

**Locked Out of Dystopia:**  
**Gender and Diversity Issues in Popular Young Adult Literature**  
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Megan Rutell

University of Denver, University College

Capstone Advisor: Jennifer Zukowski, MFA

Academic Director: Joseph Hutchison, MFA

Dean: Michael J. McGuire, MLS

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### **Abstract**

Reading young adult fiction during adolescence promotes development of a moral philosophy, sense-of-self, and lifelong reading habits. Current publishing trends in young adult literature—particularly young adult dystopian fiction—largely exclude boys and minority groups from the most visible titles in popular culture. This paper establishes prevailing understandings of literacy gaps between boys and girls and their preferences for certain themes, formats, and protagonists. It also includes an independent analysis of themes and patterns in titles featuring female protagonists, male protagonists, and multiple male-female perspectives. Inclusion of this analysis in the academic literature on teen literacy informs librarians, educators, teachers, parents, readers, and publishers about the importance of curating and promoting inclusive, high quality literature for teens.

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## Introduction

Purpose of the capstone and justification for the topic

Since its inception in the 1950s and 1960s, Young Adult Literature (YAL) has evolved into a rich tapestry of genres written for and about teenagers. What started as a handful of novels (notables include *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Outsiders*) filling the gap between children's and adult literature has evolved into an entirely separate category of literature complete with its own subgenres paralleling adult fiction: mystery, science fiction, fantasy, romance, contemporary realistic fiction, thriller, historical fiction, and so forth (Owen 2003). One of the most notable developments in young adult fiction today is the emergence of Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (YADF) as a popular subgenre of Young Adult Literature (YAL). The latest runaway bestsellers like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*—which in its first three years sold over 23 million copies in the U.S. alone—threw YADF into the public spotlight and revealed what a powerhouse the genre could be for YAL (Schutte 2012). Dystopian fiction is no longer simply a subgenre of science fiction, and the dysfunction of the societies in which these stories take place offers unique thematic opportunities.

Young Adult Literature is increasingly viewed as a legitimate and vital part of the literary growing-up process. Since the category's inception, YAL was generally criticized either for having lower quality than the classics or for its content (corruption of the young) (Crowe 2001, 146). Critics like Ruth Graham—who shamed YAL as flimsy kids' books—are increasingly in the minority (Graham 2014). The prevailing opinion today is that YA literature has more in common with adult books than children's books, and young adult novels “have significance to all of us, regardless of which age category we fall into, because they speak to the human condition”

(Daniels 2006, 79). Accordingly, educators, librarians, parents, and publishers collectively view YA books as an extraordinary resource for developing lifelong reading habits; literary theorist study YAL more fully, and high-quality contemporary titles are even used in high school classrooms.

Within the broader context of YAL, dystopian fiction merits considerable study and analysis, particularly as it pertains to the reconstruction of gender and ethnic roles in contemporary literature. The cultural impact of the most popular titles—*The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* among them—makes the potential of YADF impossible to ignore. The tendency for these dark and gritty books to feature strong female protagonists is especially notable. They are determined, courageous, intelligent, and mindful of what their world ought to be. YADF has changed the role of the female protagonist in ways other genres have yet to approach, placing female characters in a position to “recreate the worlds in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free” (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 2014, 3). These stories redefine traditional female archetypes that called for passive female characters standing in the background of strong and daring young men. It is not surprising that today’s bright and independent girls, who have experienced more gender equality than any prior generation, identify readily with characters who can not only match, but outperform their male counterparts and who do not view their female status as a disadvantage.

In a 2012 article for *The Atlantic*, Meghan Lewit points out that women authors are achieving unprecedented success in Young Adult Fiction, accounting for 63 percent of NPR’s list of 100 Best-Ever Teen Novels, as compared to the world of adult fiction in which women only make up about a quarter of publishers’ titles (Lewit 2012). While the development is a boon for

female authors (and readers who crave strong female protagonists), it has led some experts in the field to wonder if YAL is becoming “too girly” in that it neglects or excludes boys from mainstream fiction.

Award-winning YAL author Robert Lipsyte told *The New York Times* that his experiences with publishers indicate they are more concerned with serving girls (who make up 75 percent of their readership) than providing high-quality literature that speaks to a broader audience (Lipsyte 2011). While his complaint has less to do with the gender of the author than the content of the books, he asserts that today’s YAL overwhelmingly fails to speak to boys in a meaningful way, and while earlier YA authors like Judy Blume and S.E. Hinton were able to appeal to both boys and girls, the trend today is to split along gender lines (Lipsyte 2011). There are countless high-quality books streaming into the market that would appeal to young men and women, but dystopian adventures about girls crowd bestseller lists, leading to the assumption that boys feel YAL has little or nothing to offer them.

Not only does YADF fall subject to criticisms that it excludes boys, but also that it is too white and contains little to no racial diversity. Even when novels do provide an alternative to Eurocentric perspectives, “the challenge is to bring these to the attention of young readers” (Landt 2006, 690). Just as young adults craved literature that spoke to the teen experience prior to the advent of YAL, so do nonwhite teens desire stories that bridge the gap between their own lives and the literary experience.

Despite the array of high quality books available, the field is often described in mainstream media channels according to whichever books sell the most copies, which in YADF are mostly by and about women. While this development is certainly not in itself an indication

of low quality, it does raise concerns as to how this perceived female dominance is affecting the literary habits of boys. The successes of women in popular YAL may have somewhat corrected the imbalance that historically favored male authors and characters, but the newest generation of novels is also criticized for placing too much emphasis on romance and contributing to cultural homogenization. The important role YAL plays in the literary development of teens makes it crucial to understand trends in the industry and whether teens of various demographics have equal access to meaningful literary experiences.

#### Goal of the project

The goal of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how current trends in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (YADF) affect the industry's accessibility based on gender and diversity factors. The first section of the paper will contain a detailed review of the existing research and literature pertaining to the topic. Secondly, the paper will present a snapshot of today's popular YADF to illustrate characteristics of the most visible titles (themes, character traits, literary quality, etc.) and how variations of common themes may affect readers' reactions toward them. Finally, the discussion will apply known theories in the field to the sample novels to determine if, as a group, they create a culture of exclusion for certain readers.

By combining what is already known about young people's reading preferences and habits, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how the industry may be underserving certain portions of the reader population. The emphasis on popular YADF is crucial in studying YADF books because of their highly visibility nature, and they are often used to make generalizations about YAL and may even eclipse other high-quality titles into obscurity. It is the



ultimate vision of this project to affect a more inclusive and accessible canon of high-quality contemporary teen fiction.

### Thesis statement

While the recent upsurge in strong female protagonists in young adult literature—particularly young adult dystopian fiction—allows female characters to actively confront social injustices, display leadership qualities, and challenge traditional expectations of demure feminine passivity, the genre’s continued underrepresentation of cultural diversity and reliance on romantic infatuation may alienate many readers and undermine progress made toward legitimizing the genre.

### Literature review

With all the attention dystopian fiction draws in popular media channels, it is surprising that scholarly research and analysis of the topic remains relatively sparse. That is not to suggest that teen books do not attract attention—quite the opposite, in fact. Many studies exist examining literacy rates among teens, reading habits, choice of materials, the importance of reading during adolescence, the crossover phenomenon of adults choosing YA books, and innumerable other aspects of YAL. Scholars have long been fascinated with the advent of Young Adult Literature (YAL), but specific references to dystopian teen fiction, are characterized mostly by media debates in terms of generalized perceptions of tropes and quality trends.

One such public debate arose from an article in *The Atlantic*, which explored the supposed dominance of women authors and characters in YA fiction (Lewit 2012). Lewit praises the women of the field while simultaneously expressing her surprise that they held a majority in an industry historically favoring men. The literary glass ceiling, which often prevented female

authors and books featuring female protagonists from even being reviewed in the *New York Times*, is conspicuously absent in teen literature; more than merely being reviewed, Lewit states, “at least commercially, teen fiction is crushing almost everyone else...[making] it increasingly difficult to marginalize the genre” (Lewit 2012). She emphasizes that women authors occupied 63 percent of NPR’s list of Best-ever Teen Novels. The heroes of the most popular YA titles—or heroines, as is often the case—become household names in ways their adult counterparts cannot match. They are among the most visible, the most commercialized, the most widely read books on the market today.

It is precisely this perceived dominance that attracts so much attention and criticism. Why all the fuss? After all, girls have been reading books by and about men for hundreds of years. Is there something inherent to seeing a woman on the cover of a book that sends boys running for the door? It may seem like a double standard, but existing research suggests so.

#### Why dystopias matter

Young adult fiction is increasingly understood as a vital part of developing lifelong reading habits, and as adults even explore YAL in their own leisure time, more people understand how such books communicate complex themes in an approachable way. Some educators even favor popular YA titles over the canonized classics; these teachers find that they can “present the same literary elements found in the classics while engaging adolescent students in stimulating discussions and assignments” (Santoli and Wagner 2004, 66). Educators are often disappointed when their enthusiasm for titles like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations* fail to spark interest in their students, but “unlike classic literature, [young adult literature] can foster a desire to read” (Santoli and Wager 2004, 66). Enjoyment is not merely a

luxury; pleasure reading becomes valuable and useful for developing social conscience, non-intrusive discouragement of risky behaviors, simple relaxation, and validating teens own life struggles (Howard 2011). Furthermore, reading habits typically decline in the teenage years, a trend that is only exacerbated when teens associate reading with books about adults and boring adult problems (Owen 2003). Young adult literature allows them to read about characters they identify with, problems that concern them, in a voice they find authentic and understandable. Within the larger construct of YAL, YADF has the rare ability to engage young people in philosophical, moral, and political dialogues while also getting them to care about characters similar to themselves.

The variety of dystopian novels available to young people today is extraordinarily varied. Young Adult Dystopian Fiction can be difficult to place in any single categories, and so it is often treated as its own subcategory—although, it remains true that dystopian novels often lean toward one genre more than another. *Feed*, for example, is usually categorized as science fiction (set in a dystopian society), whereas *The Selection* is undeniably a dystopian teen romance novel. The differences between these two books are staggering, thus it is misleading to claim that all YADF books are characterized a certain way. Amazon.com has even begun to subdivide dystopian fiction further into categories like “dystopian teen romance” or “dystopian science fiction and fantasy” (Amazon.com). There are, however, some commonalities among YADF novels.

