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A Cover is Worth 1000 Words: Visibility and Racial Diversity in Young Adult Cover Design

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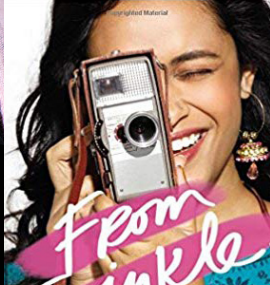
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FACES OF COLOR ON 2017 YA BOOK COVERS

Most Anticipated Diverse YA Books of 2018



The Rise of Diversity in Young Adult Literature

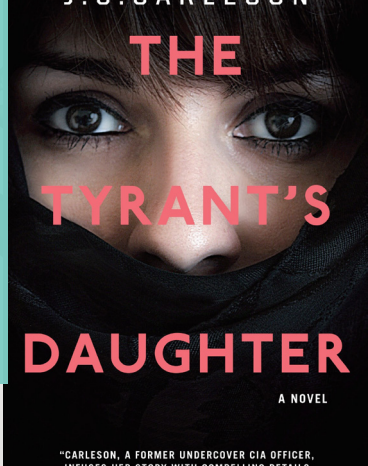
tanaz bhathena
A Year Later, #WeNeedDiverseBooks Has Left Its Mark On BookCon

More diversity, fewer YA love triangles? Some predictions for children's literature in 2018
Utah authors and book experts talk about current trends.



A COVER IS WORTH 1000 WORDS

VISIBILITY AND RACIAL DIVERSITY IN YOUNG ADULT COVER DESIGN
JENNY KIMURA | MA IN BOOK PUBLISHING
SPRING 2019

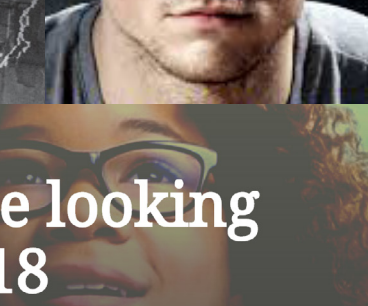
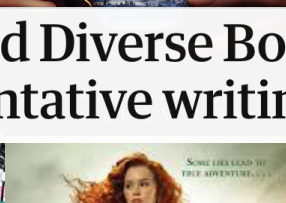
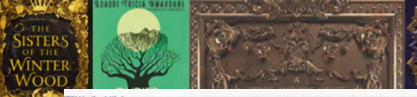


17 #OwnVoices YA Books Coming Out This Year We Can't Wait to Read



#WeNeedDiverseBooks Announces Initiatives

'We Need Diverse Books' calls for more representative writing for children



Diverse YA book adaptations we're looking forward to in 2018

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About

RESEARCH QUESTION

What can a qualitative and quantitative analysis of visual representation of racial diversity in young adult book covers from 2014 and 2018 tell us about how calls for racially diverse YA have changed publishing industry practices, and what can it tell us about how future cover design practices can help represent more diversity in YA?

ABSTRACT

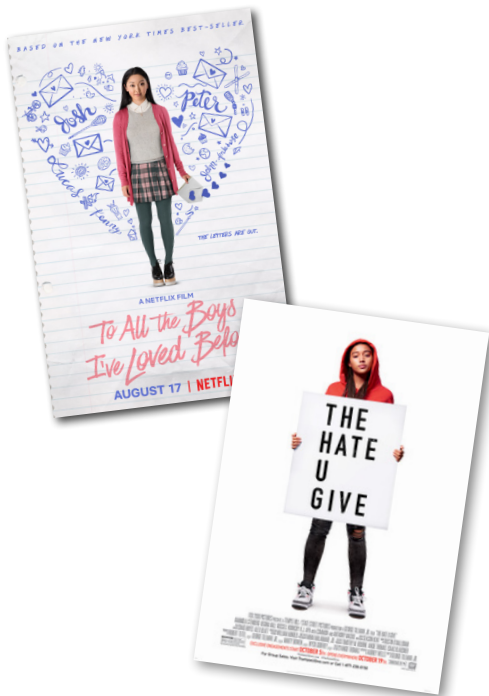
Diversity in young adult literature has been a hot topic in the publishing industry for many years now, and calls for diversity from the YA community, librarians, authors, and publishing professionals have garnered nationwide attention. But while the conversation around diverse content is well-documented, few have considered how young adult cover design might have an impact on how diversity, especially in terms of race/ethnicity, is represented visually.

The research detailed in this paper compiles and analyzes data from 700 covers each from 2014 and 2018 respectively (1400 book covers total). In my quantitative analysis, I wanted to know whether young adult literature increased the amount of POC characters represented on book covers between 2014 and 2018. In my qualitative analysis, I analyzed the quality of those existing POC characters on covers, using a standardized scale that measured the visibility of an individual character to a viewer of a cover based on the individual's position, size, body, face, eyes, and obscurity.

While my results require a further analysis of other years to make more definitive assumptions, overall I found that while explicit POC representation on covers is becoming more identifiable, more accurate totals of representation that reflect race/ethnicity in the US is still not a reality. The data found in both the quantity and quality analyses not only help us understand how the diversity movement in YA publishing has helped create change over the last four years, but also how cover designers and other industry professionals working within publishing can use the visibility standards presented here to make more people of color present and highly visible on future book covers.



Book covers are a key place to visualize diversity in YA publishing. So shouldn't we be talking about the quality and quantity of that visual representation?



The movie posters of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and *The Hate U Give*, respectively.

From the triumphant young adult movie adaptations, including *The Hate U Give* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, to *New York Times* best sellers like *Children of Blood and Bone*, the amount of visual diverse representation in the young adult ecosystem has never been so prominent than in 2018. But the conversation around diversity in YA books is not new. It's been four years since the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign went viral, starting on Twitter and gradually making its way into numerous articles, book panels, and full blogs dedicated to the subject. Four years later, and it is still the number-one topic on everyone's lips in the publishing industry when it comes to YA. We've seen successful diverse books and best sellers pointed out year after year, but they do not answer whether or not diverse representation in YA literature has changed significantly overall.



There are so many different aspects to both diversity and YA books that it is impossible to answer this question with a simple, easy statistic. What does a fully diverse YA category look like? Are we counting diverse content, diverse authors, diverse cover design? Perhaps these unanswerable questions are why people stick to the individual success stories—after all, if *The Hate U Give*, a YA contemporary about an African American teenager named Starr who deals with racial discrimination and a police shooting in her hometown, can top best-seller lists and make it to Hollywood, then it stands to reason that it will open the magical publishing door for diverse books just like it ... someday. All we have to do is give the publishing industry

time to find those books and those important voices, right?

