

St. Catherine University

**SOPHIA**

---

Antonian Scholars Honors Program

School of Humanities, Arts and Sciences

---

5-2021

## **Girls on Fire: The Evolution of Female Characters in Young Adult Literature**

Emily Cox

Follow this and additional works at: [https://sophia.stkate.edu/shas\\_honors](https://sophia.stkate.edu/shas_honors)



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

---

Emily Cox

### Girls on Fire: The Evolution of Female Characters in Young Adult Literature

As the younger sister of a fantasy lover, I grew up reading many of the same classics of the genre as my brother: *Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Eragon*, and – of course – *Harry Potter*. I enjoyed those books for what they were, but I could never quite shake what they weren't. I had a hard time seeing myself in any of the primarily male protagonists, even young Harry experiencing the ups and downs of adolescence at his magical boarding school. That's not to say that young women weren't leading their own stories out there somewhere – I just hadn't found them yet, lost as I was in the male-dominated sphere of fantasy and science fiction.

It wasn't until late middle school that I discovered the burgeoning world of Young Adult Literature (YA). Suddenly, I had a wealth of novels to choose among, in any genre I could imagine, including my beloved fantasy. More importantly, however, was the realization that a majority of these novels featured young female protagonists taking charge of their own destinies. I desperately latched onto these heroines throughout my adolescent years, finding between the pages of many YA books quiet girls like me who mustered their own kind of strength and courage alongside fierce young women who weren't afraid to speak their minds.

Three books stand out to me now as paradigms of their respective times and genres, as well as influential to my own development as a reader, writer, and young woman: *The Hunger Games*, *Red Queen*, and *The Hate U Give*. These books may span different genres and feature entirely distinct protagonists, but they are nonetheless important representations of the impact of YA and the many changes these types of novels have undergone in the last ten years amidst the

call for more diversity, eventually leading us from stoic and cool leading ladies like Katniss Everdeen to vulnerably fierce champions for change like Starr Carter.

Though Young Adult literature has exploded into the public zeitgeist in recent years thanks to the popularity of books like *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*, the genre has existed far longer. Well-known classics like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series and Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* are some of the earliest books that deliberately feature young protagonists in coming-of-age narratives. These were outliers for their respective times, however, and it took years for the Young Adult genre as we know it today to form. Michael Cart explains in "How 'Young Adult' Fiction Blossomed With Teenage Culture in America," that librarians began using the term "young adult" to refer to teenage readers as early as the mid-1940s, but the genre itself was not solidified until the 60s with the introduction of books like S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (1). These books featured stories led by young adult protagonists who tackled a range of relevant subjects for teenagers, cementing the genre as more than a passing phenomenon and more than the morality-focused tales of good and evil that preceded them.

Additionally, YA opened the door for women writers and young women readers, offering a place for both parties to feel welcome. Erin Blakemore points out how many YA books "explore 'the territory of female imagination' and act as inclusive portrayals of teenagers" (2). Unable to see themselves portrayed in other forms of media, many young women readers finally had a place to turn to see their lives and their faces reflected back at them in an honest and nuanced way. Instead of being reduced to harmful tropes or stereotypes, teenage girls could explore the complicated reality of growing up in a safe, understanding space. Similarly, YA

trends in recent years have focused on “Own Voices” narratives: stories that highlight people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, disabled people, and many other marginalized communities that have been left out of popular media.

Like their predecessors, modern YA books deal with high stakes issues for young readers, regardless of genre. The books grapple with impending adulthood in myriad ways, touching on how growing up intersects with topics such as gender, race, and class. These stories encourage young readers to challenge the world around them, a particularly important theme for young women growing up in a society laden with often unreasonable expectations. As Cart writes, “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” (1). Moreover, reader response critic Elizabeth Flynn posits that, “Reading is a silent, private activity and so perhaps affords women a degree of protection not present when they speak” (252). Inundated with harmful messages and stereotypes from a young age, YA offers girls a safe place to explore the world and come to their own conclusions, without the overbearing expectations or judgements of the outside world.

Furthermore, Flynn describes the reading process as one “which assumes that reading involves a confrontation between self and ‘other.’ The self, the reader, encounters the ‘other,’ the text, and the nature of that confrontation depends upon the background of the reader as well as upon the text” (236). Rather than bowing to the untouchable intentions of the author, reader response criticism focuses on the unique relationship between the reader and the text itself. As such, it allows for interpretations of the text that stem from more diverse backgrounds than the typically white and male understanding of art that has been pushed for centuries. For young

women, YA books offer the opportunity to not only see their diverse experiences reflected back at them, but allow those experiences to help them come to meaningful conclusions about the text and ultimately about the world they live in.

There is no question that YA has become a behemoth all its own in the 21st century, especially in the last decade. According to *The Balance Careers*, 10,000 YA books were published in 2012 alone, compared to a mere 4,700 ten years prior in 2002 (Peterson). The popularity of such books has only continued to grow in subsequent years. YA fiction boasts its own *New York Times* Bestseller List, has its own section in most libraries and bookstores, and has even spawned a unique community on social media sites like Twitter and YouTube. In short, the genre has become a modern phenomenon, perhaps catapulted into popularity because of its varied selection of genres, topics, and protagonists; YA readers can browse for dystopian and fantasy titles or seek out more realistic options in contemporary and romance books, all within the same section.

