

Spring 2014

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Julia Andersen
College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

Andersen, Julia (2014) "So You Want to Write YA: Social Responsibility and Young Adult Literature," *ESSAI*: Vol. 12, Article 8.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol12/iss1/8>

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So You Want to Write YA: Social Responsibility and Young Adult Literature

by Julia Andersen

(English 1102)

Despite what the uninitiated might assume, there is much more to Young Adult literature than supernatural love triangles; writing quality YA is a difficult and time-consuming task. Although no one can deny the popularity of titles like Stephenie Meyer's best-selling *Twilight*, for example, many a critic has lampooned her flimsy characters and flat writing, and the borderline-abusive relationship between the novel's main character and her love interest has been thoroughly decried. Meyer's novel, written in three months, took off in the Young Adult market, but the message she sends to teens about gender roles and relationships is considered by many to be a troubling one. YA authors must consider their impressionable adolescent audience while crafting their story, and take into account young adults' many and varied needs during a time of intense life changes. As a relatively new genre, Young Adult literature is still coming into its own; therefore, it has great potential to address the needs of all its readers, including members of minority groups traditionally ignored by the publishing industry. As an aspiring YA author, you must educate yourself on the concerns and needs of your audience, the current state of the Young Adult writing and publishing industry, and the potential for that industry to change over time. Is YA truly the genre for you?

Of course, to answer that question, you first have to figure out exactly what YA lit is. Unfortunately, there's no easy answer to that question; because it's a relatively new genre, Young Adult literature's definition and conventions are still being determined. As Michael Cart notes on behalf of the Young Adult Library Services Association, a branch of the American Library Association, it is difficult to give such a dynamic genre a static definition. He says, "The term 'young adult literature' is inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms 'young adult' and 'literature' are dynamic, changing as culture and society—which provide their context—change." Currently, YALSA defines a "young adult" as someone between the ages of twelve and eighteen.

One of the few things on which most experts seem to agree is that Young Adult novels typically address coming-of-age issues, and feature a main character between the ages of twelve and sixteen. This age window is conducive to discussions of difficult topics that are often associated with adolescence, ranging from drug abuse to sexuality to race to self-determination to social acceptance. Some novels approach such issues directly, while others deliver guidance in the form of metaphor or analogy. Some are concerned with the suburban teenager's everyday concerns—dating drama, changing or disintegrating friendships, familial pressures or parental troubles—while others take place in fantastic or far-removed settings, such as J.K. Rowling's Hogwarts or J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. Yet, more often than not, these fantastic and far-removed stories still deal with many of the same issues as their more immediately realistic fellows. For example, Harry Potter finds in the Weasleys the family he was denied by the Dursleys, struggles to separate himself from the evil he fights (and which, he finds, literally lurks inside of him), and deals with his share of romantic frustrations. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, authors of *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001*, explain:

[F]antasy and science fiction, the two main forms of literature of the fantastic, are usually set in either an unspecified past or future. Either setting allows for a world populated by beings or technology not found in a contemporary setting. Yet while the world of the novel is significantly different from the world of the reader, it frequently is plagued by the same anxieties about the same conflicts as the world the reader inhabits. (140)

Evidently, addressing common adolescent concerns is a major part of what classifies a book as Young Adult literature. According to Pam B. Cole, author of the McGraw-Hill textbook *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*, other “characteristics that have historically defined the genre [of YA lit]” include:

1. The protagonist is a teenager.
2. Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict.
3. The story is told from the viewpoint and in the voice of a young adult.
4. Literature is written by and for young adults.
5. Literature is marketed to the young adult audience.
6. Story doesn't have a 'storybook' or 'happily-ever-after' ending—a characteristic of children's books.
7. Parents are noticeably absent or at odds with young adults.
8. Themes address coming-of-age issues (e.g., maturity, sexuality, relationships, drugs).
9. Books contain under 300 pages, closer to 200. (49)

However, Cole immediately goes on to warn that “reliance upon a laundry list of characteristics... results in a narrow and misleading definition of young adult literature.” She mentions, for example, that “YA books range from thin novellas to books with 800+ pages,” as in the case of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, mentioned above (49). So, while the protagonist is almost always a teenager, and events are often related from their viewpoint and in their voice, not all aspects of Cole's list are or remain accurate.

A notable example of the changing face of YA lit, and one that has already begun to void Cole's list, is the increasing interest of adults in the Young Adult market. As Cole herself has noted, “In [recent] years the young adult genre has evolved, becoming more sophisticated, more inclusive, has gained more widespread popularity” (50). In fact, even more adults than teens are beginning to flock to YA lit. According to Ashley Strickland's recent article, “A Brief History of Young Adult Literature” on CNN.com, “55% of young adult books purchased in 2012 were bought by adults between 18 and 44 years old.” Many experts cite the inherent turmoil of adolescence as a draw for audiences of all ages, whether they be teens eager to see their real-life struggles dealt with in some form, or adults looking to revisit the transformative teen years in print. As one young adult author said in an interview with Pepperdine University's *Pepperdine Magazine* last year, “I think a lot of adults like the theme of finding yourself. You get to go back to that time in your life and relive the wonder of your teenage years, and all of those not so wonderful firsts, too” (Suzanne Lazear qtd. in Fisher). Fellow YA author Cynthia Struloeff agrees, “Teenagers' lives are about transitions and defining moments. That's very exciting in a narrative sense, so it makes sense to me that adults are drawn to YA” (Struloeff qtd. in Fisher). As Kat Falls, author of YA novel *Inhuman*, told Bob Sirott and Marianne Murciano during her WGN radio interview:

“I read YA, and so much is being done in that genre that's exciting and new and edgy. And you don't get boxed into a genre the way you do with adult fiction. Like, if you're sci-fi, you're in this *one* section of the bookstore, and only sci-fi lovers head over to it. Well, YA, all those books are shelved together. They're just lumped as YA because it has a teenaged protagonist.”

