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# Diversity in YA: A Look at How Book Description Language Talks About Race

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# Diversity in YA:

A LOOK AT HOW

BOOK DESCRIPTION LANGUAGE

TALKS ABOUT RACE

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BRITTNEY FINATO  
SPRING 2019

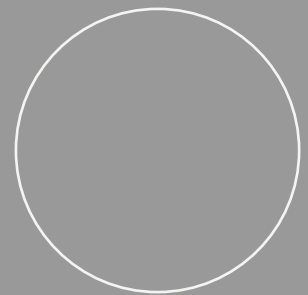
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# Book Descriptions (methodology: word list)

feels unheard unable hide neighborhood ever since body grew into curves learned let fists fierceness do talking plenty wants say pours all frustration passion onto pages leather notebook reciting words prayers especially after catches feelings boy bio class named family can never know about with determination force daughter obey laws church understands thoughts best kept invited join school s slam poetry club doesnt know how could ever attend without finding out much less speak words out loud still cant stop thinking about performing poems because face world may not want hear refuses be silent years ago father murdered by police officer Along with losing parent media's vilification father lack accountability left with near crippling panic attacks now sophomore year high school fellow classmates find increasingly treated criminals by own school new rules random locker searches constant intimidation police department stationed halls despite youth students decide organize push back against administration tensions hit fever pitch tragedy strikes must face difficult choice give fear hate realize anger can actually be gift doesnt think ever be enough speaks better than knows more about hobbit social cues than ones about take first ever trip pretty overwhelming especially dealing with clinical depression disapproving dad chronically anemic social life gets know ailing still formidable grandfather loving grandmother rest moms family first time meets boy next door changes everything makes sure people speak can understand going gets national football team jersey makes feel true first time understands sometimes best friends dont have talk never true friend before now spending days with playing soccer eating rosewater ice cream sitting together hours special place rooftop overlooking skyline calls original version name never felt more than does now time go home have find way be own twin goes party decides tag along keep eye brother starts harmless fun turns into shooting followed by police raid next day gone missing up find found dead video leaked online tells even more chilling story been shot killed by police officer terrified mother unravels mourning brother now hashtag must learn justice freedom really mean high school total nonevent friends were okay grades were fine while somehow managed land boyfriend doesnt actually know anything about heads college learn how become writer seventy miles zillion light years away from everything cant wait leave behind stuck literally figuratively emotionally financially works café sleeps mattress floor empty storage room upstairs knows god awful chapter life will serve inspiration famous movie director right second bucks checking account dying laptop really testing cross paths less meet cute more collision unbearable awkwardness still they swap numbers stay touch via text soon become digitally inseparable sharing deepest anxieties secret dreams without humiliating weirdness having see each other absolutely certain about thing mother died by suicide turned into bird half half white travels meet maternal grandparents first time determined find mother bird search winds up chasing after ghosts uncovering family secrets forging new relationship with grandparents grieves must try reconcile fact same day kissed best friend longtime secret crush mother taking own life year after extremely turbulent time politically especially someone year old Muslim girl tired being stereotyped never surprised by how horrible people can be tired rude stares degrading comments even physical violence endures result race religion hijab wears every day built up protective walls refuses let anyone close enough hurt instead drowns frustrations in music spends afternoons break dancing with brother then meets first person in forever really seems want get know terrifies seem come from irreconcilable worlds guard up long not sure ever be able let down only summer taught anything universe can deliver showstopping romance you least expect thinks universe needs mind business universe back wouldnt be way post office carrying box exboyfriends things meet cute post office exactly does universe have store maybe nothing after all get separated maybe everything after all get reunited cant quite nail first date second first date third tries hard make work doesnt try hard enough life really isnt play year old moves between worlds poor neighborhood lives fancy suburban prep school attends uneasy balance between worlds shattered witnesses fatal shooting childhood best friend hands police officer unarmed soon afterward death national headline some calling thug maybe even drug dealer gangbanger protesters taking streets name some cops local drug lord try intimidate family everyone wants know really went down night only person alive can answer does does not say could upend community could endanger life hour minutes cannon strap piece biscuit burner heater chopper gat hammer tool rule you can call gun fifteen year old shoved back waistband jeans see brother just murdered knows rules no crying no snitching revenge now heading with gun shoved back waistband jeans gun brothers gun gets elevator seventh floor stoked knows after does elevator stops sixth floor comes finds out gave gun before took gun tells check gun even loaded sees bullet missing only could have fired gun Huh didnt know ever actually used gun bigger huh dead elevator just trying think through door next floor opens teenage girl gets on waves away smoke from dead cigarette doesnt know knew knew were stray bullets cut through playground tried cover hit anyway wants know fifth floor elevator stop is with gun shoved back waistband jeans misses goes whole long way down elevator stops each floor each stop someone connected brother gets give piece bigger story than thinks knows story might never know end gets off elevator finds slur about best friend scrawled across back school deaf covers up with beautiful albeit illegal graffiti mural supposed best friend snitches principal expels mothers set up with way ticket mainstream school suburbs treated outcast only deaf student last thing left art not even could convince give up out burbs paints anywhere can eager claim some turf own soon learns might not be only vandal town someone adding tags making better showing off showing up process expected art might get painted over by cops never imagined getting dragged into full blown graffiti war believes anything possible you have plan how became student body president varsity soccer star how get into never boyfriend fact disaster hottest human specimen have ever lived walks into life day decides tackle flirting failures with same zest applied everything else life finds guidance dramas father been obsessively watching years hapless heroine always seems end up arms true love by episode simple formula a quick study armed with k drama steps true love goes after moody elusive artist boat rescues love triangles staged car crashes ensue fun games turn true feels finds out real love about way more than just drama top class set ivy league none matters police officer just put handcuffs despite leaving rough neighborhood behind cant escape scorn former peers ridicule new classmates looks teachings answers do hold up anymore starts journal find out then comes day goes driving with best friend windows rolled down music turned up way up sparking fury white off duty cop beside words fly shots fired caught crosshairs media fallout under attack rock water does not know pain rock sun corner street thought would finally find une belle vie a good life after leave mother detained by immigration leaving