### **The Hunger Games**

One of the most popular adventure stories in YA featuring a young female protagonist blazed onto the scene in 2008. Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* brought Katniss Everdeen, the original Girl on Fire, into the limelight in a standout way. A harrowing look into a dystopian future in which twelve struggling districts must offer up two of their children each year for a brutal arena competition, the novel spent over six consecutive years on the *New York Times* Bestseller List and even spawned a hit movie franchise. Girls all over the world dress up as Katniss with her signature braid and bow and arrow, ready to fight modern-day battles thanks to the example of her selfless bravery and determination.

Despite its futuristic, science fiction setting, *The Hunger Games* tackles many important issues through Katniss' story. Young readers are introduced to concepts like class divides, the effects of war, and the dangers of a society based on consumerism. Katniss herself comes from one of the poorest districts, allowing her to view the actions of the tyrannical Capitol for what they are, and though she fights fellow teenagers in the arena of the titular Hunger Games, they are never framed as her true enemies. Rather, the evil that Katniss must overcome is the corrupt government of Panem as she sparks the flames of a revolution. As Cart writes, part of the value of YA literature stems from "its capacity for telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be, for in this way it equips readers for dealing with the realities of impending adulthood and for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (2). *The Hunger Games* confronts the disagreeable truth of Panem's corruption through Katniss' first-person narration as she comes to terms with the cruel world she lives in and gathers the will to fight back.

Katniss herself is introduced as serious and hard-working, the family's main provider after her father's untimely death in a mining accident, something that is all too common in District 12. Due to her unfortunate circumstances, she has been forced to grow up too fast, forgoing a childhood in favor of taking care of her beloved younger sister, Primrose. It is for Prim that Katniss volunteers to fight in the Hunger Games, and it is for Prim – initially at least – that Katniss vows to win. She thinks only about returning home to her sister, and though her sacrifice for Prim is certainly heroic, the path of her character arc ultimately sees her learn to expand her worldview and recognize the institutional corruption and tyranny of the Capitol beyond her own struggle in District 12.

Katniss starts off the novel relatively uninterested in taking any concrete steps to change her situation and those of the other characters trapped in poverty around her. In fact, when her friend Gale rants about the corruption of the Capitol, she thinks to herself, “But what good is yelling about the Capitol in the middle of the woods? It doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t make things fair” (16). This apathetic stance is one that is easy to take, especially in the face of deep societal issues that seem impossible to fix. Katniss is content to look out only for herself and her family, further emphasized by her decision not to help a pair of Capitol traitors when she was younger for fear of retaliation. She remembers, “Later, we wondered if we could have helped them escape. Perhaps we might have... But we only watched” (63). These moments set up her journey toward empathy and defiance. She is a reluctant hero at first, fighting in the Games to save her sister and working with fellow District 12 tribute, Peeta, out of a sense of obligation. As the story progresses and she is faced with the disagreeable truth of the Capitol as an institution, the sparks of rebellion come to life within her.

Dehumanized from birth due to poverty and neglect, Katniss is further mistreated at the hands of the Capitol gamemakers. She is “remade” to be beautiful and desirable to the audience of wealthy Capitol citizens, just another commodity to be bought and sold to a population obsessed with appearance and status. She describes an elaborate process in which her stylists, “erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out” (88). The real Katniss is quite literally erased in favor of a palatable Katniss the public will love. She is essentially a doll for the Capitol to manipulate and dress as they see fit, nothing more than an object, a body to be sacrificed in the Games in the name of a false and fragile peace. Furthermore, her romantic connection to Peeta makes her that much more desirable as the

feminine half of a traditionally heterosexual relationship. Katniss and Peeta's mentor, Haymitch, acknowledges this directly in the narrative when he says in response to Katniss' outrage, "He made you look desirable! You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do" (98). She is being cultivated as an object for the Capitol's consumption, removing her agency as a character, but especially her agency as a young woman still coming into her own as a person. This dehumanizing process of objectification would be familiar to many young women today inundated daily with messages about impossibly idealized standards of beauty.

Furthermore, Lykke Guanio-Uluru discusses the role of Katniss' gender in "Female Focalizers and Masculine Ideals: Gender as Performance in *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*," exploring how the extreme performance of gender in the Games contributes to Katniss' growing character. Guanio-Uluru argues that "it is only through combining her performance of emphasized femininity with her ability to *also* display physical strength and hunter prowess (that is: to perform hegemonic masculinity) that Katniss prevails in the Games" (212). Katniss plays by the Capitol's rules when she wears elaborate dresses and displays a romantic interest in Peeta, but it is her combination of this with more masculine-coded traits that lead to her ultimately winning the Games. She is a hunter and the main provider for her family – both traditionally masculine roles. She does not fit comfortably into more feminine-coded traits, and as such, must work to emphasize these traits to a degree that will garner sympathy from her audience. The way she performs this role is yet another method the Capitol employs to strip her autonomy as a multi-faceted person.