The variety within the YA genre is something readers of all ages may find attractive—the genre’s inclusion of titles addressing everything from death and life-after-divorce to first dates and after-school jobs, making Falls’s definition seem particularly apt. However, not all authorities in the field agree. In a personal interview, Young Adult author Trina Sotirakopulos, argues:

Adult books with young protagonists are still Adult books, such as *Lovely Bones*. ... *Lovely Bones* is [narrated by] a character, Suzy Salmon, who’s twelve... but she’s writing from heaven, and she’s writing about her brutal murder. ... So that’s Adult. ... I don’t think you can look at the age of a character and say that this is Adult or Young Adult. Young Adult is more responsible. ... The Adult book, you can write however you want. You could end with horrible, horrible sadness, and you’re not held to any other standard.... But in the Young Adult novel, it *must* end with hope. Something *must* give the teenager hope. ... I think that’s the difference.

However, one of the key attributes of Young Adult literature, which differentiates it from Children’s literature, is the absence of “storybook endings”—so while Young Adult novels do generally end on a hopeful note, this characteristic does not necessarily prevent the author from addressing difficult or delicate topics.

After all, YA includes titles like *Speak*, *The Hunger Games* trilogy, and *The Fault in Our Stars*, each of which concludes with the sort of practical optimism that has become a characteristic of the genre. The first is a novel by Laurie Halse Anderson that centers around a rape victim’s struggle to acknowledge and overcome the trauma she suffered; the second, by Suzanne Collins, features protagonist Katniss’s struggle to first survive in, and later bring down the tyrannical government of, her dystopian near-future setting; and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* deals with issues of mortality and grief through the experiences of teenaged cancer patients. In each, the protagonist works to overcome, or at least come to terms with, their difficulties. Rather than curing Hazel, the main character of *The Fault in Our Stars*, Green writes of her appreciation for life even as she fears dying and comes to terms with the death of a friend (also a cancer victim). Rather than promising a perfect new world when Katniss succeeds in escaping the previous government regime, Collins offers the potential for large-scale healing in an improved (but still imperfect) world—hope over a trite happily-ever-after.

However, not all YA novels accomplish this balance of realism and optimism. Cole claims, “The societal belief that stories should have hope impacts the way some writers end their stories.” She explains, “[w]hile good writers shy away from the happily-ever-after endings, many still tend to ‘lighten’ events by story’s end,” despite the fact that, typically, the time frame of a YA novel “is not conducive to deep character development and, most importantly, it is not long enough realistically for characters to work through personal and family issues” (65). These endings may be the basis for some criticism on the general quality of the YA genre, although such criticism is generally considered surface and uninformed, as there is great variety in any other category of literature. As Cole explains in *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*:

Grounding their criticism in erroneous and misleading media coverage and in limited familiarity with young adult literature, some critics assert young adult literature is worthless and inferior to classical texts and adult literature. Those who study the young adult genre, however, understand multiple factors contribute to this negative pigeonholing. They also know that young adult literature offers some of the best in contemporary literature. . . . A number of issues contribute to a stigmatic view of the genre. First, the location of young adult literature in bookstores is problematic. Some bookstores combine young adult literature with children’s literature, and by doing so, send an unwritten message that young adult literature is not sophisticated enough for teens, especially older readers. Other bookstores place young adult literature in *close proximity* to children’s literature, sending a similar message. (57-60)

So, while some would consider Young Adult literature childish or simple, it is actually a relatively sophisticated and often challenged genre. In fact, because so many YA novels tackle important and sensitive subjects, covering everything from abuse to poverty to sexuality to race to religion, the genre is a favorite target of censorship groups across the U.S. Cole explains, “[w]ould-be censors genuinely believe they have a definitive take on ‘morality’ and . . . criticize young adult authors for ‘corrupting the young,’ ‘being evil,’ or ‘writing shocking, violent, and obscene stories to make a buck.’” She condemns their censorship, which “violates intellectual freedom, the individual right to access information from all viewpoints free of restriction,” and connects their behavior to that of oppressive regimes:

Censors of young adult literature fail to see the parallels between their own desires to suppress information about such topics as sexuality, religion, violence, vulgarity, and the successful attempts by dictators, governments, and military groups to control and even brainwash their countries’ population. They see their actions as ‘helpful’ and ‘decent.’ (70)

Cole also provides a list of classical titles challenged and the censors’ reasons for objecting, including *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank for being “obscene and blasphemous,” J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*—“A dreadful, dreary, recital of sickness, sordidness, and sadism”—and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because “The word ‘rape’ is used several times. Children should not see this in any literature book” (70-71).

Of course, contemporary YA titles are also challenged fairly regularly; now, however, people are fighting back very publicly. The American Library Association, for example, runs a Banned Book Week each September encouraging people to read books that have been banned or challenged. According to the ALA, the top three reasons materials are banned are that “the material was considered ‘sexually explicit,’ . . . contained ‘offensive language,’ . . . [or] was ‘unsuited to any age group.’” The ALA even keeps lists of the most challenged authors by year, and the top one hundred banned books by decade. Recent years have featured names like Sherman Alexie, John Steinbeck, Judy Blume, Ellen Hopkins, Suzanne Collins, J.K. Rowling, Stephen Chbosky, Chris Crutcher, Lois Lowry, Toni Morrison, and John Green as most challenged authors. The list of most challenged titles in recent years include Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, the novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, and even the *Captain Underpants* series by Dav Pilkey.