navigate loud cousins grittiness westside news schools surprising romance all own just finds footing strange new world dangerous proposition presents itself soon realizes freedom comes cost trapped crossroads impossible choice will pay price dream having best senior year still much look forward class trip prom with boyfriend beach week after graduation dads wedding then be off college with school close enough come home bake chocolate chip cookies weekends life couldnt be more perfect least thinks until gets some unexpected news now girl dreads change must rethink all plans your heart your head saying different things which should you listen september little after midnight death cast calls give some bad news going die today total strangers different reasons both looking make new friend end day good news app called last friend through about meet up last great adventure live lifetime single day perfect daughters do not go away college do not move out parents house after high school graduation perfect daughters never abandon family not your perfect daughter role then tragic accident busiest street leaves dead left behind reassemble shattered pieces family no seems acknowledge broken Instead mother seems channel grief into pointing out every possible way failed not long before discovers might not have been perfect everyone thought with help best friend first kiss first love first everything boyfriend determined find out really seemed more sisters story either way how can even attempt live up seemingly impossible ideal hours minutes kinds people my world Saints special people moving world forward sometimes you glaze over or least I do your face much you cant see how you cant see your nose misfits people dont belong me way I dont fit into brand new family leftover composed my older brother me misfits because although alliteratively speaking sound good together we dont go together same planet different worlds sometimes worlds collide beautiful things happen right monsters well monsters wearing saint masks stories monster my mosque people think holy untouchable nobody seen under mask except me all figured out with graduation behind more than ready break from family from inexplicable obsession with finding ideal husband ugh knows must respect principles some level though truly believed needed husband right now wouldnt have paid attend summer program aspiring web developers right hopeless romantic parents tell future wife will be attending same summer program wherein have woo totally board because silly sounds most people life wants be arranged believes power tradition stability being part something much bigger than didnt mean start turning wheels suggested arrangement early childrens lives noticed both gravitate toward same summer program figured not may think have each other figured out opposites clash love works hard prove itself most unexpected ways things people hates destroying my social life allowing become neanderthal becoming neanderthal supermarket everyone else after borrowing fathers credit card finance more stylish wardrobe suddenly finds grounded by grounded means working indentured servant familys struggling grocery store pay off debts with each order deli meat slices can feel carefully cultivated prep school reputation slipping through fingers willing do anything get out punishment lie cheat maybe even steal invitation ultimate beach party within reach no intention letting familys drama admittedly good looking outspoken boy from neighborhood keep from goal sixteen year old many secrets some small how bothers friends dont invite parties some big fact father may be having affair then can barely even admit about how might have crush best friend family move begins wonder finally time some honesty especially after meets beautiful smart unlike anyone ever known just few problems new friends dont trust crowd friends clearly dont want around anyway sweet guy named seems have more than friendly feelings meanwhile dads affair becoming obvious ignore anymore always figured hardest thing would be tell people wants date girl quickly learns telling truth easy comes after though whole lot more complicated used know place with adoptive gay father loving family best friend senior year suddenly throwing punches questioning everything realizing no longer knows not thought believes must get out neighborhood ever going succeed mother says take every opportunity accepted scholarship mostly white private school even saturday morning test prep opportunities some opportunities feel more demeaning than helpful invitation join women women mentorship program risk girls except really black girls from bad neighborhoods doesnt need support just because mentor black doesnt mean understands maybe some things could show successful women about real world finding ways make real difference im girl believes science facts not fate not destiny dreams will never come true im definitely not kind girl meets cute boy crowded street falls love with not my family hours away from being deported falling love with wont be my story ive always been good son good student living up my parents high expectations never poet dreamer i see i forget about all something about natasha makes me think fate something much more extraordinary store both us universe every moment our lives brought us single moment million futures lie before us which will come true leaving headed just came out family isnt sure mom will ever speak again plan sort of going help figure out whole lesbian thing interning with author her favorite book ultimate authority on feminism womens bodies or gay sounding stuff will be able figure out life over course magical summer even possible running away from all problems seem big handle with more questions than answers takes on most importantly absent again today sidewalk graffiti started all well no actually lady tripping over store making drop bag chips started all because didnt matter said next accident wasnt stealing cop just kept pounding over over pummeling into pavement then rotc kid with mad art skills absent again again stuck hospital room because looked stealing black kid baggy clothes must have been stealing how started white kid saw saw best friends older brother beating daylights out classmate first doesnt tell soul not even sure understands does matter whole thing caught camera anyway school nation start divide happens blame spreads wildfire fed by ugly words racism police brutality realizes got understand because bystander not part history just figure out side history will be just year old thinks cant handle more piece terrible news meets girl dealt with lot more just might be able clue how rise up life keeps knocking down wry gritty novel from author i greatest wears black suit every day no not because mom died although did sucks wears suit for gig local funeral home which pays way better than cluck bucket needs income since dad cant handle bills anything really own while snagging bottles whiskey snagging bucks hour not bad everything else not good then meets got crazy name been through more crazy than can imagine never cries tough really tough tough way wishes could be which maybe drawn definitely cant seem shake because nothing more hopeful than finding person understands your loneliness can maybe even help take away my disease rare famous basically im allergic world i dont leave my house have not left my house years only people i ever see my mom my nurse day moving truck arrives next door i look out my window i see tall lean wearing all black black tshirt black jeans black sneakers black knit cap covers hair completely catches me looking stares me i stare right back name maybe we cant predict future we can predict some things example i am certainly going fall love with almost certainly going be disaster comes home from boarding school isnt sure ever want go back friends family along with crush stepbrother been diagnosed with bipolar disorder needs emotional support settles old life finds falling someone new same girl brother love with disorder spirals out control forced confront past mistakes find way help brother before hurts worse

**“If diverse books  
are only valued  
because they can  
be categorised as  
being different...  
they are still  
othered...”**



*| Sunili Govinnage, The Guardian*

# Diversity in YA:

A LOOK AT HOW

BOOK DESCRIPTION LANGUAGE

TALKS ABOUT RACE

*Question: How does found book description language talk about race in young adult literature? Is there particular language used to identify or signify character race? What are themes that arise?*

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**W**hen exploring young adult literature, it is specifically important to research racial diversity because it can help show particular stereotypes, biases, and tropes that may be used in YA overall. This helps inform current issues or excellencies in the canon and leads to broader discussions about the importance of racial, and other, diversity in books generally. By developing methods to isolate racially diverse books in YA, extracting specific language from their Goodreads copy, and talking broadly about overall themes, I will analyze the types of language that book descriptions use when talking about race, if they do at all.