The Games themselves loom closer as the novel progresses, leading Katniss to more and more examples of this dehumanization. Slowly, she begins to find small ways to fight back and

regain her agency. During a scene in which Katniss must display her skills in front of the Gamemakers for a numbered rating, she notices that they have already dismissed her as merely another poor tribute from District 12. She thinks, “Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don’t even have the decency to pay attention to me... Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Gamemakers’ table” (76). Katniss’ bold act finally earns their attention when they give her the highest score in the Games, but for all the wrong reasons. In their eyes, she has proven herself a true contender to win the Games, but Katniss is not interested in winning their approval or their corrupt competition. Her boldness and ferocity are born from a place of anger at the Capitol’s mistreatment of her and her fellow tributes, and she no longer wants to play by their rules. In preparing for a televised interview, Katniss seethes, “All I can think is how unjust the whole thing is, the Hunger Games. Why am I hopping around like some trained dog, trying to please people I hate?” (86). To a point, Katniss has been willing to do as she is commanded by the Capitol, hoping to keep her head down and spare her family any unwanted attention. As the injustices pile up, however, she is no longer capable of “hopping around like some trained dog,” as she so aptly refers to herself. She wants to fight, not just for herself and her family, but for all those who have suffered at the hands of the Capitol’s greed and corruption.

This sentiment comes to a head when Katniss befriends the young tribute Rue during the Games. Rue is the same age as Katniss’ younger sister Prim, and Katniss immediately wants to protect her. They work together, combining their respective skills to stay alive, but everything goes horribly wrong when Rue dies at the hand of a District 1 tribute before Katniss’ eyes. Overcome with grief, Katniss realizes, “To hate the boy from District 1, who also appears so

vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us" (168). Rather than blaming herself or even the boy who made the kill, Katniss rightfully turns her attention to the Capitol, the true enemy. They force children to murder each other and starve the districts all in the name of false peace, and Katniss wants to do something to fight back. It is noteworthy that her choice is not one of violence, as she decorates Rue's body in wildflowers before the Capitol can collect her. Rather than physical confrontation, she takes to heart something Peeta felt when he told her, "I want to die as myself... I don't want them to change me in there" (102). If her earlier combination of feminine and masculine traits is what allowed her to survive in the Capitol, it is in choosing to be wholly herself in this quiet moment of grief that she truly defies the Capitol. She sings softly to Rue as her late father used to sing to her, reasserting her autonomy as a person and proving – after being treated like a commodity all this time – that she is more than a body to be sacrificed for the Capitol's gain, and so is Rue.

Her decision to reclaim her autonomy holds true until the end of the Games, when she and Peeta choose to die together rather than either "win" the Games alone. The idea is hers, and it is her largest act of rebellion against the Capitol yet. She forces their hand with one small act, exposing their weaknesses for all the world to see, and it is in these small moments of courage and defiance that Katniss sparks the beginnings of true revolution in her country. In "The Games People Play," Latham and Hollister point out how decisions like these indicate Katniss' growing understanding of the world she lives in. They write, "Her strategies of resistance involve increasingly well-developed information and media literacies. Surviving the Games requires these literacies; at the same time, the Games themselves, and more broadly speaking the oppressive government of the Capitol, facilitate their development" (35). Katniss understands

that in order for the Capitol to retain its power over the districts, the Games must have a winner, so she threatens this fragile power in the name of her *own* fragile power over her choices. The Capitol reacts as she expects, choosing to offer the win to both her and Peeta to prevent the chaos their deaths would provoke. She has undermined the Capitol's authority with this manipulation, a manipulation she learned, as Latham and Hollister posit, from the Games themselves. Her decision to offer a tribute to Rue is a similarly deliberate act of her newfound understanding of how she can assert her autonomy. Honoring Rue's death is not expressly forbidden, but Katniss can read between the lines at this point in the Games, and understands that highlighting both Rue's humanity and her own is in direct conflict with the dehumanization of the Games and how the Capitol tries to control its citizens.

It is no wonder, then, that so many young girls flock to Katniss as a character. Latham and Hollister note, "Katniss's demonstration of these literacies not only accounts for her appeal as a character, but also provides a model that many readers can admire and emulate" (36). It is not the weight of the bow and arrow girls crave, but the truth and quiet strength Katniss represents. She is an ordinary person who comes from hardship and poverty, whose seemingly insignificant act of rebellion manages to shake the foundations of a corrupt government. *The Hunger Games* may take place in a dystopian future with speeding trains and strange mutations, but it does not look so different from the real world most of the time. The challenges that Katniss must face are familiar to any young woman growing up and adjusting in a time of commodification and corruption. Young female bodies are often treated like objects by the media, but Katniss' story reminds readers about the importance of remaining critical of such messages and fighting back with the knowledge critical thinking fosters. As Cart points out, YA

literature unveils the truth, no matter how ugly, in order to give young people the tools to act as responsible citizens in the world.

