surface level” (J5).

In conclusion, this study has highlighted significant gaps within the YA category when it comes representation of black voices. It has also charged the publishing industry to do something about it. Hire people of color. Publish black authors. Listen to readers. Diversity is wanted. Diversity is needed. Representation matters because every black and brown face across the United States matters. Their story deserves to be told; they deserve to be seen.

Bibliography

Alter, Alexandra. "Where Fiction and Reality Collide: Books and Black Lives Matter." *The New York Times*, 20 Mar. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/03/20/books/where-fiction-and-reality-collide-books-and-black-lives-matter.html.

Anderson, Tara. *A Book Club for the 21st Century: An Ethnographic Exploration of Booktube*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.17615/r4aq-e587>

Cart, M. *From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature. Voices from the Middle*, 2001, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/From-Insider-to-Outsider%3A-The-Evolution-of-Young-Cart/0548d4853afd8973f67faffaf22424047bc7cf11>

Colyard, K.W. "'The Hate U Give' By Angie Thomas Was The Most Searched-For Book On Goodreads In 2017." *Bustle*, 18 Dec. 2017, www.bustle.com/p/the-hate-u-give-by-angie-thomas-was-the-most-searched-for-book-on-goodreads-in-2017-7625535.

Davis, Melvette Melvin. "Daughters Reading and Responding to African American Adult Literature: The Umoja Book Club." *Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 70, no. 9, Pennsylvania State UniversityUMI; ProQuest, Mar. 2010, p. 3464. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2010652619&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Doll, Jen. "What Does 'Young Adult' Mean?" *The Atlantic*, 30 Oct. 2013, www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2012/04/what-does-young-adult-mean/329105.

Ferry, Laura E. *Interactions between Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Identity Development*, Truman State University, Ann Arbor, 2013. ProQuest, <http://umiss.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/1518533991?accountid=14588>.

Ginther, Ruth A. *Middle Years Teachers' and Students' Responses to Young Adult Literature with Online Content*, University of Victoria (Canada), Ann Arbor, 2013. ProQuest, https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/bitstream/handle/1828/4875/Ginther_RuthAnn_MA_2013.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Grady, Constance. "The Outsiders Reinvented Young Adult Fiction. Harry Potter Made It Inescapable." *Vox*. June 26, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/26/15841216/outsiders-harry-potter-ya-young-adult-se-hinton-jk-rowling>.

Griggs, Brandon and Roberts, Holly. "South Carolina Police Protest Two Novels on a School's Summer Reading List That Grapple with Police Brutality." *CNN*, 17 July 2018, edition.cnn.com/2018/07/16/us/police-protest-books-shootings-trnd/index.html.

Hay, Monica. "Why Do Adults Read Young Adult Books?" 2019. Book Publishing Final Research Paper. <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/28851>

Hughes, Melina. 2017. "BookTube and the Formation of the Young Adult Canon," PDX Scholar

Ishizuka, Kathy. "Can Diverse Books Save Us? In a Divided World, Librarians Are on a Mission." *School Library Journal*, 2018, www.slj.com/?detailStory=can-diverse-books-save-us.

Jensen, Kelly. "Male Leads in Fiction Sell 10 Million More Books on Average Than Female Leads." *BOOK RIOT*, 27 Apr. 2020, bookriot.com/male-leads-in-fiction.

Jensen, Kelly. "What Would The YA Canon Look Like?" *BOOK RIOT*, 1 Oct. 2015, bookriot.com/ya-canon-look-like.

Jewkes, Cary. *Changing the Narrative: The Educational Power of Reading Young Adult Literature*, The University of Vermont and State Agricultural College, Ann Arbor, 2019.

Kawi, Terry. "The Importance of Windows and Mirrors in Stories." *PBS Education*, 2020, www.pbs.org/education/blog/the-importance-of-windows-and-mirrors-in-stories.

Kelly, Mary Louise. “#PublishingPaidMe: Authors Share Their Advances To Expose Racial Disparities.” *NPR*, 8 June 2020, [choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872470156/-publishingpaidme-authors-share-their-advances-to-expose-racial-disparities](https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872470156/-publishingpaidme-authors-share-their-advances-to-expose-racial-disparities).

Kitchener, Caroline. “Why So Many Adults Read Young-Adult Literature.” *The Atlantic*, 1 Dec. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/why-so-many-adults-are-love-young-adult-literature/547334.

Lee & Low Books. “Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2019 Diversity Baseline Survey Results.” *Lee & Low Books*, 10 Feb. 2020, blog.leeandlow.com/2020/01/28/2019diversitybaselinesurvey.

León, Concepción. “Meet the YouTube Stars Turning Viewers Into Readers.” *The New York Times*, 8 Aug. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/07/31/books/booktubers-youtube.html.

Locke, Kaitlyn. “‘The Hate U Give’ Pulled from Texas School District’s Shelves.” *BostonGlobe.Com*, 2 Dec. 2017, www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/names/2017/12/01/the-hate-give-book-banned-texas-school-district/8C2XDJ2rGSK2jjwyajmKJK/story.html.

Martin, Rachel. "Latinx Critics Speak Out Against 'American Dirt'; Jeanine Cummins Responds." *NPR*, 24 Jan. 2020, [choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/798894249/latinx-critics-speak-out-against-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins-responds](https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/798894249/latinx-critics-speak-out-against-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins-responds).

Moorhead, Andrew. "10 Benefits of Reading Books." *Campbell County Public Library*, 21 Feb. 2018, www.cc-pl.org/10-benefits-of-reading.

Morales Soto, Denise, "Identifying and Connecting with Diverse SFF Readers," 2020. Book Publishing Final Research Paper. 52. <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/33243>

Moses, Jeremy. "Industry Report OD4394: Children's Book Publishing." *IBISWorld*, 2020, my-ibisworld-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/download/us/en/industry-specialized/4394/1/0/pdf.

Myers, Walter Dean. "Opinion | Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books?" *The New York Times*, 15 Mar. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/opinion/sunday/where-are-the-people-of-color-in-childrens-books.html.

"New Study: 55% of YA Books Bought by Adults." *PublishersWeekly.Com*, 2012, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html.

Oldham, Laura E. "A Hairbrush is Not a Gun": Narratives and Counternarratives of Race, Power, and Identity in Young Adult Literature, New Mexico State University, Ann Arbor, 2019. ProQuest, <http://umiss.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.umiss.idm.oclc.org/docview/2278173460?accountid=14588>.

Parent, Robin A. A Feminist Examination of how Girls and Women Engage with a Female Protagonist in Dystopian Young Adult Literature, Utah State University, Ann Arbor, 2015.

Perrin, Andrew. "Who Doesn't Read Books in America?" *Pew Research Center*, 26 Sept. 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/26/who-doesnt-read-books-in-america.

Schild, Darcy. "How the American Girl Toy Empire Has Changed over Time, from Its Iconic Historical Characters to Dolls with Modern Stories." *Insider*, 21 Sept. 2020, www.insider.com/american-girl-dolls-history-evolution-brand-2020-1.

Schonfeld, Bryan Sam Winter-Levy. "After This Summer's Protests, Americans Think Differently about Race. That Could Last for Generations." *Washington Post*, 12 Oct. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/10/12/after-this-summers-protests-americans-think-differently-about-race-that-could-last-generations.

Scholastic. Kids & Family Reading Report. Scholastic, 2016. Available at <http://www.scholastic.com/readingreport/key-findings.htm>.

Seattle Public Library. "Own Voices." *The Seattle Public Library*, 2020, seattle.bibliocommons.com/list/share/628692720/1259856807. "#OwnVoices." *Corinne Duyvis*, 2015, www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices.

Shearn, Amy. "#1000BlackGirlBooks and the Importance of Diversity in Children's Literature." *JSTOR Daily*, 8 June 2018, daily.jstor.org/1000blackgirlsbooks-and-the-importance-of-diversity-in-childrens-literature.

Oregon State University. "Snowball Sampling." *Research Office*, 8 July 2017, research.oregonstate.edu/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling.

Tyner, Madeline. "The CCBC's Diversity Statistics: New Categories, New Data." *The Horn Book*, 2019, www.hbook.com/?detailStory=the-ccbcs-diversity-statistics-new-categories-new-data.

"U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States." *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, 2019, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219.

We Need Diverse Books (WNDB). "About WNDB." 2021, We Need Diverse Books <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>

Woodard, Jennifer Bailey, and Teresa Mastin. "Black Womanhood: 'Essence' and Its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2005, pp. 264–281. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40034332. Accessed 25 Mar. 2021.

"Young Adult Hardcover Books - Best Sellers - Books - The New York Times." *The New York Times*, 2021, www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/young-adult-hardcover.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Author Interviews

Kristina Forest Interview

Describe your own relationship with reading.

K1: I try to read as much as I can when I have the time. I mostly read YA, adult romance/women's fiction, and occasionally literary fiction.

What are your favourite titles?

K2: *This Lullaby* by Sarah Dessen, *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, *Devil in Winter* by Lisa Kleypas, *Indigo* by Beverly Jenkins, *The Mothers* by Brit Bennet

How do you pick out your next read? Do you gravitate toward literature written by black authors? Why or why not?

K3: It really depends what I'm in the mood for at the time. I tend to read more romance in the summer. I do gravitate toward books by Black authors, mostly because I'm constantly seeking a sense of connection and familiarity with main characters.