Book descriptions are one of the first two places that readers look to get a sense of what a book is about and who the characters are, the other is cover design. Publishers have a responsibility of both informing their readers and intriguing them, but they also *must* do this in an inclusive, respectful, and anti-racist way. What we find when looking at these descriptions is that publishers still struggle with consistent use of inclusive language and often forgo talking about race altogether when other minority statuses are involved. Viewing YA literature, on a small scale, has been informative and has helped to generate a set of questions publishers can ask when they are acquiring diverse books.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

## HISTORY

YA literature isn't a new phenomena, but moving into more inclusive spaces is. Creating space for representation is incredibly important for young people because not only do readers learn about the identities of those around them, but literature gives them a space to continue developing their own identities—but only if they can find that representation.

It's not difficult to see the ways that literature, as a whole, has and continues to favor wealthy white men and women as both authors and protagonists. Stories about and by people of color are becoming more frequent, yes, but there is still a lot of work to be done. This slow movement could be based on socio-political issues like America's history with racist language and policies:

“...CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IS ITSELF PRODUCED AGAINST A BACKDROP OF WHITE SUPREMACY. THUS, EVEN CHILDREN READING DIVERSE LITERATURE WILL STILL ENCOUNTER A WORLD IN WHICH MOST PRIMARY TELEVISION AND MOVIE CHARACTERS ARE WHITE, MOST OF THEIR ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES ARE WHITE, MOST EXECUTIVES OR ACADEMICS THEY ENCOUNTER ARE WHITE, AND SO ON. THUS, CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IS ONLY A PIECE OF THE LARGER PUZZLE...”<sup>1</sup>

There is a pervasiveness of erasure of anything that is not white, straight, male,<sup>2</sup> and cisgendered, and until that's no longer the case, organizations like We Need Diverse Books<sup>3</sup> are necessary to bring awareness to the diverse work that is being published. I first turned to their website to find books for this research.

One reader, Sunili Govinnage, chose to expand their yearly reading by focusing on books written by authors of color for 12 months. In an article for *The Guardian*, Govinnage said, “If diverse books are only valued because they can be categorised as being different...they are still othered...[v]aluing a writer only for their diversity, but not their humanity or talent—that's tokenism.”<sup>4</sup> How do we move away from tokenizing these authors and books and into an actually diverse and multicultural book world?

Part of doing this work is to look at the whole of YA books. Govinnage mentions a study conducted in 2012 by Lee & Low<sup>5</sup> about the “best of” lists that often come out at the end of each year. Lee & Low's goal was to see the kinds of author representation present on general bestseller lists for each week in 2012. The results showed only three books were written by people of color (POC) authors, and only

1 Welch, “The Pervasive Whiteness of Children's Literature.”

2 Although YA is particularly skewed toward women and girls, a 2010 study by Casey H. Rawson found that racially diverse books were more likely to be male.

3 We Need Diverse Books is an organization that was started in 2014 out of a need they found to connect readers to diverse books.

4 Govinnage, “I read only non-white authors for 12 months. What I learned surprised me.”

5 Lee & Low is a multicultural children's book publisher started in 1991.

one of those three had a main character who was a POC.<sup>6</sup> This is pretty bad news for the publishing industry as a whole.

Another 2015 study, completed by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) found that only 8%, or 269, of the total books analyzed had a black protagonist and 2.4%, or 82, books had a Latinx character.<sup>7</sup> Compared to 2018 statistics by the CCBC, there was only a 2.5% increase for books that had a black protagonist and a 4.3% increase for Latinx protagonists.<sup>8</sup> Though these percentages have increased, it’s not much growth in a three year span.

#### INTERSECTIONALITY

A study from 2010 compared national census data to YA books and found that POC protagonists were underrepresented in every category (award winning in YA fiction, teen-selected top 10 fiction titles, and bestselling YA fiction) and white protagonists were overrepresented.<sup>9</sup> Minority race protagonists were, however, more likely to be male, religious, in a one-parent or no-guardian household, low-income, and LGBTQ+ compared to their white counterparts.<sup>10</sup> In this study Rawson found that the award-winning YA books most closely reflected national demographics.<sup>11</sup>

Racially diverse characters are likely to not only be biracial, they also inhabit other minority statuses.<sup>12</sup> Bowker and Star provide several questions that ultimately build on one another and ask how people can inhabit multiple spaces,<sup>13</sup> which helps inform how individuals who live with two or more identities may be represented within YA readership. In order to look at these intersections, some of the presented data represents other minority identities to gauge and view how this portion of YA canon is articulating diverse statuses and experiences. These stories are often intersectional; nearly half of the books present in this research have a protagonist that is not only racially diverse, but diverse in other ways too.