That certainly may be true, but it's been four years since the awareness for diversity in YA has received national attention—in mainstream media, across social media platforms, and within industry-specific publications and conventions—which is more than enough time to publish several cycles of diverse books, and yet, there are only a few that receive widespread attention each year. While we should of course be celebrating those victories, promoting them across the country to our teens and young adults, we must recognize that in order for change to occur in our lifetime, representation of diversity in publishing must increase significantly every year—and not just in content. Rather, opportunities for diversity must be found not only in the stories we read, but also in the authors we publish, in the publishing professionals we hire, in the book covers we design.

While a whole host of notable YA authors, librarians, and book bloggers have diligently tracked diverse children's and YA books, both by subject and author, for years—in the case of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), since 1985—few have turned to the subject of tracking diverse representation in book covers on a large scale.¹ We can all agree that the cover of a book

is a key place for promoting visual diversity, especially for YA books, as they don't have the benefit of interior illustrations like many children's books do. The cover is not only the first encounter a reader will have with a book, but it is also the first indicator of whether or not a book is diverse, which is vital to teens and young adults who are seeking a reflection of themselves in the books



An infographic from Kate Hart's 2012 study of YA book covers.

they read. With such an important responsibility on the shoulders of a book cover, why haven't we tracked covers with the same vigilance that we do the content inside?

Certainly, diversity (or perhaps lack thereof) in book covers come up most often when a publisher makes the mistake of whitewashing a book character. This was made famous in 2009 by Justine Larbalestier's *Liar*, when Bloomsbury used a white

cover model for a black main character on its cover.² On a positive note, book bloggers and even mainstream media sites like *Buzzfeed* have regularly curated articles about each year's most prominent diverse books and their covers. But these instances—both good and bad—are small, individual cases that cannot represent the whole picture of diversity within YA cover design.

I suggest that a lack of conversation about diverse book covers on a large scale is due to two reasons: first, there are too many books and too many variables to accurately count and track. The last large sampling of YA book covers to count diversity was done by YA author Kate Hart in 2012, who conducted an informal survey of 624 YA books that were pulled from a combination of Goodreads's 2011 YA book list (which included some, but not all, self-published and independent titles in addition to the Big Five) and acquisitions announcements in Publisher's Marketplace. Her survey reported that 90% of YA books in 2011 portrayed a white character, while 1.2% were black, 10% were ambiguous, 1.4% were Latinx, and 1.4% were Asian.³ However, there are many variables that this information depends on. Even if we assume that Hart's determination of race was fairly accurate, we don't know whether those rulings were

¹ "Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators," Cooperative Children's Book Center, updated March 8, 2019. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp#charts>

² Justine Larbalestier, "Ain't that a Shame (Updated)," *Justine Larbalestier* (blog), July 23, 2009. <http://justinelarbalestier.com/blog/2009/07/23/aint-that-a-shame/>

³ Kate Hart, "Uncovering YA Covers 2011," *Kate Hart* (blog), May 16, 2012. <https://www.katehart.net/blog//2012/05/uncovering-ya-covers-2011.html>



Above are the covers of Maura Milan's *Ignite the Stars* (2018), and Renée Ahdieh's *Smoke in the Sun* (2018), respectively.

based solely on the visuals of the cover or a combination of back cover copy and visuals, and we don't know what constitutes a "full" character, as she included both 1-person covers and multiple-individual covers.

Second, how do we even distinguish what *good* diverse cover design looks like, which matters if we want cover designers to create more recognizably diverse cover design in the future? Unfortunately, comparing covers is not as simple as comparing content. In looking at two racially diverse YA covers from 2018, Renée Ahdieh's *Smoke in the Sun* and Maura Milan's *Ignite the Stars* both feature fairly recognizable Asian characters on their covers. On a quantity level, these two covers are the same, yet the character featured on Milan's cover is much more obvious and recognizable as Asian—that is, her *visibility to the reader is higher*. The question, then, that I have begun to answer here, is how we measure that qualitative difference in visibility, using standards that can be applied to any book cover with an individual on it.

My survey of YA book covers, the methodology and results of which are detailed next, thus aims to address these two issues by measuring a large sample of covers quantitatively and qualitatively, specifically for racial diversity. As many other quantity studies, such as the annual diversity data from the CCBC, already keep score of racially diverse books each year by content and by author, the goal of my quantitative measurements is to find out how those statistics change when applied only to book covers, while the qualitative study focuses on book covers with individual characters, and will provide a method to help rank and give standards to cover design trends in YA as they relate to visibility and the reader.

QUANTITY METHODOLOGY

For my quantitative study, I looked at book covers from two different years: first, 2014, the starting year of #WeNeedDiverseBooks, to act as a "control" sample. The books published during this year would have been designed and chosen prior to the most prominent campaign for diversity in YA, and though there were certainly conversations about diversity before 2014, many consider it to be the year where the conversation jumped to national prominence. The second year is, of course, 2018, as we want to use the most recent year of books.

Next, I pulled book covers from Goodreads, a social cataloging website for books, which contains user-generated lists of YA books for each year, starting in 2010 and moving up through the present year and even beyond. Anyone can add titles to the Goodreads lists, which makes it an ideal resource, though there are limitations (see note).⁴ I cataloged books

⁴ As Goodreads lists are user-generated, I occasionally saw titles I recognized as not being YA, such as Shannon Hale's *Princess in Black*, which is considered middle-grade fiction. If I caught the titles during the quantity process, I replaced the title with a new one from the Goodreads YA list in order to maintain 1400 total book covers surveyed, though this was dependent on my own ability to recognize a mismatched title.

starting with page 1 of the list, which ranks the books with scores determined by the number of votes from users. For example, in 2018, Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince* currently sits in the #1 spot, with a score of 107,420 and 1097 users who voted, as of this writing.⁵

Total, the complete Goodreads lists averaged at about 1500 titles per year, but by about the 700th spot, books had petered out to mostly self-published books, so I limited my sample from both years at 700 books each. Even though 700 books were a little under half of the total books that Goodreads reported as published in the YA category for 2014 and 2018, this is still a fairly comprehensive sample that includes books from a wide range of publishers, including the Big Five and their imprints, a range of independent publishers, and self-published work.⁶ To see how covers break down by racial diversity and by publisher, see page 9.⁷

I recorded the title, author, and publisher of each book, as well as notes about how many people were on a cover, if there were any, and my best guess about their race/ethnicity, using the terms “unclear” or “unclear-nonwhite” if I couldn’t determine race/ethnicity, and some notes about how each character was positioned on the cover. I used the small cover files that Goodreads provided for each book, which was a thumbnail size of 130x200 pixels. Goodreads also included an option to enlarge the cover, which boosted the size to 317x475 pixels. I used that option occasionally to get a better look at an individual if they were extremely small. I did not look up any larger versions of the covers than those, considering that most browsing readers will not take the time to scrutinize every book cover closely, on the web or in person.

