Young Adult literature, from The Outsiders to Harry Potter, has helped shape the cultural landscape for adolescents perhaps more than any other form of consumable media in the twentieth and twenty-first century. With the rise of mega blockbuster films based on these books in recent years, the young adult genre is being co-opted by curious adult readers and by Hollywood producers. However, while the genre may be getting more readers than ever before, Young Adult literature remains exclusionary and problematic: few titles feature historically marginalized individuals, the books present heteronormative perspectives, and gender stereotypes continue to persist.

Taking a critical approach, Young Adult Literature: Challenging Genres offers educators, youth librarians, and students a set of strategies for unpacking, challenging, and transforming the assumptions of some of the genre’s most popular titles. Pushing the genre forward, Antero Garcia builds on his experiences as a former high school teacher to offer strategies for integrating Young Adult literature in a contemporary critical pedagogy through the use of participatory media.
Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature
Critical Literacy Teaching Series: Challenging Authors and Genre

Volume 4

Series Editor:

P. L. Thomas, Furman University, Greenville, USA

Editorial Board:

Leila Christenbury, Virginia Commonwealth University
Jeanne Gerlach, University of Texas-Arlington
Ken Lindblom, Stony Brook University
Renita Schmidt, Furman University
Karen Stein, University of Rhode Island
Shirley Steinberg, McGill University, Montreal

This series explores in separate volumes major authors and genres through a critical literacy lens that seeks to offer students opportunities as readers and writers to embrace and act upon their own empowerment. Each volume will challenge authors (along with examining authors that are themselves challenging) and genres as well as challenging norms and assumptions associated with those authors’ works and genres themselves. Further, each volume will confront teachers, students, and scholars by exploring all texts as politically charged mediums of communication. The work of critical educators and scholars will guide each volume, including concerns about silenced voices and texts, marginalized people and perspectives, and normalized ways of being and teaching that ultimately dehumanize students and educators.
Critical Foundations in Young Adult Literature

Challenging Genres

Antero Garcia
Fort Collins, CO, USA
“But where do you learn the answers?” Violet asked, pointing to the piles of paper underneath the table. “Where does all this information come from?”

“Libraries, mostly,” Olivia said, wiping her eyes. “If you want people to think you’re a fortune-teller, you have to answer their questions, and the answer to nearly every question is written down someplace. It just might take a while to find. It’s taken me a long time to gather my archival library, and I still don’t have all of the answers I’ve been looking for.”

—*The Carnivorous Carnival*, Book Nine in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*  
(Lemony Snicket, 2002, p. 152)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix  
Preface. Young Adult Literature Comes of Age: The Blurring of Genre in Popular Entertainment xi  
Introduction. Reading Unease: Just Who, Exactly, Is Young Adult Literature Made For? 1  
1. Capitalism, Hollywood, and Adult Appropriation of Young Adult Literature: The Harry Potter Effect 13  
2. More than Mango Street: Race, Multiculturalism and YA 37  
3. Outsiders?: Exclusion and Post-Colonial Theory 59  
4. Gender and Sexuality and YA: Constructions of Identity and Gender 77  
5. Pedagogy of the Demonically Possessed: Critical Pedagogy and Popular Literature 95  
6. Grassroots YA: Don’t Forget to Be Awesome 109  
Conclusion. YA and the “Emerging Self”: Looking Ahead at the Genre and Our Classrooms 129  
References 135  
Index 141
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this book to the memory of my father, Jose “Joey” Angel Garcia. His enthusiasm for word and story gave my childhood a creative buoyancy. He instilled in me the right to dream and laugh and question.

Similarly, I want to recognize the most influential English teacher I have ever had: my mother. No Christmas or birthday passed without her giving me a book to dive into.

In addition, this book would not have been possible without the guidance and expertise of my former students—both in Los Angeles and in Fort Collins. Collectively, they impressed upon me the importance of books on the lives of today’s youth.

Finally, I could not have completed this book without the patience, knowledge, and love of the greatest librarian I know. Thank you, Ally.
PREFACE

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE COMES OF AGE

The Blurring of Genre in Popular Entertainment

It happened to comic books and graphic novels over a long period of time—from the 1930s-1940s into the twenty-first century—but the final boost needed for the superhero universe to go mainstream and even gain respect was film technology (Thomas, 2010). When Spider-Man, the X-Men, Superman, and Batman seemed to come to life in ways that weren’t cheesy or campy (think the 1960s Batman series for television), comic books and graphic novels eased into popular media as texts not just for children, or just for nerdy boys.

As this volume catalogs, Young Adult (YA) literature has a rich history, but the genre has too often been marginalized and even demonized. For YA, the turning point was the somewhat unexpected popularity of YA novels among teens and adults, notably the popularity of the Twilight series and then The Hunger Games trilogy.

However, Connors (Thomas, 2013) recognizes that YA novels still face considerable efforts to discount the works as merely genre fiction:

Critics occasionally deride speculative fiction—an umbrella term used to refer to a range of genres, including science fiction (SF), fantasy, utopian and dystopian fiction—as genre fiction with the result being that they dismiss it as a form of superficial entertainment. The cultural expectations that have historically accompanied young adult literature—namely, that it must perform a didactic function—coupled with its status as a commodity, subject it to additional stigmas and mischaracterizations. Indeed, as Daniels (2006) argues, there remain critics in both secondary and higher education who insist that young adult literature does not warrant serious “attention because it doesn’t offer enough substance to be included within the traditional literary canon” (p. 78). One might assume, then, that young adult dystopian fiction represents the low-person on the literary totem pole. (p. 146)

Texts can often struggle under the some times contradictory weights of popularity and artistic merit, but YA works have increasingly been embraced by adult readers, adult movie goers, educators, and literary critics. Part of the reason for these gains for YA literature is likely how these works speak to the greater human condition, and not just to the specific teen experience.

Below, then, is a brief look at how Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games trilogy, as both YA and SF, has resonated with debates about public education in the U.S.
THE EDUCATION GAMES: REFORM AS DOUBLESPEAK

Although we currently live in a world informed by George Orwell’s (1983) dystopian unmasking-as-novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four, we seem unable to acknowledge that the Ministry of Peace is actually waging war. In our current education reform debate, educators must come to terms with Orwell’s (2003) recognition of the essential nature of political speech:

I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don’t know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind [emphasis added]. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one’s own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase...into the dustbin where it belongs.

In 2012, The U.S. Department of Education is the Ministry of Peace, and from the USDOE, we are facing doublespeak that thinly masks the de-professionalizing of teachers and the dismantling of public education—all in the name of reform under the banner of “hope and change.”

“One Need Not Swallow Such Absurdities as This”

One consequence of calling for educators to be apolitical (Thomas, 2012, February 24) is that the education reform debate remains in the hands of the inexpert and that reform is allowed to maintain and perpetuate the status quo. Here, however, I want to call for educators to expose and reject the doublespeak driving the education agenda under President Obama and personified by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (Thomas, 2011) by addressing four key areas of that debate: (1) high-stakes standardized testing, (2) Common Core State Standards (CCSS), (3) expertise in education, and (4) claims based on ends-justify-means logic.
High-stakes Standardized Tests

The doublespeak around high-stakes standardized testing is one of the most powerful weapons used today by Duncan. The Obama administration has produced mountains of evidence that claiming to reject and decrease testing is a cloak for the inevitability of more testing and more corrosive accountability for teachers. But that debate is masking a deeper problem with confronting high-stakes standardized tests: Many educators are quick to reject the high-stakes element while adding that standardized testing is being misused. And here is where educators are failing the debate.