As with most YAL, the protagonists are adolescents, and quite often the narrative is written through the protagonist’s eyes. The narrative is fast-paced and covers a broad variety of themes, but most stories include a coming-of-age or loss-of-innocence (Owen 2003). The

protagonists typically project intelligence equal to (or greater than) adults in the story, and like the generation reading them, they are willing to “share their beliefs and perspectives with adults from a perspective of equality” (Eubanks 2006, 2). Most importantly, the story takes place in a dystopian society, “an ominous nightmare scenario warning us of repressive futures that seem all too disturbingly possible and plausible” (Kennon 2005). Sometimes these societies initially present themselves as utopias—perfect states in which people are healthy, safe, happy, and fulfilled—only to have their dark inner-workings revealed as the story progresses. The leaders of the society are exposed as corrupt oppressors, and it is up to the teenaged protagonists to set the world right.

Real-world power struggles between teens and adults (which are common to the point of cliché) are represented in the dystopian backdrop of YADF as a battle between the oppressive status quo and the hopes of younger generations for a better future. Complex dysfunctional societies force the protagonists to reposition themselves to affect change, even when it puts their very lives at risk. Their situations become so desperate in their broken worlds that they risk everything, overcome unbelievable obstacles, and summon courage and ingenuity to fight back against their oppressors.

John Bushman and Shelly McNerny discussed how such stories help construct a sense of morality. By immersing themselves in fictional dystopias, teens “discover how their personal sense of self relates to society...and is shaped by the identity of society” (Bushman and McNerny 2004, 4). The moral struggles of their own lives parallel ones facing YADF protagonists from societies that—not unlike the real world—“cannot always be counted on to properly define morality” (Busmand and McNerny 2004, 4). The books challenge teens to think for

themselves; they must look deep inside themselves for answers to moral dilemmas, and if they are unsatisfied with the rules imposed upon them, they look for ways to change them. This is common to most YAL, but dystopian fiction owes much of its growing popularity to its ability to deliver sharp commentary on modern society.

The dystopian element is key to the structure of the story and “provides a promising vehicle to depict adolescents’ political and social awakening and their mediation with the authority of adults and inherited institutions” (Kennon 2005). Dystopian fiction is especially well equipped to explore real-world problems teens are beginning to understand: concerns over environmental changes, energy shortages, overpopulation, government corruption, a surveillance culture, terrorism, and political turmoil. Additionally, the protagonists must grapple with the same problems teens face today such as family troubles, poverty, insecurities with the opposite sex, finding one’s identity, body image, belonging, looming life decisions, and so forth. The society in dystopian fiction, and the tension it places against the protagonist, is one of the key strengths distinguishing the genre from other types of YAL. Additionally, fans have met dystopian fiction with remarkable enthusiasm, making it one of the most visible and influential genres in YAL today.

#### Girls in dystopian literature

As dark and lethal as these societies are, the genre has most recently become a haven for female protagonists; the “desire to resist the limitations of gender and age can be found in many contemporary girl protagonists, particularly in the dystopian novels that are commanding so much attention in the world of YA literature now” (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 2014, 3). It is not uncommon for girls of YADF to display exceptional combat skill, perform daring feats of

acrobatics and athleticism, and resort to killing when circumstances call for it. Weapons, motorcycles, explosives, jumping from speeding trains, scaling skyscrapers—these are part of daily life for girls of dystopian stories, and their popularity shows in large part how much they reflect the interests of millennial girls.

In *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature, 1990-2001*, Joanne Brown and Nancy St.Clair compare today's heroines with female protagonists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who "even at their most spirited (even resistant) moments...remained paragons of spotless virtue" (Brown and St. Clair 2002, 7). Brown and St. Clair label such characters "good good girls" of fiction (as opposed to the "good bad boys" who are glorified in their bad behavior), such as Anne Shirley and Pollyanna (Brown and St. Clair 2002, 6-7). Their gentle and feminine natures were rewarded with a softening of the cold, cynical adults around them. Conversely, the millennial generation of young women, having experienced more opportunity and gender equality than any prior generation, demands a new type of heroine. Writer Gemma Malley told the *Telegraph* the current generation of girls expects protagonists like themselves, "who are sparky and think for themselves. Dystopia enables them to have big adventures, but it's also about creating strong characters whom readers care about" (Craig 2012). The protagonists are often presented as average girls embodying opposing character traits (e.g. nurturing and lethal), the juxtaposition of which illustrate how their affections for other characters become motivation for full-blown assaults on their oppressors.

Not all experts agree that the genre is doing all it could for female readership. While Patricia Kennon agreed that such books have tremendous potential for empowering female

characters, she also maintains that “patriarchal authority seem[s] to exert an overwhelming ideological pressure....[and threatens] to overshadow and indeed overwhelm the transformative potential of young adult protagonists in these dystopian future worlds” (Kennon 2005, 48). *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction*—one of the most complete examinations of the female protagonist’s role in dystopian fiction—echoes Kennon’s concerns:

Dystopian novels with adolescent women protagonists in particular often include (and even privilege) romantic elements – love triangles, such as the one made by Katniss, Peeta, and Gale are common features...as are considerations of eventual marriage and motherhood as desirable future outcomes. Although it must be noted that there are empowering possibilities in romance literature, the conventions associated with romance novels may intersect with dystopian settings and adolescent rebellion in a variety of ways, advancing the possibilities of personal growth and adventure or reinforcing traditional emphasis on heterosexuality and gender roles, as well as the centrality of relationships to the maturation process. (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz 2014, 10-11)

It is ironic that the very books bringing so much attention to the importance of YAL are also cited to undermine the legitimacy of the genre. Readers are certainly not blind to recurring patterns in the books they read, and their reactions to the emphasis on romance in female-led YADF surface over and over in literary discussions. The perception is so strong that popular media channels openly mock romantic plot devices. A cursory internet search yields page after page of headlines discussing the prevalence of love triangles and other romantic plot devices: “Thoughts on *The Hunger Games*: Are love triangles killing young adult fiction?” (Lubanszky 2014), “Team Jace vs. Team Simon: Are Fictional Love Triangles Hurting Young Adult Readers?” (Feminspire blog, entry posted August 20, 2013), “The Problem With Love Triangles in YA” (Sandie, Teen Lit Rocks blog, entry posted May 6, 2013), and a discussion board from National Novel Writing Month lists love triangles as one of the top pet peeves in YA literature (National

Novel Writing Month 2013). Whether or not romance is a desirable theme is a question of taste, but its prevalence in the genre is nonetheless apparent.

Romantic elements are common to all genres of fiction, the classics included, so one cannot assume they are always an unwelcome development, especially for teenagers who find themselves entering a period of sexual maturity. It is natural that they would expect their literature to reflect desires and emotions they feel in their own lives. Furthermore, romance is not confined to stories only featuring a female protagonist. Male protagonists are often affected by feelings of adoration and attraction, but the narrative attention usually remains focused on the struggle between the protagonist and the exterior dystopian conflict, while the romance is read as secondary. For example, *Matched* follows the romantic dilemma of Cassia Reyes, and the plot is based on the eventuality of traditional male-female marriage. The Society assigns spouses through statistical matching, therefore romance is already built into the plot material, making it impossible to separate it from the rest of the story (Condie 2010). *The House of the Scorpion* is an excellent example of a story with light emphasis on romance. While Matt has a romantic interest that provides him with insight into his own humanity, she is not the source of his decisions, which are built upon his quest for survival and purpose (Farmer 2002). Cassia's central conflict is one of love; Matt's is one of humanity. The pattern repeats itself in other titles. *The Knife of Never Letting Go* focuses on themes of survival, featuring only latent romance throughout, whereas in *Uglies*, Tally rethinks her loyalties for a love interest even after refusing to do so for her best friend.

Literature on the subject references *The Hunger Games* repeatedly as a case of romance in a dystopian novel. *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers*



expresses how the novel's "love triangle plays a significant role in fueling the narrative progression toward a better world: each boy represents a different path out of dystopia... The courtship narrative therefore says a great deal about Katniss's revolutionary potential and, in turn, raises significant questions about her revered status as a feminist icon for readers of all ages" (Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2013, 118). Placing the focus of the stories on dating, when so much more appears to be at stake in their dystopian backdrops does give the impression that these dark, gritty, edgy novels are simply junior romance rags under the guise of soft science fiction. While these female protagonists are simultaneously characterized as liberators of the powerful female archetype and as lost girls clinging to their boyfriends for identity, another school of thought exists which claims this trend is harmful not to girls, but to boys.

#### Boys and reading: A complicated relationship

The difficulty in getting boys to read is a long-standing interest item for boys' educators and parents. Study after study documents boys lagging behind girls in reading comprehension, reading enjoyment, and overall time spent reading, and the gap is especially wide in the early teenaged years (Loveless 2015, 1-4). Theories as to why this gap exists cover everything from boys not being wired for reading, to cultural dissuasion, to a lack of appropriate reading material for boys. Making sense of YADF, especially how the perceived female dominance relates to boy readers, involves a complicated web of theories about boys' reading habits, what they prefer, how they choose literature, and how the story content affects their engagement.

There is a growing school of thought among educators that adults underappreciate boys' choices in reading material, making boys feel their choices are invalidated. While boys often claim they do not read, many of them reveal they do read a great deal of non-narrative

fiction (graphic novels and comic books) and nonfiction material: video game manuals, sports articles, and other material associated with their hobbies (Jones and Fiorelli 2003, 9). There is undoubtedly value in this type of reading, so much so that one might wonder if girls are getting the worse deal, even as the more skilled reading group. Anne Simpson conducted a study of how boys and girls relate to their choices of fiction and nonfiction materials, and she concluded that while girls were more skilled readers and writers, “boys’ reading practices are more congruent with the acquisition of social power and financial success” (Simpson 1996, 274). Boys do relate to their world through their choices of nonfiction literature, and they should be encouraged to continue this habit, but doubts remain as to whether nonfiction skimming or graphics-oriented fiction can replace the academic, social, emotional, and developmental benefits of narrative fiction.

Kevin St. Jarre wrote in an article for the *English Journal* that “anyone who wonders at the boys’ performance should take a fresh look at the titles that schools are offering or, more often, mandating” (St. Jarre 2008, 15). He proposes school allow students to select their own reading material as a method of promoting lifelong reading habits (St. Jarre 2008, 16). However, a similar article in *School Library Journal* also points out that nonfiction materials, while useful and important, “don’t provide boys with the sustained, language-rich reading experiences they need to become mature readers” (Sullivan 2004, 37). St. Jarre’s notion of allowing teens to choose their own literature is worthy of consideration, as it could open literary dialogue between teens and teachers using some of the most popular titles today, but the idea of allowing hobby magazines or sports articles to completely replace books is unlikely to gain widespread support. The moral and social bridge (discussed above) formed by reading young

adult literature is just as vital for boys as it is for girls (Bushman and McNerny 2004). Arguments built upon abandoning narrative fiction in favor of a broader definition of literature fail to demonstrate whether such reference materials can replace the social, political, and moral commentary in these books. Still, it is true that boys are statistically less likely to relate easily to books, therefore the legitimacy of St. Jarre's indictment of the titles thrust upon boys cannot be ignored; and what message do young men receive when some of the most visible titles surging in popular culture feature love-struck girls in ball gowns superimposed over dystopian backdrops? Perhaps the books—not the boys—are still to blame.