Once I had a complete data set for 2014 and 2018, I started categorizing my data further. Of the 700 covers per year, 2014 contained 516 books with some sort of human representation on the cover (including one individual, multiple individuals, human silhouettes, or body parts), while 2018 contained 381. Though I had originally intended to look at covers with both multiple characters and individual characters, covers with multiple figures were simply too complicated and too different from individual character covers, so I narrowed my focus to only one-individual covers. I excluded all covers with simple graphic silhouettes and covers with only hands, legs, or disembodied eyes, as these do not contain enough information to make a judgement about the race or

⁵ “YA Novels of 2018,” Goodreads, originally accessed March 10, 2018. https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/74439:YA_Novels_of_2018

⁶ In this paper, the term “independent” refers to large, medium, and small publishers that are not connected to the Big Five.

⁷This is not a central part of my research and is not the main focus of this paper, but I have provided the data to help visualize the status of racial diversity in book covers on a smaller scale. Seeing that most (though not all) publishers have about 50% of their book covers designed with white individuals show that including racial diversity is not just a challenge for the Big Five, but every publisher, big and small. Thus, in order to change our overall totals, every publisher must make a change in how they represent race/ethnicity on their book covers.









YA Novels of 2018

YA due to release in 2018!

Please don't add Middle Grade or New Adult— there are other lists for those.

Young Adult Books by Year:
2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017
2018, 2019, 2020, 2021

Note by list creator Jasmine: this list uses the publisher's classification of what genre books belong in, not reviewer classification. Sarah J. Maas's and Tahereh Mafi's 2018 books are published as Young Adult and are not to be deleted. Removing those books will lead to you being reported to Goodreads.

	All Votes	Add Books To This List
1	 The Cruel Prince (The Folk of the Air, #1) by Holly Black (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 4.18 avg rating — 79,960 ratings Vote For This Book score: 107,420, and 1,097 people voted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Want to ... Rate this ★★book★
2	 War Storm (Red Queen, #4) by Victoria Aveyard (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 3.88 avg rating — 37,439 ratings Vote For This Book score: 95,123, and 964 people voted	<input type="checkbox"/> Want to Real Rate this ★★book★
3	 Queen of Air and Darkness (The Dark Artifices #3) by Cassandra Clare (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 4.41 avg rating — 23,760 ratings Vote For This Book score: 74,829, and 772 people voted	<input type="checkbox"/> Want to Real Rate this ★★book★
4	 A Reaper at the Gates (An Ember in the Ashes, #3) by Sabaa Tahir (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 4.26 avg rating — 20,890 ratings Vote For This Book score: 73,612, and 750 people voted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Read My rating: ★★★★★
5	 Obsidio (The Illuminae Files, #3) by Amie Kaufman (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 4.57 avg rating — 20,679 ratings Vote For This Book score: 64,243, and 657 people voted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Read My rating: ★★★★★
6	 Catwoman: Soulstealer (DC Icons, #3) by Sarah J. Maas (Goodreads Author) ★★★★★ 4.14 avg rating — 9,109 ratings Vote For This Book score: 53,931, and 555 people voted	<input type="checkbox"/> Want to Real Rate this ★★book★

Above are the first six titles listed in Goodreads’ 2018 YA list.

QUANTITY METHODOLOGY

1400

TOTAL NUMBER OF
COVERS

700

NUMBER OF BOOK
COVERS PER YEAR

16.4%

FEWER ONE-INDIVIDUAL
BOOK COVERS IN 2018
THAN 2014



RACE/ETHNICITY
DETERMINED ONLY BY
WHAT COULD BE SEEN
ON FRONT COVER

2014 vs. 2018 total sample breakdown

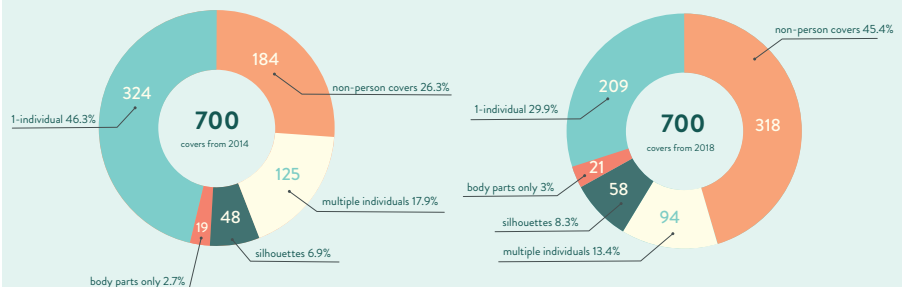


Figure 1. 1400 covers broken down by year and type of cover.

ethnicity of a character. 2014 had 48 silhouette covers and 19 body-parts-only covers, for a total of 324 covers to survey, while 2018 had 58 silhouette covers and 21 body-parts-only covers, bringing the final survey count to 209 covers.

QUANTITY RESULTS

The chart above (Figure 1) documents the breakdown of the total sample of 700 books for each year. The two most interesting categories here are non-person covers and one-individual covers. Non-person covers increased by 19% between 2014 and 2018, while the number of one-individual covers decreased by 16% between 2014 and 2018. The reason for this decrease in individuals on covers and increase in non-person covers could be a simple change in cover trends, though it is impossible to know for sure.