#### INFORMING READERS

PEN America, a human rights literary organization, stated the need for diverse books for young people and said, “...a crucial part of education is learning about differences, learning to value other cultures, histories, and experiences” and that they help children “[understand] the breadth of experiences” both “locally and globally.”<sup>14</sup> *How* we inform young people is almost as important as informing them: “[w]e should be concerned with whether some particular child develops racial biases and stereotypes or fails

6 Jasontlow, “Where’s the diversity? The NY Times top 10 Bestsellers List”

7 PEN America, “Missing From the Shelf: Book Challenges and Lack of Diversity in Children’s Literature.”

8 School Library Journal, “CCBC Releases Annual Statistics for Multicultural Children’s Books”

9 Rawson, “Are All Lists Created Equal? Diversity in Award-Winning and Bestselling Young Adult Fiction.”

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Rawson found that POC protagonists were more likely to be a part of every other minority status category.

13 Bowker and Star, “Sorting things out: classification and its consequences.”

14 PEN America



to cultivate compassion for others, and we should be concerned with whether some particular child can access the same valuable goods that another child can.”<sup>15</sup> Publishers, especially, should write copy for their books that is reflective of the entire content because this is a space where readers begin to form their opinions and, ultimately, decide whether a book is for them. Quite often, as we’ll see below, race is a fundamental part of the story but is often left out of the book copy.

## METHODOLOGY

Here is a thorough outline of how each of the titles were found and analyzed. The first section identified which books would be a part of this research, while the second and third sections helped isolate the overall language used in these descriptions. Those sections took the words out of their contexts and helped isolate the overall positive or negative themes in language. The final section is meant to put everything back into context—what are the words saying in each description and what other factors are at play? Does Rawson’s 2010 study still hold up when it comes to YA books?

### TITLE SELECTION

In order to get an in-depth look at YA canon, as it pertains to books that have a protagonist of color, I started my research by doing Google searches of lists that feature books with a POC as the protagonist. Although this was helpful, I realized that many of the books I was finding were set in fictional worlds that did not represent our own and, as a way to combat the stereotypes and biases that might arise in a world unlike our own, I decided to look specifically for titles that follow the subsequent criteria:

- » Has a POC as the protagonist : To determine whether the protagonist was a POC, I looked for language in the Goodreads description or in comments that would point to that. Additionally, I relied on cover images for some of the titles and also looked at We Need Diverse Books to find some—specifically looking at the books in their curated lists.
- » Non science fiction or fantasy
- » Sold more than 5,000 copies<sup>16</sup>
- » Published in 2015-2018 (for a total of thirty titles)

### WORD LIST

Once I collected the titles, I went to Goodreads to find their book descriptions and removed the following eight criteria to get a better sense of commonalities and differences within the book descriptions.

- » All coordinating conjunctions
- » Article adjectives, pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, etc. (e.g. a, has, like, there, to, when, he, she, they, etc.)

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15 Welch

16 Earlier in my research it was a higher number but in order to get a broader look at YA canon it has been lowered significantly.

- 
- » Author names
  - » Punctuation
  - » References to the *New York Times* or other magazines and newspapers
  - » Numerals
  - » All proper names
  - » Identifiers of place or language
  - » Buzz words, including any copy that had specific language to sell the book<sup>17</sup>

#### CONNOTATION

Originally, there were almost 2,500 total words in the list, though they weren't all unique, far too many to analyze properly. In order to get it down to a more reasonable size, I set up a second set of methods which helped in two ways: first, it shortened the wordlist down to a more reasonable size and second, it helped to understand the trends in language being used. The second set of methods is as follows:

- » Tested every word five times by quickly marking positive or negative based on initial reaction. Words that couldn't be quickly decided were given a neutral status and marked accordingly<sup>18</sup>
- » Placed words on spreadsheet and color coded dependent on each test (red, green, and yellow)
- » Deleted anything that was majority neutral at a first pass
- » Deleted undeclared majorities [2 negative, 1 positive, 2 neutral] or [2 positive, 1 negative, 2 neutral]<sup>19</sup>
- » Divided by color to see scope of language

#### INTERSECTIONAL MINORITY STATUSES

In this section I identified each protagonist's gender, race, and any other minority groups present. The categories chosen were mostly based on the 2010 study conducted by Rawson:

- » Gender
- » Race/ethnicity based on two factors—explicit language within the Goodreads description and other findings (book covers, comments, having personally read the book, etc.)
- » Other minority categories include:
  - Mental health status
  - Single or no-parent households
  - Low-income households/individuals
  - LGBTQ+
  - Disability or illness
- » Finally, gun, police, and other forms of violence or policing were identified

<sup>17</sup> For example, "Raw, captivating, and undeniably real, Nic Stone joins industry giants Jason Reynolds and Walter Dean Myers as she boldly tackles American race relations in this stunning debut."

<sup>18</sup> "Fit" and "sun" were both found positively connotated whereas "war" and "test" were negatively connotated

<sup>19</sup> Words that had to of each positive and negative and one neutral were put into a "true neutral" category for example "escape" and "random" were in this category

# Findings

## TITLE SELECTION

A total of twenty-nine books were found and analyzed in this research. The intended amount was thirty, however finding titles that fit into the four main criteria proved extremely difficult. Even though the original methods were significantly changed to help accommodate the number of titles intended for the research (dramatically reducing the number of copies sold) there still weren't a lot of books that fit all four criteria.

## WORD LIST

After removing all of the indicated criteria, there were nearly 2,500 words identified, of which some words had higher frequency of use. Nearly half, 45.2% or a total of 1,128, unique words were found. Duplicates were removed partly because of the expansiveness of the word list and partly to see specific words being used and start the analysis there. Were duplicates to be counted, the data for the following section could, and probably would, be different.

## CONNOTATION

Everything that wasn't positive, negative, or a true neutral was removed at this point for a total of 834 words left to be analyzed. Overall, the trend seems to be more positive than negative. More than half of the words analyzed had a positive connotation, 54.6%, compared to the negatively connotated words, 43.2%; true neutral accounts for roughly 2% of the total words (Figure 1).