Robert Lipsyte asserts that the early generations of YAL (by writers like Judy Blume, S.E. Hinton, and Robert Cormier) were not gender-specific. The gender demarcation seen today is important because "it's a cliché but mostly true that while teenage girls will read books about boys, teenage boys will rarely read books with predominantly female characters"(Lipsyte 2012). Whether this is an unfair double standard for boys is an entirely different discussion, one this paper is not prepared to address, but Lipsyte's assertion is corroborated by numerous studies.

Who decides if it is a boy book or a girl book? Mostly, the readers do. Elizabeth Dutro's 2001 study concluded that boys sometimes showed interest in what they considered girl books but would reject them publicly for fear they might be teased. She also found that girls made assumptions about boy preferences but held no such reservations about their own reading habits, crossing gender boundaries into boy books without reservation (Dutro 2001, 383). She further describes that gender boundaries are much stricter for boys, and the hierarchy of masculinity determines their reading habits much more than their actual interests in the books' content. Both boys and girls in the study agreed that a book was automatically a girl book if it

pictured a girl on the cover. The findings explain some of the perception that popular female protagonists are not created with boys in mind, since much of the cover art features either the face or silhouette of a girl, or a girl in a ball gown.

An earlier 1984 study also indicated that young boys strongly preferred male characters, but the study also found the strength of this preference decreased as grade level increased. Again, the gender bias was not as strong for girls as it was for boys, making girls more willing to accept stories featuring boys. However, this study made a distinction between the age of the protagonist, as well, stating that the “age of [the] main character may be a more powerful variable in story preference than sex of the main character (Johnson, Peer, and Baldwin 1984, 150). Interestingly, a 2010 study suggested that by the time they reach adulthood, readers of both sexes prefer male protagonists. Researchers modified protagonist sex in excerpts from four different texts and both men and women subjects preferred the male protagonists, regardless of the original sex of the character (Bortolussi, Dixon, and Sopčák 2010, 312). The collective implications of these three studies would suggest that protagonist sex plays varying roles as readers age, and they partly validate the old belief that girls will read about boys, but boys will not read about girls. The literature in this particular area indicates a need for more research, especially in studies specifically addressing protagonist preferences in young adult narrative fiction.

The sex of the protagonist does not itself create an entire story, therefore book content is also highly important in whether a teen will enjoy or reject a book. Simpson observed that girls “empathized with the characters and related events to their own feelings...the boys...would discuss the plot, focus upon the action, and challenge the probability of particular

events in the story” (Simpson 1996, 271). Lipsyte believes this emotional connection—which, according to Simpson, girls relate to easily—makes boys uncomfortable. He also argues that many boys respond well to “tough, edgy story lines that allow boys a private place to reflect on the inner fears of failure and humiliation they try so hard to brush over” (Lipsyte 2011). It follows suit that boys would select stories embodying their own experiences just as their girl counterparts do.

Clark and Foster conducted a study on behalf of The National Literary Trust in the United Kingdom, finding that there were significant overlaps and differences in how story content appealed to boys girls. Notably, boys preferred romance far less than girls (approximately 8% for boys and 39% for girls), although both groups enjoyed adventure, comedy, and horror equally. Each group also enjoyed elements of mystery, crime, and science fiction (Clark and Foster 2005, 35). Applying these findings to popular YADF illustrates how both groups might find common ground in the genre, which often combines elements of adventure, science fiction, fear, and suspense. It also gives credence to concerns over the consistent emphasis on romance that has become such an ingrained part of YADF, especially in books featuring a female protagonist.

#### The white assumption

Equal to concerns over exclusion of boys from popular YAL are calls for more diversity in popular fiction for young adults. As American culture moves toward one of inclusion, the perpetually white world of YAL is conspicuously outdated. A 2009 survey from the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* indicated the landscape of YA fiction remains surprisingly Eurocentric. White characters had the highest representation in YA literature (32% of all titles),

but African Americans were represented only 5% of the time. Even more notably, the study recorded no appearances of Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, or Middle Easterners, and only 10% of the titles surveyed contained characters with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (Koss and Teale 2009, 570). Despite significant social progression, trends in young adult fiction are still dominated by straight, white characters. Given the important role YAL continues to play in literacy development—and the growing influence it has on popular culture—such ethnic homogenization is concerning since it sends the message to underrepresented American adolescents that their experiences simply do not matter.

One of the challenges for authors of culturally explicit books is that they want to highlight the diversity without having the weight of an entire culture's expectations on their shoulders. Award-winning author Matt de la Peña asked in an article for *CNN*, "Where's the African-American Harry Potter or the Mexican Katniss?" (Strickland 2014). He further explains that his work evolved from being about race issues to the race issues becoming an integral part of the larger story, and he hopes a popular iconic character of a race other than white would have enormous implications for minorities (Strickland 2014). Before his death in 2014, African-American author Walter Dean Meyers conveyed the disappointment he experienced as a teenager to discover the books he read were not about him, and he really needed "to become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that [he] saw around [him]" (Dean Myers 2014). Koss and Teale point out that this type of integration is where multiculturalism falls short in YAL. Their study noted that even among titles featuring characters of nonwhite ethnicities, they rarely contained "culturally salient aspects" (Koss and Teale 2009, 566); in other words, the

book featured a token black character or token Latino character with no other facet of the culture represented in the story.

Additionally, the Cooperative Children's Book Center maintains an ongoing study of books by and about people of color, documenting thousands of titles and reviewing them for ethnic diversity. The last update of 2015 recorded approximately 3,500 books, of which only 180 were about African Americans, 38 about American Indians, 112 about Asian Pacific cultures, and 66 featured Latino characters (Cooperative Children's Book Center 2015, 3). Less than 9 percent of the titles recorded in 2015 prominently featured a person of color, a startling figure when nonwhites make up over one third of the U.S. population (United States Census Bureau 2014). The underrepresentation of such a large portion of the population weakens the potential for these titles to promote self-identification in cultural minorities and undermines common themes in dystopian fiction about the privileged elite perpetuating oppression.

Cultural representation is especially important during adolescence, not only to validate the experiences of minority groups, but also "to connect students to the world by providing a wider view" (Landt 2006, 691). As teens enter into the sociopolitical dialogue, it is beneficial for them to be exposed to as many viewpoints as possible, especially those affecting Americans outside their immediate contained communities. Furthermore, exposure to authentic literature on other cultures has the effect of tempering ignorance and prejudice about those cultures (Landt 2006, 692). When teens immerse themselves in the viewpoints of others they are exposed to considerations of a culture they never would have experienced otherwise. Considering the known importance of YAL, and the specific abilities of YADF to address some of the most controversial aspects of society—politics, religion, rights to life, division of wealth,

etc.—it is surprising that the most visible titles should continue to speculate about a future that is ethnically blank.

### Gaps in the literature

Very few studies examine adolescent reading habits with an emphasis on popular YADF, entertainment reading, and visible literature in popular culture. Top titles are pervasive enough to reach television, movies, and social media, even spawning their own slang and fashion movements. Studies on how teens interpret such titles and their applicability to their own experiences are critical in determining whether certain populations are underserved.

Furthermore, studies relating to gender and protagonist preference are inconsistent or do not offer a comprehensive look at long-standing trends for young adults, although some studies examining story content preference do offer insight into teen reading choices. The most recent information available regarding theme preferences by gender was collected in 2005 and should be reexamined to account for changes. While the studies from Elizabeth Dutro and Johnson, Peer and Baldwin suggest strong to moderate gender-match preferences among boys, the later finding of Bortolussi, Dixon and Sopcak (although conducted with adult subjects) contradict earlier findings (Dutro 2001) (Johnson, Peer and Baldwin 1984) (Bortolussi Dixon and Sopcak 2010). There is a clear need for in-depth studies of protagonist gender and ethnic preferences of teen readers and how such preferences affect their choices in material.

Additionally, Clark and Foster's research on theme preferences by gender are instrumental in understanding the types of stories boys and girls relate to. Clark continues to publish studies with the UK's National Literacy Trust, but the most recent studies no longer include analyses of children's and teens' theme preferences. As theme preferences of teens



continue to evolve, research in this area must continue if it is to remain current. Furthermore, the literature was surprisingly sparse on the subject of romance in teen novels, especially with regards to how romance and its many variations may attract or dissuade different reader groups.

While publishers may conduct in-depth studies of cover art, teen habits for choosing novels, and which format will attract them the most, this information is not available in academic circles. The many variables that go into teens' book choices—friend recommendations, effects of cover art, format (paperback vs. e-reader), bookseller recommendations, advanced marketing material—form a complex web of whether a teen would read a certain book. While Rosemary Hopper's study of adolescent reading habits mentions some reasons teens cite for choosing their books, few studies address the topic more fully. The literature is still unclear as to the weight teens apply to factors such as the book's cover, marketing material, the book's summary or blurb, protagonist characteristics, recommendation (either by authority figure or peer), television and movies, genre preference, and familiarity with the title or author.

### **Design and methodology**

Many of the debates surrounding YADF are based on perceptions and media hype, and surprisingly few studies address trends in current YADF and how characters of different genders and ethnic backgrounds affect the themes presented in these books. I wanted to establish whether current perceptions of gender and race representation have merit and to clarify the implications of such trends as they relate to established research in the field of Young Adult Literature.

I began by reviewing the existing research in literary journals, textbooks, and online academic databases for studies on young people's reading habits, preferences, and known research on gender and reading. This research is outlined and discussed in the literature review above. The next portion of the project involved taking an updated snapshot of some of the most popular and visible titles in YADF today, which is essential in determining if there is any credence to claims that YADF books (or YAL in general) have common characteristics deterring boys and nonwhite readers. To gather the sample, I selected popular dystopian novels using the same methods employed by teens: bestseller lists, prior knowledge of the book or author, the appearance of the book, librarian or bookseller recommendation, and books adapted for television or movies (Hopper 2005, 113). This approach made it quickly apparent which titles were most visible to a teen reader searching for book choices, as the same recommendations surfaced over and over. For example, *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner was recommended on Amazon.com based on interest in *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, it was recommended again by the Richland County Public Library (Columbia, SC), and I had prior knowledge of the title from the movie release in 2014.