The high-stakes problem is the secondary problem with standardized testing. Yes, high-stakes create inexcusable outcomes related to testing: teaching to the test, reducing all course content to what-is-tested-is-what-is-taught, reducing teacher quality to test scores, reducing student learning to test scores, and cheating. But rejecting or even calling for removing the high-stakes ignores that standardized tests are flawed themselves. Standardized tests remain primarily linked to the race, social class, and gender of students; standardized tests label and sort children overwhelmingly based on the coincidence of those children's homes.

The standardized testing debate is the cigarette debate, not the alcohol debate. Alcohol can be consumed safely and even with health benefits; thus, the alcohol debate is about the use of alcohol, not alcohol itself. Cigarettes are another story; there is no healthy consumption of cigarettes so that debate is about the inherent danger of tobacco.

Educators must expose the double-speak calling for less testing while increasing the testing and the stakes for students and teachers, but we must not allow that charge to trump the need to identify standardized testing as cancerous, to state clearly there is no safe level of standardized testing.

Common Core State Standards

Few moments of double-speak can top Duncan’s recent comment about the CCSS: “The idea that the Common Core standards are nationally-imposed is a conspiracy theory in search of a conspiracy. The Common Core academic standards were both developed and adopted by the states, and they have widespread bipartisan support” (Statement by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2012).

Among a few others (Krashen, 2012), Susan Ohanian and Stephen Krashen have spoken against the CCSS movement. But as with the high-stakes standardized tests debate, many educators have rushed to seek how best to implement CCSS without considering the first-level question: Why do we need national standards when the evidence shows that multiple standards movements have failed repeatedly in the past? (Thomas, 2012, February 13).

The current dystopian-novel-du-jour is The Hunger Games. Like Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, this young adult sc-fi novel offers insight into defiance
against compliance to power. Before they are plunged into the Hunger Games (a horrifying reality TV show), the two main characters, Katniss and Peeta, confront their ethical dilemma:

“No, when the time comes, I’m sure I’ll kill just like everybody else. I can’t go down without a fight. Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to...to show the Capitol they don’t own me. That I’m more than just a piece in their Games,” says Peeta.

“But you’re not,” I [Katniss] say[s]. “None of us are. That’s how the Games work.” (Collins, 2008, p. 142)

One of the most relevant messages of Collins’s novel is that Katniss comes to understand Peeta’s critical nature, embracing that her agency is about rising above the Hunger Games, not simply winning the Games as they are dictated for her.

For educators and professional organizations to justify supporting CCSS by demanding a place at the table, they are relinquishing the essential question about whether or not that table should exist.

And this is where educators sit with the CCSS: To implement the CCSS is for the Capitol to own us, to reject CCSS for our own professional autonomy is to be more than just a piece in their Games.

**Expertise in Education**

The Los Angeles Times has now been followed by *The New York Times* as pawns in the USDOE’s games designed to label, rank, and dehumanize teachers the way our education system has treated children for decades. Again, the pattern is disturbing since publishing VAM (value added methods) related data on teachers creates a debate about the publishing of the data and ignores first-level issues. But in this case, another problem concerns who has the expertise to frame these debates.

As the backlash mounted against the NYT’s publishing teacher rankings, Bill Gates inexplicably rejected publishing VAM-data, and quickly all over Twitter and in blogs, educators began citing Gates’s criticism. And here is the problem.

Gates is inexpert about education (Thomas, 2011, March 3); he has no credibility whether his claims are flawed (most of the time) or accurate (although only on the surface since we must ask why he makes these claims). Thus, if educators wish to claim our rightful place as the experts on education, we must not embrace the inexpert, ever. (And this overlaps with the testing dilemma; we must also stop referring to test data when it serves our purposes just as we reject test data when they are harmful.)

Doublespeak as a weapon of the political and cultural elite depends on masking the value of expertise. To expose that to sunshine requires that the expert remain steadfast in honoring who determines our discourse and where we acknowledge credibility and judiciousness.
The Ends-Justify-the-Means Logic

The ugliest and seemingly most enduring double-speak surrounds the rise of support for Teach for America (TFA) and Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charters schools (Thomas, 2011, October 23)—both of which promote themselves as addressing social justice and the plight of poverty. These claims often go unchallenged because both TFA and KIPP keep the debate on the metrics (the ends) and not the “no excuses” ideology (the means).

As long as TFA and KIPP keep the argument about whether or not their approaches raise test scores or graduation rates, we fail to examine the essential flaws in each: TFA creating leaders at the expense of children and schools trapped in poverty, and KIPP (and many charters) implementing “no excuses” practices that are re-segregating schools and perpetuating classist and racist stereotypes.

And this may capture the overarching issue with all of the four points I have addressed here: The ends do not justify the means.

As Orwell has warned, however, politicians craft their words regardless of political party to mask the means with the ends—“to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”

It is now ours as educators to expose the double-speak of the education reform movement while also taking great care not to fall prey to the allure of that strategy ourselves.

About two-thirds into the narrative of The Hunger Games, Katniss is forced to confront the earlier discussion between her and Peeta because she has come to love one of her competitors, Rue:

“It’s the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us....Then I remember Peeta’s words on the roof....And for the first time, I understand what he means.

“I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.” (Collins, 2008, pp. 235–236)

Universal public education and the autonomy and professionalism of teachers in America are worth this same sentiment, and it is past time for our voices to be heard and our actions to matter.

When research, history, and allegory all converge to tell us the same story, we must pause to ask why we have ignored the message for so long and why are we likely to continue missing the essential thing before us.

The New York Times and Education Week reveal two important lessons in both the message they present and the distinct difference in their framing of that message:

SEPARATE, UNEQUAL...AND DISTRACTED

xv
“Black Students Face More Discipline, Data Suggests [sic]” headlines the NYT’s article with the lead: “Black students, especially boys, face much harsher discipline in public schools than other students, according to new data from the Department of Education” (Lewin, 2012).

And EdWeek announces “Civil Rights Data Show Retention Disparities,” opening with:

New nationwide data collected by the U.S. Department of Education’s civil rights office reveal stark racial and ethnic disparities in student retentions, with black and Hispanic students far more likely than white students to repeat a grade, especially in elementary and middle school. (Adams, Robelen, & Shah, 2012)

One has to wonder if this is truly news in the sense that this research is revealing something we don’t already know—because we should already know this fact: America’s public schools and prisons are stark images of the fact of racial, gender, and socioeconomic inequity in our society (Thomas, 2011, December 22)—inequity that is both perpetuated by and necessary for the ruling elite to maintain their artificial status as that elite.

The research, coming from the U.S. Department of Education, and the media coverage are not evidence we are confronting that reality or that we will address it any time soon. The research and the media coverage are proof we’ll spend energy on the research and the coverage in order to mask the racism lingering corrosively in our free state while continuing to blame the students who fail for their failure and the prisoners for their transgressions.

X-Men and The Hunger Games: Allegory as Unmasking

Science fiction allows an artist to pose worlds that appears to be “other worlds” (Atwood, 2011) in order for the readers to come to see our own existence more clearly.

In the most recent film version of Marvel Comics superhero team, X-Men: First Class, the powerful allegory of this comic book universe portrays the isolation felt by the mutants—one by one they begin to discover each other and share a common sentiment: “I thought I was the only one.”

These mutants feel not only isolation, but also shame—shame for their looks, those things that are not their choices, not within their direct power to control. While this newest film installment reveals the coming together of the mutants, this narrative ends with the inevitable division of the mutants into factions: Professor X’s assimilationists and Magneto’s radicals.

It takes only a little imagination to see this allegory in the historical factionalism that rose along with the Civil Rights movement between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

In whose interest is this in-fighting?

Although written as young adult literature, The Hunger Games trilogy is beginning to spread into mainstream popular consciousness. The savage reality show that pits
children against children to the death gives the first book in the series its title, but as with the research on racial inequity in our schools, I fear we fail to look at either the purpose of these Hunger Games in that other world of the novel or how it speaks to us now.