Next, I sorted one-individual covers by race/ethnicity into the following categories, based on the US Census categories: white, black, Asian, Middle Eastern/North African (MENA),⁸ Latinx, unclear, and unclear-nonwhite (Figure 2). I looked for Native American and Pacific Islander individuals on covers, but found none. Sorting the covers by race/ethnicity was based on my own judgment, cover text, and front cover imagery, no extra content or research was used. As such, some covers with unclear or unclear-nonwhite character visualizations may actually have meant to represent specific people of color, but were for many different reasons unclear from visuals alone. Thus, these percentages, while helpful for an overall visualization of where our YA samplings stand, should be taken as an estimate, not hard fact, as book covers are an imprecise kind of data to measure.

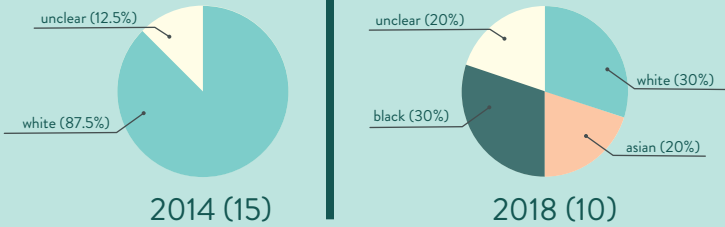
⁸ The term "Middle Eastern/North African (MENA)" is used in this paper to identify individuals whose origins are from countries in the Middle East and select parts of North Africa. While this term is not the preferred term, there is no politically correct or more accurate term available, as, according to the US Census, people who identify as being from these regions are currently considered white. However, the US Census may introduce a new category in the future called MENA (Middle Eastern and North African descent) to better distinguish people from this region, and are currently considering whether it is a race or an ethnicity. For this reason, this study chose to label the category as "Middle Eastern/North African" (abbreviated as MENA on Figure 2 and 3).

DIVERSITY BY PUBLISHER

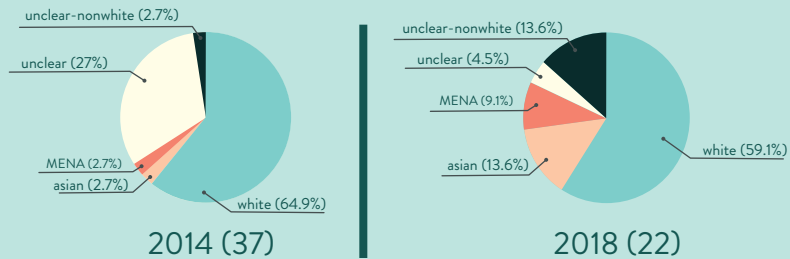


Looking at how individuals on covers break down by publisher and by year show a better increase in diversity. However, while 2018's output for many of the publishers listed below look quite good, the results should be taken remembering that with the exception of Macmillan, the total number of covers with one individual decreased across the board between 2014 and 2018.

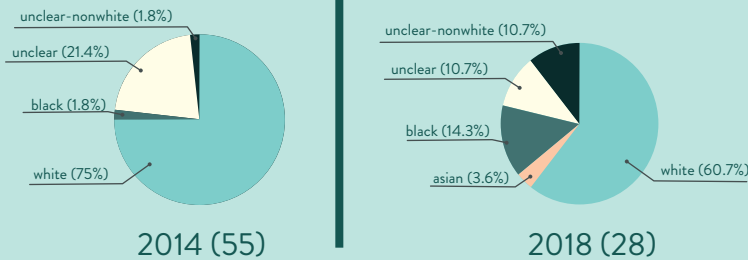
HACHETTE



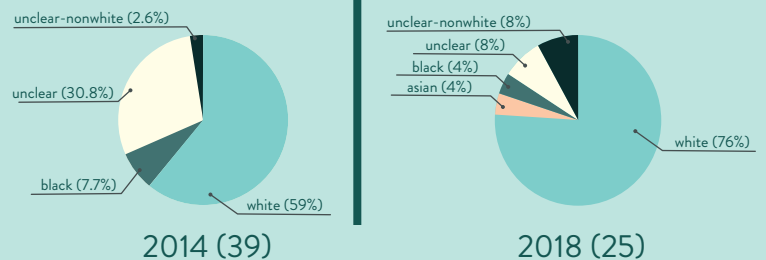
PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE



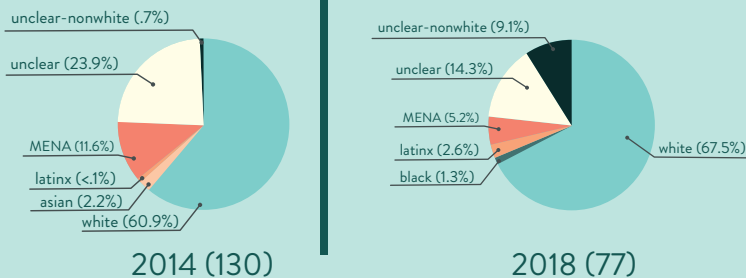
HARPER COLLINS



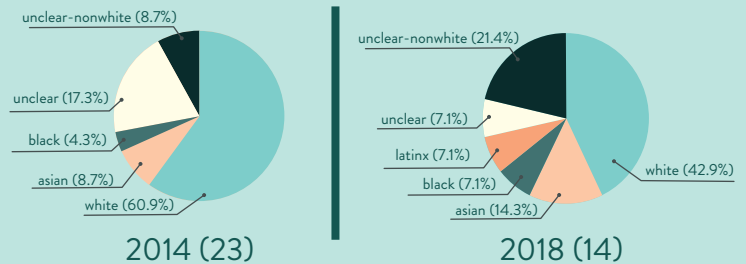
SELF-PUBLISHED



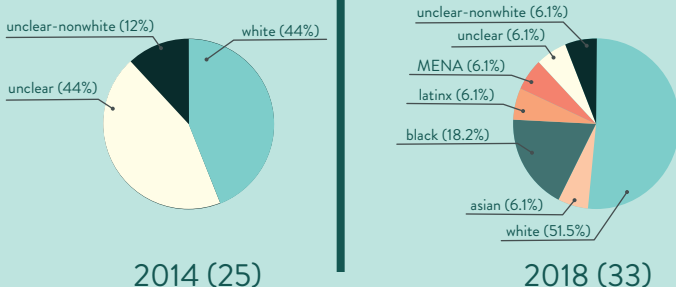
INDEPENDENT



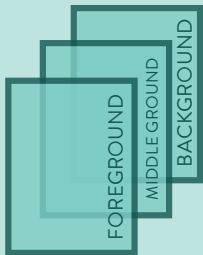
SIMON & SCHUSTER



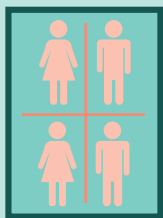
MACMILLAN



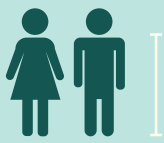
QUALITY METHODOLOGY



POSITION



SIZE



BODY



FACE

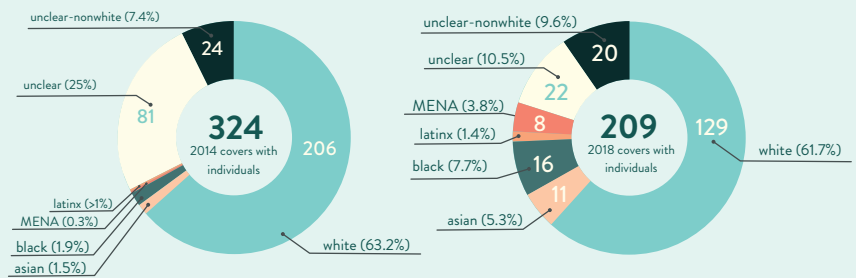


EYES



OBSCURED

2014 vs. 2018 racial diversity breakdown



*Native American and Pacific Islander covers were looked for in both years, but no explicitly recognizable covers were found.

Figure 2. 1-individual covers broken down by year and race/ethnicity categories.

In addition, in comparison to the CCBC’s annual numbers, which compares content rather than covers, this small sampling is not radically different. In 2014, of 3500 books, 5% were about black characters, 1% were about Native American characters, 3% were about Asian characters, and 2% were about Latinx characters.⁹ In 2018, the CCBC received 3,369 books from US publishers. 12% of books were about black characters, 1% of books were about Native American characters, 8% of books were about Asian characters, and 7% of books were about Latinx characters. Thus, both the CCBC’s data and my own YA survey show a steady increase in representation for all groups except Native American characters.

Though the CCBC doesn’t track the number of white characters in their survey, my survey of covers suggests that while POC representation has gone up, the number of covers with white characters has virtually remained the same—decreasing only from 63.2% to 61.7%—even though there is a four-year age gap between the two, where nearly every other category of race/ethnicity (except Native American representation) has grown. The amount of covers in the “unclear” category was also reduced by half, which suggests that perhaps fewer covers are using ambiguous characterizations of people of color.

QUALITY METHODOLOGY

By the numbers, then, the case isn’t looking good for the number of visually diverse book covers in circulation. What about the quality of the representation we currently have? In order to create some sort of standard in order to judge all of the book covers with individuals, I devised a 5-point scale and rated each cover according to six total

⁹ “Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,” Cooperative Children’s Book Center, updated March 8, 2019. <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp#charts>

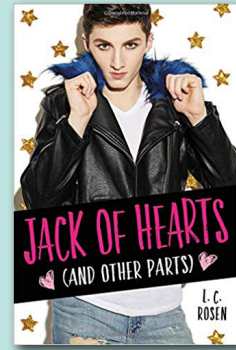
categories that revolve around the relationship between the individual on the cover and reader:

- **Position:** How “close” the individual was to the reader
- **Size:** How much of the cover the individual took up
- **Body:** How the body of the individual, if shown, was oriented to the reader
- **Face:** How the face of the individual, if shown, was oriented to the reader
- **Eyes:** Where the eyes of the individual were looking, if shown
- **Obscured:** Whether something blocked or hindered the reader’s view of the individual, such as a large title, shadow, transparency, or partial silhouette

Each of the first five category values are, at highest, a 1, and at lowest 0 (such as when a category is not present in the cover), and increase in increments of .25 or .5. The sixth category, which considers whether or not something is obscuring the individual in some way, is the only category that takes away points. Here, 0 is the highest score, meaning there is nothing obscuring the individual, and increases down to -1 by .25 increments, depending on how much the individual is obscured.

Note that in the following section, the decisions and calculations used in the visibility scale are, at its base, subjective, as is the nature of observing art, though the same rules and guidelines were tested over a total of 533 books. Moreover, the goal of the visibility rating is not to make a 5.0 score the goal. For every book cover to strive for this goal would be to devalue the unique creativity of each cover and the artists who created them. Rather, the visibility rating helps us first get a sense of where covers stack up against each other, and second, how certain design decisions increase or decrease a viewer’s ability to distinguish characteristics of individuals on book covers. Below are further descriptions of each category, with notes about unusual or difficult covers to measure.

The first category, **position**, considers how close the individual is to the reader on the cover. The three options, foreground (+1), middle ground (+.5), and background (0), are determined first by considering what the viewer might “touch” first if they were to stick their hand into the cover. However, while this is a satisfactory test for most covers, sometimes foreground and middle ground blur together, particularly in relation to the placement and presence of titles. For instance, in some covers, the title tends to be large, using a font that takes up a lot presence and size, such as in the case of *My Plain Jane*, by Cynthia Hand, Jodi Meadows, and Brodi Ashton. Here, the title is the first thing you would touch if you were to reach into the cover, and the woman behind that title second, placing her in the middle ground. However, for a book cover like *The Belles*, by Dhonielle Clayton, while the title is also in front of a woman, it doesn’t take up the same amount of space and sense of importance; it’s much smaller and makes clear that the individual is the most important



To see the visibility scale in action, here is one of the highest-ranking books from 2018: L.C. Rosen’s *Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)*.

- Position:** Foreground (+1)
- Size:** ~100% of the cover (+1)
- Body:** Facing forward (+1)
- Face:** Facing forward (+1)
- Eyes:** Looking at reader (+1)
- Obscured:** Partial-body (-.25)
- Total:** 4.75/5



For comparison, here’s one of the lower-ranking titles of 2018: *Lost* by P.C. Cast and Kristen Cast.

- Position:** Foreground (+1)
- Size:** ~25% of the cover (+.25)
- Body:** Back turned (+.25)
- Face:** Not visible (+0)
- Eyes:** Not visible (+0)
- Obscured:** Partial body (-.25)
- Total:** 1.25/5



The covers of *My Plain Jane*, *The Belles*, *American Panda*, and *Always Never Yours*.

element. Thus, I would score the placement of the individual of *The Belles* as positioned in the foreground, whereas the individual of *My Plain Jane* is positioned in the middle ground.