These words are completely out of context which is why words like “politically,” “emotional(ly),” and “attempt” might be considered true neutral where in other circumstances they would be viewed differently. Additionally, the current socio-political environment is also important to consider. Are words like “immigration,” “detained,” and “president” connoted the way they are because of the current environment and bias? Almost certainly. That's why, although the trend overall seems positive, considering context is equally as important. Language out of context is perfectly fine to look at, and it's important to understand those trends but within their actual contexts there's a lot more going on.

For example, words like “black” and “white” were removed because they were either too neutral or didn't have a majority in positive or negative connotation. These words, in context, *do* help identify race and are used multiple times in the Goodreads descriptions to do just that. Additionally, words like “mosque” and “Muslim” (which was kept as it was considered a religion, though in the copy it is used as a racial identifier too) both had positive connotations where others doing the same research might find them negative, so context absolutely matters.

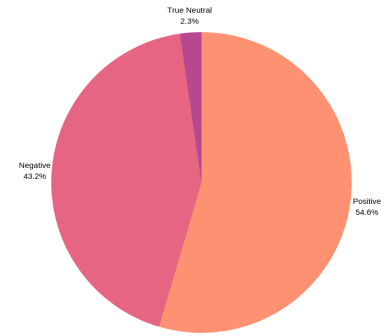


Figure 1. Connotation Results

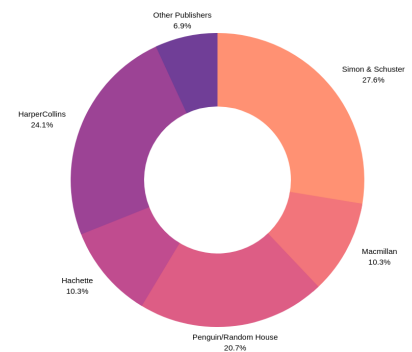


Figure 2. Publishers

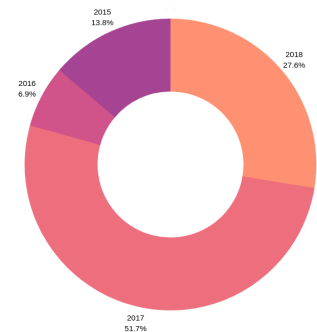
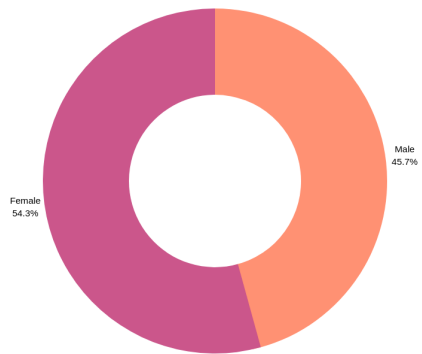


Figure 3. Publication Years

# Findings

## GENDER

Unlike the 2010 study conducted by Rawson, there were more female than male characters in the twenty-nine titles. This is surprising because some of the books had dual characters and those always had at least one male. Overall, 54.3% of protagonists were referred to as she/her and 45.7% were referred to as he/him (Figure 4). For this section I looked at a total of thirty-five characters that were presented as either male or female. No characters were non-binary, gender-fluid, or used they/them pronouns, or other forms of gender identity.

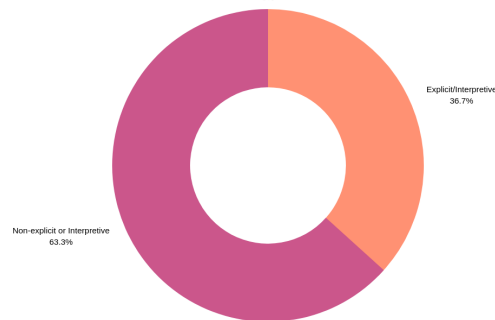


**Figure 4. Gender**

## RACE & ETHNICITY

The diversity of the protagonists is the most important part of this research. After establishing a race for each protagonist, I checked to see how many of the book descriptions explicitly identified the race of the character. After completing that, I found that only 36.7% explicitly identified a character's race (Figure 5).

Other ways that were used to identify character's race were Goodreads comments, additional research outside of the Goodreads platform, if they were on a diversity booklist, and if I'd personally read the book. A total of 63.3% either do not explicitly say the character(s) race(s) or there is no language in which to infer or interpret a race. Although there were typically several people confirming the race of the character, there's always room for human error.

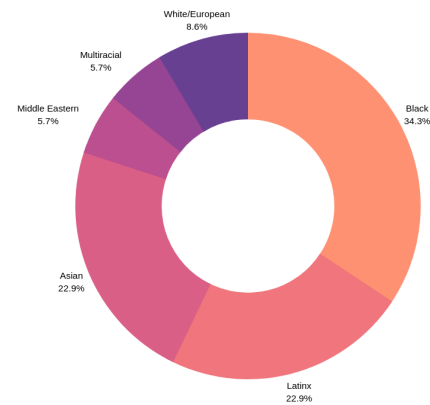


**Figure 5. Word List Identification**

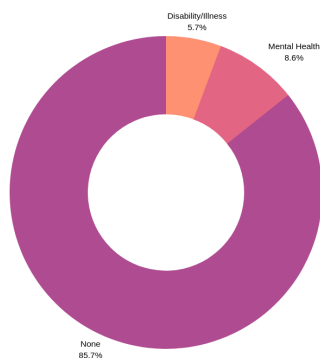
## RACE & ETHNICITY CONT.

Here's how the character races broke down: Asian protagonists were 22.9%, Latinx protagonists were also 22.9%, Black protagonists were 34.3%, Middle Eastern protagonists made up 5.7%, as did Multiracial characters, and the remaining 8.6% were European protagonists (Figure 5). The last figure is present because of books that featured dual protagonists—half of the dual-perspective books featured a character of color and the other half were white.

The representation in each of these categories is as follows: Characters who were part of the Asian population were characterized as Asian, Indian, Korean, and Japanese; the Latinx population were characterized as Puerto Rican, Mexican, Latina, and Cuban; the Black population were characterized as mostly either Black or African American, included in this section is a Haitian character from *American Street*; the Middle Eastern population were characterized as Iranian, Muslim, and Arab; finally, European presented characters were characterized as German and Polish (based on Goodreads comments) or was something I knew because I'd read the title.