In *Catching Fire*, Katniss Everdeen, the narrator, confronts directly that her country, Panem, has created stability by factionalizing the people into Districts, ruled by the Capitol.

Panem exists because of the competition among the Districts, daily for resources and once a year personified by two lottery losers, children from each district.

In this second book, Katniss learns something horrifying but true when the winners of the most recent Games, Katniss and Peeta, visit District 11—home of Katniss’s friend killed in the Games, Rue: During the celebration, the people of District 11 repeat Katniss’s act of rebellion:

> What happens next is not an accident. It is too well executed to be spontaneous, because it happens in complete unison. Every person in the crowd presses the three middle fingers of their left hand against their lips and extends them to me. It’s our sign from District 12, the last good-bye I gave Rue in the arena. (Collins, 2009, p. 61)

Then as Katniss and Peeta are rushed from the stage, they witness Peacekeepers executing people in the District 11 crowd. As President Snow has warned Katniss about the possibility of uprisings:

> “But they’ll follow if the course of things doesn’t change. And uprisings have been known to lead to revolution....Do you have any idea what that would mean? How many people would die? What conditions those left would have to face? Whatever problems anyone may have with the Capitol, believe me when I say that if it released its grip on the districts for even a short time, the entire system would collapse.” (Collins, 2009, p. 21)

What maintains the stability of Panem? Competition, division, and *fear*.

What threatens the stability of Panem and the inequity it maintains? Solidarity, compassion, cooperation, and rebellion.

*Separate, Unequal...and Distracted*

U.S. public education has always been and remains, again like our prisons, a map of who Americans are and what we are willing to tolerate.

Children of color and children speaking home languages other than English are disproportionately likely to be punished and expelled (especially the boys), disproportionately likely to be retained to suffer the same grade again, disproportionately likely to be in the lowest level classes with the highest student-teacher ratios (while affluent and white children sit in advanced classes with low student-teacher ratios) in order to prepare them for state testing, and
disproportionately likely to be taught by un- and under-certified teachers with the least experience.

And many of these patterns are distinct in pre-kindergarten (Thomas, 2012, February 11).

We don’t really need any more research, or history lessons, or SF allegory, or comic books brought to the silver screen.

We need to see the world that our children live in and recognize themselves (just ask an African American young man), and then look in the mirror ourselves.

Why do those in power remain committed to testing children in order to label, sort, and punish them?

Who does the labeling, sorting, and punishing benefit? And what are the reasons behind these facts, the disproportionate inequity in our schools and in our prisons?

We only need each minute of every day to confront what the recent data from the USDOE reveal, but it is always worth noting that this sentiment is often ignored despite its value:

...I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free. (Debs, 1918)

How and why?

Eugene V. Debs is marginalized as a socialist, a communist so no one listens to the solidarity of his words. Because this sentiment is dangerous for the Capitol.

If we persist in being shocked by the research or enamored by the exciting story of Katniss, we will remain divided and conquered.

Katniss in *Catching Fire* responds to the president with: “It [Panem] must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down.” To which the president replies, “It is fragile, but not in the way that you suppose” (Collins, 2009, p. 22).

The fragility is masked by the 99% as separate, unequal, and distracted—fighting among ourselves in fear of what we might lose otherwise.

It is time to suppose otherwise.

Garcia’s chapters that follow offer a challenge to YA literature as an examination of a genre that is itself challenging. The problems, questions, and tensions Garcia explores are intended to inform and confront a wide range of audiences interested in YA—fans, scholars, and teachers. Ultimately, this volume along with others in the series seeks to add momentum to the wider discussion and debates about what constitutes “text,” “genre,” “medium,” and “mode”—as well as why any of those questions matter.

P. L. Thomas
Series Editor
Furman University
June 2013
NOTES


REFERENCES


Thomas, P. L. (2012, February 11). It’s the end of equity as we know it (but we should all feel fine. Daily Kos. Retrieved from http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/02/11/1063803/-It-s-the-End-of-Equity-as-We-Know-It-But-We-Should-All-Feel-Fine-


I first felt the feeling of unease during one of those bright and elusive moments of engaged silence in my 11th grade classroom. Those few times I would cling to as a new teacher when the entire overcrowded classroom, including myself, decided to delve into a book and take part in school promoted “silent sustained reading.” In retrospect, I probably should have savored this moment. Here I was, a new teacher usually spending my time feeling out of my depths and the class was actually focused. But then something caught my eye. The smiling white face with even whiter teeth on the cover a student’s copy of *Gossip Girl* seemed curiously out-of-sync with the all black and brown faces of the students I worked with in South Central Los Angeles. One student was hooked on book five of the Harry Potter series—this was before the final volumes of the series were published. All around me I saw, for a fleeting moment, my students immersed in the *products* that were marketed for them. The deliberate depictions of fun and affluence on the covers of these books often looked nothing like the lived experiences of my students. A quick scan of authors’ names and I made an assumption that most of the students were reading works by white authors.

Reading the immersion of my students around the room that day did not fill me with the kind of pride I would previously get when the class was mutually engaged. Instead, I read the classroom with concern and unease. In some ways, these feelings actually mirrored many of my students’ attitudes toward to reading; I suspect that the resistance many of my students initially met reading in my classroom with was a response to the ways they were required to read about *someone else’s* culture in the young adult books they were offered. In the print-rich classroom environment I strived for, the lives, experiences, and challenges unique to the diverse and questioning students in my classroom were largely left unprinted and unacknowledged.

* * *

I grew up in a print-rich household. The son of two educators, I learned books were kind of a big deal growing up. I remember polishing off *The Hobbit* early on in elementary school and by middle school being caught in whirlwind of Crichtons and Grishams and the fantasy of Piers Anthony and the flurry of comic books pulled from my local shop near-weekly. It was actually the required reading in my high school English classes that pulled me more fully into the realm of YA literature: *The Outsiders* and *The House on Mango Street* and Holden Caulfield and Gene from *A Separate Peace*. 
INTRODUCTION

were my guides into a world of literature that was written specifically for people my age. As a multiracial young man, I discovered my reading choices reflected diversity of characters. From early on I dove into Neruda and jazz biographies; books were a space of possibilities that reflected realities and lived experiences both similar and very different from my own. To be clear, if I wanted, I had the resources (and a patient mother that would drive me to a library or bookstore) to read about people and cultural practices I understood. These were largely not young adult books, though.

That morning, back in my classroom with my 11th graders, as an overwhelmed new teacher, was different from my childhood experiences. That morning served as a wake-up call for me: what exactly were my students reading? Perhaps more importantly, what kinds of lessons were they taking with them from these books.

WHAT’S THIS ALL ABOUT?

This is a book that sets out to better illustrate what is being explored, defined, and conveyed in young adult literature today. In my own concern about how one of the fastest growing genres of books (even in this digital age) is impacting student identity, I have set out to identify some of the biggest challenges educators face with regard to young adult literature. Along the way I also hope to identify how to turn even problematic aspects of books into powerful opportunities for learning and engagement. This book is for educators, librarians, and others that may work closely with young people. Further, if you’re interested in how the young adult literature section of your local library or bookstore is redefining society today, keep reading.

In an essay discussing race and positionality as a white male, William Ayers (1997) writes:

But race is unspeakable. “We don’t talk that way.” I’ll say. We don’t talk at all. And in silence a lens of distorted images, fears, misunderstandings, and cool calculatedness slips neatly into place. (p. 131)

Throughout this book, I prod and poke at the spaces of young adult literature that I feel are not under enough scrutiny. Why are certain characters typically white? Or heterosexual? Or able-bodied? And when they’re not how do these books tokenize, appropriate, or make up the cultures of others? It may seem like I am unfairly picking on cherry-picked books here. However, the focus here is with voicing and revealing the “lens of distorted images, fears, [and] misunderstandings” that emerge in young adult literature. As the genre of YA continues to complexify in today’s global economy, a discussion of what is and is not being represented within these books needs to take place for educators and librarians.