Using the methods described above, I selected six titles featuring female protagonists, six with male protagonists, and three additional books presenting dual male-female protagonists. Many of the books selected are part of a larger collection such as a trilogy or series, however, this project only accounts for the first book of the series; the first book sets the tone for the themes explored in each of these series and allowed for a broader sample of authors. Also noteworthy, the dual protagonist novels were not part of the original design of the study, but they were prevalent enough during the selection process to merit inclusion. By

sampling novels with various protagonists, I believed I could establish if authors treated female protagonists differently and if there was something inherent to the themes or plots of female-led novels that made them unappealing to boys. I read all 15 novels, coding them for common themes, patterns, character traits, plot devices, and made note of significant awards won for quality comparison purposes (Appendix). Awards driven by factors other than literary quality are not listed (such as readers' choice awards or bookseller reading lists) because they do not necessarily provide insight beyond the title's popularity.

#### Research questions

- What types of titles are available and visible in popular YADF, and does this confirm or contradict prevailing perceptions of the genre?
- Does the content in these books speak to both male and female audiences?
- As a prominent subgenres of YAL today, does YADF appropriately reflect the array of cultures that make up the post-millennial United States?
- What solutions does the industry provide to ensure all young people have equal access to meaningful literary experiences contributing to lifelong reading habits?

#### Results

There was significant thematic repetition across the novels regardless of protagonist demographic, author gender, and story content. For example, the theme of friendship occurred in every novel, and some type of romance was represented in all but one. Not quite as universal, but still strongly represented were themes of rebellion, power and oppression, life choices, survival, and death (Table 1). The least common themes were quests and consumerism (each only occurred in one book) followed by spirituality or afterlife (three books).

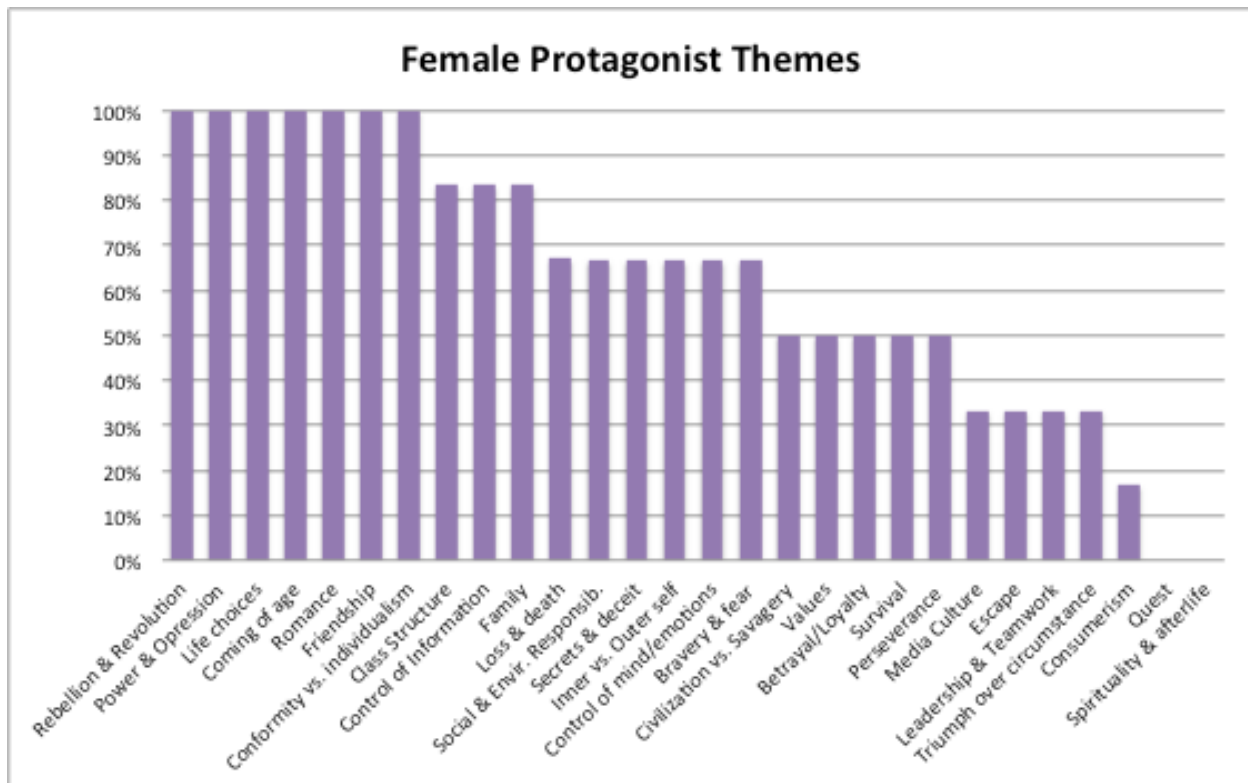
Table 1. Themes across all YADF novels sampled

		Female Prot.					Male Prot.					Mult.				
		<i>The Hunger Games</i>	<i>Divergent</i>	<i>Matched</i>	<i>The Selection</i>	<i>Delirium</i>	<i>Uglies</i>	<i>The Maze Runner</i>	<i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i>	<i>Ready Player One</i>	<i>Feed</i>	<i>Ship Breaker</i>	<i>The House of the Scorpion</i>	<i>Unwind</i>	<i>Legend</i>	<i>Incarceron</i>
Government	Civilization vs. Savagery	X				X	X	X			X				X	
	Rebellion & Revolution	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	
	Class Structure	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	X	X	
	Consumerism						X			X						
	Media Culture	X			X				X	X						
	Power & Oppression	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
	Control of Information		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	
	Social & Environmental Responsibility	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Teen Issues	Life choices	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	
	Coming of age	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X		X	
	Values	X	X			X		X		X						
	Romance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
	Family	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X		X		
	Friendship	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	Secrets & deceit		X	X		X	X	X				X		X	X	
	Betrayal/Loyalty	X	X				X	X			X	X	X	X	X	
	Conformity vs. individualism	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X				
	Inner vs. Outer self	X	X		X		X		X							
	Other	Escape					X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X
Quest									X							
Survival		X	X		X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
Perseverance		X	X			X		X			X				X	
Leadership & Teamwork		X	X					X	X			X	X		X	
Triumph over circumstance		X			X			X	X		X	X			X	
Control of mind/emotions			X	X		X	X			X					X	
Bravery & fear		X	X			X	X	X			X		X	X	X	
Loss & death		X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Spirituality & afterlife								X				X	X			

A separate analysis of stories containing female protagonists all featured elements of rebellion, power and oppression, major life choices, coming of age, romance, friendship, and the battle of conformity versus individuality (Figure 1). The least common themes, not present at all in books with a female protagonist, were quest and spirituality. Although many titles

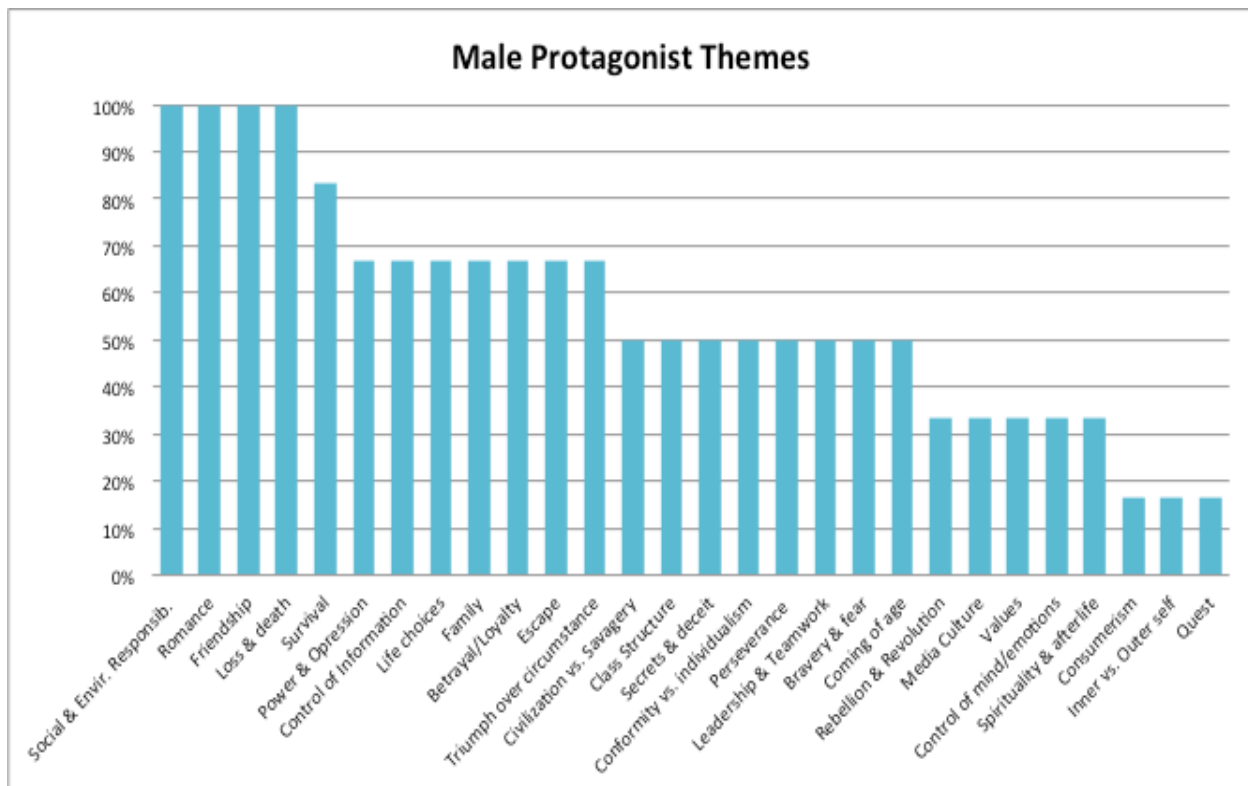
focused on classism, only one contained elements of consumerism (material possessions as desirable achievements in life). A significant minority of the titles featured themes of survival, escape, perseverance, values, loyalty, and civilization vs. savagery.