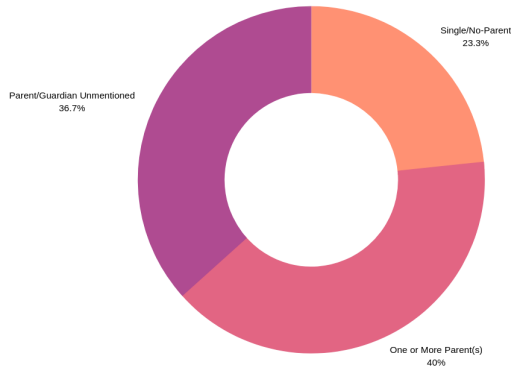
**Figure 5. Protagonist Race Identification**



**Figure 6. Mental Health, Disability, and Illness**

For the purposes of this discussion both sections identified above will be discussed together here. Those that were dealing with mental health, disability, or illness issues represented five unique characters. This is nearly 15% of the total character population which is a pretty significant percentage of the overall character experiences (Figure 6) especially compared to some of the other data points.

## MENTAL HEALTH + DISABILITY OR ILLNESS



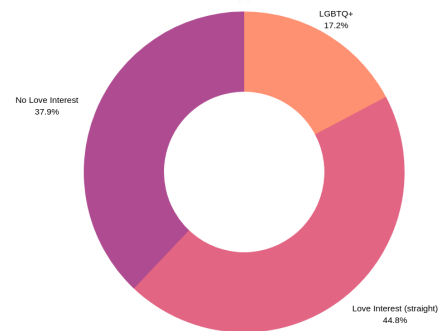
**Figure 7. Single or No-parent Households**

At least seven of the twenty-nine titles had single or no-parent households. While this isn't a large number in the grand scheme of YA canon, these were the only books that were immediately identifiable as fitting this category. For the purposes of this section only books that didn't mention parents and guardians or mentioned one parent without identifying the loss or separation of another weren't counted in the seven. It's possible that some, none, or most of the additional titles are also part of this section; books that had one or more parents explicitly identified, but weren't a part of the seven, were counted and those that had no parents identified were counted separately. Individual character experiences, from dual protagonist titles, were not looked at unless they *explicitly* showed they were a part of a single or no-parent household, otherwise they were counted in one of the other two sections. Of the titles, those that had at least one parent mentioned made up 40% of the overall list and unmentioned or inconclusive family structures made up 36.7% (Figure 7). While the single or no-parent households do make up a significantly smaller amount of titles than either of the other categories, it's still one fifth of the overall list.

## LGBTQ+

Four of the twenty-nine titles had at least one LGBT character, though in total, at least six characters were a part of the LGBTQ+ community. I chose to represent the books rather than the characters because, especially in the books that were about specific love stories, the other main or secondary character was always going to be LGBTQ+.

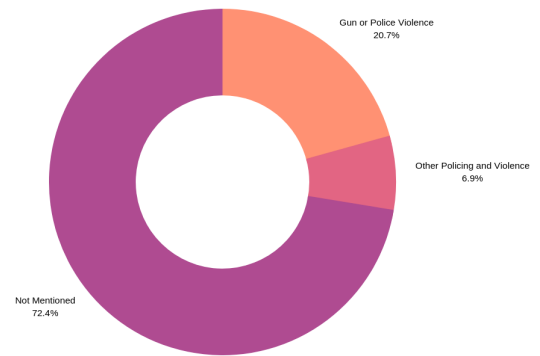
Although this representation is above the number in the 2010 study, none of the titles explicitly talk about other experiences within the queer community—five of the six characters are identified as either gay or lesbian with one character who is bisexual. In addition, almost 40% of the titles do not indicate a love interest which is something that is typically heavily prevalent in YA books (Figure 8). Now, this doesn't mean that none of those books have romantic partners, but rather that there was no indication within the book copy.



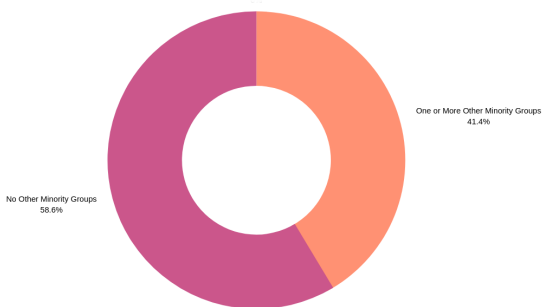
**Figure 8. LGBTQ+**

## GUN, POLICE, & OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Once the overall trend of the language was identified it was important to put everything back into context. I started by looking at some of the language I thought should be called out. For example, in the top fifty most frequent words, three stand out because of their connotations: “gun,” “police,” and “officer” because of their frequency and connotation. These three words appear a total of twenty-one times in the book description found on Goodreads and while I didn’t entirely look at frequency for most of these findings, it seems excessive to use these words so many times in so few books. These words appear in 20.7%, six of twenty-nine, of the titles (Figure 9). At least one-fifth deal with policing or guns in some way—but that doesn’t account for the two other books that don’t have that specific language but do deal with some sort of policing or violence. If that was to be accounted for, at least 27.5% of the titles would deal with policing, guns, and violence in some way. This trend will be discussed further in a later section.



**Figure 9. Violence & Policing**



**Figure 10. Overall Minority Findings**

Just under 42% of the titles had protagonists that were part of one or more minority groups in addition to their race (Figure 10). Typically, they weren’t a part of more than one in most cases but in a few of the books characters who were low-income also had single or no-parent households. Another example is a character who has mental health issues and is also part of a single or no-parent household.