As much as this book is written as a resource for educators, I also want to note what this book is not. What this book isn’t, is an annotated bibliography of YA books for the classroom. Other publications dedicated solely to the purpose of reader’s
advisory are available. Likewise, I do not offer a comprehensive, decade-by-decade history of YA. Noted YA scholar Michael Cart’s work, such as 2010’s *Young Adult Literature from Romance to Realism* functions as a powerful background in this regard. Instead, I offer enough background to provide salient examples for readers to reconsider the challenges and pedagogical opportunities to be found within the genre. Additionally, this is not purely an instructional guide: though significant lesson ideas, discussion questions, and curricular ideas are shared in each chapter, this book does not seek to be used as a planning guide for teachers.

In particular, I hope to suggest the reading of this book as a provocation: it is a challenge to the status quo acceptance of how YA has crept into mainstream popular culture. Beyond the picket-fence boundaries of yester-year, the genre today presents a capitalistic force that needs to be confronted, challenged, and revealed within classrooms and out-of-school learning spaces like libraries.

**A GENRE IN MOTION**

In recent years, the role that young adult fiction plays in particular strands of adult society has shifted significantly. More than a pastime for the demographic for which it is named, young adult fiction drives cultural engagement for a large portion of literate America. Additionally, as more young adult authors work toward bleak and post-apocalyptic world-building, the novels that are consumed profitably by the book-buying audience are acting as a zeitgeist of the current climate in America, politically, civically, and culturally. Recent best selling series like the *Hunger Games*, *Uglies*, *Chaos Walking*, and the *Maze Runner* are not necessarily exceptional in that they point to a radically different and violent future. The ways dystopian novels function for teens is discussed in Chapter Three.

As numerous young adult texts are transformed into lucrative Hollywood franchises, the potential of young adult literature to guide hegemonic understanding of society increases exponentially. Depicting traditional, rags-to-riches visions of success in wizardry schools, being rescued as damsels in undead distress, and the meek inheriting the “colonies” of *The Hunger Games* are ways to placate American audiences and ensure a lack of criticality is fostered in both text and adaptation.

At the same time that these novels point to a post-apocalyptic collapse of society, the form of these texts drives young people and the middle-class and affluent book-buying audience toward further understandings of consumption and commodity. A look at how capitalism affects publishing models and the books our students are reading continues in the next chapter.

Indeed, unlike almost any other sector of the entertainment world, the shift in book buying seems to move away from the kinds of DIY-practices that are enabled by what Jenkins (2008) calls a “convergence culture” (p. 2). While record sales have declined rapidly as a result of file sharing and film companies take extraneous measures to attempt to thwart pirating of commercial material, book sales have shown
sharp increases in recent years (Goodnow, 2007). In particular, these increases often point to the fact that YA sells not simply to a youth market but speaks to the interests of myriad generations of American youth. These sales, however, are not necessarily fostering communities of readers in the same way that book clubs and local libraries might; they funnel interest toward specific serialized texts. Independent booksellers and publishers are facing increasing challenges in this context. The corporate systematic closures of Borders bookstores, for instance speaks to the ways that spending habits of book buyers has shifted.

What does this mean in our classrooms? Well, for one thing, the ways that young people encounter and interact with young adult literature is significantly different. The likelihood that these texts will speak to heteronormative, white protagonists is substantially increased; in a recent article two authors claimed that publishers would not print their YA books unless they “straightened” gay characters (Flood, 2011). Additionally, other publishers are blatantly attempting to incorporate product-placement within their texts.

Violence, misogyny, and exploitive sex are rampant in some texts. A controversial recent article from the Wall Street Journal, “Darkness Too Visible” condemned the genre and its popularity particularly because of these recurring tropes in a genre aimed at maturing youth (Gurdon, 2011). And while the article itself is problematic, the depictions in many YA texts of graphic imagery are often read by students without opportunities for critical discussion or classroom community support. While I am a strong proponent of life-long reading, these changes in how books are authored, published, and consumed speak to fundamental changes in how young people are reading and understanding their role in the world around them.

As books are serialized by mainstream publishers, YA literature is–in general–forcing readers to consume books in ways that orient them towards hegemony, encourage their consumption of specific forms of publishing, and–ultimately–redefine what it means to be a reader in the 21st Century.

There are, of course, several positive changes in the ways that the YA genre is changing. While corporate book publishers largely have a strong grasp on the market of popular books, several authors have developed strong followings that critique various aspects of hegemonic definitions of identity. Similarly, several authors and fan communities have utilized the affordances of digital media to foster activism as a form of fandom. Popular novelist, John Green, for example, leverages digital media to engage directly with fans, share ideas with them and bridge this relationship into a civic-focused online community called Don’t Forget to Be Awesome (DFTBA). Green’s work and that of groups like the Harry Potter Alliance will be discussed at length in Chapter Six.

Throughout this book, I offer a critical examination of the role that the young adult book genre plays in fomenting public opinion, cultural understandings of race, class, and power, and ways to engage in American civic life. To this end, I begin this book with a general introduction about what is considered “young adult literature” and how this definition has shifted in recent years.
TROUBLING QUESTIONS: WHAT IS YA AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

What do I mean by Young Adult literature? The definitions of young adult (YA) literature tend to revolve, unsurprisingly, around the name itself. These are genre books that—at first—tended to be written about and for adolescents. That’s partly it. However, even this definition and the assumptions of what counts as YA need to be parsed more critically. In particular, this book is concerned with who YA is directed at.

The Young Adult genre is a staunchly American tradition. Though there has been a long tradition of books for children, Cart (2010) argues that the first book deliberately marketed for young adults was Maureen Daly’s only novel, *Seventeenth Summer* (1942). Cart explains:

The merchandising of and to “the juvenile” had begun in the late 1930s, coincident with the emergence of the new youth culture. The movement picked up steam in the 1940s as marketers realized that these kids—whom they called, variously, teens, teensters, and finally (in 1941) teenagers—were “an attractive new market in the making” (Palladino 1996, 52). That market wouldn’t fully ripen until post-World War II prosperity put money into the kids’ own pockets, money that had previously gone to support the entire family. (p. 11)

It is important to recognize the commercial origins of YA literature. A market emerged around new American wealth and teens were catered to in ways that U.S. Society had not previously. This commercial beginning parallels other emerging publishing genres including comics and graphic novels (Thomas, 2010).

More specific than simply teenagers, a large portion of YA is focused on the interest of white, affluent teenagers. It depicts the culture and life choices of America’s affluent even in controversial texts that are seen as challenging, provocative, difficult. What’s more, in depicting a specific set of cultural practices, YA—in general—defines and reinforces these practices over time. Let’s explore the implications of this a bit more closely: for the black and Latino students I spent the majority of my teaching career working with, it means that the high-interest YA that my bookshelves were filled with often did not reflect my students’ life experiences. It negated them.

Of course there are numerous popular YA authors that help bridge a multicultural scope within the genre. The names are a mantra for many teachers and librarians because this handful of authors are the easy go to writers when looking for youth of color: The Walter Dean Myers and the Gary Sotos and the Sherman Alexies and Sandra Cisneros and Sharon Drapers. This multicultural canon is discussed at length in Chapter Two. These are authors that write important texts that need to be read and recognized. However, think about what it means that the writers of and about youth of color that are validated by the publishing industry can be easily listed in a single sentence. There is a clear gap in name recognition of multicultural writers and all the rest of ‘em.