Individual authors have also been seen taking a stand against book banning. When her book, *The Bermudez Triangle*, was challenged in Barlesville, Oklahoma, author Maureen Johnson mobilized her fan base by posting multiple blog entries about the attempted censorship and her response. The parent in question challenged Johnson’s book on the grounds that it contains “[h]omosexual content, unprotected sex, underage drinking, and reckless promiscuity” and “wrongly

promotes a ‘do whomever you want to discover yourself’ mentality. There’s no mention of the myriad of diseases, pregnancy, destruction of friendships and lives that are very real consequences of a ‘sexual free-for-all’ decision” (Angela Rader qtd. in *I Am A Very Dangerous Person*, Johnson). While there is a homosexual relationship in *The Bermudez Triangle*, there is no sexual activity beyond kissing, invalidating Rader’s charges of “reckless promiscuity” and eliminating any worry of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, Johnson writes, “The book is entirely about what happens to friendships when relationships enter the picture,” and therefore devotes much attention to the possibility of ruined friendship as a consequence of romantic involvement (Johnson, “I Am A Very Dangerous Person”).

When the school board, who admitted they had not read the book before voting, recommended removing the book from the high school library, Johnson took action. It was not simply because she thought her book did not deserve to be banned, she explained in multiple entries, but because book-banning sets a dangerous precedent, especially when school committees do it so quietly that the majority of their towns’ residents don’t even realize it’s happening. She emailed the committee members, alerted her readers, and even involved the town’s local newspaper. She continued to chronicle her struggle against the book banning until the case’s conclusion, almost two months after the committee originally voted. They decided that Johnson’s book would be kept on a “special shelf,” and only be checked out to students with a parental permission slip (Johnson, “News Flash: Victory in Bartlesville (Sorta, Kinda)”). Johnson credited this partial victory in large part to the hundreds of letters and emails her readers and fans sent protesting the banning.

Johnson is not the only individual author who has taken a stand against book banning, either. Chris Crutcher is known for his arguments against censorship, and other authors with a notable social media presence have used their online clout to help anti-book banning movements gain momentum. Authors like Johnson or John Green may provide the professional email addresses of the public officials involved so that concerned citizens can share their views on literary censorship directly with the people in charge of determining whether or not a challenged book will remain on the shelves.

Of course, social media can be used for publicity outside of anti-book banning movements; the vast majority of authors today have some online presence, and some have particularly large and devoted followings. Of these, few can rival Internet and YA giant John Green. Green has certainly had his fame augmented thanks to his social media presence as half of the wildly popular Vlogbrothers YouTube channel, and co-founder of the DFTBA record label and product line (named after a Vlogbrother community catchphrase, “Don’t Forget to Be Awesome”). The Vlogbrothers “brand” has expanded to include multiple YouTube channels like CrashCourse, the Art Assignment, and even an Emmy Award-winning web series. Of course, Green’s literary work can also stand on its own; as Cole writes in *Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*:

[Y]oung adult literature offers some of the best in contemporary literature. It’s almost impossible to read a book like John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2005), for instance, and not develop huge respect for young adult literature and those who write for this audience. Deeply philosophical and richly textured, *Looking for Alaska* is an intense coming-of-age story about a group of teens, a boarding school, and one boy’s search for the ‘Great Perhaps.’ First-time novelist Green depicts the intensity of adolescence seldom seen in contemporary literature. (57-58)

Green has since gone on to write several more books, including *The Fault in Our Stars*, which was recently turned into a movie. Another novel of his, *Paper Towns*, is also being adapted into a film. While his novels are certainly high-quality, it’s not unreasonable to assume that the enthusiasm of his widespread online fanbase was encouraging to filmmakers considering adapting his work for the screen. Of course, Green is an outstanding case; while some authors also gain large followings on

other social media sites—Johnson currently has 100,000 Twitter followers, for example—few have yet to reach Green’s level of online prominence. Even so, almost every professional author also has a blog with biographical and bibliographical information, and many run blogs similar to Johnson’s. Official websites, like that of the Authors Guild, also demonstrates the online presence of authors; a list of members on the site includes the likes of Laurie Halse Anderson and Judy Blume.

But these are public concerns of authors that have already been published and are looking to maintain or augment their recognition; what kind of training is required to produce and sell a book in the first place? According to Sotirakopulos, education plays a key role in a writer’s ability to produce a high-quality novel. In a personal interview, she explained:

I think it’s a combination of experience in writing/education, or just the education. But [the author] Linda Sue Park is a great one who will say that to write a novel you need to read one hundred novels, to write a picture book, ...[read] one thousand picture books. ... So I don’t know if you need a degree, or certificate, but you certainly need to study the craft.

So where in the United States can aspiring YA authors go to study the craft and get a degree or certificate along the way? Unfortunately, traditional sources on the topic of career training have little information tailored to Young Adult authors. However, by taking a sample of fifty critically acclaimed and popularly successful American Young Adult authors, one might evaluate these authors’ history of higher education.¹ The results might be surprising—not only did 18% of the authors surveyed for this paper not complete any formal higher education at all, the remaining 82% showed remarkably little consistency in their schooling choices. Six attended Ivy League schools, but thirty-five did not. Four authors attended schools in the South, fifteen in the West, eighteen in the East, and eleven in the Midwest. The survey also found that seven attended colleges with less than 10,000 students, while the remaining thirty-four went to large universities ranging from 20,000 to 50,000 students. It seems, then, that there is no great regularity to the colleges these authors have attended, only that the majority—82%—completed some formal higher education, and most of them did so with a focus in an English- or Communications-related field.

If only 18% of these authors succeeded without a degree or certificate, how did the vast majority’s degree or certificate contribute to their career success? According to Sotirakopulos, level of education is generally reflected in the quality of an author’s writing. She explains that authors like “John Green and his editor... Julia Strauss-Gabel... know literary work, so they can still write for teens, they still produce work for teens, but they follow a nice literary pattern... [with] a complex plot and beautiful prose.” She goes on to explain that, in her mind, the important thing is a balance between education and experience:

I think there is something to be said about education, or at least recognition in the field. ...I can’t say whether or not people look at [a writer’s] education and publish their [work] because of the education [they have]. Although I am editing an anthology on women’s life shifts, and when we were looking at submissions we did take into consideration ...not only the quality but [also] the author’s interest in the field, submersion in the field, you know. So it wasn’t necessarily where did they go to college or what did they teach, that kind of thing, but it was more or less did they know the field, ...are they attending conferences, are they active in some kind of organization. That was the focus.