## GENERAL MINORITY REPRESENTATION

# Discussion

“...a crucial part of education is learning about differences, learning to value other cultures, histories, and experiences...” | PEN America

## CONTEXT MATTERS

What does all of this say about how language represents race in diverse young adult literature? It doesn't, really. Yes, some of the books do talk about race but in reality more Goodreads copy talks explicitly about other minority statuses than the race of the protagonist(s). Of the eleven titles that do explicitly discuss race, three of those, or 27.2%, are also in the other minority

statuses group. This confirms the idea that was first brought up in Rawson's study that racially diverse minorities are likely to also be a part of other minority groups.<sup>1</sup>

These representations are important and we should continue to challenge those spaces that only offer one lens or one set of diverse experiences.

While the statistics may not show that character race is being talked about

1 Rawson

there are other, more subtle ways that these conversations are happening. For example, in *Dear Martin*, part of the Goodreads copy talks about an experience Justyce McAllister, the protagonist, has while driving with his friend. Although this is one of the books that doesn't explicitly bring up race in its description, there is a line that says: “Then comes the day Justyce goes driving with his best friend,

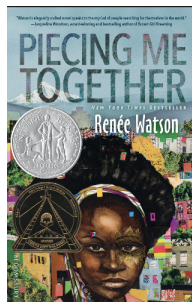
Manny, windows rolled down, music turned up—way up, sparking the fury of a white off-duty cop beside them.” What this signals is that, even though Justyce's race is never brought up in any of the copy, pointing out the police officer as something other than Justyce's race makes this addition significant.

Additionally, themes of living in or leaving dangerous or bad neighborhoods comes up often in these book descriptions. In *Piecing Me Together*, Jade “accepted a scholarship to a mostly-white private school” and in *The Hate U Give*, Starr is going to a “fancy suburban prep school.” Both of

*Piecing Me Together*

## Jade

“She accepted a scholarship to a mostly-white private school and even Saturday morning test prep opportunities.”



*The Hate U Give*

## Starr

“Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends.”





these schools are outside their own neighborhoods and they aren't the only ones that experience this attention toward their neighborhood or school not being safe for them. In *Anger is a Gift*, Moss and other students are “increasingly treated like criminals” in their own school and in *Dear Martin*, Justyce is “leaving his rough neighborhood.” All of these characters are black. Stories like these can be reflections of white supremacist ideology and may maintain the idea that black neighborhoods aren't safe or healthy and perpetuates otherness.

The other huge theme of police, gun, and other forms of violence makes up roughly 30% of the titles, and while that is a real experience that young people of color are facing in this society, there's not a single book that comes to mind that has a white protagonist (beside the dual protagonist stories here) that isn't fantasy or science fiction that also have these topics. If nearly a third of the diverse books available for young people to read deal with violence, what experiences are we leaving out?

These experiences are important to talk about but they often continue to conserve long-standing tropes. Ideally, YA and book publishing generally should be in a place where it can be assumed that books are adequately diverse without the need for explicit recognition, but that's not currently the case. Until that happens, publishers should take care in how they talk about race and other diverse statuses to ensure that they are not being insensitive, inaccurate, and perpetuating stereotypes. When this doesn't happen books can end up being pulled or blacklisted by readers for insensitivity and bias.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is work being done, we should consider how even good intentions can lead to erasure and bias. Rather than using a colorblind approach,<sup>3</sup> publishers should be focused on a multicultural one—perhaps best represented by Lee & Low Books. Especially when young people are creating and discovering their identity, their race matters:

“...MULTICULTURALISM, AN IDEOLOGY THAT ACKNOWLEDGES, HIGHLIGHTS, AND CELEBRATES ETHNORACIAL DIFFERENCES. IT RECOGNIZES THAT EACH TRADITION HAS SOMETHING VALUABLE TO OFFER. IT IS NOT AFRAID TO SEE HOW OTHERS HAVE SUFFERED AS A RESULT OF RACIAL CONFLICT OR DIFFERENCES.”<sup>4</sup>

By becoming a more inclusive industry, overall, and especially toward young people and adults that read these published books, we can actualize real change. What we can learn “is that a book, and more specifically a YA novel, can burst the bubbles we often live in.”<sup>5</sup> Books challenge our notions of what's acceptable, what's good or bad; they inform our worldviews.

<sup>2</sup> Just this year, Amélie Wen Zhao's book, “Blood Heir” was pulled for “blatant racism” and fear of harm to a particular minority community.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, “Colorblind Ideology is a Form of Racism.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Cook, “Using Young Adult Literature to Question Stereotypes, Society, & Self.”

## Limitations + Considerations

In exploring the topic of diversity in this research I am aware that my status as a white woman in a predominantly white area of the United States can significantly influence how I interpret this research. As I've worked through defining meanings and exploring the data I've become aware of an increasing number of ways that language is used to perpetuate otherness. Language like "person of color" or "POC" is used throughout along with other phrases or words that can continue this perpetuation. While that's not the intention in using them, the hope is that by pointing out stereotypes and tropes used in book descriptions we can move toward a broader and more inclusive space. Ideally, I hope to identify ways that the publishing industry, overall, can manifest changes to be less biased and more inclusive.

This research started in a place of curiosity about current diversity trends in YA and is meant to explore changes or stagnation in language over time, but it manifested into a larger project with dozens of avenues that aren't explored here, but should be explored by future research. I was especially cognizant of ways that I may be employing confirmation bias and did my best to take a step back from the work when and where I could to evaluate this.

Another issue I ran across while conducting this research were the restraints that my original methods section introduced. As I was only looking at books published between 2015-2018 that had sold 5,000 or more copies, the pool for diverse books was actually pretty low. Not only were those dates and sales numbers already an expanded version of my original methods, but once I reached around twenty-two total titles, finding the remaining eight took a lot more digging. And, I wasn't even able to find all the books I was hoping for. Young people, or really any person that reads YA books, should be able to easily find racially diverse titles.