Through reading YA literature, nuanced definitions of what it means to be a teenager in western society are reified. Youth culture is in part constructed through
the ways society reads, interprets and reflects the books of young adult literature. And if authors of color are not at the heart of this effort, troubling implications about whom has power in defining culture are at work in our classrooms and libraries today.

Several questions follow from this broad look at how YA produces culture. For one, who is constructing this culture? Authors of these books come to mind, but they are only a small part of what Thompson (2010) calls the “value chain” that goes into producing a book. Implicit here is the next question: for whom is this culture constructed? As a consumer of YA texts long after my formative adolescent years, I am reasonably convinced that the stories in YA novels are not written with me in mind. However, the language, the actions, and depictions of normalcy within the novels all exert force on me, guiding me to understand what youth behavior looks like and what are normal feelings. Of course, I don’t always agree with these depictions of youth. They do not always align with my own experiences when I was a young adult.

All of this leads us to another question: if YA books are directed toward building culture for the readers that encounter them, exactly whose culture are we talking about? However, the audience (intended and actual) of YA literature is contested; there is not a defined age group that is specified within YA. The sharp rise in popularity of YA books amongst adults is a topic that will be significantly discussed later in this book.

ON THE BOOK INDUSTRY

John Thompson’s 2010 book exploring the nature of book publishing is fittingly titled Merchants of Culture. Apropos of the preceding questions about the role of YA, it is interesting to see the growth of YA within the history of how books have been consumed. As Thompson’s book described an “industry in transition” YA is only one faucet of how book distribution and cultural consumption is taking place.

Looking at the 20th century of book sales, Thompson (2010) describes books as an “elite” market through the late ’60s. Though books influenced culture, they were not consumed regularly by most middle and working class families. However, the ’70s and ’80s were the rise of the mall bookstores that helped usher in book buying practices for the masses. The B. Daltons and Waldenbooks that proliferated in malls made buying books, easy, affordable and something that was visible and accepted.

I would add that—as someone who grew up during this era—these were stores that became safe havens to seek refuge during marathon mall-shopping trips. As I grew out of the toy stores of my youth, I found I could wander the bookstores of malls and find things of interest. These public, commercial spaces, helped guide lessons of identity as I perused the shifting covers from month to month.

By the 1990s, a new form of commercial book selling space emerged: the big bookstores. Barnes and Noble and Borders helped redefine the shopping space even further. Instead of merely wandering, these spaces encouraged lounging and engaging in these spaces. The local big bookstore had comfortable seats and maybe
even a Starbucks. Hey, grab a seat, dive in, maybe buy something while you’re at it. It’s not a surprise that many libraries today are shifting to a bookstore model of organization: these were stores that offered the resources of libraries without the whispering and no-food policies that I was met with in my school library spaces.

By the late ’90s, book selling started moving online. As I write this, the buying of books online is a regular, common practice, though it may have sounded outlandish just 15 or 20 years ago. Further, that books can be bought digitally and that such a notion can feel normal is also something that would be alien not long ago.

Throughout all of these shifts within a relatively short period of time, waves of opening and closing emerged: the big bookstores signaled a death knell for the Waldenbooks for the most part. Likewise, online markets are largely overcoming the big bookstore model of the ’90s. And more importantly, consumers are reading and buying different books in different ways. Though waiting for books to be printed in paperback used to make the most economic sense, the undercutting of retailers like Amazon make hardcover books much more cost effective. As mall bookstores, according to Thompson, relied on the sale of paperback books and word-of-mouth backlisted, non-current titles, today’s market is much more focused on recent publications.

So where does YA fit into all of this change? In general the Young Adult genre really came to fruition during the quickly spreading popularizing book industry of the ’70s and beyond. As the rise of mall bookstores came and went, so too did the kinds of books marketed to teens. Today the YA section is flush with hardback books, marked at lower costs than hardcover adult works. These are books that replicate adult books in both form and size. The lengths of these books often equal if not surpass typical adult novels, even if the word count may be less. Increased font size and widened margins stretch shorter YA novels into 300 and 400 page books.

Through all of these changes an interesting trend emerges: YA is not a back-list genre. As the Harry Potter and Twilight crazes came and went, the interests in these books in my classroom subsided. New books are the lingua franca of YA. Though there are enduring classics that teachers cling to, if a book isn’t new—as signaled by timely design and marketing—its moment has already passed. I would argue this is a major reason for the serialization of books in the post-Potter era of YA. Authors need to stay relevant in an era of many options for young people.

ARCHETYPES AND TROPES

As I stated earlier, this book is not a census of YA titles. It looks broadly at the ways young adult novels tend to depict the world in very similar ways. While each chapter of this book will focus on a handful of published books, these are shared to elucidate my arguments about how YA texts help reify cultural assumptions and viewpoints about power and representation; for example, one chapter focuses on how YA novels reinforce gender stereotypes. The texts I’ve chosen are books I’ve seen my students regularly engage with, books I see most prominently featured in
INTRODUCTION

brick and mortar bookstores, and books that I noted on bestseller lists. As such, this is a book that is focused on the contemporary young adult novels that are easily accessible to the students in our schools and libraries today. Throughout this book I look at some historical antecedents to contemporary works and also explore YA novels that have continued to find an audience decades after they were first published (e.g. Go Ask Alice, The Outsiders, and The Chocolate War). However, though a book like John Donovan’s I’ll Get There. It better be worth the trip (1969) is a historically significant YA novel—it is regarded as one of the first teen books to feature a homosexual protagonist (Cart and Jenkins, 2004); it is not a book that is widely read or most representative of LGBTQI topics in YA.

This populist approach to books in the YA genre is understandably problematic. However, I am attempting, here, to look closely at whose voices are most represented within the genre and how such voices contribute to young people’s understanding of the world around them. Yes, there are numerous books that cater to challenging dominant ideologies and some of these will be shared as examples and corollaries throughout this text. However, for the most part, these books are often difficult books to acquire for teachers and young people. More importantly, in challenging the YA genre as this book’s title suggests, I am not seeking to guide educators and readers to solely read alternatives. Instead, through reading and exploring best selling titles through various literary lenses, I am hoping to guide readers to feelings of empowerment regardless of the text before them.

As a former high school teacher that constantly attempted to stay current with the available YA texts for my students, I admire the work that librarians do, staying on top of the latest publications in a now flooded YA marketplace. These herculean efforts by librarians are synthesized in periodicals like the School Library Journal. If you are looking for non-critical resources that detail the abundant YA titles available, I encourage you to look at this title. Even better, I’d encourage you to become friends with the local teen librarian and ask lots and lots of questions. I will not be trying to share an objective representation of YA titles. Instead, I reject the notion of an objectivity when reading or selecting the publications for a book such as this.

However the books I’ve selected throughout this book for analysis are representative of the kinds of recurring archetypes and tropes that I’ve seen most common in my reading of YA during my formative (and awkward) adolescent years and the decade I have spent working in the classroom and with preservice English educators.

Archetypes and tropes help illuminate the blueprint inherent in many YA texts. The familiarity of stock characters and plot devices make these spaces familiar even as they differ somewhat from book to book. Further, familiarity of the books within YA subgenres such as dystopian and paranormal novels (described in Chapters Three and Five) help readers navigate the stories while also engraining the messages the books provide about living and acting within the real world. Bakhtin’s (1981) exploration of discourses finds polyphonic voices echoing across novels. The heteroglossia of texts reveals a rich cacophony of ideas and experiences in the words our students encounter.
A BOOK ABOUT THEORY

In each chapter of this book, key critical theoretical lenses are used to analyze a component of YA literature.