What types of books did you read growing up at home or in school?

K4: I went through a phase in middle school when I didn't really read very much, unless it was assigned in school. One school required title that I remember really liking was *Holes* by Luis Sachar. I also read *Cousins* by Virginia Hamilton, which I really loved. During high school was

when I really started to read for pleasure and when I started reading YA. I really loved Sarah Dessen, and like most teens my age at the time, I was really into *Twilight*. School required books that I liked were *Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Things They Carried*.

Did you feel represented in what you were reading? Why or why not?

K5: No. It was hard to find books with Black main characters. Or specifically young Black girls.

Can you recall the first time you truly connected with a book? What was that like?

K6: The first time that I wholeheartedly connected with a book was probably when I read *The Mothers* by Brit Bennet. I think I was 23 or 24 at the time, so around the same age as the main characters. I think Brit Bennet did such a great job at capturing the African American experience for people in their twenties.

What compelled you to write your first manuscript?

K7: I've always wanted to be a writer. I wanted to write a love story about a girl on a road trip. I wanted it to be fun, and I wanted her to have a creative pursuit, which is why I made Chloe a ballerina. *I Wanna Be Where You Are* is the first manuscript that eventually led to being a published novel. But I have many manuscripts that I started and stopped in grad school!

Why Young Adult literature?

K8: I think there is something really special about writing for today's youth, and I love to write about people who are experiencing things for the first time with so much life ahead of them.

What is your relationship with your audience/readers?

K9: Lately, our relationship only exists online via social media because in person events are currently non-existent. I'm very appreciative of my readers and always try my best to reply when they tag me in posts. I'm also very respectful of their online space and grateful that I even have readers who like my books.

Do you keep your readers in mind while writing, how so?

K10: I do. I write romance, so I'm always aiming to make sure that the romance will feel satisfying and fulfilling.

How important is representation, especially African American representation in YA? Why is that?

K11: I think representation is very important. It's important for readers to be able to see themselves reflected in literature.

In your opinion, is the black community well-represented in YA literature? Why or why not?

K12: I think it's getting better, but books by and about Black people are still a very small portion of what's being published right now.

Tell me about any changes or shifts you've seen in the YA category over the past few years?

K13: YA Romance specifically is WAY more inclusive. I also think that people are paying more attention to romantic comedies, even more so than when my debut rom-com published in 2019.

What does the future of YA literature look like?

K14: I don't know, honestly. But I hope it will continue to be more inclusive.

J. Elle Interview

Describe your relationship with reading.

JE1: I was a reader growing up. I've always loved books. When I was a kid, I read a lot of Goosebumps. And with our summer reading lists in schools, I always read all of them. There were not a lot of books where the story was personally relatable because I didn't see representation like mine within those books but I still devoured everything that there was. In high school, there was a little bit more literature that centered black characters but at the time there was no YA as an age category. There were kid books to adult books, so in high school I was reading Omar Tyree, Eric Jerome Dickie, and Toni Morrison. There wasn't this YA/teen coming of age space but I was able to read a lot more books that centered black characters which was great. Now, I read very widely, and obviously I write.

Do you have any current favorite YA titles?

JE2: So many. How much time do you have? Anything Nic Stone writes and anything Tiffany Jackson writes. I also really like Jacqueline Woodson and Dhonielle Clayton; I have this whole list of authors that whatever they pen, I want it. Those are some black authors but some authors who aren't specifically black... I really love Sabaa Tahir's *An Ember in the Ashes*, Victoria Schwab, and Leigh Bardugo. In the middle grade space I love Tami Charles, Daniel Jose Older,

and the book *Holes* — just in terms of plotting, I thought it was brilliant. Jessica Lewis is another black debut author writing in the middle grade and YA spaces. I think her middle grade has come out but it's under a pen name Jazz Taylor, but those are some of my favorites.

How do you pick up that you personally want to read? How do you decide what to read next? Do you feel like you gravitate more towards black authors in your reading?

JE3: Now, I certainly do just because I feel like it's like if you couldn't have candy then you find out you can have it and you want all the candy. That's what it's like because I feel like I've been so starved of these things my entire life, and I'm so hungry and eager to get lost in all of these stories with people that look like me and places that look familiar to me. It's a magical experience to see yourself in a book — portrayed in the pages of a story. Now, I read widely. Sometimes what will draw me to a book is the magic or the world building, the authors reputation, a word-of-mouth recommendation is huge, but of course, representation is a big one too. The hook of the story is also another thing that will pull me into the pages. What is the book about? Does it sound intriguing? Whether it has representation or not, if it sounds interesting enough, I'll pick it up. There are certain books that I don't know when I'll get to them but it's an auto-purchase for me. One, I know I'm going to love reading it when I get to it because of who the author is. And two, I want to support that author in their career, and those are black authors.

Was there a difference in the types of books you were reading at home v. what you were reading in school?

JE4: Somewhat. I think there was not a lot of difference in terms of what's available... Right now, what's inside of school's and what's on shelves can be vastly different, but back then, there

were a lot of similarities between those two things. Especially in fantasy, anything speculative, or in the horror space, largely centered white characters. My Goosebumps books I adored, and none of that was assigned by school... in high school, I saw a huge difference. None of the books that I read in my personal time, even Toni Morrison who is a legend — none of her books were assigned books. The books that I was reading in school were *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Brave New World*, and *Crime and Punishment*, and stuff like that. So, I did see a vast difference in high school.

You mentioned YA becoming popular as you came up, when you found out about young adult literature, especially being a writer, what was that experience like for you?

JE5: When I discovered YA, I wasn't a writer at the time nor did I aspire to be. It just wasn't on my radar. I knew I loved words but the connection between 'this is cool' and 'I want to do this' just wasn't there. That's a lack of representation as well. Had I been exposed to more as a kid, then perhaps, being an author would have been on my 'things I want to do' list for when I get older. I also just didn't know a lot about it. The schools I attended didn't have author visits. It was a mysterious nebulous thing that I didn't fully understand. When I discovered YA, you know, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* is the birth of YA reading for me, and it wasn't until I started to see books by Nic Stone and Angie Thomas that were very much centering inner city kids with experiences like mine that I began to say maybe I could do this. There's this sort of implicit idea that you have to mimic what's out there to have a chance in publishing, and I think that was pervasive for a long time.

What compelled you to write your first manuscript?

JE6: I believed I had a shot. I believed there was a chance publishing would be open to it and I honestly felt very compelled to get the story out. Rue came to me in such a fury, and I felt like I had a duty and an obligation to tell her story for my community, for my actual neighborhood, for kids who look like me, grew up where I grew up, my teenage sisters. Once the story was on my heart, I felt it would be wrong to keep it there. I had to let it out so to speak.

What is your relationship with your audience and your readers?

JE7: I would like to think that I'm very accessible and engaged. I try to be accessible on social media because it wasn't something that I had as a kid. I didn't understand or connect that I could be an author. It's really important for me to do school visits. I try to do as many as I can because I want to interface with students and have them understand that what I do is something that they can do. Obviously school visits are a paid thing but I try to do free ones as well because a lot of schools can't afford to bring in speakers and I'm aware of that too. The main thing is I try to interface a lot and be very accessible.

Do you keep your readers in mind while writing?

JE8: I'm aware that my audience — and my audience isn't only black readers at all, but I'm definitely keeping in mind my community while I write. No necessarily my readers because they could say, 'Do this. Do this.' and you have to stay true to the art, keep your head down, and write the book that you stay passionate about. But I do keep in mind a broader perspective of the stories we have not had and the kids whose hearts I'm trying to reach.

How important do you feel like representation, especially African American representation is in the YA space, and why is it so important at this time?

JE9: It's life changing. And the absence of it is detrimental for so many reasons. I used to be a teacher, and first of all, just purely academically, literacy is a gateway into learning. Teachers work so hard to try to get kids to love to read, and you need to be able to read and analyze texts and think critically about what you're reading to succeed in your upper high school classes and in college. We know that high education is a cornerstone of upward mobility. When I look at inner city communities and socioeconomic status, and I look at the things that impact the well-beings of my community and kids in my community, especially kids that come from poor communities like mine, I see the importance of reading. It's critical, and it's very difficult when you hand a kid a book and you want them to force them to read it and like it, but they can't connect to it, it's a disservice to those communities. There are a huge number — there is no shortage of books not by black authors, right — by white authors and about white characters. So, white kids have these opportunities to engage with stories that make them feel seen, validate their lived experience, reflect things that are true to them, take them to fantastical worlds grounded in Eurocentric magic that feels a step removed from reality, like it could be their actual history... but then in my community, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I mean, what exactly are educators wanting black kids to take away from books that we're forced to read? It's certainly not a love of learning because I'm not going to love reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I'm not going to love that in the same way that a white kid is going to love discovering magic in a *Harry Potter* world. There is a systemic issue here, and that systemic issue is only upheld by the lack of diversity in publishing, so it's a huge problem.

Do you remember the first time you personally ever felt connected to a book? What was that like for you?