¹ See Appendix for full list and findings.

So while it is unlikely that an author's education will be directly responsible for the success of their work, the indirect effect—namely, the improved writing quality due to education—will most likely contribute to career success.

But how does a YA author's level of education affect their salary? Unlike many professional careers, a high-level degree does not guarantee an increase in pay, as demonstrated by the fact that 18% of the YA authors surveyed earlier never completed any form of higher education. But while a degree or certificate may not be absolutely required to succeed as an author, knowledge of the publishing industry is—at least traditionally. The recent self-publishing craze seems to be leveling the playing field for the less-experienced writer, although an increasing number of expert voices deny that self-publishing gives novice authors any real advantage. Certainly, self-publishing requires much less knowledge of the publishing world and all its intricate relationships and maneuverings than navigating the traditional publishing house process. Unfortunately, as article after article will tell you, this ease does not always lead to success. Perhaps even more unfortunately, all the effort that goes into having your book published in the traditional manner doesn't always pay off, either.

Let's start with traditional publishing—a process that begins with polishing your own manuscript, and never seems to end. According to author Nathan Bransford, once you have a full manuscript that you're relatively happy with, you have to continue working on it. Polish it “so much it's shining like the top of the Chrysler Building. Now it's time to find an agent, right? Nuh uh. Time to learn about the publishing business.” He advises, “Before you embark on your quest for a literary agent, you should devote many, many hours to familiarizing yourself with the business, literary agents, editors, and anything else you can possibly do to discern how this unique industry operates.” This advice is echoed by Jerry Simmons of *Writers Digest*, who explains, “Knowing how [production, marketing, sale and distribution of your book] comes together doesn't just increase your odds of crafting a submission that will get you a deal—it also gives you a better chance of impacting the decisions that can make or break your book's success.” These important decisions, of course, include things like the book's cover, which will be discussed later in this paper. Simmons adds:

Writing is a craft, but publishing is a business. ...Being able to intelligently discuss books and authors with professionals who make their living in publishing builds your credibility as a market-savvy author—especially if you can demonstrate an understanding of where your own book will fit in. Once you know exactly where your work belongs on the shelf, be sure that knowledge is reflected in the query or cover letter accompanying your submissions to agents or editors. It will increase your chances of getting one.

A query letter is a brief letter that describes your work, which you send to prospective agents in the hopes they'll be interested and want to take you on as a client.

Bransford also recommends networking as much as possible in order to increase your chances of a referral by an established author, explaining that agents are “more likely to [give your manuscript] a thorough look” if it's been endorsed by someone that agent respects. Considering the amount of work that crosses their desk, this is a definite advantage. But, no matter how desperate you are to have an agent look at your work, author Maureen Johnson advises wariness: “Anyone that offers a quick-fix, a sure deal, a new method of getting to editors... are lying to you. Money up front is a 100% sign that an agent is a fake. Real agents only take a percentage from something they sell.” Johnson recommends contacting the Author's Guild if you are unsure of an agent's credentials or a contract you've been offered, whether by an agent or publishing company.²

² See Appendix for more information on the Authors Guild, including services, dues, and membership types.

Even once you've snagged a bona fide agent with your Chrysler-Building-shiny manuscript, referrals, and/or query letters, which can take months or longer, there's quite a bit of work to be done. The purpose of having an agent, of course, is that they know the ins and outs of the publishing world; as Johnson puts it on her professional website and blog:

Editors tend to specialize in one type of book. ... Writers out in the world won't know what these editors specialize in. ... [Agents] know which editors are publishing which books. They will know that Editor Suzy LOVES books with a little romance, but doesn't want to hear about your vampire. Editor Grace, who works at the same company, is gasping for a vampire. She's got a long list of vampire books. The editor will know to send the romance to Suzy, the vampire to Grace.

Once you have an agent to send your manuscript, Johnson warns there will be long periods of waiting for publishing companies to respond. If you're lucky enough to have more than one interested publisher, your agent takes care of auctioning off your work. When your agent has negotiated a deal with a publishing company, they will come to you for the final sign-off. After that, Simmons of *Writer's Digest* cautions, it's out of your hands: "The moment that contract was signed, you lost rights and control over how your manuscript will be published." This includes decisions like cover art, marketing, and even the book title. Simmons recommends meeting with the staff in charge of putting your book out into the world and developing relationships with them to increase the chances that your suggestions will at least be taken under consideration. He insists that maintaining these relationships are key to ensuring a final product everyone is more or less happy with: "[E]very smart writer knows his editor is also his main contact (and advocate) for all things relating to the publication of his manuscript. Conduct yourself accordingly."

So, when does the money start rolling in? Well, not until *after* your book makes a profit. The publishing company first has to make back what it spent on your advance—the amount the publishing company paid for the rights to your work. Advances can range "anywhere from ten grand, which is very low-end, to six figures," according to Sotirakopoulos. Once the book has begun making a profit, authors can begin receiving their royalties, or percentage of earnings from book sales. According to Johnson, this amount is usually between 8% and 15%. Of course, this only happens if your books make it off the shelves and into the hands of readers.

Which brings us to one of the great lures of self-publishing: it can be very, very cheap, and very, very lucrative—if the author hits mainstream fame. According to Leslie Kaufman's article in *The New York Times*, "New Publisher Authors Trust: Themselves":

While self-published authors get no advance, they typically receive 70 percent of sales. A standard contract with a traditional house gives an author an advance, and only pays royalties—the standard is 25 percent of digital sales and 7 to 12 percent of the list price for bound books—after the advance is earned back in sales.

However, according to Sarah Fay's article, "After 'Fifty Shades of Grey,' What's Next for Self-Publishing?" in *The Atlantic*, "The success rate [of self-published books] is less than one percent."