- In Chapter One we look at Marxist critiques of capitalism.
- In Chapter Two we engage YA novels through action and reflection known as Critical Race Theory.
- Chapter Three utilizes Post-Colonial Theory and Post-Structuralism to look at popular books like *Gossip Girl*.
- A feminist lens and application of queer theory help explore gender and sexuality construction in YA in Chapter Four.
- Chapter Five revolves around educating with YA through the use of critical pedagogy.
- Chapter Six explores how technology shifts YA literature in a participatory culture.

Asserting the role of critical literary theory in English classrooms, Appleman (2000) begins her book, *Critical Encounters in High School English* by describing what is gained by this approach. She writes that “the direct teaching of literary theory in secondary English classes will better prepare adolescent readers to respond reflectively and analytically to literary texts, both ‘canonical’ and multicultural” (p. 2). She extends this shortly after by noting the transformative ways theory can expand learning beyond the literary page: “contemporary literary theory provides a useful way for all students to read and interpret not only literary texts but their lives—both in and out of school” (p. 2).

This book also takes a theory-driven approach to understanding the nature of books adolescents are frequently exposed to. However, while Appleman’s (2000) text tends to focus on literary theories or on literary applications of theories such as feminism and Marxism, this work looks to extend these even more deliberately. When discussing feminist readings of a text like *Gossip Girl*, for instance, this book offers such analysis as a launching point for larger inquiry into social critique. As literature can act as a doorway toward larger reflections on sociocultural practices, the intention here and in the classes I taught while working with teens in South Central Los Angeles was to use theory as a transformative process. As such, a theory such as Critical Race Theory (discussed in Chapter Two) challenges existing assumptions of race and its intersectionality with other forms of marginalization. Not typically a theory for reading and interpreting literary texts, the central tenets of this theory help offer blueprints for action. Theory, in this book, strives to be something to act upon and to incite practice and social transformation.

This is not purely an intellectual exercise. Instead, in wielding these various lenses as a means of parsing the complicated, layered challenges of YA, I offer strategies for discussing books with young people. Each chapter is rooted in key questions to apply to a secondary classroom practice.
INTRODUCTION

Though this book focuses on utilizing theory as a means of unpacking, problematizing, and expanding on YA novels, it is important to recognize that this is a text that is focused on teachers, librarians, and teacher educators. The shifting vocational nature of the teaching labor force is pushing teachers to be seen less as intellectual contributors and more as curriculum distributors. However, as a former high school teacher and current teacher educator, I write this book with the sense of continued hope in teachers as intellectuals. I see educators and individuals who are working directly with young people as experts that need to contribute to and be challenged by educational and literacy theories. That being said, I see theory—understanding it, responding to it, building it anew—as an essential gateway that can hold back or provide a sense of empowerment for educators and students. Teaching with theory not simply about theory is an important resource for educators to better reflect and challenge the lived experiences and expectations of young adults today.

Critical theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) describes theory as a “set of knowledges” (p. xxv). In looking at the role of theory in relation to women of color, Anzaldúa describes the importance of direct interaction with theory for disenfranchised individuals broadly:

Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space. (p. xxv)

I would argue that Anzaldúa’s framework of working from and occupying a “theorizing space” is a necessary stance with which to approach YA literature in both classrooms and library spaces. Intellectualizing the reading experience for young people is an actionable process of social transformation and one that is collaborative. As I describe below, my work on this book was done in collaboration and solidarity with the students I’ve worked with as an educator.

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

In Chapter Six, I will look at the ways digital tools have shifted cultural assumptions about production and consumption of young adult texts. In doing so, I will explore the online writing and social community, Figment. It is one of several online spaces focused on young people writing, sharing, and discussing young adult literature. And though the site and the way it helps challenge traditional understandings of the YA genre are discussed in that chapter, it is important to acknowledge, here, Figment’s implicit contribution to this book. In early 2012, I was preparing to teach my first Adolescent Literature course at Colorado State University. I felt that, though I was an avid YA reader, I would prefer to have the book selections in the course...
guided by the appreciation and enthusiasm of actual adolescents engaged in reading adolescents’ literature. I posted on Figment asking for book suggestions for the class.

The numerous responses I received over a month-long period varied widely from advice on what books not to teach to suggestions of activities I should include to well-argued rationales for certain books to be taught. Though I augmented the student recommendations with slightly older books (The Chocolate War, The Pigman, and Go Ask Alice) I felt helped illustrate classical YA tropes, the syllabus for my first Adolescents’ Literature class reflected the selections and voices of passionate YA reading teenagers. These books aside, immersing myself within this select group’s textual choices helped me identify trends, outliers, and various ways the YA genre is in a state of flux. The books most discussed throughout my inquiry into the YA genre are reflective of the books that Figment members selected. The digital fingerprints of young people’s personal reading recommendations helped shape and gather the analysis in this book.

In a class I teach for future teachers, “Teaching Reading,” my students read Donalyn Miller’s The Book Whisperer (2009). The flood of books she describes handing out to her students sweeps away some of my students with enthusiasm and terrifies others. “I don’t have the time to read enough books to make recommendations to my students,” my students comment (not to mention questioning the cost of building a classroom library as a new teacher). Over my years as a teacher, I’ve made it a habit to read lots of YA books. I’ll admit it’s a fun genre to dive into (though getting glares when reading a book like Gossip Girl in public is always interesting). However, while I may have numerous ideas of books to point my students to, youth recommendations, in my eyes, always trump what a crotchety adult is going to say. If I can get students to recommend books to each other or get other teen-recommendations from sites like Figment it goes a long way toward building strong readers over time.

A NOTE ON CONTRADICTION AND PASSION

Before ending this introduction, I want to note that, while the chapters of this book point to myriad YA texts, there is a plethora of YA books that are not addressed that may run counter to the thesis of each chapter. To be clear, there are, indeed, numerous YA books that challenge typical conceptions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and power. Readers may feel the examples shared here are not inclusive of these. However, as I stated earlier, my goal in this book is not to provide a sweeping look at every instantiation of every YA topic, but to look at general trends prevalent in twenty-first century YA as a marketed genre.

I want to recognize that the statements in this book are often generalized in ways that can be seen as problematic: for every statement I make decrying portrayals of race, class, gender, and sexuality in popular YA, I am sure that avid readers can quickly point to exceptions. Of course their are some powerful and honest depictions of gay teenagers in YA. And of course their are powerful representations of youth of color in YA that do not simply depict an urban ghetto. There are even sensitive and
empowering paranormal male and female heartthrobs out there! When appropriate, I attempt to share the counter-narratives to problematic and stereotypical politics of representation. However, when I focus much of a chapter on a single, problematic text, I don’t do this to pinpoint one single book’s shortcomings but as a depiction of continuing trends in Young Adult literature.