JE10: I don't remember it with any sort of specificity but I do remember that it was in high school. I was always in AP English class and such, but the books that I had to remember for class were like pulling teeth, and the ones that I got from the bookstore on the weekends were devoured. I would get in trouble reading in class because I was so hooked into the story, but when the teacher asked if I did my reading of *Crime and Punishment* last night... I tried, and I swear to you I like books, just not that one. If you look at my grades, I got a D in my tenth grade English class... A friend of mine told me in high school that grades aren't a reflection of intelligence, they are a reflection of work ethic. I think there are layers to that but I feel that a lot of that is true, and I was not motivated in that class to work. I felt completely disconnected to the text and frankly, I felt that the teacher didn't like me. I was demotivated by that. His goal on some level was to get me to love books, and little did he know, I already did. There is some dissonance there, and I don't think that my teacher realized that a lot of the issue he was having getting us to connect was a self-perpetuating problem because it was the stuff he was putting in front of us.

Do you see any changes or shifts in the YA category in general or the past few years?

JE11: Absolutely. I'm seeing a lot more diversity... There are strides happening and whether or not it's a trend remains to be seen. That's probably the best way I can put it. We are still only at 4%-7%... We are making strides but the journey is long.

That's what we see in the fashion industry, that's what we see in so many industries. We see black people treated as a trend because we understand that publishing is a business at heart and their goal is to make money. I get it. It's a profit business so they have to focus on that but it's not a public service to them like it is for me.

What does the future of YA literature look like for you? What do you want to see?

JE12: I would like to see books on shelves that are representative of the culture and diversity in America. Bookshelves need to look like the people, and until that happens, I'll be writing until my fingers fall off. I'll be mentoring other aspiring writers and doing whatever I can to open doors for people in my community and other people of color who want to write. I'm going to continue to use my platform to uplift others and hopefully inspire them to pursue their dream of becoming an author because I firmly believe that if I can do it, anyone can. I'm not special, I just worked hard. I mean, access is an issue obviously, and the privilege to be able to write full-time while my husband was working is also a factor. Anyway, public service and community service is very important to me. I've always said that if publishing cracks the door open for me, I'm going to bust it off the hinges and bring everybody I know with me. We're all coming. That's what's next.

Appendix 2: Focus Group 1 Transcript

Describe your own relationship with reading?

A1: Growing up, my mom was an English teacher or she kind of made me read as a little girl. I enjoyed it but growing up and going to college, I just didn't read as much for fun. However, through middle school, I actually read for fun.

B1: That definitely resonates with me too, not reading as much for fun anymore in college. But I've always been a really big reader, especially elementary school, middle school and early high school, particularly fantasy books and other sort of fiction stories. I've been trying to be more intentional about picking it back up.

C1: I think the same kind of goes for me. I read a lot all through middle school and high school. I read for leisure especially over the summer but after my freshman year of college, I have not been able to find a book and just read it just because I wanted to in my free time. When I do read, I read a lot of fantasy, science fiction, and things of that nature. I am trying to actually get back into it, especially with the pandemic because I have a lot more free time.

D1: I agree with everyone. I read a lot growing up. I also took a lot of AP English class, so I had to read. But when I got to college, I didn't read as much. I hope I can get back into it.

What are some of your favorite books?

D2: I really like the Twilight series and other fantasy stuff.

C2: A book that really stood out to me in high school was *Legend* by Marie Lu. It was a dystopian novel. It had three parts to it, and I read that series three or four times. It was definitely my favorite. Along with anything John Green writes, and I recently have gotten into poetry books, so I definitely like those too. A lot of people don't know about *Legend* but it was top tier.

A2: Growing up I used to love reading Nicolas Sparks books and John Grisham, he's my favorite author.

B2: Growing up I really loved the *Harry Potter* series. It was the first series I read a million times. I was also really into *The Hunger Games*. As I got older, I started reading *Americanah*. I've grown up with books all my life. My dad is a collector so I've read a lot of his books as well.

How do you pick books? Recommendations, bookstores, etc.? Do you gravitate towards black authors?

B3: As I've gotten older, I've gravitated more towards black authors. As for how I come across books, I like spending time in bookstores. I'll get a recommendation from one of the bookstore clerks, or I'll get a recommendation from a friend or family member.

C3: For me, if I read a book that I liked, I'll look it up on Google and look for books that are similar to it, then go to a bookstore and hang out in the sci-fi section until something caught my eye. As far as black authors, I definitely started looking for those as I got older and understood supporting black people and things like that. I've been trying to make a conscious effort of doing so.

Are you aware of black authors who write young adult literature? Of course, Angie Thomas is really big right now but are you aware of any other authors.

D3: Jesmyn Ward reads a lot of young literature. Is Angie Thomas the same lady who wrote *The Sun is Also a Star*? Wait, Nicola Yoon? She writes a lot of good young literature.

B4: When I think of young adult literature specifically, it's harder for me to come up with more examples besides the authors who have already been named.

How do you discover new black authors?

A3: At the beginning of the year, I tried to make a resolution list that said I wanted to read more. I wanted to dive into more black authors, so I started looking it up on the internet 'good books to read by black authors.' I also try to pick a book that I can possibly relate to so one book I recently bought was by Damon Tweedy and it's about his life as a black man going through medicine. Because I'm a pre-med student, I thought that'd be a good book to read since I'm going into that field. I also try to find things that relate to me somehow.

What books did you read growing up at home and in school? What books during that time stand out to you?

B5: The first book that came to mind was Malcom X's biography. That was a text that we read, and it was one of the only black teachers I've had that helped teach that book. I remember it being both powerful and nice learning more from another black adult so that was one in high school that really resonated with me.

D4: My granddad was a civil rights activist so they would really try to get us to read like *Roots* and stuff, but when I went to school we would read common civil rights or black history. People like Fredrick Douglass. It was common people so it was a bit of a contrast.

How were your school libraries? Were they curated or censored in any way?

C4: My senior year of high school, we got a new librarian and she was really big on making sure there was material in the library for everyone. She actually sent out a survey where everyone could submit two books or genres of books that they liked to read and by the end of the year, she did a good job of making sure that the library was diverse and had variety to it. But before that I do feel like we had that list of banned books, so I didn't go to our library to find books, I'd go to the bookstore to see things that I was interested in.

The school that I went to was pretty diverse but there were some standards that were set in stone like the olden days and we didn't branch out much. The librarian before was a little older and had her own view of things, so I guess she just wanted a new start with the world changing and things like that.

A4: My high school, it was predominately black but our librarian was white, so she kind of censored a lot of stuff. It wasn't relatable to any of the student body but my mom always tried to introduce us to different literature. She had us read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and other really classic books like that. Also *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Then the principle had an issue with it, so they took out those two books during my senior year. They kind of censored everything after I left.

B6: I often turned towards my public library before I turned to my school library. At least for me, it was more so stressed as a computer lab versus a library. There were definitely different spots when it came to finding a book I wanted. It was either the bookstore or the public library just because they had a bigger selection and usually multiple copies which made it easier to get my hands on whatever book I wanted.

Do you think the age of the librarian has a lot to do with whether or not they are in touch with what younger students want to read?

D5: Yes, because they probably don't really look into what younger people would want to read, and they are putting out there what they grew up on. They would have to actually make an effort to research what younger people would want. It depends on if the librarian is trying to research for the younger people or not.

C5: I agree, I think it has to do with age a little bit but at the same time, it comes down to the person and what they want and their values because my eighth grade english teacher was an older white lady but she was always encouraging more advanced and diverse books for us.

Though the librarian at my high school, before we got the new one, was the same age as her, she was the complete opposite. I think it depends on the person.

Ashley, what was the reason behind your school banning those two books?

A5: It was mostly dealing with the language, using the "N" word. The language in the books, they thought it was inappropriate but there were other books in the library that was way worse.

However, with the use of the “N” word, they thought that students shouldn’t read stuff like that even though it was a predominantly black school and everyone understood history. The teachers just felt uncomfortable.

Generally, did you all feel represented in what you were reading as kids?

D6: I didn’t feel truly represented until I got to high school and started searching for black authors myself. They were telling stories that I could relate to versus the popular books that were either historic stories or some kind of fantasy literature. And there’d never be a black person in the book so I didn’t feel like I related to it.

B7: I think it’s interesting because as I got into high school, I started relating to the books I was reading more but it was also a bit strange because I’d be having discussions about it in predominantly white spaces. It was kind of multi-layered, so yes, I’m relating to more of the characters and the author for a particular book but maybe not always comfortable talking about my experiences or why I might relate to the things I’m reading about.

When was the first time you remember reading about a black character?

C6: The name of the book is slipping my mind but it was in seventh grade, and it was a book about a black guy raised in the projects. He was destined to go to jail but it was a book that we were required to read for class. That was the first story that I can remember that had a black lead character, and it kind of sucked to have it go that route but it was a black character.

D7: The first black character I read about was something similar. It was about a girl growing up in the hood, or whatever, and she was trying to navigate it between going to school and not getting caught into gang violence. It was sixth or fifth grade.

B8: The book was a gift from a family member and they made it so that the character was me. I was really, really young so from what I can remember, the first black character I can remember was me illustrated in that gifted book.

Do you remember the first time you connect with a book or felt seen?

B9: I said before that I was a big *Harry Potter* kid. She wasn't a black character but I really identified with Hermione, just her personality really. I felt it was similar to my own, so I've always had a really special place for those books for that reason. I felt like it captured who I was and wanted to be at that young age. She was definitely a big part of my reading journey.

D8: It was about third grade, and it was a book about these twin girls. One was a vampire but her sister really liked pink and was a cheerleader. I thought 'Oh, she's so girly.' Then, she was really close to her mom, so I felt like she was just like me.