In a personal interview with recently self-published fantasy author and fellow College Of DuPage student Nathan Kiehn, he explained to me:

I basically wrote it with no intention of publishing it, and then my dad mentioned, “Hey, why don’t you, you know, try to publish it?” And I thought, “OK.” So my mom had read it over, and then I read it over. We made a couple changes, mostly notes, to catch spelling and grammatical things, and that was pretty much all the editing we did.

He added that they did not come up with cover art or spend any money to have a company format it for him, and did not spend money to print any hard-copies; instead, he simply formatted it as an HTML document and uploaded it to Amazon KDP. How much did it cost him to publish? I wanted to know. “Nothing.” And how many copies had he sold? Nine or ten, for \$2.99 each—technically a profit, though certainly not on the scale of the e-published *Twilight* fanfiction that became an international best-seller. (As of April 18th, 2013, *Fifty Shades of Grey* had already sold over 70 million copies worldwide, according to the *Huffington Post*.) Certainly Kiehn’s experience was not as complicated as the traditional publishing route described earlier: no agents or publishing houses are required, and the author retains all rights to their work.³ Perhaps he hadn’t sold as many copies as E.L. James’s hit, but he’d still come out in the black.

Naturally, there are also some downsides to self-publishing your work. For one, the self-publishing field is so new that the market is still flooded with low-quality, formulaic genre books that would normally never leave a casual writer’s attic or closet floor or similarly disused section of their computer’s hard drive. So, if you hope to catch the attention of a big publishing house this way, your chances are low. Even books of decent quality are not always successful in the Wild West of self-publishing, as it “now accounts for more than 235,000 books annually, according to Bowker” (Kaufman). Of course, there are a few tales of moderate success amidst the disappointments and the dizzying glories of self-published authors; Sotirakopoulos explained, for example, that her colleague Ophelia Julien “does very well” with her self-published work. However, Julien has also been writing for about twenty years, and has had previous experience and success in the publishing world.

It seems, then, that experience may be a key factor in the success of self-publishing, barring phenomena such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, especially as more established authors begin exploring self-publishing options. Such established authors include the likes of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and author David Mamet; according to Kaufman’s article in *The New York Times*, Mamet was attracted in part by the idea that self-publishing allows “well-known figures like Mr. Mamet to look after their own publicity,” as “traditional publishers have cut back on marketing” in recent years. So what’s Sotirakopoulos’s take on self-publishing—was it something she had ever considered? In my interview with her, she explained:

I did not consider that, only because I work with friends [who] have a press, [and] they kind of grandfathered me into it. But my situation is quite rare. ... I know people who do quite well with [self-publishing]. [A] couple [of my colleagues] ended up self-publishing—... They opened a press and did it. So I think if you have a press name, you’re fine. But I think it’s the people who go off on their own and go do it [who might get in trouble]. ... I recommend it if the book is edited, and clean, and a good representation. The publishing market right now, I don’t know, it’s tough.

Although traditional publishing may include more paperwork and rejection letters, and does not guarantee success in the end, its success rate is certainly higher than self-publishing’s one percent. As of now, self-publishing is still a virtual free-for-all with no guarantees beyond ease of

³ For more information on copyrights, see Appendix.

production, should you take the simplest route. And, be warned—the cost increases substantially if you bring in professional editors, printers, formatters, packagers, and so on.

Even choosing to publish electronically, while definitely the cheaper option, may negatively impact your success. According to *Voices of Youth Advocates*, or VOYA, a publication targeted at Young Adult librarians, the vast majority of teens still prefer reading physical copies of books. In her February 2014 article, “I Am Not a Robot: Teens and Technology,” librarian Geri Diorio reports that her teen advisory group’s preferred reading platform is still print: “Only one TAG [teen advisory group] member preferred ebooks [to print], but not by much: ‘...[I prefer] ebooks because of convenience, but it’s 60 to 40 (ebooks to paper)’” (22-23).

How else might the self-publishing and e-publishing revolution affect the industry? Regina Sierra Carter, Ph.D., suggests that customizable cover-art could significantly alter a reader’s experience with literature. Her paper, “YA Literature: The Inside and Cover Story,” published in YALSA’s official publication *The Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*, “acknowledges a need for cover art that reflects the ‘changing faces of today’s teen’ and offers suggestions for how this may be realized on a small scale.” She explains:

As of now, there is little that lovers of YA literature can do about cover art that grossly misses the mark, which is unfortunate. However, in the future, readers may have more of a say in how cover art is constructed. When that time comes, there may be a move toward a more creative and reader-oriented approach to producing cover art. For example, in the future, cover art may be personally selected via pre-order services or created using kiosks.

For, as much as most people hate to admit it, a book’s cover largely informs potential readers whether or not a particular book is something in which they’d like to invest their time. Thus, the book’s cover has a large amount of power in determining what will be read and what won’t, the expectations of its readers, and sometimes the mental image the reader has of the main character before reading. A very serious concern, therefore, is the “whitewashing” of book covers featuring people of color as their protagonists—something that could very well be addressed by the innovative methods of cover art development Carter suggests in “YA Literature: The Inside and Cover Story.”

“Whitewashing,” or misrepresenting the race of the book’s main character on the cover of the story—usually a person of color incorrectly portrayed as White, hence the term “whitewashing”—is an enduring controversy. (“People of color” is a term that includes anyone who identifies as Black, Asian, Indian, Native American, multiracial, and so on.) Even before the covers can be whitewashed, of course, the protagonist must *be* a person of color. As Carter notes, “Racial minorities have not traditionally experienced widespread coverage in YA literature [in the first place]”. With such limited representation already, whitewashed covers are particularly concerning. Carter expresses this concern in her paper, quoting from the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s publication, *Choices*:

For quite a few years we have been commenting on how few books by and about people of color are published in the United States in relation to the overall number of books produced annually. As the population of the United States continues to not only increase but become more diverse, the output of publishing houses has not been a mirror of society, at least in terms of the numbers.