Figure 1. Theme distribution among books with a female protagonist



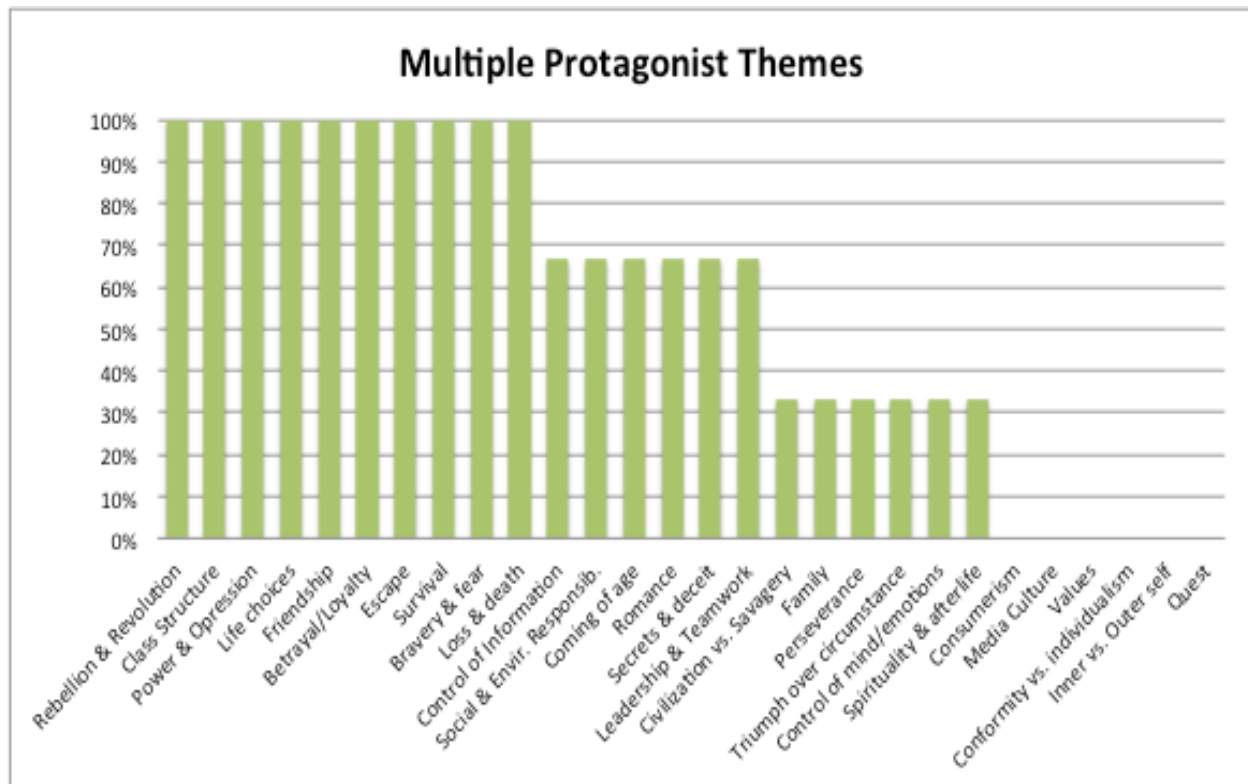
Romance and friendship were also present in all novels involving male protagonists, as were themes of death and social or environmental responsibility. Survival was much more common to books with a male protagonist (83% versus 50% of female-led novels), however, coming of age, and rebellion were far less common (Figure 2). Again, quest and consumerism were among the least common themes, as was inner versus outer self.

Figure 2. Theme distribution among books with a male protagonist



The sample contained three books featuring dual or multiple protagonists. Both *Incarceron* and *Legend* alternate between the viewpoints of a male and female protagonist on opposite sides of a problem, and *Unwind* follows two boys and a girl who share the same problem. Many of the themes were, as expected, similar in nature to those of single protagonist dystopian novels (Figure 3). Still among the most common themes were romance, friendship, power and oppression, loss and death, survival, life choices, and rebellion. Class structure, bravery and fear, and escape were also prominent in all three books. To be fair, this very small sample of dual protagonist books cannot appropriately account for theme trends, although these books are quite popular and influential. Nevertheless, the structure of these books was noteworthy, and this project will discuss their unique capabilities in further detail.

Figure 3. Theme distribution among books with dual male-female protagonists



The emphasis on romance has been a central question throughout this study, and the prevalence of love and romance among the sampled YADF titles made it especially important to examine how the theme manifested. All but one novel featured romantic love (*Incarceron* was the exception), and there were notable differences in how much of a role the central love interest played on characters' decision-making, priorities, belief systems, and actions. The weight of the central romantic relationship was accordingly coded as high, medium, and low (Table 2). Stories having high levels of romantic emphasis were inseparable from the romance, or the romance was the story itself. Additionally, the protagonist abandoned responsibilities in favor of the central relationship and treated other interests as secondary. Stories with medium emphasis treat the romantic involvement as a catalyst for the rest of the story, adding complication and emotional stakes to an existing conflict, but the protagonist's decisions are

not completely determined by romantic considerations. Finally, a book's romantic emphasis was recorded as low when the romance factored little into the final outcome of the story, or if the author did not explicitly write it into the book.

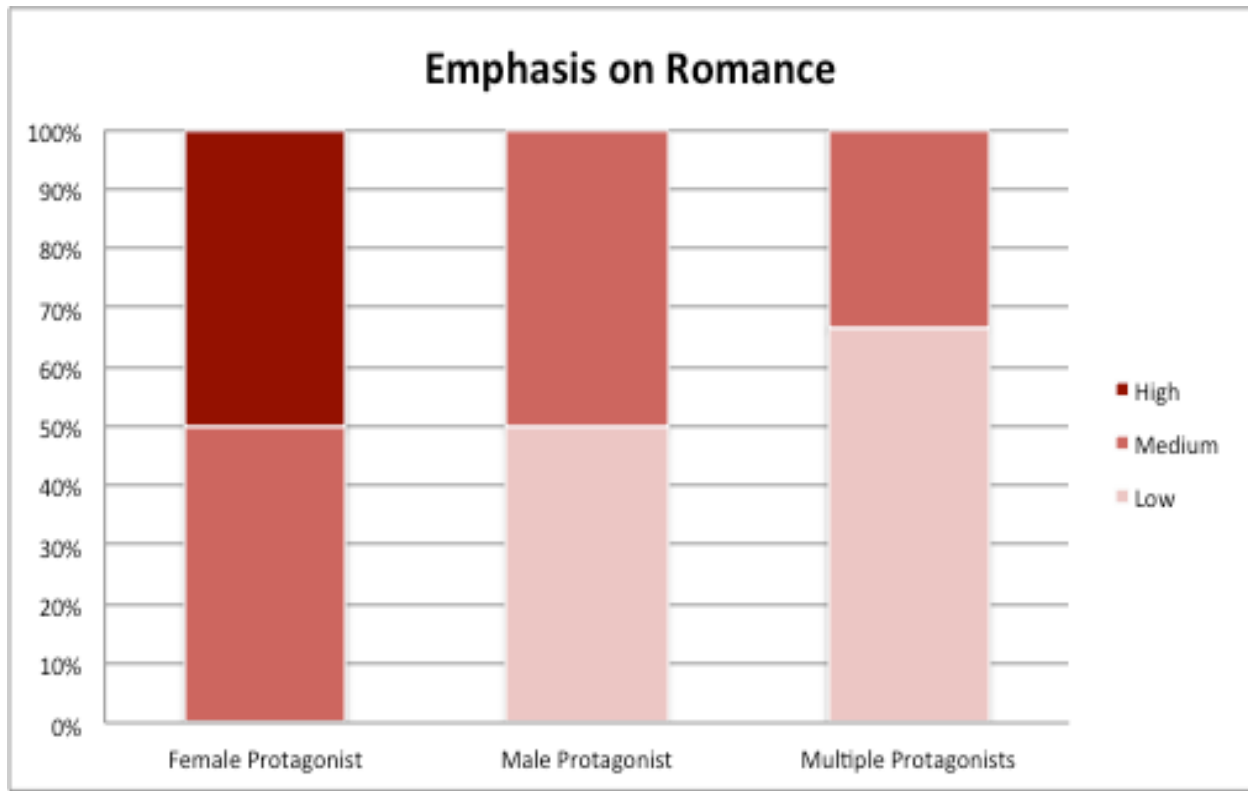
Books with a female protagonist placed primary emphasis on romance in 50% of the titles, and medium emphasis on the other 50%—and some of these could be argued as higher (Figure 4). No titles with a single female protagonist placed less than medium emphasis on romance. Half of the books with a single male protagonist explored romantic love with medium importance, with the remaining half placing little or no emphasis on the romantic relationship. Interestingly, the books with alternating protagonist viewpoints placed the least emphasis on romance, with only one title, *Legend* by Marie Lu, presenting romance as an important vehicle for the rest of the story.

Table 2. Romantic emphasis by title

	Low	Medium	High
<b><i>The Hunger Games</i></b>		X	
<b><i>Divergent</i></b>		X	
<b><i>Matched</i></b>			X
<b><i>The Selection</i></b>			X
<b><i>Delirium</i></b>			X
<b><i>Uglies</i></b>		X	
<b><i>The Maze Runner</i></b>	X		
<b><i>The Knife of Never Letting Go</i></b>	X		
<b><i>Ready Player One</i></b>		X	
<b><i>Feed</i></b>		X	
<b><i>Ship Breaker</i></b>		X	
<b><i>The House of the Scorpion</i></b>	X		
<b><i>Unwind</i></b>	X		
<b><i>Legend</i></b>		X	
<b><i>Incarceron</i></b>	X		