How did your childhood reading influence you reading life now?

A6: Growing up, I never really enjoyed reading non-fiction books. They've always been boring to me, and now it's kind of hard for me to read non-fiction books unless it's something I can relate to or it's very interesting. Growing up, reading fiction books helped me with creativity,

writing, and putting different thoughts and ideas in my head. I always thought, ‘What type of life lesson can I get out of this fiction book?’ That kind of shaped my creativity.

C7: I hated non-fiction books with a passion unless it was someone I was really interested in, a celebrity memoir or something learning about their life. But I think that definitely spills into my life today. I still do not like reading non-fiction, and I have a hard time with articles that don’t entertain me. With the books that I did read growing up, they did help my creativity. I was a pretty shy kid growing up and socializing with a lot of people... I had a hard time making friends. But reading always brought me joy, and I think it's the same now whenever I’m stressed out or need a break from reality. A good book really puts me back in the right headspace of where I need to be.

D9: When I was younger, I read a lot of books where the character would tell their story, like writing in a diary. As I got older, it made me want to write. Now anytime I’m feeling down, I write it out, even if it’s just in my notes. The author of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley, I think she was 17 when she wrote that so if I had a dream or something, I would write it down thinking that maybe this could be a famous book one day. It just made me want to write everything that I thought about down.

Generally, did the types of books you read in high school negatively impacted your reading upon graduation?

B10: I don’t know about negatively impacted because I think it gave me certain skills that I’ve learned in college as far as reading things that I’m not necessarily super in love with or engaging

with but still knowing how to get through it. I think at the time in high school, it made me like reading less because I didn't like the whole being on a schedule or being rushed through a book. I felt like that took a lot of the fun out of reading. It irritated me quite a bit.

If you're picking up something to read right now, are you drawn to adult or YA books?

D10: I really like young adult books. I want to get into adult books but because I grew up reading [young adult books], I'm attracted to those so I really like YA still.

What about young adult books that draw you in? Writing style, themes within the books, etc.

D11: I like the writing styles but also the classic coming of age story — their first crushes and finding out who they are — I'm a sucker for those types of stories.

A7: I think growing up, I always read books beyond my time. So in middle school, I would always read Nicolas Sparks books or I'd read about marriage or having kids. At that point, I'm super young so I didn't understand it but I've always been drawn to literature that's beyond my years. Now I primarily read adult fiction because I've always been into those titles.

B11: It's really a toss up for me. It depends on the writing style and the main storyline and theme of the book because I could go either way in terms of young adult versus more adult books.

C8: For me, the young adult books that I like to read are heavy on the sci-fi and dystopian themes, and maybe I haven't branched out to see what's out there with adult books with those

same themes so I've definitely kept into the young adult side. But like I said, I'm really into poetry now as well.

How do you feel when finding black protagonists or reading stories about black characters?

D12: I feel more attached to books and the authors like Nicola Yoon, I make sure if she writes another book I read it immediately because she writes about black characters and you feel seen through them. It's also refreshing when it's not just about them being black. They are actually just living a life and it's not talking about the struggles, just a story so that's nice.

B12: I definitely agree and I loved it when I found out that a character was black especially when the stories were not always about a struggle. That was always uplifting for me and empowering.

A8: Sometimes I was inspired reading a book that had a black main characters or sometimes I felt down depending on the type of book. Like I remember my first book with a black main character was *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, and I remember reading that when I was really young. They talked about the bomb in Birmingham and stuff, and I didn't know it was true until I asked my mom about it. It kind of bothered me because I was a young child learning about how blacks got tried and how they are getting treated still to this day so I've always had mixed feelings about whether I was inspired or felt down, depending on the type of book.

Is it important that black characters are represented in literature? Why or why not?

D13: I feel like it's important because representation matters. It's also like I said earlier, it's a breath of relief when black kids can see themselves in a book and it's not just some type of struggle. You can actually be creative and relax and read a book. You don't have to have a heavy weight on you all the time.

C9: Just like in TV shows and movies, we have a push for more black characters to be portrayed. I feel like it's just as important to be portrayed in literature because I know a lot of my friends, cousins, and especially my sister growing up don't enjoy reading because they don't feel like they can relate to a lot of the things they read. If there was more of a presence for black women especially in books, I think that could increase the amount of people who are actually reading books.

Is representation more important in children's books or adult?

A9: Children's books because everyone wants to see someone succeed that looks like them. If a child is reading a book, and they see that there is a black doctor, black lawyer, or just some monumental person who's made an impact on many lives that's black, I feel like that's very inspiring at a younger age.

B13: Also, we pick up a lot of messages whether it's really in your face or hidden when we're in our childhood, so I think having folks who look like you, being represented in literature sends a message about inclusivity, representation, and diversity.

Are black characters well represented in literature now/today?

B14: No, because I think a lot of the times it's only one kind of story. And it usually centers around black people struggling. There's a place for reading those kinds of books but I also want to see black people falling in love. I also want to see black people getting the job of their dreams, ya know? I think there's a need for happier stories in the way that other books have been able to do that while also featuring black people.

What do male authors get wrong that female authors get right?

B15: I think that women are often characterized as being overly emotional, and I don't think that's true. I think that's a stereotype that I've seen persisting in certain books but not by female authors.

A10: I've also noticed that in some films and books, the women can't make a decision on their own. It's always her asking for advice from a man or basically being told what she should do.

D14: How they portray black women as being able to take so much. They are putting so much on that black woman, and they aren't being portrayed as being human too or that they need to process stuff. It's always 'She's a strong black woman, she can handle it.' She was never given a chance to really process everything.

C10: It was written by a white author and the main character was interacting with a black female character. She was portrayed as really angry and over the top. I didn't feel like there was a need for that, especially because in the book it felt overexerted.

How would you like to see African Americans portrayed in books? (10:15 left)

D15: I would like to see black women — a lot of time if they are in literature, they are a supporter or helping someone else — I'd like to see them being supported and shown with a more sensitive side, not just them being hard all the time.

B16: I would honestly like to see more black characters and black women in a lot of dystopian, sci-fi novels that I enjoy. I'm trying to remember now and I don't think that I can pick out one character that was black in any of those types of novels. I love those types of stories. I'd definitely like to see more black people there.

C11: Yeah, I feel like black characters in those dystopian stories are always the sidekick, they get killed off, they end up going rogue, or something like that. It would be nice to see them be the hero in stories like that too.

A11: I'd love to see any black character put their foot down. There are many books about the civil rights movement and a black person putting their foot down and not accepting how society is but I'd like to see it in other issues as well.

C12: I think in stories where there are black leads, the rest of the characters in the book are often white or of another race. The black character doesn't even have any black characters that look like them in the book, so that would be something I think authors could consider too. You can have more than one black main character.

Are there any stereotypes that you see a lot in books?

D16: Usually if there's a black character in literature, they are portrayed as fiesty or firey. They are always snapping. I'd love to see that change. I don't think that should be the token personality trait for all black people.

What are some positive changes you've seen in YA?

B17: I have, and I say that tentatively, there have been more stories that I've been able to read in the YA category that feature more black characters... *Children of Blood of Bone* was great... stories like that are coming out now so I think that's a positive shift.

What are some negative aspects of YA?

D17: ...sometimes the plot or problem in the story, if it's not fixed is portrayed as the end of the world. It could be a simple fix but they play on it like 'If this happens, I'm going to die.' Sometimes it isn't as realistic.

B18: I'll echo the realistic point just because there's a balance between being too much of a downer and also being way too fantastical and feeling like that might not be an actual reaction somebody might have.

What popular YA titles do you know of now?

D18: *After*

A12: *To All the Boys*

B19: All the ones I'm thinking of are older.

C13: I can't think of anything new or relevant.

What are some changes you'd like to see in YA or publishing?

B20: A precedent should be set — well, it's starting to be set — when telling stories about people of color, having people of color working on it, like on the team. I think books are starting to do that more but it's something that really needs to be stressed.

D19: Letting POC fall in love without there being some type of barrier or struggle just focusing on their story with no struggle attached.

Appendix 3: Focus Group 2 Transcript

What is your current relationship with reading?

E1: I read constantly. I try to do it every day but that's mainly because I don't have a social life.

F1: I definitely put it on the backburner until I have more time, especially now with the classes I'm in. Honestly, everything is second to school at this point. Reading too, but whenever I have time, I try to read. Though I don't actively make time every day or every week to read.

G1: For me, reading is a part of my daily routine but it's more tied to work or getting my thesis done. Recently, instead of using my phone and social media to go to sleep, I try to plug my phone up across the room and find something short to read before I go to bed. I've just started doing that in the past few weeks and it's really helped my health, sleep, and rest. I do that probably for the hour before I go to sleep.

What were some of your favorite titles growing up?

H1: I would say that *Twilight* was my life when it first came out. I read the whole series within a very short amount of time. I was very disappointed with the movies but I always think that books are better than movies. That was my #1. I also read the *Maze Runner*.

G2: *Twilight* for me too. I was that girl in middle school walking around with the huge *Twilight* books in school — that was me. One of the earliest books that I remember impacting me as a reader was *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake. I was in fourth grade, and I still think about it today. Another book I remember reading really young was *Walk Two Moons*. That was in about the third grade and that was a really impactful book. *The Outsiders* is one of my favorite books of all time. Also, *Secret Life of Bees*, I love that book and I really liked *The Hunger Games*.