Carter and the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) insist that “[i]n our ever-more-diverse nation, we need books that provide all children the opportunity to see themselves and the world in which they live reflected.” This sentiment is echoed by Young Adult librarian Robin Brenner in her interview with Lisa Weidenfeld of *Metro*. She says, “[Y]ou want books to be either mirrors or

windows. Mirrors should show you yourself in some way, and windows should show you other people so that you can see what it's like to not be you, and that's where the empathy starts to grow in terms of reading fiction.”

Unfortunately, there is still a distinct lack of minority voices in YA—not only in terms of characters, but also writers, leaving much to be desired in the way of “mirrors and windows.” In a recent article for BuzzFeed, “Diversity Is Not Enough: Race, Power, Publishing,” author Daniel José Older describes his struggle to be heard as an author of color. In a majority-White industry, he was confronted with agents “that said they loved [his] writing but didn’t connect with the character, ... didn’t think [his] book would be marketable even though it was already accepted at a major publishing house, ... [and] ones that wanted [him] to delete moments when a character of color gets mean looks from white people.” He even encountered a “white magazine editor who lectured [him] on how [he’d] gotten [his] own culture wrong.” And his experience is not unique. Older explains, “My friends all have the same stories of whitewashed covers and constant sparring with the many micro and mega-aggressions of the publishing industry.” Older goes on to quote publishing industry expert Sarah McCarry, who explains that even if a non-traditional book is published, the publishing house’s advertising “money and attention overwhelmingly goes to what the industry has already decided is ‘marketable’—heterosexual narratives featuring white characters [instead of those books featuring people of color or LGBTQ+ members].”

Indeed, issues in representation are not limited to young people of color; perhaps more pressing, suggests Talya Sokoll, is the dearth of transgender youth representation in Young Adult literature.⁴ She laments that “[w]hile in the past four years publications of these [trans*-oriented] titles has slightly improved, ... the number of books being published is still very low, and some of these titles are published by small press, with little or no marketing, which makes them difficult for library staff, or teens, to locate” (Sokoll 23). She emphasizes that “[t]he lack of titles does not mean there is a lack of need for these books,” citing findings that “Transgender students experienced more hostile school climates than their non-transgender peers—80 percent of transgender students reported feeling unsafe at school because of their gender expression” (“2011 National School Climate Survey” qtd. in Sokoll 24). She also referred to *Parrotfish* author Ellen Wittlinger’s goal to “normalize homosexuality and transexuality and make gender and sexual orientation just two of the many ways in which we are different from each other. She hoped that her book would not only appeal to adolescents who saw themselves in the characters, but to straight adolescents who did not think they knew any gay teens” (24).

Unfortunately, some authors’ attempts to include trans*, genderqueer, multiracial, or other minority group members may backfire, as these characters are too often reduced to stereotypical token characters, and/or over-exoticized. So, how does one fairly present characters who are also members of one or more minority groups? According to Sotirakopoulos, author of trans*-oriented YA novel *In Her Skin*:

I’ve read books where people have just put [in] a... token character... and it does a disservice, it’s an insult, I think to that group of people [they’re trying to write about]. So, I would say, base it on reality. ... If you, or another writer, is interested in writing about a specific group of people, submerge yourself and *be* that person for a while.

⁴ Transgender is one identity included in the trans* umbrella; other identities represented by the trans* prefix include transsexual, transvestite, genderfluid, bi-gender, agender, and non-binary, all of which are severely underrepresented in YA literature.

She explains that her own experiences with a close friend since childhood, who went through the gender-transitioning process, is the only reason she felt comfortable writing about the topic of a transgender character herself, and agrees that “there isn’t much fiction [for trans*-youth], and it’s not fair.”

As for over-exoticization, it can occur both within a text itself and, of course, on the cover. As author Mitali Perkins notes in her article for the *School Library Journal*, “Straight Talk on Race”:

Sometimes books may be packaged with covers depicting a character as more foreign than he or she is described in the story. Nowhere in Cynthia Kadohata's novel *Weedflower* (S & S/Atheneum, 2006), for example, does 12-year-old Sumiko wear a kimono. But she does on the cover. For a story about the Japanese internment in North America during World War II, why did the powers-that-be make an American protagonist appear more culturally Japanese than American, especially when a girl in jeans behind barbed wire would have been more historically accurate? Perhaps they were trying to tap into a fascination with all things foreign, amping up the exotic factor so that those looking for a book about "faraway cultures" might buy this one.

She goes on to explain that “[o]verexoticizing a nonwhite character to appeal to white readers can happen inside a story as well as on a cover,” and uses her own book as example. Despite her own Bengali heritage and awareness of the overexoticization issue, she had, almost unconsciously, inflicted it upon her own main character. She explains that she didn’t even notice what she’d done until a reviewer pointed out the “unnecessary exoticization of [her] protagonist,” particularly the description of the character looking like “some exotic Indian princess” at the end of the novel: “I fumed, but, dang it, the reviewer was right. Exotic Indian princess? What was I thinking? Enduring a twinge of shame, I moved on and tried to learn from my mistake.”

Unfortunately, misrepresentative covers don’t begin and end with whitewashing and over-exoticization; sexism is still a very real issue faced by female authors and their readers. Because a book cover largely informs the reader on the apparent worth and subject of a book before reading, even issues seemingly as insignificant as cover art that has little to no connection to the plot can leave a reader unprepared for the story they’ve just picked up. For example, librarian Darcy Lohmiller picked up Chris Crutcher’s *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* “because on its cover were three kids celebrating apparent victory on a baseball field, and [she] needed a sport book in [her] repertoire,” only to find that “this was a scene from the first chapter,” after which “[t]he hero... gets into a water-skiing accident and is partially paralyzed, his parents’ marriage crumbles over their guilt and grief, and he is quickly alienated from his friends, family, and past life” (13). Not what she was expecting, and not what your average reader would predict from the cover. While this is a relatively neutral example, there is an epidemic of misrepresentative covers for fiction written by women; due to sexist marketing, the perceived value of books by women is often very low. That is something people like Maureen Johnson want to change.