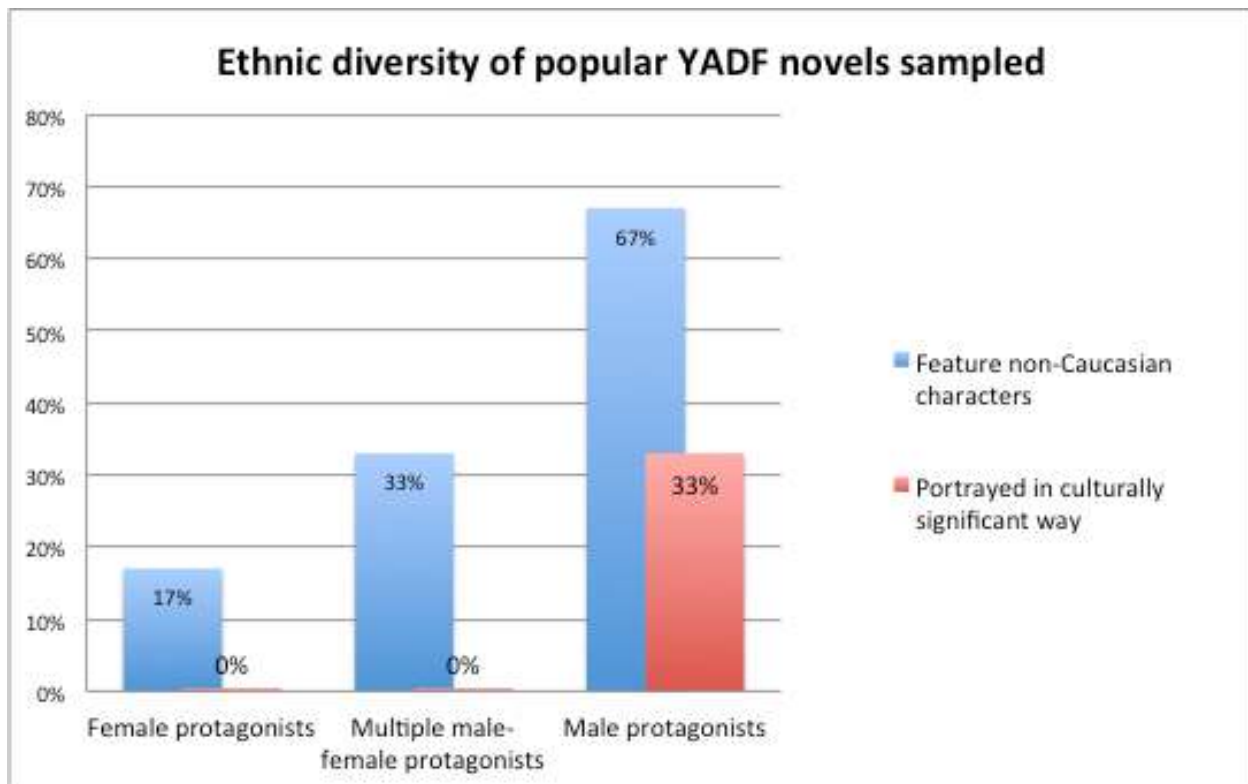


Figure 4. Role of romance as it relates to protagonist gender



The ethnic makeup for protagonists and significant characters for each of the three categories of the study appears in Figure 5. Of the books with a male protagonist, 67% featured nonwhite characters in prominent roles of the story. One third (33%) of the dual male-female protagonist titles featured ethnicities other than Caucasian, and only a single title (17%) of the YADF novels with a female protagonist featured any non-Caucasian characters. Of the titles containing characters of more diverse ethnicities, only two titles (33%)—both featuring male protagonists—presented the minority characters in a culturally significant way.

Figure 5. Ethnic diversity of characters across sample of popular YADF



### Discussion

This sample of popular titles in YADF intended to determine if sufficient evidence exists to validate concerns about YADF publishing practices. The results confirmed heavy romantic emphasis in books with female protagonists, cover art practices consistent with marketing to girls among the titles with female protagonists, and very few titles containing cultural diversity.

While gathering novels for inclusion in this study, it was surprising initially to find how comparatively few dystopian young adult novels had male protagonists. There were quite a few popular titles with male perspectives to choose from, but the visibility and sheer volume of titles with female protagonists was overwhelming. When using library recommendations and online booksellers, lists of dystopian romance novels buried dystopian novels featuring male protagonists; other books recommended to me with male protagonists were not dystopian at

all, but were popular fantasy, supernatural, and superhero books. The process of simply selecting books for this sample provided interesting anecdotal evidence as to the overwhelming visibility of dystopian teen romance titles. The results from my review of popular titles revealed important differences between YADF books featuring male and female protagonists, and may give insight into claims that young adult publishers are catering only to girls.

First, the cover art of these books varies greatly, and despite the old saying about judging a book by its cover, teens admit that the appearance of a book is a significant factor when choosing reading material (Hopper 2005, 117)(Jones and Fiorelli 2003, 9). Of the books featuring female protagonists, four show a picture of a girl, two of which are in ball gowns (*Matched* by Ally Condie and *The Selection* by Kiera Cass), and the last two show only a prominent symbol (*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth). Elizabeth Dutro's study showed that both boys and girls were "adamant that the presence of girls on the cover marks the book as a girls' book" which would have disqualified four of the six female-led YAFD books surveyed for this project before the boys had made it to page one (Dutro 2002, 382). The titles with dual or multiple protagonists, however, are not nearly so gendered in their cover art choices. *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman features a blurry silhouette of a hand, Marie Lu's *Legend* follows the model of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* with a simple symbol, and *Incarceron* by Catherine Fisher shows a picture of a key.

In keeping with the research, it cannot be assumed that teenaged boys are completely unwilling to cross the gender boundary, although they do adhere to self-imposed boundaries much more than girls do. The literature is unclear in this area because too few studies specifically address gender preferences of teenagers. Dutro's study suggests that at a young age

boys are highly gendered in their reading, although she suggests boys reject girl books publicly for fear of reprisal as opposed to actual dislike (Dutro 2002, 379-380). Johnson, Peer, and Baldwin found that boys have a very strong gender match preference, but this wanes as they age. Most recently, Bortolussi, Dixon, and Sopcák conducted a study that unexpectedly indicated that among adults both men and women had a clear preference for male protagonists (Johnson, Peer, and Baldwin 1984). Although the findings are inconsistent, they collectively suggest that by the time boys reach their teenaged years they might explore a book featuring a female protagonist, especially one of the titles with less gendered cover art.

#### Limitations of romantic emphasis

The results of this YADF survey revealed a great deal of overlap in themes between novels with male and female protagonists, providing further evidence of the progressive potential of modern female protagonists taking on nontraditional roles in literature (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz). Most of the novels contained elements of adventure, which Clark and Foster determined is enjoyed equally by both girls and boys, but romance was also prominent as a theme in all but one title (Clark and Foster 2005, 35). This confirmed the claims by Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz that YADF frequently relies on love stories when a female protagonist is involved, which is especially significant given the strong difference between girls' and boys' preferences toward love and romance as a primary theme (Clark and Foster 2005, 35). It feels rather sexist to confine interests by gender—indeed, Johnson, Peer, and Baldwin tempered their findings by calling them “trends, not definitive comments on human behavior”(Johnson, Peer, and Baldwin 1984, 150), adding that children’s reading choices are as unique as the children themselves. Furthermore, it is not for this project to say whether boys

and girls should appreciate the same literature, but studies indicate they overwhelmingly do choose different literature even with equal encouragement from authority figures. It is only by acknowledging trends that this project can address whether current practices unintentionally exacerbate existing literacy gaps between young men and women.

Books with a female protagonist placed at least medium emphasis on romantic elements (and it could be argued that some titles assessed as medium were actually higher). *The Selection* by Kiera Cass, for example, is based on a young girl leaving her futuristic dystopian hometown, mainly to escape a breakup with her boyfriend, and she participates in a competition to become the prince's bride—not unlike the popular television program *The Bachelor*. The dystopian factors were more of a backdrop than an actual part of the story, and the romantic love triangle was privileged to the point that the story could not stand without it. Unlike *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, the societal problems of the dystopia were not especially concerning for the protagonist, America Singer. Diluting the dystopian elements in favor of romance not only excludes readers who find romance unappealing, but it weakens the independent nature of seemingly strong protagonists and calls into question the quality of the literature (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz) (Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2013). It is worth noting that although established literature references *The Hunger Games* repeatedly as an example of a dystopian romance, my analysis found its romantic elements were less prominent than other examples involving female protagonists; this is consistent with the literature by Basu, Broad and Hintz claiming “most adult critics tend to read the romance as a secondary concern” (Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2013, 118). Regardless, a great many female-led novels have love stories that are at least central—if not singular—to the plot. It is still concerning that so many authors

undermine the seriousness of their own themes in favor of excessive romantic plot devices. Interestingly, the male protagonists all had love interests as well, and since these books are quite popular among boy readers, it might be concluded that boys do enjoy romance, but a closer examination of the role of romantic love across genders in YADF revealed important distinctions.

The manifestation of romance in titles told from the male perspective was quite different; although the male-led titles in the sample all contained some type of love story, not one featured it as the story's basis. The findings of Clark and Foster that boys, as a group, prefer stories based predominantly on factors other than romantic love suggest boys require much more emphasis on the adventure of the story (on plot rather than character emotions), even if they tolerate or enjoy stories containing a secondary romantic thread. In M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, for example, the protagonist was not ready to view the world according to his love interest's philosophies, and he ended the relationship; contrast this against *Delirium* by Lauren Oliver, in which Lena abandons her lifelong philosophies and values to run away with her boyfriend. To be fair, *Feed* is a National Book Award Finalist recognized for its high quality, but these comparisons hold true across YADF, giving validity to concerns that many strong heroines being sold to girls are actually throwbacks to traditional gender roles requiring women to pair off with a husband (Kennon 2005) (Day, Green-Barteet, and Montz) (Basu, Broad, and Hintz 2013). Furthermore, the romantic focus of these stories distances teenage boys, a group already recognized as having well-documented lags in literacy and difficulties relating to narrative fiction.

One title that stood apart was *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline. The story follows a young gamer living in a crumbling future America as he searches for legendary “Easter eggs” hidden in a massively multi-player online (MMO) virtual reality. The book reads like a video game with battles, levels, games within games, and countless references to 1980s music, video games, television shows, and movies. Admittedly, the literary quality leaves something to be desired due to loosely defined themes and marginal character development. Also, outside the confines of the gaming world, no connection exists between the dystopian elements and the protagonist’s victory. At times the author’s own voice seems to overtake his narrator, inserting narrative material that did not necessarily add to the story and came across as a personal soapbox. Still, Cline’s book accomplishes what Sullivan, St. Jarre, Jones and Fiorelli, and Jami Jones call for—it respects boys’ preferences, gives them a story emphasizing the physical rather than emotional, and it gets them reading narrative fiction (Sullivan 2004, 37) (St. Jarre 2008) (Jones and Fiorelli 2003) (Jones 2005). High quality must always be the goal, but books like *Ready Player One* may still act as gateways for boys who are reluctant to explore the gritty labyrinth of dystopian fiction for fear it is girly—unfortunately, books like it are the exception, not the rule.

While it is not reasonable to expect every book to be everything to every reader, the unique ability of dystopian fiction to communicate an individual’s impact within societal structure and question the status quo make it especially important to preserve the genre’s applicability across demographics. Dystopian books with little or no romance are certainly available, but in the shadow of the viral popularity enjoyed by female-led dystopian love

stories, making boys aware of the titles that speak to them is the challenge. The same can be said for ethnic representation in popular YADF.