The **size** category asks how much space the individual takes up: 100% (+1), 75% (+.75), 50% (+.5), or 25% (+.25). Though many covers observe the traditional “rule of thirds”, points were given by quarters, so as to keep the overall scores divisible by .25. Individuals who were roughly a third of the cover were considered 25% of the cover (with a score of +.25). Individuals who were significantly less than 25% were given a score of 0.

The **body** category considers everything from shoulders down to feet. Because covers vary widely in how much of the body they show, as it’s less important than the face, the score for this category is based on how whatever part of the body is shown in relation to the reader. For example, in Gloria Chao’s *American Panda*, only the shoulders of the individual are shown, which is less than 25% of her whole body. However, in relation to a reader holding up the cover in front of them, she faces 75% towards the reader (100% would be completely facing forward, shoulders at 180 degrees), thus, her score for the body character is +.75. In contrast, Emily Wibberley and Austin Siegemund-Broka’s *Always Never Yours* features a character whose entire torso is shown, but she is facing away at 25%, so she receives a score of +.25. If an individual’s back is completely turned to the reader (180 degrees), that also receives a +.25 score. I found that when an individual’s back was fully turned, it was usually an indicator that the cover will not have a high visibility score, as it means that the face and eyes will be hidden from view.

The **face** category, which extends to the head and neck, is similar to the body, but takes both the relation of the face to the reader and how much of the face is actually shown, since it’s a much smaller surface area and far more important than the body. For example, in Sandya Menon’s *From Twinkle, with Love*, the individual on the cover is facing completely forward. However, about half of her face is obscured by a camera. Thus, the visibility of her face is +.5. There are a few other tricky covers that had to be dealt with case by case; for example Sarah Nicole Smetana’s *The Midnights* featured an individual facing forward, but whose face was partially obscured by sunglasses. In this case, I determined that 75% of her face was on the cover (missing chin and mouth), and of that, a further 25% was missing from the sunglasses. So, the face category for this cover received a score of +.5.

The **eyes** of an individual is perhaps the most dynamic aspect of a figure on a book cover, and thus must be treated separately from the face. Unlike the face and body, the eye category is not determined by

position (as its positions don't vary much from the face) but by their engagement with the viewer. Thus, a full +1 score means that the individual is directly looking at the reader, a +.75 indicates looking forward but not directly at the reader, a +.5 means the individual is looking off to the side or at something within the book cover frame, +.25 means that the individual's eyes are closed, and 0 indicates that the eyes are cut off, shadowed, or hidden in some way from the reader. In cases where only one eye is visible and looking at the reader, the individual is given a score of .75, but this only applies to when both eyes could be visible and they are not, such as in the case with Natasha Ngan's *Girls of Paper and Fire*, whereas in a cover with a side profile, such as in Alexandra Bracken's *The Darkest Legacy*, where logically both eyes can't be seen, this does not apply.

Finally, the **obscured** category judges covers on how much of the individual is present on the cover, but hidden in some way, and how much. The three main ways that individuals are often obscured include shadows, partial silhouettes (that still include enough detail to not be considered a purely graphic silhouette), titles over an individual, and opacity of the individual. The impact of these are measured by where the obscuring occurs: -.25 for parts of the body and insignificant parts of the face, -.5 for all of the body but not the face, -.75 for on the head, face, or eyes, -1 for the full body, head, and face, and 0 if nothing is obscured.

QUALITY RESULTS

Overall, from 2014, all 324 books fell somewhere between a score of 0.25 and 4.75, with the most popular scores being 2.25 and 3.75, and the rarest scores being .25, .5, and 4.75. In 2018, of 209 books, scores ranged from 0.5 to 4.75, with the most popular scores being 2.75 and 3.25, and 4.5 and 4.75 with the least amount of covers (Figure 3). In the rest of this section, I have summarized my most significant findings. Note: as 2014 and 2018 are just two years out of many, the data presented here should not be taken as hard fact, as more research is needed to establish any long standing patterns across YA literature.

As we saw in the quantity analysis, there were simply too few covers with racially diverse characters and too many covers with white characters to even begin comparing those categories. However, between 2014 and 2018, a few key similarities and differences are noticeable. First, the number of racially diverse covers in 2018 in comparison to the amount recorded in 2014 is substantial, not to mention that there is a good number of racially diverse covers on the higher end of the visibility scale 2018. To put this in perspective, in 2014, eight racially



The covers of *From Twinkle, With Love*, *The Midnight's*, *Girls of Paper and Fire*, and *The Darkest Legacy*.

2014 vs. 2018 racial diversity by visibility scale

Looking at book covers organized by race and by visibility score show most prominently how many more diverse books there were in 2018 vs. 2014. While 2014's scores show the connection between unclear characters on covers and a low visibility score, the number of racially diverse titles towards the higher end of the scale is quite promising.