Finally, I also need to make clear that I write this book from a place of reserved love for the genre. Reading drew me into my constant orbit around bookstores (and the subsequent toll my passion for reading has had on my wallet). While the majority of the text that follows often looks critically at the current state of young adult literature I do so not as a despised take-down of books that ‘kids are reading these days’ but because this is a genre that is important to me as an avid reader, an educator of young people, and a participant in the society that is being shaped by and through youth readings of these texts.
CHAPTER 1

CAPITALISM, HOLLYWOOD, AND ADULT APPROPRIATION OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The Harry Potter Effect

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

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

Harry Potter as a book franchise has sold more than 400 million copies globally. Subsequently (and sometimes concurrently depending on book and movie release dates), the eight film adaptations of the seven J.K. Rowling novels earned more than $7.7 billion in worldwide box office sales, making it the highest grossing franchise of all time (Box Office Mojo, 2013). The astronomical success of the Harry Potter franchise is unlike any book that has since followed in its publishing footsteps. The Twilight films have broken numerous box office records, but the sustained book, movie, and product sales of Harry Potter have yet to be surpassed. For myriad children growing up around the world during the years that the Rowling series was released, Harry Potter is beacon of exactly why we can fall in love with books. Though his world was mysterious and rife with danger and wonder, it was also
CHAPTER 1

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

CAPITALISM

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

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

The problem with the way capitalism drives society is that it doesn’t leave young people with a lot of options. In a very basic sense, capitalism is a socioeconomic system that allows individual businesses or corporations to profit from the products they produce or the services they provide. This takes place in a free market system where government intervention does not take place. One of the main critiques of capitalist systems is that profit falls on the backs of a laboring, working class. Laborers depend on business owners for a living wage salary and businesses profit by maintaining a surplus between what is paid to laborers and the value their products receive within a market. While workers may feel like they are not being paid enough, there are few alternatives in the reality of free markets today: scant job opportunities and high unemployment mean that the power owners maintain in providing salaries allows them to dictate wages. From a Marxist perspective, capitalism drives large societal stratification between a minority class that maintains surplus and a majority of society that works as laborers.
For young people, free markets compete for their interests and money. Whoever creates a product that is of interest to young people will, in theory, receive money (and profit) for the services they provide. However, when very few publishers largely control the majority of the YA market, the choices made available to young people are limiting. If bookstores only display the prominent titles being released, it is difficult for young people to truly find the books that speak to them; instead they must bend to meet the garroting options of a modern capitalist market. This form of push marketing offers consumers little opportunity for exploration, personal inquiry, or choice in the book buying market.

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

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

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

ON CO-OPTING YOUTH CULTURE

It snuck up on all of us. At least I’d like to think so. On July 7, 2000, I met my mother at a local Barnes and Noble in east San Diego County at 11 at night. The place was packed. It was packed with kids. Not the teenagers I would work with as a teacher a few years down the road, but like kid kids. My mom, a middle school teacher at the time, smiled as the youngsters that would come up saying hello to “Mrs. Garcia” shyly got back into line, awaiting the release of the fourth book in the Harry Potter series, \textit{Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire}. I’d browsed the books displayed, but neither my own interest nor professional responsibility called for me to dive into the Harry Potter books. These were, I assumed, still books for kids and about kids. Many Potter fans will point to the way the books increase in plot, linguistic, and emotional complexity as the stories unfold, essentially growing into the kinds of books maturing readers would appreciate. Over time, Harry Potter’s foibles became the fodder of a teenage audience less interested in troll boogers and more interested in the responsibilities of individuals, the labor rights of elves, and accepting loss and responsibility. In this gradual shift over the course of the seven books, J.K. Rowling helped sneak a strand of youth culture into mainstream acceptance. It was kind of cute in the early 2000s seeing my friends reading Harry Potter. Around the time the first Twilight film came out, you probably noticed other adults unabashedly enthralled with the comings and goings of the Cullens. This wasn’t always the case. While nostalgia may have driven some YA reading selections for adults, I am arguing that it was largely the transitional nature of the prose and content in J.K. Rowling’s books that helped turn young adult literature into something that even adults openly embrace. In fact, the J.K. Rowling series is typically filed in the Juvenile Fiction section of public libraries based on the age of the protagonist in the book (at least at the start of the series). The mixture of narratives that were being written for an aging, teen audience and a budding film franchise helped Potter become a beacon for young adult literature being accepted by a mainstream and adult audience.

Fast forward more than a decade later, and the results of this work are staggering. A 2012 market research report, “Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer in the Digital Age” (Bowker Market Research) found that the majority of YA consumers are 18 years or older. Though some of this demographic may be purchasing YA titles for friends, siblings, and children, the report clarifies that 78 percent of this demographic are typically buying these books for their own reading. Again, in isolation, this statistic can be lead toward incorrect inference about book buyers: one could assume that book readers that only recently became adults or hit their 20s are continuing to draw on their youthful interests and reading the YA books that they grew up with. This isn’t the case. The Bowker report indicates that the biggest
group of adults buying YA books in the 21st century are between the ages of 30 and 44. This demographic accounts for nearly 30 percent of all YA book buying, which is staggering. For a genre that—at least in name—claims to be for and about young adults, that much of its primary audience is older has significant ramifications on the future of the genre. The graphic depictions of sex and violence in blockbuster titles such as *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* (a book that the report notes makes up a large percentage of the adult readership) are often pointed to as reasons why *young adult* titles aren’t necessarily suitable for a teenage readership (Gurdon, 2011).

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

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

What does this mean for our classrooms? For educators, the discussion of market consequences of changes in the YA genre are tricky: it is not entirely clear where such discussions should fit. Even within the free-reading environments of classrooms such as those Donalyn Miller (2009) describes in *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child*, the content of writing and discussion is on individual’s relationships with texts. While I think meaningful discussions
of the role of capitalism and surplus are necessary at all grade levels, educators can feel pressed for the space of such discussions in the shifting landscape of education reform. However, guiding metacognitive discussion of how certain books are marketed to boys or girls, for example, can be a powerful entry point for analyzing symbolism, imagery, and authoritorial intent. Instead of shying away from discussions of marketing and youth, it is important for educators to be able to face capitalism head on within classrooms and align these discussions to the standards and evaluatory requirements teachers may be facing in their given school context.

I AM NUMBER FOUR: A CASE STUDY IN YA CAPITALISM

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

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

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

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

> text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations...they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its ‘reception’ and consumption in the form (nowadays, at least) of a book. (p. 1)
With this in mind, *I Am Number Four*’s paratext helps market the book and convey its value for an enthusiastic youth-driven market. The book’s cover and title work as a teaser of the content and general cliff-hanging style of writing that runs throughout the book: above the title, the following is embossed: “THREE ARE DEAD,” and then the title: *I Am Number Four*. The intrigue of the title, the ominous explosive colors and smoky hues invite readers into the book. Likewise, if the edition being examined is a cover featuring the film adaptation, a pensive and rugged white boy looks confidently from the book. It’s an image that suggests the handsome desirability of a young, white man to female readers and the aggressive confidence of masculinity for male readers.

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

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

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

The net effect of all of these paratextual features is a highly desirable book. The inviting title, the unique printing on the page edges, the free bonus material, and the visibility of the book’s movie tie-in all compel potential readers to pick up and want to purchase *I am Number Four*. All of these feature do little to push the narrative forward. The cryptic symbols are never explained. The QR code leads to pages that essentially function as advertisements for additional installments in the book’s series. All of these paratextual features identify a target audience and directly market to it.
CHAPTER 1

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

In an online interview, Lore writes,

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

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

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

A QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP

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

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

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

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

In the beginning of the book, Four makes it clear that his purpose on earth is to survive long enough to develop his “legacies” in order to defeat the Mogodorian nemesis that obliterated his home planet; Four’s sole purpose is perseverance and resilience on behalf of a fallen race. And while Four’s actions when acting as “John” demonstrate the occasional baffling decisions of adolescent (human) teens, often the
decisions made by Four throughout the book make little sense: postponing checking-in with the father figure, Henry, who trains and guides Four, for instance, takes a backseat to a home-cooked meal with Sarah’s family. Blatant displays of strength and dexterity continually place Four’s cover into jeopardy. It is difficult to discern what kinds of motives drive many of these actions. In looking for a rationale, there are two main points to keep in mind. First, many of these strange plot decisions seem “cool”: superhuman strength, explosions, and a lengthy reconnaissance mission to rescue Henry are all parts of the book that read quickly and could be easily translated onto the screen in impressive fashion. Secondly, in digging into the intent behind the creation of *I Am Number Four*, sensical character decisions are secondary to the underlying goal of creating a book that will sell in abundance.