*The Hunger Games* sparked a trend of related dystopian novels around the same period of time. YA had seen a comparable trend of complementary novels in one genre a few years back when *Twilight* ushered in an era of urban fantasy and romance novels featuring vampires, werewolves, and other paranormal creatures. After *The Hunger Games* came books like *Divergent* and *Matched*, stories that featured female protagonists navigating a futuristic world governed by a cruel or oppressive authority. As Latham and Hollister point out, “Dystopian fiction, it has been argued, is popular among teenagers because it resonates so deeply with the adolescent experience...By nature, dystopian fiction is well equipped to demonstrate the workings of power relations in an exaggerated way” (34-35). The corruption of the Capitol, or any of the other cruel governments represented in dystopian novels for that matter, may seem laughably heavy-handed, but in the midst of the corruption, Katniss and her readers learn valuable lessons about resisting oppression and retaining personal autonomy.

Notably, none of the other dystopian novels of the time quite matched the popularity of *The Hunger Games*, and the genre itself eventually faded into obscurity, but its brief rise to significance spoke to a hunger for stories that allowed young female protagonists – and their readers – the chance to explore the complexities of power in society, a trend that continues to this day and unites many YA books across genres, including our next novel.

### **Red Queen**

In 2015 the YA boom continued with *Red Queen*, a sprawling fantasy from debut author Victoria Aveyard. In a world divided by the color of one’s blood, the Silvers reign supreme with

superhero-like abilities as the powerless Reds fight in their endless wars. Like *The Hunger Games*, *Red Queen* immediately positions its protagonist against a corrupt ruling class and an unjust conflict. Main character Mare Barrow is a Red living in poverty with her parents and sister while her brothers are off at war. Mare herself is doomed to conscription, bringing Katniss and her inevitable time in the Hunger Games to mind, but when Mare discovers she has powers of her own, she is poised to challenge the Silvers with more than a bow and arrow. Set in this fantastical world, the sparks of revolution are quite literal, highlighting the use of fantasy worlds and tropes in dissecting real world issues. Meredith Sutphin writes, “What librarians and educators who advocate the power of fantasy novels... believe is that setting novels in a whole new world with its own rules can help readers to think outside the boxes of our own culture” (6). Novels like *Red Queen* allow readers the space to explore complex concepts and issues without the biases of society getting in the way.

Wielding fire, superstrength, and other impossible powers, for example, the Silvers abuse their position by treating the Reds as expendable in a war of their making, ensuring their continued place at the top. Mare thinks of the difference between Reds and Silvers, “We are not equals... Our backs are bent by work and unanswered hope and the inevitable disappointment in life” (5). So when Mare herself discovers her ability to control lightning and accidentally displays this power to the world, she upsets the cruel imbalance the Silvers have enacted for hundreds of years. Suddenly, Mare has the chance to change the world, to fight for those who are unable to fight for themselves and who have been so long subjugated by the very power she can now command.

At the beginning of the novel, however, Mare flounders, lost and purposeless. Her younger sister sews to support the family, but Mare herself hasn't found a similar passion, dooming her to conscription when she turns eighteen, unable to do anything to support her family. This sense of helplessness leads her to view her sister with jealousy as she thinks, "Gisa is going to save us one day, with nothing more than a needle and thread" (14). It is also what drives her forward in the story, this need to do something for the people in her life to relieve her sense of guilt. When her best friend loses his job and suddenly faces conscription, she comes to life with sudden passion. The prospect of war for herself was bearable, but she cannot stand by and watch her friend suffer a similar fate. She tells her friend even as he seemingly gives up hope, "There must be something we can do... We'll find a way" (21). Her protective instinct sets the story into motion as she seeks a way to save her friend; long before she discovers her Silver-like powers, she is doing what she can to fight for others.

Her actions only lead to more guilt, however, when her younger sister gets caught attempting to help Mare steal enough money to spirit her friend away, and Gisa is punished by losing the use of one of her hands. With her sister no longer able to sew to support the family, Mare feels the weight of this failure settle solely on her shoulders, instead of directing her anger at the Silvers who carried out the punishment. Dejected, she thinks, "I guess causing pain is all I'm good for" (43). It is here at her lowest point, unable to help her family or her friend or even herself, that she discovers her strange powers. She accidentally falls into an electric force field while working for the Silvers, and as a seemingly ordinary, powerless Red, expects to die. Instead, she finds herself lighting up with power as she "[feels] the heat of the sparks, running up and down my body, setting every nerve on fire... I feel, well, alive" (70). With this moment she

comes to embody what the Silvers fear most, and represents a popular trend in YA fantasy novels where the seemingly ordinary protagonist discovers a powerful ability that sets them apart from their peers, even if some of those peers have abilities of their own. Sutphin justifies this trend in saying, “It makes sense that teens would want to read about unique individuals who stand out, having special lives, when they are going through a period of intense self-involvement” (67). In contrast, it might also represent a way to combat a feeling of powerlessness in one’s own life, for the discovery of power often accompanies a moment in which the protagonist might otherwise suffer horrible consequences, such as Mare discovering her lightning abilities just in time to save her from the forcefield.