Several months ago, Johnson, who often Tweets about her experiences in the writing and publishing industries, made an off-hand comment about how vexing it is to receive messages from prospective readers who find her covers too embarrassingly “girly” to actually read. She came up with the idea of a “coverflip”—reimagining the cover of a famous book as if its author’s gender were “flipped,” both to expose the excessive gendering of book covers and to get a good laugh. When followers’ responses to her idea of a “cover-flip” took off, she even partnered up with *Huffington Post* to run a short competition, putting the top cover-flipped entries of famous and not-so-famous books on the *Huffington Post*’s website.

Johnson argued that pointlessly gendered book covers are so common that most people do not even realize they are inferring the quality of a book based on its cover. Unfortunately, the general

consensus is that “chick lit”—books by women, perceived to be “for” women—is of an inferior quality. Emily Matchar’s article in *The Atlantic*, “Chick Lit Remixed: The Simple Brilliance of Gender-Flipping,” discusses the general trend of people using gender-flipping to expose the absurdity of many media’s hyper-feminine and/or hyper-masculine treatment of certain subjects. She then moves specifically onto cover-flipping: “Wherein ‘guy’ books are given the ‘women’s fiction’ treatment, with pastel colors and misty photos of pensive-looking girls, and girly books get bro-ed up with graphic black-and-white. . . . Highlights [include] John le Carré’s Cold War spy classic *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* done up in pink and baby blue with four model-like men lounging provocatively on the jacket, [and] *Freedom* by ‘Jane Franzen’ featuring a manic pixie dream girl raising her arms to the wind, Titanic-style.” Matchar goes on to suggest that “if more men read ‘women’s fiction’ it would cease to be ‘women’s fiction’ at all, and simply become what male-written novels have long been called: ‘fiction.’”

It wasn’t the first time Johnson called out the stigma attached to women writers and so-called “chick-lit”; she also started the hashtag trend “#IsItChickLit,” in which Twitter users summarized a great male-authored literary work as if it were being promoted as “chick lit.” A few outstanding examples include *The Odyssey*—“When the hubby’s away, will Penelope play? She has to learn to rely on herself—and wait for true love,” from user @turning_Beth; a summary of *Hamlet* from @elmify: “One big castle, one Danish invasion, and one ZANY boyfriend—what’s a girl to do?”; and even *The Great Gatsby*, from @maureenjohnson herself: “Sure the parities [*sic*] are amazing and the clothes are fabulous, but how will Daisy’s torrid love affair with Gatsby end?” As anyone who has taken high school English can tell you, that is certainly not the focus of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age novel—which is exactly Johnson’s point. As she writes in her *Huffington Post* article on the subject, “The Gender Coverup”:

[T]he simple fact of the matter is, if you are a female author, you are much more likely to get the package that suggests the book is of a lower perceived quality. Because it’s ‘girly,’ which is somehow inherently different and easier on the palate. A man and a woman can write books about the same subject matter, at the same level of quality, and that woman is simple [*sic*] more likely to get the soft-sell cover with the warm glow and the feeling of smooth jazz blowing off of it.

Frustratingly, as Johnson notes on her blog, authors seldom have control over their publisher’s marketing decisions, up to and including the book cover. So, while it is somewhat discouraging to acknowledge the biases people have regarding female writers, it may be bolstering to know that there are those like Johnson and the countless #IsItChickLit and CoverFlip participants actively trying to change such gendered stereotypes. As Johnson notes in her article on *The Huffington Post*’s website, “This idea that there are ‘girl books’ and ‘boy books’ and ‘chick lit’ and ‘whatever is the guy equivalent of chick lit’ gives credit to absolutely no one, especially not the boys who will happily read stories by women, about women.” In a literary world inundated by Manic Pixie Dream Girls and damsels in distress, it is important that books by women about women are taken seriously, especially if they provide a more realistic view of the world as it is, with full and flawed female characters.

Obviously, representation is an issue that starts at the cover and continues to the core of much of today’s Young Adult literature. Covers misrepresenting the content of their books, whether that misrepresentation is as serious as whitewashing and sexist marketing, or as seemingly mundane as illustrating an insignificant scene from the story, are rampant. Thankfully, professionals in the field are bringing these issues to public attention—whether it be through articles, “coverflipping”, or hashtag trends. As seen in public responses to the social media movements instigated by Maureen Johnson, readers and writers agree that trends in misrepresentative cover art must be corrected. There

is a dire need for more realistic representation of minority youth in young adult literature—not merely token characters, or white-washed covers, but true-to-life “mirrors and windows” that allow young adults to see themselves and their peers truthfully portrayed, as Young Adult librarian Robin Brenner suggests in her interview with Lisa Weidenfeld of *Metro*. After all, adolescence is an important and difficult time for many, and YA literature often provides adolescents with a method of understanding and navigating the world in which we live.

Now that you know the basic process of becoming a published YA author, as well as some of the current controversies in the field, you may be questioning your decision to write Young Adult literature. After all, there is a lot of hard work and risk involved in this profession. Not only must you take into account your impressionable audience and strive to produce a quality piece of literature that fairly represents our world, you must learn the ins and outs of publishing to first become published, and then try to make your published work a financial success. Is it worth the struggle?

That is something you have to answer for yourself, bearing in mind that Young Adult literature has an important social and cultural impact, especially because it speaks to a rapidly maturing audience. As Michael Cart explains in his YALSA whitepaper “The Value of Young Adult Fiction”:

Whether one defines young adult literature narrowly or broadly, much of its value cannot be quantified but is to be found in how it addresses the needs of its readers. ...[T]hese needs recognize that young adults are beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage [is]... distinguished by unique needs that are—at minimum—physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal in nature. By addressing these needs, young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers.