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

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

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

To begin with, Frey looked at the trends of the early part of the 21st century in YA book sales. Wizards and vampires were big. Rowling’s Harry Potter and Meyer’s Bella Swan had ushered in a plethora of knock-off titles that cashed in on the ravenous book-buying interest in the spell-slinging and the undead. Frey, attempting to jump ahead of the curve guessed the next trend would be … aliens. He quickly culled together the components for a YA novel focused on aliens that would be user
friendly for readers weaned on the bolt-scarred wizard and the clumsily stubborn vampire lover. *I am Number Four*’s basic components are boilerplate YA:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I AM POSTMODERN

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

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

readers, especially young readers in classrooms, do not have to be unnerved
by self-deprecating fears that their responses to a poem are wrong. Instead of
right and wrong answers, deconstruction encourages plural responses. Instead
of a hidden meaning that must be revealed, the poetic text is a site where the
reader’s imagination, experience, understanding, and emotions come into play in unique performances. (pp.187–188)

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

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

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

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

Specifically, is I Am Number Four literature? Is it a postmodern attack on youth consumption or a savvy exploitation of how young people buy books today? I would argue that it doesn’t matter so much. If we can empower young people to be critical of and understand the mechanisms of publishing at work, this is a step toward critical conscious building. However, more problematically, if this is what counts as
young adult literature today, it is a powerful statement on how a production machine governs the psyches and interests of millions of young people today. While Full Fathom Five can be interpreted as an elaborate, shaky form of performance art, it is one that is executed at the expense of millions of dollars spent by teens.

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

LIFE-LONG READING AS LIFE-LONG CONSUMING

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

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

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

And here is where I struggle with the marketing. As an English teacher, one of the main goals in my classroom was to instill a sense of passion in my students. I wanted my most resistant readers to, by the end of the school year, fall in love with books and reading. I am confident that I was not alone in having this goal be the centerpiece
of my classroom and my annual syllabi. I was striving to create lifelong readers by hook or by crook. However, lifelong reading is dependent on a steady stream of books always being at the ready. Simply put, to be a lifelong reader also means to commit to being a lifelong consumer.

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

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

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

All of this brings us back to the improbable figure of Damien Hirst, his dead shark, and the recurring question: but is it art? The subjective question is one that’s explored in documentaries like *My Kid Could Paint That* (Bar-Lev, 2007) and in
books about the fluctuating art industry like The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art (Thompson, 2010). In seeing this model being enacted in the publishing world, the question is if the conglomeration of writing and design and marketing and product placement can be suitably considered literature. In terms of the art world, Warhol’s factory model which Hirst’s productions can be seen as based upon, ushered in a new art movement. Pop art is a genre that embraces or reflects the mass production of twentieth century mass production and proliferation of media. There’s a reason that Warhol’s Campbell’s soup can is such an iconic image: it was screen printed in the factory ceaselessly.

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

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

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

Let’s step back for a second: we essentially have a book functioning as a tool for mass marketing of products. I am Number Four is not merely a poorly written book. It is a capitalist gateway. The design and deliberate production related to the book strongly suggest that readers even remotely interested in Lore’s tale buy all related books, buy a copy of the film (and its soundtrack, of course), and if there are any other products related to the work currently available then buy them too. Whereas Warhol and the artists he influenced attempt to negotiate the fine line between capitalist greed and artistic critique, Frey’s Full Fathom Five disregards any of the
artistic tenets of the model he adapts and whole-hog dives into the process of selling and marketing. There is no nuance here, only advertising and tepid content.

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

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

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

Another key tension that arose from my classes when discussing publishing is the feeling or intent or passion of the writers. For example, upon hearing about the ways that *I Am Number Four* was produced many of my students recoiled from the book.
That the production of the text does not match their image of the impassioned writer slaving away at producing the book felt disingenuous to my students. In contrast, looking at the deliberate ways author John Green attempted to share his writing process with his readers (as discussed in Chapter Six), my students approved of the “love of the craft” of writing that Green demonstrates. “It’s tricky,” one student said during our discussion. She pointed out that, on the one hand Green and Frey are both focused on a similar goal: selling lots of books. However, on the other hand, their efforts in doing so and the implied sense of meaning behind the book creation process appears to differ in ways that make young people embrace Green’s approach and recoil from Frey’s. But is one better than another? Should the intentions of either act as deterrents from approaching a book?

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

SERIALIZATION

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

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

Serialization is nothing new, obviously. Dickens and Dumas were masters at the form of serializing a story over time. Comic books today rely on readers feeling compelled to pick up the next issue of a series each month. However, what’s different about serialization in YA texts is that this is done in ways that places profit before
satisfaction. As readers seeking resolution, endings of books feel pushed less toward completing narrative arcs than toward helping ensure readers will be strung along for another profitable journey. The final pages of books like *I am Number Four*, *Divergent*, and *The Maze Runner* all position the books as entry points which readers have already invested time and money. James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* started with a strong narrative in a somewhat hackneyed post-apocalyptic world, only to have the trilogy conclude with few questions answered and little sense of resolution. Discussing the book with students and other readers, the general consensus seemed to be that Dashner had no idea how his books would end and tried to tie haphazard pieces together as best as possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In 2012, videogame fans created a digital outcry over the shoddy ending of a series millions had invested in. *Mass Effect 3* was released with the over promise of its developers that the conclusion of the massively popular game would provide answers and satisfying resolution for characters. Based on the opinions of many of its players, it failed. *Really failed*. Fans created a Facebook group called “Demand A Better Ending to Mass Effect 3” with over 60,000 members. In the description of the group’s page and echoed by fans in reviews across the Internet, the main argument of these gamers is: “This is a horribly unfulfilling ending to what should have been the masterpiece of the trilogy. We need to show Bioware that we are unhappy with the way they handled this. Fans of the Mass Effect trilogy have put far too much time, effort, and money into the game to be abandoned with such a fate.” Mass Effect players wanted the series to have a satisfying ending. After spending countless fulfilling (and sometimes frustrating) hours mashing buttons in front of a television screen, these fans have connected with and expect resolution for the characters they’ve guided through numerous encounters with peril. As fan complaints gained significant media coverage, the game’s executive producer, Casey Hudson responded to concerns: “We have reprioritized our post-launch development efforts to provide the fans who want more closure with even more context and clarity to the ending of the game, in a way that will feel more personalized for each player” (Newman, 2012).
Though we’ll explore the potential of organizing and fan communities in Chapter Six, the statement here explores how content producers may or may not consider content consumers when creating products for consumption. In many ways, the complaints of the Mass Effect audience voice essentially the same frustrations you read from readers of YA books in online reviews such as Goodreads and Amazon. However, with hundreds of millions of dollars funneled toward a lucrative gaming series, fans are actively moved toward action. However, the frustrations that authors would leave their plots “abandoned to such a fate” to quote the Mass Effect organization is felt throughout online reviews. Look at a few examples:

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

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

And

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

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

Ok so this was one of the most disappointing endings to any series i’ve ever read. First of all their were so many plot holes you couldn’t tell what was happening half the time. Also in the second book….Brenda. I mean, who really gives a crap about her? She is really only their to fill in plot holes and make the book longer so they can charge you more for it. In the last book she is only their to complete the “love story” part of the book. When Teresa died in the last book, i just about lost it. How could Dashner just kill her like that? And Thomas didn’t really care at all about it. I mean I know he is mad at her and all, but just forgive her. She was just doing what she thought would save his life, and he seemed so heartless about it. Then their was the way they talked. If you had everything in your mind erased except your name, you wouldn’t be able to talk. The author seems to think that somehow the never forget how to talk. A lot of the review’s that say the book was good, say that it is perfectly clear how the flare started. People who say this, please tell me…………HOW THE HE** DID
CHAPTER 1

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

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

A HOGWARTS OF ONE’S OWN

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

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