All the power and magic in the world means nothing, however, if the person who wields it isn’t willing to fight. Frightened for her family and her own life, Mare allows herself to become a pawn for the ruling Silvers. Much like Katniss, she is forced to conform to their standards of beauty, though this is taken to the extreme when she is forced to hide her status as a Red and pretend to be a Silver. She describes how “the makeup is the worst, especially the thick white paste applied to my skin. They go through three pots of it, covering my face, neck, collarbone, and arms with the glittery wet powder” (88). While Katniss was treated like a commodity to be bought and sold, Mare is told that her only value is to become someone else, to embody the very people who have looked down on her for so long.

For a time, she suppresses her rage at the Silvers and pretends to fit in among them, but she cannot ignore her ability to make change with her power and position forever. After a clandestine visit with her family, she learns that one of her older brothers was executed for desertion before she could bring him home with her newfound status. Devastated, Mare thinks,

“My brother, my closest brother. I fall backward, almost missing a step in my anguish” (156).

Learning that her brother was murdered at the hands of the people she has been pretending to imitate becomes too much for her. She knows that she can use her position at the palace and her strange new power to fight back against the tyrannical Silvers. Her sister, the same one who lost the ability to sew at the hands of the Silvers, helps her realize this too when she says, “This is a gift... Don’t waste it” in reference to Mare’s power (160).

Emboldened, she seeks out a rebellion called the Scarlet Guard and offers her services, determined to fight for a better, more equal world. She tells them, “I’m in the palace, the center of their world. I’m quick, I’m quiet, and I can help the cause” (163). Despite the danger, Mare is uniquely suited to fight the Silvers. She lives among them, pretending to *be* one of them, and has power to rival theirs. She is using her newfound privilege, fragile though it may be, to wage battle on behalf of those who have far less than they deserve. Though the Silvers who know the truth about her blood view her with contempt and disdain, she does not let this deter her as she thinks, “I am the little lightning girl, and I am going to make the world change” (259). She takes their derisive nickname for her – little lightning girl – and turns it into something powerful, something to be proud of.

In the end, though it appears she has lost the fight and may not live to see another day, it is not her lightning that comes to her aide, but her will. She has nothing left, but facing the boy who betrayed her, a Silver named Maven who pretended to care for the plight of the Reds, she shows him that she is not beaten. Despite all that she has lost, she does not give up the fight as she revels in her tenacity, “For once, I feel like I control fire and Maven has been burned by it. He stumbles back from my cell, somehow defeated by the little girl without her lightning, the

prisoner in chains, the human before a god” (352). Having the quiet strength not to give up is Mare’s superpower in this moment, and like Katniss honoring Rue’s unjust murder, it becomes a staple of her arc as a character. She starts the story powerless, and in gaining power and position amongst the Silvers, finds the strength to fight back. Now that she is powerless once more, she takes these lessons to heart. She does not need her lightning to be powerful; she has conviction and determination.

*Red Queen* is part of a larger series, like *The Hunger Games* was, but the ending of Mare’s story packs a powerful punch of a message whether or not you pick up the next book. She has been beaten down, but in escaping the clutches of the Silvers and joining the ranks of the Scarlet Guard, she knows that her fight is not over. She thinks, “Part of me wishes I could submit to chains, to captivity and silence. But I have lived that life already, in the mud, in the shadows, in a cell, in a silk dress. I will never submit again. I will never stop fighting” (382). No matter the trials that wait ahead, Mare has already resolved to face them head on, no longer pretending to be anything other than what she is. In a sense, *Red Queen* defies the Hero’s Journey arc popular in the stories of many male characters in fantasy novels. *Red Queen* does not end with a Triumphant Return; the heroes have lost and must retreat, but they retreat to fight another day. Mare’s failure makes her determination that much more inspiring, and this idea of perseverance in the face of failure is a trend that continues beyond *Red Queen*, culminating in one of the most influential YA novels of the last decade.

### **The Hate U Give**

In 2017, Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* exploded onto the book market. At the time of writing, the novel still sits on the *New York Times* Bestseller List and had already spawned a

major motion picture in 2018. In telling the story of a Black teenage girl's reaction to her friend's murder at the hands of a police officer and elevating modern racial equity issues, the novel hit a nerve with audiences. Told with humor and frankness, Starr Carter's story highlights the changes YA literature has undergone since its inception and displays the unique position these books hold in contemporary U.S. culture.

A direct product of the OwnVoices movement mentioned previously, *The Hate U Give* embodies many of the goals of the trend. In an article titled “#OwnVoices: Why We Need Diverse Authors in Children's Literature,” novelist Kayla Whaley outlines the hope of this seemingly innocuous statement. Started by author Corinne Duyvis with a hashtag on Twitter, the OwnVoices movement seeks to uplift diverse authors looking to tell their own stories in their own voices. Whaley writes, “There's a long history of majority-group authors... writing outside their experience to tell diverse stories. Sometimes the characters and stories they create are wonderful! But many times, they're rife with stereotypes, tropes, and harmful portrayals.” In putting the perspective of diverse authors like Angie Thomas front and center, novels like *The Hate U Give* are born, where the realities of racism and police brutality can be portrayed with honesty and nuance. Similarly, uplifting authentic narratives from historically marginalized authors gives readers who come from dominant groups – like white readers – the chance to engage with stories outside of their own experiences. Cart writes:

Another value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who – if not for the

encounter in reading – might forever remain strangers or – worse — irredeemably “other.” (2)

Reading stories like *The Hate U Give*, though they are fictional, can still offer readers a chance to familiarize themselves with unfamiliar realities that are reflected in their everyday lives as teenagers. Young readers can then approach real world issues that involve members of these marginalized groups with empathy and understanding. Building this skill of empathy is reminiscent of the way readers learn to identify with characters from the fantastical worlds of *The Hunger Games* and *Red Queen*, where the familiar is cloaked in magic and myth. Though they cannot relate to arena battles or superpowered kings and queens, they *can* relate to Katniss and Mare’s determined struggle for a better world, a struggle which is easily translated to contemporary society.