Lastly, human error is an important factor to point out. I conducted all of this research on my own because I am curious about and invested in this discussion. That creates a space where I am likely to and did make mistakes or overlook things. After doing the complete word list and connotations for each, I realized that two of the books I did choose are magical realism which while not specifically science fiction or fantasy, seems more closely related to those than anything else. Because I was already so far into the research and it would have been nearly impossible for me to isolate and extract the words from those two books alone, they were left in.

## Future Research

Research is really endless on this topic and, until there's truly not a need for it, it should absolutely continue. To expand this sort of research I would change the methods again and lower the sales limit to something like 2,500. Hopefully having a larger data set would allow me to see potential patterns across racial identities that wasn't possible with this short list. I'm also invested in doing similar research in other diverse categories. For example, the same study conducted for LGBTQ+ or discussions of mental health would also help give an idea of what is currently happening in YA literature. There's always room

for improvement and we really should strive to be the most inclusive industry that we can be, which is why I've set up some best practices to help continue this growth.

## Best Practices

Publishers should make a point of seeking racially diverse titles where those characters have a range of experiences by asking a few questions of their acquisitions team and process:

- » Why is the acquisitions team or individual passing on a book?
- » Is the publisher receiving diverse submissions? If not, does the publisher have particular language that might be discouraging those? Is there additional outreach that could be taking place?

Who is the acquisitions team comprised of:

- » Is it diverse and inclusive? If no, why? If yes, what are potential biases that they still have?

When a publisher has acquired a racially diverse title they should consider how the story is being told and marketed through book descriptions:

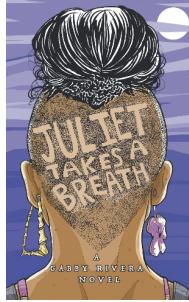
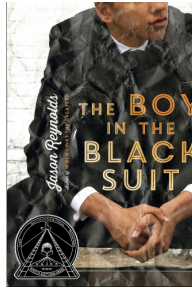
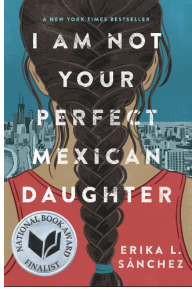
- » Who is the audience and does the publisher know how to reach them?
- » If the team that's working on the title isn't racially diverse, what are steps the publisher will take in order to make sure the story is told from the least biased and stereotyped position it can be?
- » The publisher should absolutely hire and retain sensitivity readers.<sup>1</sup>

Identify who your characters are:

- » When a book is published, does the audience know who the character is? Are they racially diverse? Diverse in other ways?
- » Is there vague language surrounding the race of the character because of circumstances they find themselves in? If so, how can that be changed to better reflect their experiences?
- » Does the book copy play into overdone, insensitive, or racist tropes? For example, does it assume the protagonist's home community isn't safe just because it's racially diverse? Are father figures left out? Are mother's single parents? Do the characters have to leave their neighborhood to get a good education? In some cases these may be important to the story but in others they are devices used to talk about race without actually talking about race.

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<sup>1</sup> Sensitivity readers are employed to read books before they are published and give notes and feedback on the diverse content of the title. Typically this reader will be a part of the particular minority status discussed in the book.

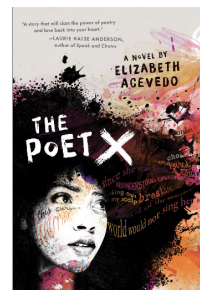
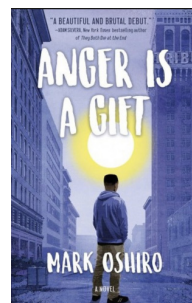
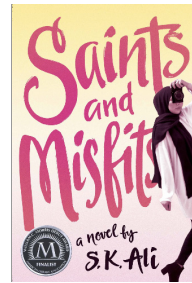


## Looking Forward

Ultimately, YA books, like most categories, are intended to inform us in some way. They're representative of lived experiences, they're adventurous and coming of age; sometimes they are raw and heartbreaking and often they are hopeful and optimistic. Young people experience identity formation and growth in innumerable ways, and reading is often an important one.

Throughout this research I found that book description language overwhelmingly does not talk about race and ethnicity, and when it does it's often about the negative experiences those protagonists have. Additionally, it is subtle and typically something that has to be assumed by the person who's reading the copy. These books are also often difficult to find and continue to perpetuate certain stereotypes and tropes. When diverse

books do exist, however, they often challenge norms, ask big questions, and seek to be inclusive of other minority experiences which is a place that this segment of young adult literature excels. There are a lot of experiences represented on this list and it's important to validate those and celebrate that work. There's still room to grow, however. We can still always do better and ultimately, our efforts are best when we contextualize the history, evaluate the present, and intentionally move toward a better future.



## Acknowledgments

My passion to create spaces that are diverse and inclusive translated well to the research I completed in the Book Publishing program at Portland State University. From Intro to Book Publishing (Winter 2018), with Dr. Rachel Noorda, my focus was on young adult literature and more specifically, those books that have protagonists of color. This interest eventually developed into my research question for the program where I looked at how book description language, found on Goodreads, talks about race. Once found, I examined the language for biases, stereotypes, and tropes, developing ‘best practices’ questions that publishers can ask in order to avoid and call these issues to attention.

I’m incredibly thankful for Dr. Rachel Noorda and Dr. Kathi Inman Berens who were both crucial in developing and focusing my ideas. Advice given by Dr. Berens was especially important when I started to form my methods in her Digital Marketing class (Fall 2018)—where she encouraged me to do more primary research, which not only resulted in a thousand extra words for her class essay, but better research overall. Kent Watson, Executive Director of PubWest and professor of Business of Book Publishing at PSU, was critical in providing feedback during my oral exam, alongside Dr. Berens, where they encouraged moving between this critical research and implementing and advancing these changes within the publishing industry. And of course, I’m particularly grateful for those that allowed me to explore this research late into the night and early mornings to ensure I looked at every angle I possibly could. It is a gift to have such wonderful people encouraging my curiosities.

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