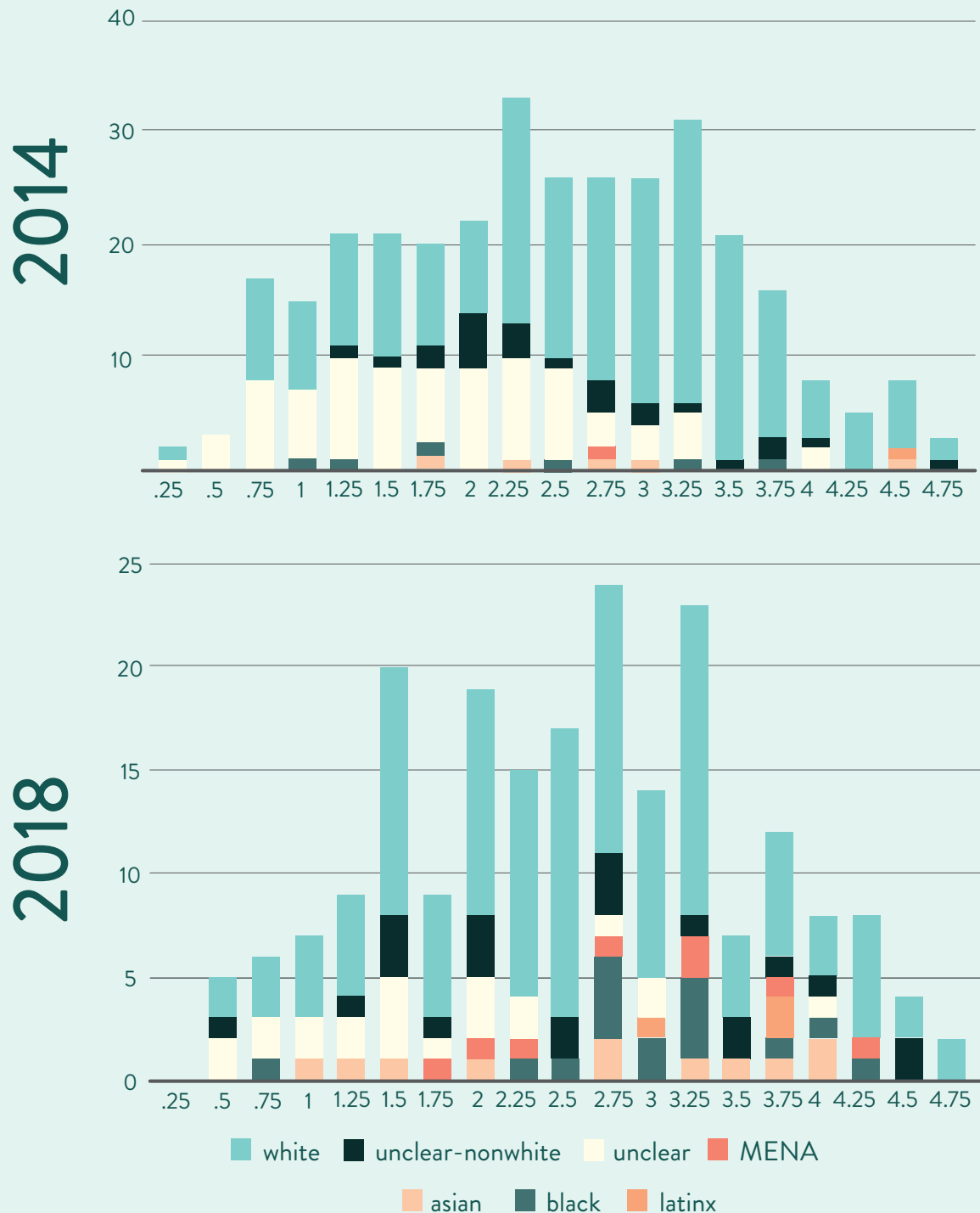


Figure 3. 1-individual covers categorized by year, race/ethnicity, and score on visibility scale.

diverse individuals had an explicitly identifiable race/ethnicity (i.e. Asian, black, Latinx, or MENA) with a score of 2.5 and above, whereas in 2018, there were twenty-nine racially diverse individuals with a score of 2.5 and above.

Second, books with individuals labelled “unclear” generally favored the lower end of the visibility scale across both years. While more research is needed to establish whether or not this is a lasting trend, this suggests that one of the reasons that an individual is labelled with an unclear race/ethnicity is because there are certain visibility choices that have helped obscure it from the viewer. Certainly, there are some book cover individuals with an unclear race/ethnicity because the physical characteristics of the cover model or artist illustration is just ambiguous enough that it’s hard to tell without further identifiers. However, since the visibility scale considers universal factors of the human figure (body, head, eyes) that don’t rely on skin tone or other unreliable judgments of race/ethnicity, this finding suggests that the artistic decisions that cover designers and illustrators make for an individual on a book cover *can* make a difference in how visible, and more importantly, how distinguishable, a person’s race/ethnicity is.

Visibility meets sales data

Next, after scoring each book cover, I looked up as many book covers as I could find in DecisionKey and recorded each book’s sales data from 2014 and 2018 respectively. I only included books that had sold over 100 copies, and combined hardcover and paperback sales only if they were both recorded in the same year. Not all of the books on my lists were found in DecisionKey; many of the self-published titles in particular were hard to find.¹⁰

I then sorted covers by their scores into four groups: .25–.75, 1–1.75, 2–2.75, 3–3.75, and 4–4.75. Every group had books with high sales and low sales, though I found that the highest-selling books (i.e. those with sales of over 100,000) only placed in the 2, 3, or 4 categories across both years. I also wanted to know the average sales numbers per category, so I chose to use the median average of each category, in order to make sure that outlying sales numbers that were extremely low or high didn’t skew the overall average. In looking at both sets of data from 2014 and 2018, I saw that with the exception of the 2-point category in 2014, the sales averages seemed to increase the higher the visibility scale went (Figure 4). While this data is inconclusive, simply because there is not enough

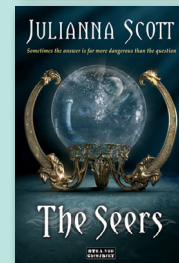
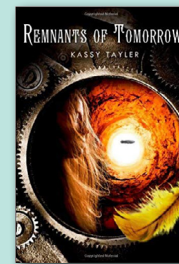
¹⁰ While looking up sales data during the quantity analysis, I came across a few titles in DecisionKey that stated a different date than what was on Goodreads (i.e. not 2014 or 2018). While I excluded those titles from my median average sales data numbers, I decided not to revise the quantity or quality analysis statistics since the number of mislabeled titles would be an insignificant change overall. If this study were to be conducted again, however, a more accurate process would be to find sales data first and check the Goodreads list against DecisionKey early on.

SAMPLE BOOK COVERS FROM EACH YEAR AND VISIBILITY CATEGORY

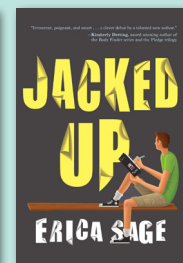
While certain visual trends emerge from the lowest-ranked covers to the highest, every cover was slightly different, and some had a very unique combination of scoring across the visibility categories that gave a cover its final score. While this makes it difficult to establish any concrete conclusions, it also reinforces how individual each cover can still be.