Additionally, in Thomas’ unique voice, Starr’s story transcends her experience with racism, allowing her the space to be a character outside the bleakness of one single part of her reality. Starr argues with her siblings and plays basketball with her friends and navigates the usual pitfalls of teenage life. In short, this is not a sob story in which Starr’s only purpose in the narrative is to point out systemic problems to the readers. She is a young girl who uses her voice and her unique experiences to attempt to make change, both within the confines of her story and the confines of our own society, all while maintaining her position as a protagonist in a YA novel. Emphasis is placed on the importance and power of her voice, especially as a young Black woman in America. In this way, the prominence of Thomas’ platform as a successful Black author is cemented with the power of her voice speaking through Starr’s words on the page.

This growing trend of offering diverse perspectives in YA is an important cultural shift from the time of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, where whiteness is not only centered in the narrative, but automatically assumed to be the default. Neither *The Hunger Games* nor *Red Queen* specifies the main characters' races; instead, it is assumed that we, the reader, understand that they are white. Both stories deal with issues of class and gender in their own way, but race is almost entirely absent. This reflects an idea that author and feminist, bell hooks, wrote about in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Much of feminist thought, even today, forgets to analyze the intersectionality of race and gender, reflecting "the dominant tendency in Western patriarchal minds to mystify woman's reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of woman's fate" (14). In order to challenge this dominant school of thought ultimately centered in whiteness, trends like OwnVoices and similar pushes for diverse books make way for a more accurate range of women's experiences.

As such, Starr's story is one of duality. She was born and raised in Garden Heights – a poor, predominantly black neighborhood – but attends a prep school in an affluent white suburb at her parents' behest. These disparate lives war inside of Starr throughout her arc as she learns to come to terms with who she is, both within herself as a young woman and within these two wholly separate worlds. This uncertainty inside herself colors the narrative from the very first page as Starr attends a Garden Heights' party and thinks, "There are just some places where it's not enough to be me. Either version of me" (3). She is lost, floundering between two versions of the same person as she tries to be enough of whatever is expected of her. Gabrielle Owen highlights the difficulty of Starr's situation when she says, "Though the idea of 'being yourself' may seem easy enough to many readers—it is, after all, a cliché—Thomas represents the

complexity of this adage for young people of color in a world where white is ‘normal’” (251). In order to meet this idea of “normal,” Starr is unable to be herself in either of her worlds, attempting to reach impossibly unfair standards in order to find acceptance.

Thus, in situations that are already hard to navigate as a typical teenage girl, she must wade through an extra layer of ceremony. Just walking into her high school, Williamson Prep, becomes a burden of code switching and second guessing. She describes her transformation in detail, “Williamson Starr doesn’t use slang... Williamson Starr holds her tongue when people piss her off so nobody will think she’s the ‘angry black girl.’ Williamson Starr is approachable... Basically, Williamson Starr doesn’t give anyone a reason to call her ghetto” (71). Garden Heights Starr, arguably the version of herself that is the most authentic, does not seem to fit in at Williamson, so she forces herself to adjust to fit the norms of the predominately white prep school, lest she receive judgement or harassment.

In hiding this part of herself from her teachers and her peers, however, she creates a wealth of guilt and exhaustion, only adding to the confusion surrounding her identity. Owen points this out when she writes, “*The Hate U Give*... represents the politics of respectability as a costly strategy for Starr as she navigates her identity and the social perceptions of her white peers” (239). The politics of respectability – represented by Starr’s code switching tendencies – is something many people of color adopt when interacting with white people. For Starr, this constant switch between two ways of being in the world is exhausting and demoralizing. She feels she is not staying true to her most authentic self, but fears the repercussions of abandoning the version of herself that is less “threatening” to her white friends.

This exhausting process extends to her life outside of school as well. When talking to a detective later in the story, she describes yet another transformation in her mannerisms. Thomas writes, “My voice is changing already. It always happens around ‘other’ people, whether I’m at Williamson or not... I choose every word carefully and make sure I pronounce them well” (95). In everyday interactions, Starr moderates her natural speech patterns, choking off her voice in favor of appearing palatable to people outside of her Garden Heights community. For women, particularly women of color, their voices are often their most powerful weapons, if only because they are so frequently silenced in the face of injustice. Learning to cultivate this weapon is one of Starr’s most important lessons, whether she is confronting a childhood dispute with a friend or standing up against police brutality. In order to find her voice, however, she must first reconcile the different versions of herself she presents to the world.