F2: I was not a *Twilight* fan but I read almost any other young adult novel you can think of. I read *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Percy Jackson*, *Harry Potter*, and all the John Green books— just every single book in that category. It's probably still one of my favorite categories to read just because it's fantasy and escapism if I'm busy or kind of stressed. It's a break. I can go read and it's just this different place. Now, I still love young adult novels but I'm trying to read more spiritual religious books as well — a step up in reading if you want to call it that but I still read a good bit of young adult novels.

I1: For me, I definitely read *Twilight*, and *The Secret Life of Bees*. There's a series called *The Uglies* that I read the whole series through. I read *The Hunger Games* but I couldn't get into it. I

read *Harry Potter* but I couldn't get into it. I liked the movies. I just stayed with a book, young adult classics, like the John Green novels which I hated. I read all of those simply so I didn't have to participate in class.

E2: I didn't like *Twilight* either. I couldn't do it. I also didn't read *The Hunger Games*. I didn't read any of the mainstream novels and I'm trying to read them now because I feel left out and everyone is like fandoming. I'm like 'What is happening right now.' Most of my life I read the wrong books for my age. When I was really young, I read bigger books, then when I was older, I was burnt out so I'd read whatever I wanted... I read all the YA novels that are out now. I read all the very forefront people of color, outstanding novels. I've read all of Angie Thomas's books. I read everything right now. Once I got a little bit older, I started reading graphic novels because they are genuinely on a different level. Middle grade now is super different and the same stands for graphic novels. I find that a lot of graphic novels have queer representation in them, and there are a lot of books coming out definitely stand out. Tillie Walden came out with *Spinning*, and I love it.

How do you decide what to read next?

G3: I trust a lot of recommendations from my friends or what people on social media say that they are reading. A lot of times me and my friends will say 'Oh, I'm reading my book. I think you would like it.' And we'll send each other books that we think each other will like reading and share that way. I don't really Google popular books or go to bookstores and ask cashiers there... When I'm on Amazon, if a book is in my Wishlist, I'll scroll down to see related titles. That's a lot of how I get new books to read.

F3: I read more often during quarantine on a Nook or a Kindle. If I'm looking for books, it'll say 'related titles' but [a Kindle] isn't my favorite things to read on because I don't like looking at the screen when I'm reading but I do read on it... it is a big help because it always gives similar options of what you're reading. I like a very particular kind of book. My friends also love to read, and they also love YA novels so they have good suggestions. There are also authors that are coming out with new books — authors that I know I like, so I'll read there new stuff.

Do you all have friends so are readers?

F4: I would say growing up, we had challenge classes and a lot of my younger friends at the time were all actively reading. Everyone was reading and I still have those friends now. They are some of my closest friends, so it's never been a stigma of 'Oh, you're reading a book,' because we've all been reading together. We've grown up reading the same kinds of books and enjoy the same kinds of books, so I wouldn't say I sought them out in any kind of way. We just grew up together but I do think that the challenge classes, having a higher reading level, and being grouped together young did force us to become friends and like the same things.

G4: My core friends group are all people from graduate school or MBA programs, so we all read. However, I do have a friend group from back home and none of them went to college so it is different conversations. I'll still tell them what I'm reading or send them a poem — which I just did last night. Saying "I read this poem, I think y'all would like it." So it's not like we don't talk about reading or I don't feel comfortable talking about books with them but it's not a conversation with my friends who didn't go to college versus my friends who have been in

college and are seeking a postgraduate degree. It does sort of speak to class status, education status, and socioeconomic status whether or not you read or have those sorts of open conversations about what books you're reading. And that's because of different things in life that you're dealing with.

H2: I was just sitting here thinking, 'Man, I need to get my friends groups together.' I will say that I usually go on Amazon and see what's the top for 2020 or what's the new releases for the month. I also like to go into bookstores because I'm a very visual person. I actually ordered a couple of books online, then when I got them and started reading thought "Oh, I don't like this." I like to be able to see the book in person and hold it. For me, bookstores are just a different environment. It gives me a different type of feeling when I go to the bookstore— though I haven't been inside on in a while — and I'm attracted to how the cover may look and the colors. I know all that stuff is marketing and it matters.

H3: At least for me, I am in pharmacy school, and I don't have time to do anything else right now. A lot of my close friends are in pharmacy school with me, and we don't have time to talk about other things but I really want to get back into reading and either have a book of the month or bring my friends up to it or find other reader friends.

E3: I think it's so funny that you mentioned that because I will die on this hill, I judge a book by its cover every single time. I hate that quote. Why would you say that? Don't pick that book up with that man and that horse on it. Don't do that; you're embarrassing us. I'm embarrassed.

I work at a bookstore, and one of my mentors read these cheesy romance books that people say don't read but she thinks are so good, and I've done that a couple times with sci-fi books but y'all can't tell me you go into Dollar General and pick out a book thinking 'This is the one. The one that looks like every other book on this stand.' I personally couldn't do it. I love being in bookstores. When I was little, my grandmother would always take us to bookstores. I don't know why, it was always just our thing. My mom was also a library assistant for a very long time and that's when I realized that books are so much bigger than this thing with my grandmother. We have this picture from the library of, I kid you not, my sister holding a boa constrictor. And people ask us, 'Why, why, why.' But it's because of books and they don't like that explanation but that's okay. It's just really cool all the places books can lead you, so I'm just saying that I've found books from everywhere.

As for the other question, I can't focus on podcasts but I can focus on YouTube videos so Booktube is where I always get recommendations. I think 'Wow, this person is really excited about this, I want to be excited too.'

I2: Growing up, I definitely had that friend group of people who coincidentally read books so they'd tell me stuff to read. As I went through college and grad school I also developed friendships with super smart people so they'd put me on a book so it's a nice balance of having grad school friends who are super academic-y and smart. Then, you have your core group of friends who put you on to books that are more fun and escapism to take your mind away from the world, which is a healthy balance. A podcast that I listen to also gives book recommendations

once a week, so if they are reading something I see what it's about. I try to read during lunch because I never take my lunch break at work, so I read during lunch.

G5: I noticed that during the pandemic, people were starting friends book clubs. I know that NoName has a bookclub. I'm not actively a part of her book club but I do browse through her titles and see what she's recommending and reading. I'm also a part of this prison abolition book club right now that started as a direct result of quarantine, so I guess I'm always seeking out different books to read.

Do you seek out people of color authors?

E4: I'm not going to lie to you. I think that 2020 was the year that black authors genuinely started taking off. I mean that in the most marketing way possible. [Publishers] thought, 'We can profit off of them now so we have to market it. We have to put it at the forefront.' Every bookstore that I go into, the first twenty books on the shelves are Angie Thomas... When I was younger I'd want to read Obama's book or Malcolm X's book but that was because it was what my mother instilled in me but now, it's definitely a lot more mainstream... I often wonder as black people, how does that feel that basically for the first time since the Harlem Renaissance that black voices have been everywhere and also been given credit. How does that feel for [black writers] to just be a marketing pitch for the rest of America.

F5: I absolutely agree. I feel that growing up any given YA novel was written by a white woman. Every single one of them. At the time, I didn't think anything of it because I still thought the world was sunshine and rainbows and that was just a coincidence but growing up almost every

single book that I read was by a white author, even the books that were available in my elementary school library. They never advertised any books written by people of color. It was always the same type of novel, the same general storyline and same kind of author.

G6: Right now, I actively seek out reading books by black people, black women and people of color. Even last year for me when Toni Morris died, I realized I'd never read a Toni Morris book. Who am I? So I went to go get some Toni Morris books to start reading, and I tried to start a book club with my grandma. I said 'We are going to read *the Bluest Eye* together.' She never even read one page but I tried. I think it goes a lot back to being socialized through books growing up that most books given to us were written by white people. Even in my high school reading of fantasy and fiction, I didn't think that the book had to be by a black person. Even now, my books don't have to be by a black person but now that I realized that I deeply relate to and want to read stories by black people, particularly black women, I actively seek that out.

Growing up what did you read at home/school? Curated, etc.?

F6: Growing up, the things that we read at school, it's interesting that every minority book was still written by a white person, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, that kind of thing. It was looking into a black person's life but it was still written by a white person. I feel that there were obviously plenty of other options that we could have read but it was the same kind of books by the same kind of 1800s white authors about black people but not by black people. That was not necessarily detrimental but it is something that you definitely take note of as you get older — that you're reading about the perspective of black people from someone who didn't experience it at all.

H4: When you're younger, you don't necessarily realize or think about what you're being exposed to and that is really something that's important as we move forward. It was talked about how a lot more black authors and black woman are being put out there and that needs to be not only in bookstores and online but also emphasized in schools to start the exposure early so that we don't have to wait until we're late high school/ early college before realizing that there is a difference. We can play a part in helping the younger generation realize that there are black authors out there. There are people who understand what we're going through. That's really important.

G7: A lot of books I read at home were books that were already at the home. So for instance, my older brother was really into *Goosebumps* so we had literally every *Goosebumps* book. I just picked them up and read them. It wasn't really that I was into horror or suspense but I just read them because they were there and short enough. However, they were still well written. You could see the movie playing out in your head. Then, I would read books based on what I was interested in. When I was younger, I really loved animals — and I still do — but I read this series about a girl who wanted to be a vet. I thought I wanted to be a vet, so my grandmother bought me all those books. That's how it was at home but at school I never really felt like things were censored or curated. I went to public schools all my life. But I do remember getting to high school and reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in tenth grade, and I don't know. It was the first time I was in class and thinking about how the book impacted black students versus white students. And of course being taught by a white woman, it was the first time I started to connect the larger dots in the world and in society. We also read *Night* by Elie Wiesel that year and other real life books.