2014

2018



.25–.75



1–1.75

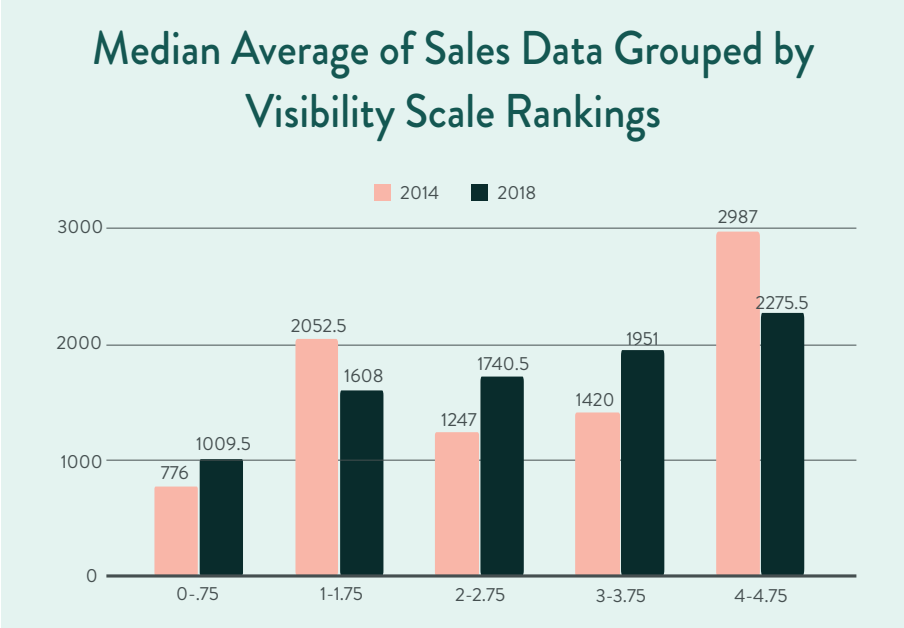


Figure 4. 1-individual covers grouped by overall visibility score, with average sales data compared by year.

data to compare, the possibility that there could be connections between visibility and sales data may merit further study and a further sampling of past years of YA publishing to determine if there are any true patterns to analyze.

CONCLUSIONS

From all that we have seen from 2014 and 2018, where does that leave us in terms of racial diversity in YA covers? The good news first: from our findings here, we can say with confidence that the amount of identifiable, visual racial representation in YA books has definitely increased between 2014 and 2018. And, if anything, the amount of buzz that books with prominent visual POC representation receive should send a strong signal to publishers that diverse representation on covers is not only necessary to help promote diverse books, but a choice that is recognizable, noticeable, and one that could make a difference in terms of sales.

In terms of quantity, however, we are still a long way from true diversity in YA literature. There were four years between 2014 and 2018, and still, in both years, white individuals on YA covers made up a little over 60% of all 1-individual covers, while all explicit POC representation combined didn't even reach 20% in 2018. This is a tough problem to solve—after all, each publishing house only contributes to a small portion of YA books annually; increasing the amount of POC representation on book covers requires an effort on the part of not only the larger publishers, but also at the independent and self-published level.

However, while of course quantity in diverse books is dependent on the stories authors and editors help create, book designers, illustrators, and art directors can play an important role in increasing the visibility of the diverse stories we *do* have by utilizing the quality methods outlined here. A cover doesn't have to score high on the visibility scale to make a person of color recognizable on the cover—and that's not the point of the scale. Rather, the visibility scale, and the six different components that make up the scale, can help designers and illustrators think about how they visually place and position characters of color on covers. Much like the way letters enable us to read and write, an individual's position, size, body, face, eyes, and how much they are obscured on cover are universal categories when it comes to books with individuals on them. Knowing what those universal categories are can allow designers to combine them in an endless amount of ways to produce diverse book covers that are visible, recognizable, and prominent.

Even though the diversity movement within YA is not new, it's a conversation and a responsibility that, for a long time, has mostly been left to editors and authors, librarians and bloggers, but in looking at what has been found in this study, book designers and everyone involved in the process of cover design cannot be separate from the conversation about diversity in YA any longer. The conversation cannot end at agreeing that we shouldn't whitewash or silhouette POC characters on covers. Rather, deliberately increasing the visibility of racially diverse characters must be something we are thinking about at every level of cover design, from conception to the final cover.

That is of course easier said than done, as every book cover is different, but the visibility scale considerations can begin to help in little ways: perhaps the difference between making a racially diverse character recognizable as such is as simple as turning their head a little more towards the reader. Perhaps it is moving a dramatic shadow to the body instead of the face. Perhaps a sense of power, of agency, can be given to a racially diverse character simply by making their eyes look directly at the reader, instead of downcast or away. Imagine if every diverse book cover received a score of 2.5 or higher on the visibility scale—perhaps then, diverse individuals and diverse covers would not be so easy to overlook. These little considerations seem small, insignificant even, but combined, can make all the difference to our young adults, if only we know how to look for them.

“

The erasure of diversity in media, it affects children. You want to see yourself on TV, advertising, books, everywhere. You should be able to have adventures and save the world just like everybody else.

**—Cindy Pon,
author of *Want*⁹**

⁹ Farah Penn, “26 YA Authors on Diverse Representation in Publishing,” *Buzzfeed*, May 13, 2017. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/farahpenn/ya-authors-on-diverse-representation-in-publishi>



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PROCESS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in diversity in young adult literature all began after reading a short online article in 2017 about the lack of diversity in the YA category. I remember thinking that surely, with my own upbringing in a diverse community, my own list of read books would be pretty diverse. Well, I was shocked to find that a mere 20 or so books out of *five hundred* on my Goodreads list were actually diverse. This wake-up call has stayed with me over the last two years as I've completed my Master's degree in Book Publishing. Throughout my studies, I've considered the various visual representations and racial diversity of Hermione Granger, considered how we hinder and promote diversity in book covers, and in this study, what diversity in YA cover design looks like on a large scale—and I'm just getting started. This will always be an important topic that's close to my heart, and I hope that you'll think about my research here the next time you pick up a book cover.

Mahalo to my wonderful professors, especially Dr. Kathi Behrens and Dr. Rachel Noorda for all their encouragement in pursuing this ambitious project, and to Abbey Gaterud and Kelley Dodd for their enlightening conversation about my findings and conclusions. Endless thanks to Brittney Finato, Monica Hay, and Jessica DeBolt for being my beta readers, and a virtual hug to Des Hewson and Hanna Ziegler for that one casual conversation about LGBTQ representation in YA covers that gave me the inspiration for this research project. You're all my heroes.

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APPENDIX

View raw data compilation [here](#). Spreadsheet file is organized into several sections, including for all 700 titles per year, sections for just 1-individual titles per year, overall totals, and totals for the visibility scale rankings.