This arc is set into motion after Starr witnesses the unjust murder of her childhood friend Khalil at the hands of a white police officer. Only a few pages into the narrative, Khalil is shot dead and Starr is thrust into the limelight, just as readers are thrust unceremoniously into her reality. She opens an early chapter by introducing readers to her life as a Black woman in America, explaining, “When I was twelve, my parents had two talks with me. One was the usual birds and bees...The other talk was about what to do if a cop stopped me” (20). She follows her parents’ advice during the confrontation with the officer, making no sudden movements, remaining docile and polite – in other words, following the same strategies she does at Williamson in making herself as least threatening as possible. Unlike at Williamson, however, this is a matter of life and death, and when Khalil fails to emulate Starr’s actions, he ends up dead. A familiar tune follows his murder. His past with drugs and association with local gangs is

brought to light, and the implicit blame for his death is placed almost entirely on his own shoulders, despite the fact that he had not done anything to warrant getting pulled over by the officer in the first place.

Khalil's death strikes Starr to the core as she realizes the injustice of a system that groundlessly murders a teenage boy when it should be protecting him. She says to her parents, "He didn't do anything. *We* didn't do anything. Khalil didn't even have a gun" (34). As the only witness to the event other than the officer himself, Starr herself becomes burdened with this truth, and she must decide how she wants to proceed with the knowledge.

At first, she keeps her involvement quiet, hiding the truth from her white friends and boyfriend for fear of their reactions. Once again, she must become someone different at Williamson, someone who never knew Khalil and certainly did not witness his murder. Filled with guilt, she thinks, "If it's revealed I was in the car, what will that make me? The thug ghetto girl with the drug dealer? What will my teachers think about me? My friends? The whole fucking world, possibly?" (113). She wants to escape the inevitable assumptions that her wealthy classmates will make about her situation, but more importantly, she fears the repercussions of speaking out to the world at large. She is only one person – a teenage girl at that – and the prospect of staring the ugly side of America in the face is at first too much for her to even consider.

Then the people around her begin to encourage her to use her voice to fight for Khalil, providing support and love when she needs it most. Her attorney, Ms. Ofrah, puts it best when she says, "I'll do whatever I can to make sure you're heard, Starr. Because just like Khalil and Natasha mattered, you matter and your voice matters" (219). Her voice matters, as a young

woman, as a Black American, as someone who witnessed an injustice done to her friend. When she watches the offending police officer and his father speak out on television, defending actions that should be impossible to defend and sully Khalil's memory, Starr finds the combination of anger and courage needed to summon her voice. She thinks,

I can't breathe, like I'm drowning in the tears I refuse to shed. I won't give One-Fifteen or his father the satisfaction of crying. Tonight, they shot me too, more than once, and killed a part of me. Unfortunately for them, it's the part of me that felt any hesitation about speaking out. (247)

Like the protagonists of the past two books, her anger in the face of injustice and corruption becomes her greatest strength, but unlike Katniss and Mare, Starr doesn't have arrows or lightning to fight her battles. She has only her determination and the power of her voice in the face of a centuries old system of oppression.

Her decision to speak out on behalf of Khalil leads to a nationally broadcasted interview where she redefines herself and her friend, striking out where it matters most. She says, "This all happened because [the officer]... assumed that we were up to no good. Because we're black and because of where we live... His assumption killed Khalil. It could've killed me" (290). Her interview travels across the country, allowing her powerful words to open people's eyes to the truth, so that when the officer who killed Khalil is acquitted, it is seen as the injustice it is. The neighborhood of Garden Heights erupts at the news, and Starr finds herself caught in the middle of the rage.

Feeling anger of her own, she wants to continue the fight for justice and steps up to use her voice once more, no longer concerned about hiding her identity, but thinking only of the

impact of her words. She tells the gathered crowd, “Everybody wants to talk about how Khalil died... But this isn’t about how Khalil died. It’s about the fact that he lived. His life mattered. Khalil lived!” (412). This sentiment is reflected in the Black Lives Matter movement as a whole, as it insists that “black lives matter even when they do not conform to the norms of respectability” (Owen 256). Khalil was not conforming to these so-called norms the night he was killed, and this nonconformity is a common talking point used to justify his death. Starr, who has grappled with these norms for years, is tired of letting them rule her life and the lives of others in her community.

Therefore, in speaking out, she fully claims her voice and embraces her dual reality as she fights for the friend who can no longer fight for himself, abandoning respectability in favor of resistance. The news of the acquittal is hard to take, but Starr does not give up or give in, though no one would blame her if she did. Instead, she resolves at the close of the novel, “Khalil, I’ll never forget. I’ll never give up. I’ll never be quiet” (444). This quiet determination, the reveal that she will never again be quiet and will always use her voice to fight for others, speaks to her strength as a character, while also representing the changing trends in the *kind* of strength expected from female protagonists. The complexity of her struggle with identity allows her the chance to develop an equally complex reaction to her struggles. It is not enough for her simply be “strong” as is so often bandied about in conversations involving female protagonists, but she is also vulnerable and willing to confront what is within as well as without.