They did send a permission slip home when we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* to students parent to see if they were allowed to read the book because of the N word being in the book and the instance of sexual assault being in the book but it was also a public school so if you didn't read the book and you didn't take the exam what was the alternative? But this is the first time I'm ever thinking about all of that.

I3: I haven't had to think about this until now but I don't think anything in high school was filtered. I did have one teacher junior year of high school who curated the books we read and didn't just pick books that were the norm. While everyone was reading *The Great Gatsby*, we'd read something like Ernest Hemingway which is still an old white guy writing a book but better and different. Then we'd read things like *Born to Run* and *Outliers* which was stuff that other students in our school weren't reading. That's the only time when I felt like things were curated at school but now that I'm thinking about it I don't think I ever read a book in high school by any author of color. I genuinely don't remember one. It wasn't a big deal like it is now. 2020 was the year for black authors, and 2021 is definitely going to be that year as well where we see a lot more voices on black authors and people of color. It's a really interesting thing that has been pointed out with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I remember reading that and until that point, I'd never read a book that used the N word. You know all the white kids in the class looked at me because I was the only black kid in the class, and it just kind of felt weird but then that was it. There wasn't any discussion about it. Everyone just moved on.

H5: My sophomore year of high school we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and I thought that that was very different and something I wasn't expecting. Thinking about reading authors of color, I know in high school we read at least one, and we watched the movie and had class discussions.

E5: The only assigned book I ever read by a black author was *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody. I couldn't even tell you what it was about. I was so lost and I think everyone in my class was also... I probably would have enjoyed reading the book outside of class but it was a strange experience overall. *Othello* by Shakespeare was the only other assigned reading book for school about a black person that I really enjoyed... I just liked that it was Shakespeare and about a black man, and I made it very clear in class that I thought it was important. (laugh) The only time I ever thought about race in class was... well, it was honestly something that I didn't try to minimize but I knew that everyone knew that I was one of the only black girls within all the AP classes which was really annoying. The only time that bothered me and I felt agitated was when we would talk about slavery in APUSH... I think black kids in public schools, and private schools too, need therapy after every class. And I'm being serious. It's like an odd-one-out kind of thing which I think is strange.

I only read two books in high school about black people and only one of those was written by a black author. It was really something that was serious... but during my sophomore year I used to check the banned list at public libraries and there were a lot of black authors and a lot of queer authors that weren't allowed in schools. I used to read this series about vampires and it was very much smut, very much I shouldn't have been reading it, very much it should have been banned.

It was strange that I was going strong with these vampires and it was available in every public library yet things like James Baldwin were banned. Though at the time, that made sense to me, and I don't know where the shift was when I wanted that to change.

Did you feel represented in the books you read as a kid/teen? (38:35)

G8: Did I feel represented in books I read in school? Even now I'm up here trying to think if I even read a book that was about black people or by a black person or person of color. It's been years since I've been in high school but I don't remember at all. That's crazy to think about in this day in age. I felt more represented in books that I read outside of school. *The Outsiders*, I read that super early in fourth or fifth grade. It was on my older brother's fourth or fifth grade reading list. *The Outsiders* is about white kids, I think. Well, it's definitely not about black kids but it does deal with different social classes. I also felt represented by *The Skin I'm In*. It's about a young black girl who is very dark skin and while I'm not very dark skinned being a black woman in these spaces, I felt ostracized and othered and picked on. You know, all of those things that you go through as a young girl in school. I felt represented in reading *The Secret Life of Bees* because of her relationship with her friends and her family of women who made her who she was. Those are the books that were at the forefront of my mind but none of those were for class. I didn't feel represented by books like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and that was the token black story, I guess. Everything else was not at all. Even now, I saw a tweet talking about how *The Great Gatsby*, which we read in high school, was a white passing black man and I texted one of my friends from high school asking if he remembered when we read this book. I sent him the tweet, and he said 'They didn't say he was black.' I said, 'Right, that's the point.' I went down

this rabbit hole of reading blog posts about it but I don't know. I feel like teaching books and analyzing them could have been approached so much differently. Now that I think about it, it was my sophomore year of college when I was taking a literature class with one of my favorite professors here. It was an early American literature class, and we read a lot of slave narratives and that was that was the first time I was thinking about reading on multiple meta levels not just 'Oh, I feel represented' but also thinking about society and the issues that plague us today. But growing up I didn't feel represented in the books I read for school.

F7: It's interesting that you mentioned *The Great Gatsby* because I was reading a tweet as well about how in *Harry Potter*, it was never stated that Hermione was white and everyone just assumed that she was white. But even the books I read for leisure as a kid, I never felt particularly represented. It's interesting that even when you have the option to make that decision in a book to movie adaptation, you don't make it. You can just make a character white, and 'Duh, she's white. She's a main character in a really important movie.' I think that's interesting. I was also trying to think of the first time I ever remembered there being a black person in a book I'd read. Other than the bible, the only one would be *The Hunger Games* with Rue. Then, she was killed off in the first book so it's kind of like okay you give us a second then 'Yay diversity. We're good now, she can go.' It's like, why couldn't Katniss have been black but then would the author have been as marketable with a black main character? Would the movie have been as marketable? I think it's pretty interesting that you could take those steps to make it more inclusive and more diverse but author and movie producers, everyone in mainstream media, especially with young adult novels choose not to do that. Almost every young adult novel that I've ever read has had an entirely white cast. I wouldn't say that I've felt particularly represented

by any book that I've ever read in school at least until I was in high school and college and started reading more books on my own.

What's it like to be represented in or feel connected to a book?

F8: When I was growing up, even if they weren't black, if it was a woman, or girl, as the main character, I connected immediately. I read *The Hunger Games* and I thought Katniss was the coolest person ever and I asked for an arrow for Christmas. In *Harry Potter*, I thought Hermione was so cool, and I got a wand. In the *Legend* series, which was a little bit more lowkey, the main girl was a lead assassin and she threw knives so I thought, 'God, I've got to learn how to throw knives.' Honestly at that age, it was very formative because I was reading those in years where I was still trying to figure out how I was as a person, so I'd adopt the traits of main characters that I even remotely connected with because I didn't really feel represented in the media. But I could just take those books of people who I could envision looking however I wanted which I thought was pretty cool. I wanted to be like them but I never wanted to be like Hannah Montana because I didn't look like her, I didn't resonate with her, but in books, I could latch onto female lead characters — maybe even in an unhealthy way. I was very obsessed with reading when I was younger...

E6: With me, I can't necessarily say that any book that tried to be inclusive ever felt inclusive to me because I'm convinced that the planet thinks that black people are a monolith. They think that black people are all the same person. That they are one entity who all walk around being the same human every day and it just doesn't work like that. There's no depth to most black characters in books. It's like he's black. That's his personality, and that's what makes him

important in this book. And that sucks. It's the same thing with television. There's this quote about how we first told word of mouth stories, then stories through books, and now we tell stories through cinema. I'm not a huge fan of Rue in *The Hunger Games*. She's unnecessarily unrealistic. It was very confusing to me why her cohort who was with her was dark skinned but she wasn't and there are a lot of theories written about that. Though there needs to be no theory, we know why. It makes me uncomfortable. That's weird. And with television now, if I'm watching like a baking show and the black person gets voted out, I genuinely cannot sit through it anymore and I don't know what it is. It's like I can't sit through something if I'm not represented at this point in my life. I will not stand for it. I don't care even the slightest bit, which has been a thing for the past couple of years. It's annoying but at some point mainstream marketers will learn. I guess in any book that I did feel represented in, it was mainly people who were neurodiverse which is interesting just because I was never diagnosed with ADHD but my teachers always treated me like I had it which was traumatic for any person. Whenever I saw a kid that was really smart but didn't stand with any crowd/ didn't really fit in or if you could assume that this person had autism, was on the spectrum or anything along those lines, that's when I felt most seen. But it felt conflicting, and of course I can't speak for all black people but I feel that anytime when there's a book that has no black people in it, but a person feels seen who is black, it feels conflicting because you think 'Should I feel that way?' I have a friend who always says 'American sociology is black history' and that's the first thing you have to learn in life. It flows through absolutely everything, so the trauma we sometimes feel as readers when we can't find that representation or when we can and it's not how it's supposed to be, is like American sociology being black history.

Are black people well represented in young adult literature?

H6: No. I don't think that black people are well represented. Well at least for me, I was never able to connect on a racial level but more of a girl-to-girl or woman-to-woman. It was more so gender as opposed to race, and moving forward I feel that it should be both gender and race that can elevate different forms of media as we forward into the future. But the short answer is no.

G9: Within the genre of young adult literature, no. But at this point in my life, when I think of young adult literature, I think Angie Thomas and Jesmyn Ward. I can't name one white author who's authored any new young adult literature so within the category no but in my mind with what I recommend to others or what I would have young people within my life read, then it would be a yes. Because I'm not recommending anything that's not written by black people or people of color, or anything that doesn't accurately represent people of color.