#### Broader appeal

Susan Landt observed that the availability of multicultural reading is slowly improving, but making audiences aware of them is difficult (Landt 2006, 690). She argues that it is important for educators to include multicultural texts in their curricula to validate the experiences of minority groups as well as open a window into other life experiences for mainstream students. The challenge, however, is finding texts that appropriately balance cultural authenticity with the temptation for authors to sneak in a token minority. The sample for this study fared better in terms of diversity than statistics from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (Cooperative Children's Book Center 2015, 3). Whereas CCBC found only 9% of its titles included nonwhite characters, my sample indicated 17% of books with female protagonists contained multicultural characters, as well as 33% of multiple POV titles, and 67% of male-led titles. These numbers are not as encouraging as they may appear at first.

For example, *The Hunger Games* was recorded as containing nonwhite characters because of the description of Katniss Everdeen as having "straight black hair, olive skin...gray eyes" (Collins 2008, 8). Of course, this description is ambiguous and could refer to a person from some parts of Europe, the Mediterranean, Latin America, areas of the Middle East or even Asia. Conversely, Katniss has a blonde sister and mother, making European decent more likely. Rue, Katniss' ally during the games, was also described as having "dark eyes and satiny brown skin," likely indicating she is African American or multiracial (Collins 2008, 98). Even Rue's ethnicity is not presented in a culturally significant way, which could lead to the impression that



she is the token minority. *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner describes Alby, the leader of the so-called Gladers, as “a dark skinned boy,” and the Runner Minho as “an Asian kid with strong arms and short black hair” (Dashner 2009, 7-78). The characters ethnicities did not play any significant role in the story other than to offer diversity of character descriptors, which admittedly still has value to an extent.

Only two titles across all categories featured diverse characters in a culturally significant way. *Ship Breaker* featured multiple ethnic backgrounds (Latino and Caribbean Islanders) within their class structure as coastal salvage workers. The characters’ races do not merely describe the color of their skin, and the book was not about racial issues, but the characters’ ethnicities became an important part of the tapestry of the story. Similarly, *The House of the Scorpion* was heavily laced with cultural references to a futuristic post-Mexican society called Aztlán. The characters’ ties to Mexican culture are so embedded in the story that, although the story is not specifically about racial issues, the culture is an integral part of the story (Farmer 2002). Such titles accomplish what Walter Dean Meyers asserts multicultural writing should do. They go beyond showcasing victimization of minority groups and validate real-life experiences of teens of all backgrounds (Dean Meyers 2014). Taking into account Vivian Howard’s stance that young adult literature is vital to teens’ self-identity construct, it is just as damaging when the prevailing popular literature (which is even ushered into the classroom in an attempt to relate to teens) implies only white stories are worth reading.

From a business standpoint, it is easier for publishers to cater to audiences with known success. Publishers are intimately familiar with well-documented reading lags among boys and minorities and the tendency for boys to favor nonfiction and non-narrative material over

narrative fiction (Loveless 2015) (St. Jarre 2008) (Jones 2005) (Jones and Fiorelli 2003). In teenaged girls, publishers have a ready-made group of literary consumers; why not focus on the formula for highly lucrative books regardless of the audiences they serve? After all, publishers are not librarians; they are in the business of making money. Nevertheless, the crucial role of literature in a literate society cannot be overlooked, and it becomes even more important when considering the role pleasure reading and narrative fiction plays in teens' identity construction—as noted by Bushman and McNerny, Santoli and Wagner, and Howard—and providing teens with “sustained, language-rich reading experiences they need to become mature readers” (Sullivan 2004, 36). Educators increasingly incorporate young adult fiction into their lessons not only for its entertainment value, but for its literary merit—a characteristic which relies on publishers putting high quality books in the market featuring characters of multiple races, genders, cultural backgrounds, and philosophies.

#### Changing perspectives on YADF

Authors appear sensitive to trends excluding many readers from the dystopian experience, and many are experimenting with different structures as vehicles for their stories, using alternating points of view to involve multiple characters of different genders and races. The three dual protagonist books were added to the study because their importance to the YA landscape was undeniable; books with multiple points of view surfaced repeatedly among the most recommended YADF titles. As Koss and Teale attest, these are not new forms, but they are becoming more prevalent as today's authors take risks and experiment (Koss and Teale 2009, 570). The equal time given to male and female characters alleviates the tendency to categorize a book as being for either boys or girls. *Legend*, for example, contains romance

between both protagonists, but the alternating points of view allowed the author to also show their distrust of one another and preserved the overarching themes of rebellion, classism, and deceit. *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman follows three main characters from different social backgrounds whose shared fate is to have their body parts distributed to others. By using multiple perspectives Shusterman explores the dysfunctional structure of the futuristic dystopia with much greater depth than a single point of view could have provided (Shusterman 2007). Catherine Fisher uses alternating points of view in *Incarceron* to follow two characters on opposite sides of a prison wall—each trapped in a different form of dystopia. Interestingly, *Incarceron* is the only title of this sample with no overt romantic themes (Fisher 2007).

Each of these books uses multiple perspectives in different ways, but the flexibility it affords each to explore characters of different genders, backgrounds, even characters separated by geography, allows them to broaden their audiences and the depth of their stories. If publishers fear poor sales from novels committing to the male perspective, or that of an inner-city kid, or transgender teen, multiple perspective novels may be able to reconcile mainstream dystopian appeal with literature that challenges preconceived notions.

### **Areas for further research**

Existing literature on protagonist preferences among adolescent readers is limited, and literary scholars would benefit from a great deal more research into how protagonist gender affects teen reading experiences. As discussed above, there are gaps in the literature as to how protagonist gender affects preferences and reading choices among teens, and studies examining theme preferences should also be updated. Furthermore, this project devoted limited attention to diversity factors other than race, but other reader populations may be

underserved in the same manner, such as gay or transgender teens. This project was unable to address such items within the scope and time frame allotted.

Also, my initial difficulty in finding YADF titles with male protagonists indicates a need to identify the percentage of YADF with male protagonists versus female protagonists.

Determining these figures would indicate whether consumers push female-led titles into the spotlight (making them easier to locate) or if publishers choose not to invest in male-led dystopian fiction. Furthermore, titles with male protagonists—though more difficult to locate—commanded the most prestigious awards and accolades in the sample. With the exception of *The Hunger Games*, female-led titles had only a few minor accolades, but awards of such magnitude as the Newbery Medal or Michael L. Printz Award were out of reach. It is unclear whether authors sacrifice quality where their female protagonists are concerned or if judges favor male authors and male protagonists. Still, the volume and visibility of female titles reinforce assumptions that YADF is largely a genre for girls.

The time limits of this project restricted sample size significantly, excluding many noteworthy titles from the survey. The study should be repeated with a larger research team and expanded book sample—for example, with the top 100 bestsellers in YADF—to account for larger trends. Also, digital publishing has significantly altered the risks and barriers associated with publishing fiction, and researchers should explore how digital media channels have changed literature quality, teen reading habits and preferences, and accessibility to characters of certain demographics. Again, these questions were outside the scope of this project, but the rapidly changing nature of publishing accessibility is redefining the roles of publishers and how titles reach consumers.

## Conclusion

Young adult dystopian fiction has created incredible opportunities for female protagonists to embody nontraditional gender roles, however the tendency for publishers to showcase the romantic aspects of their stories and underrepresent cultural minorities excludes a significant portion of the reader population. Involving all teens in literature validates their experiences, plays a crucial part in developing reading skills, and allows young men and women to explore ethics as they form their own ideas about morality. Furthermore, dystopian fiction is especially well suited to challenge political and social patterns through the perspective of an individual trapped in the greater mechanism of society. As librarians and teachers attempt to involve their students in literature, popular titles are increasingly being recognized as favorable alternatives to the classics.

For girls, the innovation of dystopian fiction has thrown them into the pages in ways previously reserved for their boy counterparts. The analysis portion of this project determined recurring themes and confirmed claims regarding the abundance of romantic themes in female-led YADF. Female protagonists in YADF occupy leadership positions, take on physical roles, and influence entire governmental regimes. Still, these books maintain one foot in the past, nearly always portraying the heroines as equally motivated by a love interest, undermining their potential for independent thoughts and actions. The common theme of romance also has the effect of distancing boy readers who demonstrate an overall dislike for emphasis on love.

Attracting boy readers is notoriously difficult. Literature shows boys' reading skills lag significantly behind their female peers, and they are more likely to state that they find reading boring. Furthermore, as a group they tend to favor graphic novels, comic books, and nonfiction

relating to their interests as opposed to narrative fiction. Publishers understand this and market to girls through heavy romantic emphasis and by picturing girls on book covers; such practices make it even more unlikely that boys, as a group, will choose such titles, even if only for fear of reprisal from peers. My analysis of YADF confirms the validity of concerns that many of the top titles in YADF are published with girl-oriented themes and cover art. Not only should claims of exclusion by gender be taken seriously, but the lack of diversity in YADF also deserves more attention.

A culture of inclusion and equality is essential to any part of a free society, but in young adult literature, ethnic minorities and non-mainstream cultures are sorely underrepresented. My analysis of dystopian fiction fares better in some ways than figures from The Cooperative Children's Book Center, however no titles with female or dual protagonists contains culturally relevant characters, and only two titles with male protagonists did. Ethnic minorities benefit from seeing themselves in literature for validation, just as ethnic majorities gain new perspectives to potentially bridge cultural gaps. Although the findings in this paper are from a small sample, the visibility of these titles is an important factor in how they perpetuate the perception and manifestation of cultural exclusion.

It is not enough for the gatekeepers of young adult fiction—especially young adult dystopian fiction with its strong emphasis on social responsibility and integrity—to brush off their own responsibilities for creating a canon of young adult literature that appropriately serves multiple audiences. High quality and inclusiveness are especially important when considering that the investments publishers make in young readers today are returned to them in the form of capable and enthusiastic future adult readers. Such an investment must begin

with understanding and appreciating reader preferences. Literacy is not simply a for-profit venture; it is a cornerstone of a free democratic society and must be cultivated by all members of society: publishers, authors, parents, teachers, librarians, and readers of all ages.

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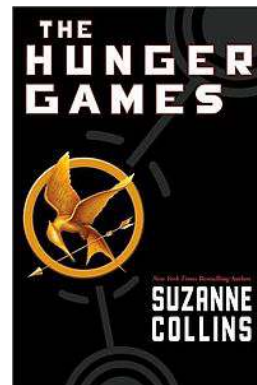
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## Appendix: Summaries and cover art for titles sampled

Popular YADF titles featuring female protagonists

### ***The Hunger Games, by Suzanne Collins (2008)***

Starvation is an ever-present threat in District 12, and the citizens are forced by the Capitol to enter their children in a televised fight-to-the-death. When Katniss Everdeen's sister is called to compete, Katniss volunteers in her place. Now facing almost certain death, she must try to outrun and outsmart the many people who want her dead.



