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More Than Fiction: Representations of Youth in Young Adult Dystopian Fantasy Fiction and
its Importance

by

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We've already encountered the soaring popularity of Young Adult dystopian fiction with series like Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* or James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*. Both movie adaptations of *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner* combined with the adaptation of *Divergent* netted "over \$630 million" (Imam). English professor and researcher of utopia fiction at York St John University Adam Stock suggests one reason dystopian Young Adult (YA) fiction might be so popular. According to Stock, this genre invites readers to understand the contemporary implications of the "terrors" of dystopian societies, going as far as to say the understanding of these implications will "demonstrate that the cultural fears and anxieties which they map in relation to the future are a result of both the known and the unknown in the present" (38). Readers, like the characters in the novels, are shaped and affected by their environments. Factors such as social norms, political climate, social rules, and laws established by the government all go into the making of a person's individuality and culture. Dystopias give a glimpse of what a place would be like if an oppressive society with unfair treatment was ruled by totalitarian powers. That is to say, depictions of dystopias are often based on fears in the past of poorly structured societies as well as concerns within the present societies and hopes of a better future.

This thesis analyzes Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows*, a dystopian YA novel first published in 2015, to examine how adolescent protagonists are represented while also considering the effects that a dystopian setting has on these characters. *Six of Crows* is told in the third person with a limited perspective of six different characters, mainly following Kaz and the main members of his gang, the Dregs. Set in the city of Ketterdam, this world is a place of crime poisoned by the greed of the oligarchy that oversees it. Victims of this society, Kaz and his crew are forced to use underhanded and lawless means to survive in an unforgiving world; eventually,

they are tasked with a heist by a high official of the oligarchy to break a man out of prison. But of course, despite how clever these kids can be, nothing ever goes according to plan. In order to understand common themes in which young adults are depicted in contemporary dystopian Young Adult fiction, I will compare *Six of Crows* and *The Hunger Games*, discussing themes regarding identity, rebellion, and empowerment while also touching on the novels' representation of the necessity of rapid growth toward adulthood and individuality. In the following pages I will first discuss what YA fiction scholars have written about the effects of a dystopian setting, the common themes of identity and rebellion, and how many characters are forced to develop as adults early on. Next, I will provide a critical analysis of a few characters from *Six of Crows* in relation to these topics.

Fiction and Youth

The immediate difference between novels and Young Adult novels is the age of the characters portrayed. The protagonists and many of the characters in the novels are ages 19 years or younger, right around the time when kids begin to develop their own ideologies, identities, and beliefs. In YA fiction, the main characters are always young. Despite the obvious differences between the readers' context and the setting or characters' looks and behaviors in YA fiction, there is always a bridge of youth itself between the characters and intended readers. The idea that as "an author, you are writing for an audience that you want to disappear, to move on" is true to a certain extent (Belbin 134). In essence, young readers inevitably get older and will more often than not move on to other literature. The limited time adolescents spend with YA fiction form a relationship between authors and readers, and this holds no different from YA novels.

Fantasy/dystopian worlds are metaphors to the systems of the real world. Societies we experience both in the past and the present are represented within these novels by portraying various parts of societies like class systems, societal hierarchies, or resistance to social structure in need of change. As Justin Scholes and Jon Ostenson put it, “Dystopian novels that wrestle with deeper societal and moral issues are often well received by young minds that are developing the ability and even willingness to grapple with complex ideas” (14). These complex ideas include social norms, moral standards, and even the class structure of society and the government they live under as a whole. Adolescence is a time frame in which children are developing their own beliefs beyond black and white, discovering the more complex gray area that is much more common in reality.

YA novels are capable of contributing to the construction of one’s foundation as a person, especially through the representation of youth within each text. Peter Caggia discusses scholar Vivienne Hill’s findings comparing *Narnia* and *Earthsea*, highlighting themes of “good versus evil, coming of age, the search for identity, and magic” (Caggia 6). These themes are fairly common and are part of developing characters in a YA fiction story. Our understanding of what it means to be an adolescent in fiction grows alongside our understanding of the developing characters.

While these thematic similarities between the reader and protagonist are noteworthy aspects of dystopian YA, how antagonists are represented as obstacles for adolescents should also be recognized. Youth are given empowering roles within a story to enact social change, often due to the failings or corruptions of generations before them. Clare Walsh discusses adolescent protagonists pursuing goals like world peace, describing how it is “particularly empowering for young readers since in reality children’s struggle against adult power ‘will not

eventuate in structural change” (241). At the forefront, this emphasizes that a common major conflict within YA dystopian novels is that, in some form, antagonizing forces are related to adults in some manner. Frequently, adolescents are given powerful roles to fight against this antagonizing force with the ultimate goal of change. Walsh also mentions how the science fiction and fantasy genre is a good fit for adolescent readers because it caters to both “their nostalgic yearnings for childhood that is passing, as well as to their impatient desire to be taken seriously in the world of adulthood” (248). Walsh is acknowledging the teen’s awkward conflict between the joy of childlike desires and the frustration of not being recognized and treated like an adult.