Starr lives at a unique intersection of struggle as a young Black woman, and the unfortunate reality is, her problems are not solved by the end of the book. There is no cookie cutter happy ending, because this is real life, this is the reality many people face every day in a

system designed to work against them. Starr is fighting a battle that has been waging for hundreds of years, and by lending her voice, she brings her world that much closer to peace.

*The Hate U Give* represents an important commonality in all three of the novels studied in this essay. These young women often start their journeys from a personal place – Katniss volunteering for the Games to save her sister, for example. They desire to protect and care for loved ones, an accepted and encouraged feminine trait, and generally keep their heads down rather than risk rocking the boat. As their narratives progress, however, we watch as their eyes are opened to the greater threat of institutional or political corruption, the kind of threat that must be combatted with radical, revolutionary change. Katniss enters the Games to protect her sister, but as she witnesses the dehumanization the tributes experience at the hands of the Capitol, she realizes the importance of making a stand against her government’s long-accepted tyranny, laying down her bow in favor of defiant action. Mare, too, is first introduced as a struggling young woman looking to keep her family and friends safe. Thrust into the dazzling world of the Silvers, she comes face to face with the true plight of her people and realizes that she has the chance to use her power and position to make real, institutional change in her world.

Finally, we return to the familiar with Starr’s story. At first, any action she takes is to defend her murdered friend, Khalil, but eventually we see Starr come to the same conclusion as the previous two protagonists. Unlike Katniss and Mare, however, this move from the personal to the political represents a very real, ongoing struggle in the United States and across the world as we grapple with systemic racism. That *The Hate U Give* and Starr’s story exploded into a bestselling phenomenon shows how the evolution of female characters in YA to this place of revolutionary change is not only a welcome shift, but a necessary one. As hooks writes, we need

to accept that “feminist movement to end sexist oppression can be successful only if we are committed to revolution, to the establishment of a new social order” (159). *The Hunger Games*, *Red Queen*, and – most importantly – *The Hate U Give* showcase the very realization of this fact, and Starr’s parting words to the reader speak to her own commitment to establishing radical, lasting change across gender, race, and class in our own social order. As the call for OwnVoices authors opens the door for more stories like Starr’s, this type of powerful young woman will only continue to command readers’ imaginations, whether they are fighting mythical monsters or the very real monsters represented by political and institutional corruption in our own world.

Nearly ten years separate Katniss Everdeen and Starr Carter’s respective stories, but it was ten years that made all the difference. Change is inevitable in any form of art or media, but the changes in YA books are particularly interesting when analyzing subsequent changes in the broader cultural landscape. Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have brought attention to systemic and societal issues that have not disappeared in the 21st century, as some would like to believe, and the call for diverse literature that reflects a range of experiences and stories is more necessary than ever. Reading Katniss, Mare, and Starr’s stories exposed me to a whole new world – a world of magic and wonder, but also a world in which young women lead the fight for a better world. For young women – and young adults in general – growing up in this time of upheaval, the heroines of their favorite novels can help guide them on the road to self-discovery and finding the strength to fight for real, radical change.

Works Cited

Aveyard, Victoria. *Red Queen*. HarperTeen, 2015.

Blakemore, Erin. "A Brief History of Young Adult Fiction." *JSTOR Daily*. 10 April 2015,  
<https://daily.jstor.org/history-of-young-adult-fiction/>

Cart, Michael. "How 'Young Adult' Fiction Blossomed With Teenage Culture in America."  
*Smithsonian Magazine*. 7 May 2018,  
[www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-young-adult-fiction-blossomed-with-teenage-culture-in-america-180968967/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-young-adult-fiction-blossomed-with-teenage-culture-in-america-180968967/).

— — — "The Value of Young Adult Literature." *Young Adult Library Services Association*  
(YALSA), ALA American Library Association, 15 Nov. 2011,  
[www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/whitepapers/yalit).

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. Scholastic Press, 2008.

Flynn, Elizabeth. "Gender and Reading." *College English*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1983, pp. 236-253.

Guanio-Uluru, Lykke. "Female Focalizers and Masculine Ideals: Gender as Performance in Twilight and The Hunger Games." *Child Literature in Education*, vol. 47, 2016, pp. 209–224

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.

Latham, Don, and Jonathan M. Hollister. "The Games People Play: Information and Media Literacies in the Hunger Games Trilogy." *Children's Literature in Education* vol. 45 no. 1, 2014, pp. 33-46.

Owen, Gabrielle. "Adolescence, Blackness, and the Politics of Respectability in *Monster* and *The Hate U Give*." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 43 no. 2, 2019, pp. 236-260.

Peterson, Valerie. "Young Adult Book Market Facts and Figures." *The Balance Careers*, 16 Dec. 2018, <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/the-young-adult-book-market-2799954>

Sutphin, Meredith S. "Finding Her Place in Her World: Female Empowerment Through Setting in Young Adult Fantasy Novels." *Caroline Digital Repository*, 2009, [https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/masters\\_papers/4j03d405x](https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/masters_papers/4j03d405x)

Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Balzer + Bray, 2017.