YA authors have a responsibility provide a realistic view of the world we inhabit to these “growing and changing” readers. By arming young adults with an understanding of the world they are coming into, both good and bad, Young Adult authors are arming their readers with an ability to shape and change that world. Whether you choose to write Young Adult literature or simply carry on as a consumer, you play an important role in shaping this evolving genre; as YA authors continue writing for and about adolescents, addressing any number of coming-of-age issues, readers continue to show their support for this literary form and its perpetual progress. Perhaps publishers will take note of consumer reactions to their products, particularly in regards to gendered and/or misrepresentative cover art, and adjust their packaging and marketing accordingly. Or perhaps the future of YA literature lies in self-published authors, or will turn entirely to e-books; perhaps changes in platforms will also contribute to clearer and more accurate cover art, and provide opportunities for voices that might have otherwise been stifled to provide new and innovative perspectives. However Young Adult literature evolves, it is an important, useful, and enjoyable resource for young adults as they struggle to understand themselves and the world around them during a period of intense life changes.

 Appendix

1. Survey of fifty successful YA writers' histories of higher education:
 - Rainbow Rowell—unreported. Possibly no formal higher education
 - John Green—Kenyon College
 - Maureen Johnson—University of Delaware, Columbia University
 - Suzanne Collins—Indiana University, New York University
 - Rick Riordan—University of Texas (Austin)
 - Judy Blume—New York University
 - Beverly Cleary—Chaffey College, UC Berkeley, University of Washington
 - S.E. Hinton—University of Tulsa
 - Veronica Roth—Carleton College, Northwestern University
 - Libba Bray—University of Texas (Austin)
 - Lois Lowry—Brown University (incomplete), University of Southern Maine
 - Amanda Hocking—self-published, no formal higher education
 - Meg Cabot—Indiana University (Bloomington)
 - Sherman Alexie—Gonzaga University (incomplete), Washington State U
 - Carl Hiaasen—Emory University (incomplete), University of Florida
 - Stephanie Perkins—unreported. Possibly no formal higher education
 - Ransom Riggs—Kenyon College, University of Southern California
 - Maggie Stiefvater—University of Mary Washington
 - Cassandra Clare—unreported. Possibly no formal higher education
 - Holly Black—College of New Jersey, Rutgers University
 - Marissa Meyer—Stanford University
 - David Levithan—Brown University
 - Scott Westerfield—Vassar College
 - Kami Garcia—has an MA in education, school unspecified
 - Laini Taylor—UC Berkeley
 - Richelle Mead—University of Washington, University of Michigan, Western Michigan University
 - Kiera Cass—Radford University
 - Margaret Stohl—Amherst College, Stanford University
 - Ally Carter—Oklahoma State University, Cornell University
 - Marie Lu—University of Southern California
 - Rick Yancey—Roosevelt University
 - Sarah Dessen—University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), Greensboro College
 - Neal Shusterman—University of California (Irvine)
 - James Dashner—Brigham Young University
 - Michael Grant—unreported. Possibly no formal higher education.
 - Jodi Picoult—Princeton University, Harvard University
 - Simone Elkeles—Purdue University, Loyola University (Chicago), University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana)
 - Laurie Halse Anderson—Onondaga Community College, Georgetown University
 - Ellen Hopkins—University of California (Santa Barbara)
 - Gayle Forman—unreported. Possibly no formal higher education.
 - Lauren Myracle—University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), Colorado State University
 - Rachel Cohn—Barnard College

Gordon Korman—New York University
Margaret Peterson Haddix—Miami University (Ohio)
Patrick Carman—Willamette University
Linda Sue Park—Stanford University
Ann Brashares—Columbia University, Barnard College
Lauren Kate—University of California (Davis)
Michele Jaffe—Harvard University
Patrick Ness—University of Southern California

2. The Author’s Guild is a not-for-profit organization that represents book authors (including co-authors, ghostwriters, translators, and self-published authors) and freelance writers. Dues are typically \$90 per year for all three categories of membership (Regular, Associate, or Member-At-Large), although after the first year the dues are technically on a sliding scale. The following services are the benefits of membership, according to the organization’s official website:

Members of the Authors Guild receive free reviews of U.S. book contracts from experienced legal staff, low-cost website services including website-building, e-mail, and domain name registration, access to [the Guild’s] free Back in Print service, [their] quarterly print Bulletin, and invitations to panels and programs throughout the year.

Regular membership is available to those who qualify as “an author published by an established U.S. book publisher, a freelance writer published by periodicals of general circulation in the U.S., or as a book author or freelance writer earning writing income” (Authors Guild). The Guild specifically includes self-published authors in the category of freelance writers. A writer may qualify as an Associate Member if they have “been offered a contract with an American book publisher, ... an established literary agency has offered to represent [that writer], or if [the writer] has earned... at least \$500 in writing income... in the 18 months prior to applying for membership” (Authors Guild). The Guild grants Associate Members the same rights and privileges as Regular Members, with the exception of voting in Guild elections, according to the Guild’s official website. They publish a quarterly bulletin that covers “publishing, copyright, tax, legal and legislative news” (Authors Guild).

3. According to the U.S. Copyright Office, a copyright is “a form of protection grounded in the U.S. Constitution and granted by law for original works of authorship fixed in a tangible medium of expression [and] covers both published and unpublished works.” There is a \$35 fee to register your copyright online, according to their page on Registering Your Work, although the Copyright in General FAQ explains, “Your work is under copyright protection the moment it is created and fixed in a tangible form that it is perceptible either directly or with the aid of a machine or device.” However, you must register your work “if you wish to bring a lawsuit for infringement of a U.S. work,” according to the official website of the U.S. Copyright Office. They add, “Registered works may be eligible for statutory damages and attorney’s fees in successful litigation. ... [I]f registration occurs within 5 years of publication, it is considered *prima facie* evidence in a court of law.”

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