Adolescent readers of YA fiction, like the protagonists of the novels, must prove to themselves that they’re ready to evolve into the adult world, and they must also first find themselves. Identity is a theme shared between dystopian novels as well as fantasy fiction novels. With youth comes a journey of self-discovery that these novels offer another avenue to traverse and explore. Identity and finding one’s role in society go hand in hand and often lead from one to the other. Caggia emphasizes that “personality development” happens in “eight stages spanning the course of an individual’s life” (Caggia 22). Mainly during one’s teen years, there is a stage before adulthood to which most wrestle with the question of their identity. Caggia goes on to describe an approach in which self-discovery occurs by defining social identity as who you are as a person and an occupational identity within society. Simply put, there are two different identities one must grapple with in order to fully conquer this “stage” of one’s life: how one views themselves and what one is capable of. We see this in more extreme variations in YA novels, such as *Hunger Games* in which Katniss discovers the skills she has as a symbol of rebellion as well as in combat. She undergoes a transition from child to adult, finding her values and what she feels it means to be a woman. Another example might be in *The Maze Runner*, in

which many adolescents discover their worth and their capabilities to cope in an unknown environment as well as their ability to create and function in a society of their own with designated roles for each person. It might also be worth noting the emphasis that Caggia puts on this stage theory is the necessity for “social context,” meaning that youth cannot discover themselves completely without the assistance and outlet of their peers. Social interaction and experiences within their lives take shape as building blocks for their identity and how they see themselves. Commonly, we see opportunities for protagonists to make choices for themselves, either going against or going with certain ideals. Companionship and trust play important roles in these, feeling empowered by having reliable supportive pillars to depend on.

Identity can also be measured in fantasy literature as well; Caggia uses *Harry Potter* to emphasize the challenges that youth face in order to live up to certain expectations in society. One must come to terms and grapple with the expectations of others and themselves in order to explore who they are. Heavy burdens and the weight of responsibility often come up within these novels, as with Katniss being a symbol of rebellion or Harry having to live up to the expectations people have of him due to his past. This coincides with the similarities that the characters in dystopian fantasy YA literature face in the context of trauma. Trauma is often used as a turning point or a catalyst to ignite change, growth, and empowerment within adolescents. Susan Shau Ming Tan uses *Hunger Games* as an example to compare how trauma is used and represented by young adults. She states that, “children are forced into adulthood by the mechanisms of the Games” and that “adults are conversely infantilized as adult disempowerment” (Ming Tan 58). The horrific systems that demand children sacrifices in *The Hunger Games* seem to metaphorically compare to the societal expectations of the real world, including the concept of a cycle that must be broken. This metaphor insists that children must abandon their childhood and

grow up fast in these dystopian settings. Oppression, death by murder and the system, abuse, loss, and others are all heavy topics that these protagonists must face. They will go through growth of not only trying to survive in an unjust society, but also coping with the burden of the important role they are given. If the protagonists are not given opportunities to make a choice or if they do nothing when these opportunities present themselves, they will be another cog in the machine. They become stuck in a cycle of oppression in which the adults become powerless against society, following through with the rules set in place to restrict the coming generations and their growth.

Finding Strength to Change

The representation of youth within *Six of Crows* contains a lot of variations thanks to the narrative perspectives constantly changing throughout the novel. We are introduced to a difference in class systems through Hoede and Anya at the beginning of the novel. There are the poor as well as gangs that thrive in the underbelly, while there are named families that need guarding in the city of Ketterdam. It is important to note that Hoede and Anya set the stage for how society functions when Hoede, a relatively influential adult in the governmental hierarchy, is using teenagers bound by what is essentially a slave contract to test a new dangerous drug. Despite these characters hardly being mentioned throughout the rest of the novel, these characters also introduce a conflict between youth and adults. Hoede is a man who is greedy and desires control over the lives of others, controlling Anya and other youths by contract. He uses these children as test subjects for a drug that he plans to sell for money, further emphasizing his adult character only having wealth and political power and nothing else. Youth, however, are given magical powers to heal through the depiction of Anya. In comparison with Hoede's

political and monetary influence, this power is much more fantastical yet is ultimately suffocated by Hoede using Anya as a tool rather than a person. Hoede is portrayed as owning Anya through indenture and that even if she wanted to, “she would never marry unless Hoede decreed it” (Bardugo 9). Despite possessing otherworldly magical powers, Anya’s sense of empowerment is repressed by an adult’s restrictive will. This sets the tone for the rest of the novel, giving important roles in the story to teenage youth while also justifying their actions in order to survive and make a difference. While Hoede and Anya are not the protagonists, the mood is set for what is to come.