I4: I'm going to say no as well because within the novels that I read, black people were the villain or a very minor role/supporting character so you didn't get much time to know about who they were. You didn't get to see them or read about them and if you did, they were probably the villain or the bad guy. If you read *Twilight*, in the first book, Laurent is the only black guy in the book and he's the bad guy. I mean, you have James and Victoria but Laurent's the bad guy. He gets killed in *New Moon*. Spoiler alert, sorry but he dies. That's the worst part. He's the villain and you really don't see anymore black people for a minute until *Breaking Dawn* and even then, it's small minor roles. They have a blip in the radar then that's it. For me, the short answer is no. You just don't see [black characters] and if you do, it's not in the light that would resonate with me as a woman or me as a black woman.

E7: The black person we know and live with on a day to day basis does not exist in most genres of book especially in young adult novels but the black person that the American society knows definitely exists in every book because black people are just the mechanism. They are just the background, maybe at the forefront but still see through. Like you know that it exists, you know why it exists, and you know how it works because of black people. We did this and that. We made it happen with almost everything. A lot of random movements that no one talks about. A lot of random inventions that no one talks about were created because we exist. In that same light, the way that American society sees us as if we don't exist and when we do, we're burdensome. That's how we're represented in books. We're either not there, some sort of lawn jockey, some sort of nuisance, or a sad story to tell. I understand why it's like that... but I don't know that there is reform, I think that there is only revolution.

How are black characters portrayed in books?

F9: For the most part, if they aren't a minor character, they're the main character's best friend. You'll have the main white girl, then you'll have her funny, probably chunky, dark-skinned best friends. It's just for comedic relief. That's how it is most of the time unless you're watching or reading something Tyler Perry style, you're really only getting side character action from your average black character.

E8: Black people are written into stories as a name you can almost read over or something really goofy. Like Rex, who's name is Rex? There are at least three novels with a black boy in them who's name is Rex but I've never seen it in real life. That's never happened, thank you. So, it's

confusing to see things represented that way. Black characters are also ostracized in books, or written extremely to a point where it's laughable and embarrassing. Not sure how it's legal to do that but every time there's a black character who's supposed to be dramatically funny, it's almost scary. I just don't know how to explain it. It's weird when you get to see it in theaters and you think that it's not at all what you expected. Books don't really get justice when they are turned into movies but black characters definitely don't get justice when it's on film.

What changes would you like to see in YA or publishing in general?

Do you currently read YA? Why or why not?

G10: For the changes I'd like to see in the publishing industry is seeing more value given to black writers and black stories. I'm thinking most recently — well, this example is about latinos — but I'm thinking about *American Dirt*. It was billed as the hispanic book of the year but it was written by a white woman. There are so many hispanic writers and authors who could write from that experience, so many immigrants, undocumented and the ones who live in this country who could write about that experience to where white people don't have to swoop in and be the white savior to everything. Though that's the way the publishing industry and society as a whole operated. It was heartbreaking hearing Jesmyn Ward talk about winning the National Book Award and still being paid X amount compared to other writers. We're talking about a brilliant writer still being underpaid. I think merit, value, financial support, and the belief that the audience is there. I think it was when 'Sylvie's Love' came out and the actor's were tweeting about them trying to get it picked up by different streaming services, and all of them being told 'There's no audience for this.' And 'Sylvie's Love' is one of the best movies I've seen this year because I haven't seen a good romance movie that was placed in the 50s or 60s that's not about

being the help so something like that which was really refreshing to watch. I think industries by and large need to realize that there are audience's for black stories and stories that center people of color. Right now, I am reading young adult literature. I also read Jesmyn Ward's *Sing Unburied Sing* and I'm reading her because she's a black woman from Mississippi writing good stuff. It really resonated with me partly because the main character in the book and his life story and his relationship with his grandparents resonated with me being raised by my grandparents and it was just so good on so many levels. Also the relationship to the land and the way Jesmyn wrote about land as if it lives, well because it does. Right now, I'm reading her, Keise Laymon, and Angie Thomas. If it's a Mississippian, I'm gravitating towards it.

F10: Changes that I'd like to see is more representation but more so accurate representation. I think that unless it's an African American author, they are scared to portray black people correctly. Rex is not your average name for a black guy but I feel like they're scared to write about Jamal or Demetrius, something more stereotypically black. Though of course you have to watch the boundaries around stereotyping and accurate representation. I just like to see people not be scared to include black people in books. You can add a black character and not feel like you're going to jump over the line to some racist author. You can have a black character without taking it to an extreme. They can simply be a good character.

I5: Definitely more accurate representation and more of a chance for black people to see themselves portrayed normally not necessarily focusing on our trauma which is something that you see a lot of white authors do. If they have black characters, they are going to talk about black trauma, and if you're repetitively exposed to that as being the only thing associated with a black

story, the public, it's overkill. I just want to see black people represented normally, like if you watch 'Insecure,' that's a show that doesn't capitalize off of black trauma. It's just black people being black people — being normal. And I feel like that's a big issue right now. I can't pick up a book without reading about a black character and seeing something like gang violence, and okay write about the representation of most black Americans.

As for reading young adult now, I don't because I'm in a different stage in my life and I've outgrown some of the plotlines and it sucks to say because seeing some of the things coming out today, I think 'Hum, that would have been the stiff back in the day when I was a kid.' Now, I feel like I've outgrown it, and there's this weird pressure when you get to grad school and also working where you feel like you're supposed to be at a different point with your reading so you're not supposed to be reading to — I hate to say not get enjoyment out of it but, you're supposed to read to get something from it. For me, it's enjoyment but all my grad school friends are reading because they're getting some deep or intrinsic meaning out of it. 'That's great for you but I'm just reading because I'm bored.' As much as I'd love to pick up a young adult novel, I'm not sure if I've outgrown the genre. I probably have.

H7: Black people need to be represented more modernly. A lot of times, it's made to seem we've always gone through these hard troubles back in the day and now there's always trauma or psychological issues but that happens to everybody. That's just not a racial thing, and by modernizing and evolving the black role, the roles of other races also need to be evaluated. Sometimes they are put up to appear to have a good life but everybody has problems. Everybody has things that they have to work through, and so I just think that coming to that middle ground

by emphasizing the black people are just like everybody else. We go through things just like everybody else. It's not just because we're black. It's because that's life. Do I really see that happening? Not really. You can always hope and want things to happen but I just think that until we are seen as equals in society and forms of media, we'll always be the minority and never properly represented.

E9: Black people should be weaved into society the way we're meant to be. There's a lot of getting stepped on. Our ancestors went through a lot, and we just need our rightful place in publishing houses, as editor, as librarians, as writers, as friends of writers. We have to infiltrate every space. There's no other choice. It has to be done. I believe it will be heard to do but not impossible. There should be a seat at every table for a black person, and right now, there's not. And our generation is not going to take it for much longer, which I'm fine with. Do what you gotta do.

I read a lot of YA. Not as much as I'd like to. Right now, I'm reading *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Fences*, the play. Not exactly sure why but that's what I'm reading. But I generally read a good bit of YA and really enjoy it. I enjoy people telling their stories and when the lines can be blurred. When you can be a reader and not just a black reader. The world wants you to think that the pronoun that exists within you is black and it is not. You have a name. You're whoever you want to be. People will ask, 'Oh, you're a black reader, do you read black books and I'm like no. My name is Edith and I read books.' That's it.

Black people are going to have to — I don't know, shake it up in a new way. And people are going to have to understand that we will infiltrate every space because it's our rightful place in this world that we built essentially. Well, not essentially, very forefront.

Appendix 4: Focus Group 3 Transcript

J1: I do a lot of academic reading for my major and it's pretty dense with a lot of jargon. It's not necessarily something that I enjoy. I'd prefer more fiction and novel reading if I had time.

K1: I also don't have a lot of time but I make time for reading because it's one of those stress relieving things for me when I'm going through my major. I also prefer fiction novels.

L1: I've always loved reading. I started when I was a little girl reading chapter books and it grew into a bigger love for reading. Again, like everyone else said, I don't have much time this semester but last semester I had pretty easy classes to where I was reading all the time and enjoying that. It's also a stress reliever to do those things.

M1: I love reading too. If I have time, I do but this has been a very jam packed semester so I don't really have time. Though when I do have time, I try to fit in a book or two. Like everyone else said. It's a stress reliever so it's something that I do when I have time.

What are your favorite books?

K2: From high school, it would be beloved but now it'd probably be, it ends with us by Colleen Hoover. She's a great author -- love her.

L2: For me, I was really into fantasy and sci-fi books. From high school, I read this series called the Gone series by Micheal Grant. It was this dystopian society type of thing. That was my favorite thing in high school. I'm also pretty late to the game reading Their Eyes Were Watching God, so I just got done reading that one two weeks ago or so that's a top favorite for me right now.

K3: That's a very good book.

M2: A recent read for me was Just Mercy by Brian Stevenson. I added that to the top of my list. It was really good, so it's probably my number one right now.

J2: I read a book for my psychology degree called Every Time I Feel the Spirit. It's about African American female experience in church and how that shapes our lives. It's told through black women's perspectives. I thought that was interesting.

How do you find new books to read?

N1: I try to go to the internet or ask friends if there's any good books that they'd recommend that they've enjoyed and think that I might enjoy.