\* Awards: *Publishers Weekly* Best Books in Children's Fiction (2008), *New York Times* Notable Children's Book (2008), American Library Association (ALA) Top Ten Books for Young Adults, ALA Notable Children's Book, Cybil Award (2008), and other accolades.

### ***Divergent, by Veronica Roth (2011)***

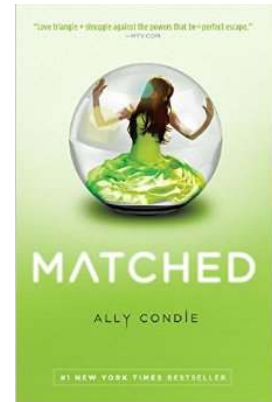
When Beatrice Potter takes her examination to determine in which of her society's factions she belongs, something goes terribly wrong with the test. Hiding her dangerous secret, she abandons her family and quiet life in Abnegation and must convince everyone that she truly belongs with the Dauntless, a rowdy and fearless group of tattooed warriors. But as her training progresses under the watchful eye of a mysterious boy called "Four" she begins to uncover her society's darkest secrets and must redefine her own understanding of bravery.



\*Awards: *Publishers Weekly* Best Books in Children's Fiction (2011).

***Matched, by Ally Condie (2010)***

Cassia Reyes trusts The Society implicitly, so when her matching ceremony reveals her best friend Xander as her match, she doesn't question it—until someone else's face flashes across her screen. She tries to accept it as a simple error, but the more she gets to know Ky, the less she is sure a life with Xander is what she really wants.



\*Awards: Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Teens' Top Ten (2011), *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's Books (2010), Whitney Award for Best Youth Fiction-Speculative (2010).

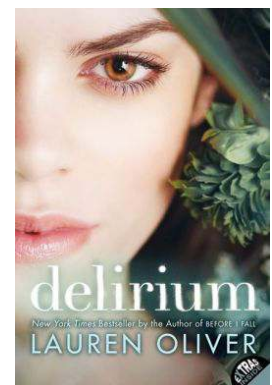
***The Selection, by Kiera Cass (2012)***

America Singer comes from a family of artists in her country's strict caste system. She and her family are Fives. Finances are challenging, and America's only hope to improve her situation is to marry someone from a higher caste. Unfortunately, the love of her life is a Six, an even lower caste. When the country's prince calls eligible girls to the palace to choose one as his bride, she wants no part of it. But after she and Aspen have a fight and break up, she decides to go and take a chance on royalty.



***Delirium, by Lauren Oliver (2011)***

Lena has grown up with a powerful fear of love, the illness plaguing a futuristic United States. She looks forward to the day she can be cured and no longer has to live in fear of falling in love. With only a few months left until her procedure, she is drawn to a boy she thought



had been cured, but she learns he is actually part of a network of rebels fighting against the Cure. Facing a choice between the safe life she always expected and life as a fugitive, Lena must decide if love is enough.

\*Awards: YALSA's Best Fiction for Young Adults (2012).

***Uglies, by Scott Westerfeld (2005)***

Tally Youngblood cannot wait for her procedure to end her days as an Ugly and allow her to live in the glittering city reserved for Pretties. For reasons Tally cannot understand, her friend Shay does not want to become pretty. But when Shay runs away, a special department of the government coerces Tally into tracking Shay for them. When she finds her in a hidden town called the Smoke everything Tally knows is challenged, and she must decide where her loyalties lie.



Popular YADF titles featuring male protagonists

***The Maze Runner, by James Dashner (2009)***

Thomas awakens to find himself in a vast maze with only fragments of his memory intact. The other boys who live there, who call themselves the Gladers, have spent years trying to find a way out of the maze—and many died in the process. When a girl arrives shortly after Thomas, everything begins to change, and the search for a way out becomes desperate. Thomas knows he is meant to be a Runner in the maze. What he does not know is who put them in there and why.

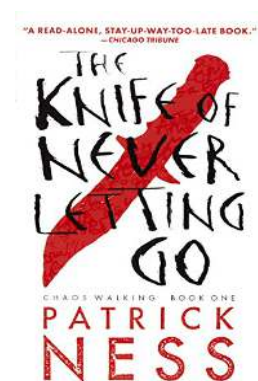


\*Awards: ALA Best Books for Young Adults (2011).

***The Knife of Never Letting Go, by Patrick Ness (2008)***

Todd Hewitt is the only boy in Prentisstown, an off-Earth colony populated only by men. A mysterious germ on the planet connects all living things through the Noise, but Todd unexpectedly stumbles upon a hole in the Noise and discovers the only girl he has ever seen. Chaos erupts in the town sending Todd, his dog, and the girl fleeing for their lives.

\*Awards: Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (2008), James Tiptree Jr. Award (2008).



***Ready Player One, by Ernest Cline (2011)***

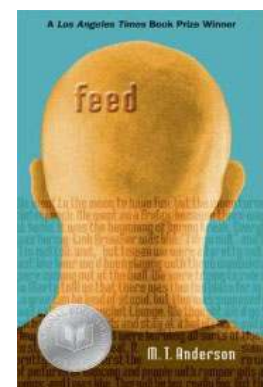
When the creator of a vast multi-player virtual universe known as the OASIS dies he leaves a cryptic video announcing a competition for his entire fortune. After years searching for Halliday's Easter egg people begin to lose interest, but when 18-year-old Wade Watts finds the first of three keys, the hunt reignites with unimaginable fervor. With his competitors on his trail, Wade soon discovers the dangers of his newfound fame. The stakes of the game may even cost him his life in the real world.

\*Awards: YALSA Alex Award (2012).



***Feed, by M.T. Anderson (2002)***

People no longer need external devices to access information thanks to the Feed implanted in their brains. While vacationing on the moon with his friends Titus meets a deep-thinking girl named Violet just before they all have their Feeds attacked by a hacker. Titus and his friends

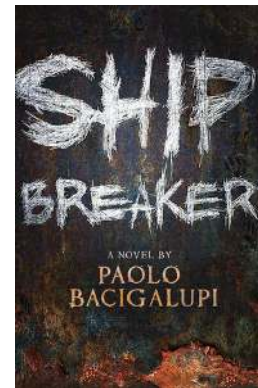


make full recoveries, but Violet’s situation seems less certain. She tries to convince Titus to resist the Feed’s marketing barrage, but her body begins to fail. Amidst his turmoil with Violet, Titus struggles to process the degradation of the world around him.

\*Awards: National Book Award Finalist (2002), Boston-Globe Horn Honor Book (2003).

***Ship Breaker, by Paolo Bacigalupi (2010)***

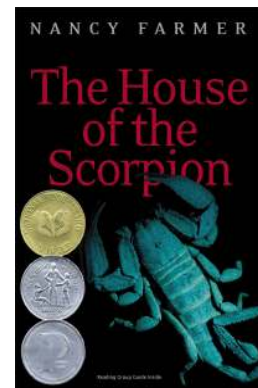
In the rubble of a Gulf Coast’s salvage yard, Nailer’s life stripping metal from old ships is difficult and dangerous. When a storm shipwrecks a luxury clipper ship he cannot believe his luck—until he finds a wealthy heiress, Nita, still alive inside. As Nailer decides between keeping the bounty for himself or helping Nita stay alive, his father’s murderous gang moves in on the girl.



\*Awards: Michael L. Printz (2011).

***The House of the Scorpion, by Nancy Farmer (2002)***

Growing up as the clone of a powerful drug lord in the country of Opium, Matt Alacrán is treated as an abomination. He suffers through loneliness, imprisonment, threats, and taunts from the other residents of the household. While struggling to understand his place in the world, Matt learns about the secrets and practices of the vast drug empire, and that El Patrón’s protection only extends as far as the clone’s usefulness. Escape from the only home he has every known may be Matt’s only hope.



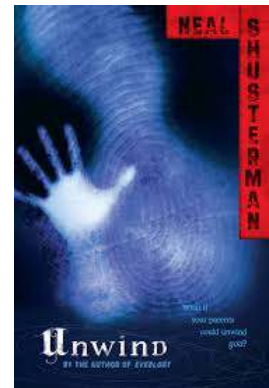
\*Awards: National Book Award (2003), Newbery Honor Book (2003), Michael L. Printz (2003).



## YADF titles with multiple perspectives

***Unwind, by Neal Shusterman (2007)***

To unite warring Pro-life and Pro-choice sides of a bloody civil war, the United States passed “The Bill of Life” to protect unborn children and allow redistribution of teenagers’ body parts to other member of society. By keeping them alive in other people, unwound children are technically never killed. Connor, Risa, and Lev cross paths on their way to being unwound, and their harrowing journeys all take unexpected turns.



\*Awards: ALA Best Books for Young Adults (2008), Bank Street Best Books of the Year (2008).

***Legend, by Marie Lu (2011)***

Day, one of the most wanted criminals in the Republic, is searching for answers about a mysterious plague sweeping through his family’s slum neighborhood. June is high-class military prodigy being groomed for leadership in the Republic’s forces. When June’s brother Metias is killed during an encounter with Day, she goes undercover and tracks him down. As Day and June become acquainted through veils of secrecy and deceit, new questions arise about the country’s enigmatic plagues and the circumstances of Metias’ death. Allegiances begin to shift.

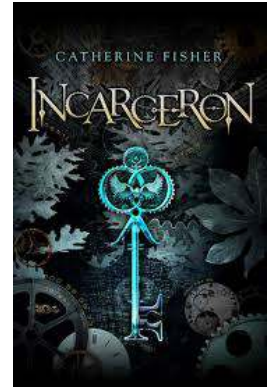


\*Awards: Rebecca Caudill Young Readers Book Award (2015).

***Incarceron, by Catherine Fisher (2007)***

No one has entered or exited the vast living prison called Incarceron in centuries; yet Finn is sure he originated outside the prison. When he discovers a crystal key that allows him to

communicate with a girl named Claudia, who happens to be the Warden's daughter, he hopes to discover who he really is. Claudia is trapped in a world made to resemble the 17th century and facing an arranged marriage to a boy she despises. As Claudia and Finn work to find an escape route for Finn, they uncover legends, mysteries, and conspiracies that could change their circumstances.



\*Awards: *The Times* Children's Book of the Year.