There are two main characters that I will be focusing on, starting with Kaz Brekker, the leader of the Dregs which is a prominent gang in Ketterdam. Kaz is depicted to be no older than 17 with a limp severe enough that he needs a cane. Others in the city refer to him by the nickname “Dirtyhands” due to the work he’d done working up to this point. Early in the novel, we are given a glimpse of what kind of psychology Kaz has in his encounter with Geels, a greedy adult. Through their interactions, readers see what Kaz means to the undercity. Kaz is described at first glance as being “cocky, reckless, easily amused, but not frightening,” which is then compared to the drastic change in his attitude that is like a “monster” that is “dead-eyed and unafraid” (Bardugo 32). These qualities suggest that this boy grew up fast. In fact, the entire idea of growing up fast is very prevalent throughout the story. In Kaz we see trauma and, ultimately, the cognitive dissonance within his brain between his morals and survival. Borrowing Shau Ming Tan’s lens and way of thinking, Kaz as well as others are forced into adulthood by mechanisms that society has created, mechanisms that these children are unable to control. This results in the early developmental understanding of darker topics and themes that force youth to accept the cards they are given, discover ways of coping, and find their own role as a cog in the collective

machine. Essentially, this ignites purpose and an end goal for the growth of each character; that is, they are faced with the choice of whether to blend in with society or change it entirely.

An important thing to note is that Kaz is not completely healthy and is disabled. Past physical trauma has stuck with him, as one of his legs is and never will be fully functional. Of course, he is depicted as pushing the physical limits of what one could do with a physical disability. Instead of what this society gleams as “perfect,” Kaz is an imperfect, young kid that leads a group of criminals wronged by the world they live in. This physicality is a permanent reminder of his history as well as a declaration of his resolve, understanding that “there was no part of him that was not broken, that had not healed wrong, and there was no part of him that was not stronger for having been broken” (Bardugo 401). This acceptance of his history emphasizes the necessary growth Kaz needed in order to live on from past mistakes while also illustrating his disability as something to be proud of. His trauma history is viewed as a strength instead of a weakness. The mental fortitude to look at each shortcoming, avoidable or not, with confidence and pride is not necessarily present nor expected of a “normal” 17-year-old. In the latter half of the novel we see more of Kaz’s interiority, showing the reality that he is still just a kid, vulnerable with weaknesses just like anyone else. Kaz becomes a person that still can and will make mistakes no matter how stone-cold and hardened he might be. Buried beneath the multilayered facade he upholds is someone still vulnerable to the longing emotions of love, human contact, and phobias. We even learn that an obstacle he’s yet to overcome, and the reason for his wearing of gloves, is due to the development of some level of haphophobia, a fear of skin-to-skin contact. What complicates Kaz’s vulnerability and fears is the presence of his love interest, Inej.

A young 16-year-old badass who was raised in a carnival and acrobatics, Inej loved the freedom walking on the highwire gives her which juxtaposes how little freedom and individuality she has. On the surface, she is illustrated as someone who excels in anything and everything spy-related, living up to the nickname Wraith. However, deeper than this, is a story about a girl kidnapped from home on a journey to rediscover and reclaim her self-worth, her strength, and her purpose. Over and over again, Inej is faced with the trauma of her past when she was taken from her family by slavers and sold to a brothel. Though meeting Kaz had given her a sense of freedom, that freedom was still under the orders of another. It wasn't until she was faced with a near-death experience that she finally realizes that what she needed was independence and to develop a will of her own. Once again, we see another character overcoming trauma. However, instead of having already overcome it, we as readers get to see a troubling journey of self-discovery by facing one's fears and trauma head-on. A common theme appearing here is that children are forced to grow up fast in the face of trauma. Hastily becoming an adult while also discovering her own independence and identity, Inej could be a symbol of inspiration and empowerment. She is represented as a girl who discovers what being a woman means to her as well as being able to overcome walls created not only by others but herself as well. She is able to process her emotions, feelings, and desires necessary in order to grow. In the truest sense of the word, she began as a wraith at the beginning of the novel and ended it as Inej.