K4: For me, there's this free books online thing, so I usually just go through the list and choose what I want to read. Also, I read some books that my favorite Booktubers recommend or from friends as well.

L3: I'm the same way. I'm in a lot of book Facebook groups that do a genre of the week where people will comment the books that like and have been reading recently. That's a big why with social media and asking my friends to see what people are reading. Also, just going to your local library or bookstore to find books. But it depends on my mood and what I'm interested in reading at that time. Like if I'm interested in reading non-fiction or history, I'll go to certain places to find that.

Most of mine, I get from Pinterest too. I follow people who strictly post books on Pinterest. I'm not sure on the names of their accounts but they'll do themes. Also people on Instagram that have joint book accounts like @booksandbean.

Do you gravitate towards black authors?

L4: A lot here lately I have been, and that comes with developing my identity and learning more about history and who I am as a black woman -- just getting more interested in reading more types of books in that way. Other than that, I don't really go directly towards a black author but I have been recently getting more into that the past couple of months, reading black authors and seeing how they write and how it's different from mainstream books that you would read.

K5: For me, since my favorite genres are new adult, romance, and mystery/thriller, there aren't a lot of black authors and if there are, the storyline is kind of the same. There isn't really diversity in that but I do gravitate towards black authors when I'm in the mood for poetry books.

J3: I've always wanted to look for black authors but until recently, it's kind of hard to find black authors even though I grew up in a household where my parents wanted us to know about black history and authors. Now, my brother is a writer who works with black authors so now I find myself gravitating more towards it. It's also the general trend of the United States right now, which makes things a little easier but I feel that in the past it was harder to find black authors.

Trendy?

M3: Personally, I feel like it's more of a trend. I haven't met people who are so hellbent on finding black authors or finding books about black people in general until here recently because of recent events so I feel like it's a trend that everyone wanted to hop on to seem woke or know what's going on.

L5: I feel like it's almost a curiosity thing for people now. Like 'Oh, I'm so curious to this culture that's so foreign to me but I'm also familiar with because I'm around it all the time.' That goes for people of color and non-POC as well. Everyone is gravitating towards that because race is the center of the nation right now. I've seen many people reading books on mass incarceration, white supremacy, and things like that. I think people want to know more about our culture without downright asking someone. And so, a lot of the time, people go directly to books because they rely on the information that books give us.

What books did you read growing up?

L6: I read stuff like the Boxcar Children and the Babysitters Club. All books with white teenagers in it. That's pretty much what the theme was. In elementary, I was reading Junie B. Jones and Ramona and Beezus so it was never anything that was pointing directly towards my heritage because I went to a school that was predominantly white too. It was something that wasn't within my reach without being at home. A lot of the times I was reading chapter books about white teenagers but it was very entertaining to me because I liked to read.

K6: I read Junie B. Jones and Amelia Bedelia. I also read those metaphorphis books where the students changed into different animals and whatnot. I can't remember a lot of what I read in middle school but that's what I read in elementary.

What were you reading in high school or more recently?

J4: I remember high school reading being very dystopian-like for some odd reason. I read 1984, Fahrenheit 451, a lot of those new world, teach you about life and what can happen type novels. I think in high school, I would read short stories on my own but a lot of it was what was assigned in school and that broadened my perspective. A lot of it was dystopian, euphoric type novels.

K7: A lot of the books, I read were high school assigned like Beloved, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and The Poisonwood Bible. On my own, I would read romance books and whatnot, and also erotica. I was going through some things in high school.

Were your school libraries curated?

M4: Ours was whatever people got. There was nothing tailored for black students or anything. I'd just pick up whatever my friends were reading or what I'd heard about by word of mouth from other people.

L7: The only time we had specific books was when we had assigned reading in class. Other than that, we didn't have a wide selection of books to choose from in the first place. Most of them were kind of picked by our librarian and put on the shelves. She picked for us.

Were those books new or old?

L8: They were pretty old like 1984, and other things that we had to read. They were -- well, I don't want to say hand me down books-- they were just old and used. There wasn't anything up and coming except maybe 6 or 7 books. It was pretty crazy.

Did you feel represented in books when you were younger?

N2: Honestly, in my childhood, I don't remember reading a lot of books that represented me or seeing a lot of characters that look like me or any of those things. I didn't feel represented. I still read books and thought they were cool. I thought they were... (she trails off).

K8: Growing up, there weren't a lot of books that I saw myself in. I had to find books like those when I got older. Certain authors like Nina Simone, and other authors that wrote about us. I had to do that by myself like it wasn't in the educational sources. I had to go outside of school to find it.

What was your experience like being assigned these books?

M5: Honestly, it was kind of uncomfortable because my first experience was probably when I read *The Hate U Give* for the first time. I could truly relate to the character just because she was a black person or black girl, and I never experienced things like that so it was a really good feeling. [But reading books about white kids] was a really uncomfortable experience for the most part because you could never actually relate and get into the book, even if it was really interesting just because it wasn't someone who looked like you. When I finally did read *The Hate U Give*, it was eye-opening because I really did relate to her. We had the same skin tone and it wasn't hard to try to imagine myself in her shoes.

J5: I had one positive experience and that was getting this American girl doll series pack of books one year, and it was like white girl, white girl, white girl, then there was a black girl who was teaching about hygiene. I thought that was so cool because she kind of looked like me, though not really because she had super straight hair. She didn't look exactly like me but it was the fact that she had my complexion that made me think it was pretty cool. It was surface level because I was too young to process that that was probably a lot of work for the publishers to have to go through to even get that published. So, it was a good feeling but really all surface level.

K9: The first book I felt connected to was *The Skin I'm In* but only because I had most of the features that she described in the book, although I wasn't bullied for them as she was. I was able to relate because when they described her, they described me.

How has your childhood reading shaped your reading now?

N3: I feel like because in high school, we were selected to read a bunch of dystopian society books, I feel like I do gravitate towards those books. I wouldn;t say that not having a black character or person of color in the book makes me not gravitate to it...

J6: It makes me want to read more. I'm really into the psychology of why don't we have these things. I think it's exciting for me when I can promote, 'Hey my brother's writing about black people in magic' and things like that, especially with younger people. People who are just starting to get a chance to read that more so than me going out and buying a novel.

So you're happy that the younger generation now has access to that representation that maybe you didn't have?

J7: Yeah, absolutely.

Have you read any YA recently?

K10: I have but they aren't black oriented. They are just regular teen fiction books or with college characters.

Some of the titles?

K11: Mostly series, like *Briar University* or I recently started reading more of *The Hunger Games* series because I watched the movies before I read the books, so I read the books to

understand why she did the stuff that she did because honestly it's kind of confusing to me. I'm also catching up and reading other books from the movies that I've seen.

Is it important to have African American protagonists?

L9: It's not really that I'd stay away from a book because there are no black characters in it but I do think that if I have that one specific dystopian novel that I absolutely loved and I started reading it and it had a black character, I'd fall even more in love with it so that's very important for the younger generation who are members of the black community to have that sort of representation inside of books. I want them to have that feeling that I didn't have. It's important too for the sake of not having a black character as a sidekick or the black best friend or the burnout.

Stereotypes and tokenism?

N4: The stereotypes bother me because we're all taught that everyone has different experiences and if you're going to set that into one character... I just want something different. If I'm reading a book with a person of color, I want them to go through a different unique experience. Everyone goes through different things.

J8: We are just breaking the surface. *The Hate U Give* was a very groundbreaking novel for many reasons and it's showing that this is profitable and that people want to see [black stories] and here about them. It's going to be a lot more popular going forward because black voices are being brought to the forefront and it's important that we give the youth of the next generation examples of what they can do that aren't stereotypical paths they can take.

How should black characters be portrayed?

L10: I would advise the writer to try to see outside of your initial idea of describing a black person. Not always extremely loud and here for your entertainment or always messing up or someone who's very submissive to their white counterparts in the books, I'd like them to think of the opposites, so someone who is very strong, but also introverted and a bit intimidated by the world and other people. But it's not so much about writing the perfect character as an African American but reevaluating the people who are writing these books and saying "Hey, step outside of your box and see us as we are, which is a variety of different things. You don't have to stick to this one idea."

K12: I agree with that and also not giving us typical backgrounds because not everyone grew up poor or "in the hood." I think our backgrounds shape the characters so if they focus on our backgrounds more, they'll get the idea protagonists that we want.

Is there a difference when a person of color/ black person writes a black character versus when a non-POC writes a black character?

M6: Yes, because when you're a black person talking to another black person, you can speak from experience. As a white person, you can speak from what you've heard but not necessarily experience. You'll have never experienced the life of a black person. You'll never truly understand what they've done or gone through.

Is the narrative more genuine if a black person writes a black character?

L11: Reading a book written by a black author about a black character, there's a lot more description, feeling, and emotion of that character. You get to see a lot more of their internal thoughts and feelings. Those things aren't made up; they are something that strikes inside of you because you know you can feel that. Black authors portraying black characters have the ability to conjure words from their heart instead of their head. And I think that's a big difference that I've noticed...

Any changes you'd like to see within the young adult or children's book category? Is there any that publishing can do differently?

L12: Hire black authors and publishers.

N5: Also more advertising because there are a lot of books out there by smaller writers and publishers that people don't know of. All the other books are pushed in front because it was by a big-time publisher. Since we are a minority in this country, we aren't always pushed out in front... I wish there was more advertising so people would actually see black books and know about them.