Tossing the title of Wraith aside and becoming one with herself can be seen as a form of rebellion; this is a common theme that seems to appear in many YA dystopian fantasy novels. Inej more strongly represents going against social norms, redefining labels given to her, and opposing judgmental cages made by others. Kaz and the Dregs, however, have a different form of rebellion by revolting against a capitalist society that is depicted as being toxic and greedy.

The capitalist society shares similarities with the oppressive forces that oppose other adolescents in YA fantasy fiction and is a strong ignition for the forces of rebellion. The Dregs can be seen as an antagonizing force against laws, politics, and the current society as a whole. In many ways, they're portrayed as being above the law, performing heists, controlling ports and docks, and buying out guards and politicians for their own personal means. For instance, it's revealed very early on how Kaz views merchants and prominent capitalist figures:

“‘I’m a businessman,’ he’d told her. ‘No more, no less.’

‘You’re a thief, Kaz.’

‘Isn’t that what I just said?’” (Bardugo 23).

Kaz dresses exactly as the businessmen and corporate merchants do as a joke, mocking them. He dislikes their way of doing things so much that he made a wardrobe just to taunt them. Kaz’s disdain for corporations exemplifies Abbie Ventura’s emphasis on capitalist resistance by stating “young adult literature repositions the child in terms of agency, power, and resistance” and that YA fiction represents “contemporary capitalist systems” as well as systems in the future (91). *Six of Crows* extends this argument with its various characters representing the greed that the society is consumed by while positioning adolescents like Kaz and Inej in positions of power to go against the rules set by this society. Ketterdam, as a city, seems to be forgotten or neglected with no sort of effort toward reformation. We soon learn however that the governance negligence extends far past just one city. The putative oligarchy runs Kerch, the country, and is thirteen of the oldest and wealthiest families in the country that call themselves the Merchant Council. Laws that are supposed to be fair are rather easy to break, and corruption is acknowledged within this world. Human trafficking is made to be illegal, but due to the system of indentures, children are sold off to less-than-savory occupations legally like what happened with Inej. The level of

criminal and underground activity shows the faults of the government in its failure to protect the safety of the people. This is not a government that pursues the betterment of the country, but instead, high officials only value pocketing money for themselves.

An example of one of the corrupt officials of the nation and also a main antagonist within *Six of Crows* is Jan Van Eck. Illustrated as very cunning and ruthless, friend or foe means little to him as long as he obtains monetary gain and political power. He's described as a "man of faith" to the Ghezen, the god of commerce, and considers his overwhelming amount of wealth and power a sign of good fortune (Bardugo 44). He is not given any sort of redeeming qualities, and, as with many adults represented within this novel, he is shown to have evil and manipulative qualities. This is far from the morally gray area that the youth are asked to traverse within this novel. Every single adolescent character is given some kind of hardship due to their predecessors and the current overruling system full of adults. These children are forced to become self-sufficient before the age of 18 and are forced to learn skills in order to better their chances of survival in a criminalistic world full of corruption. Clare Walsh explains that it is typical to depict adults in YA fiction as "exercising their authority over children" often in a "cruel and/or unpredictable manner" (240). There is an oppressive way that adults seem to apply their power of force in order to inhibit the growth of children and to stop them from achieving abilities to enact change. This depiction of an antagonizing force created to be overthrown is in line with Walsh's idea that YA fiction writers such as John Christopher and Philip Pullman empower their readers. Walsh states that neither writer "seeks to contain his child protagonists, and by extension his young readers, within a perpetual state of childhood innocence" (248). The morally complex issues that come up allow young readers to digest them in a manner that is easy to consume and understand and encourages these children to develop opinions of their own outside what those in

control tell them to do. It inspires them to question things that they think should be questioned. This is not to say that these children are incited to rebel but to question what is right or wrong and voice their beliefs and concerns instead of becoming another sheep going along with what needs to change.

Within *Six of Crows*, Inej is a symbol for young women to not only find themselves and claim the power and strength that's rightfully theirs, but to also stand against these oppressive forces that exist within society. While it could be interpreted that Kaz freeing Inej from the brothel reinforces her dependence, the action of being truly free initially is not complete until Inej decides to pursue her own goals of hunting down slave traders. What this does is signal the beginning of Inej's opportunity to grow into a woman of her own choosing and to freely decide how she wants to live independently, saying, "I will have you without armor, Kaz Brekker. Or I will not have you at all" (Bardugo 434). Even with the feelings she harbored for Kaz, and the temptation of staying with him, she still values her own worth and puts her foot down for the sake of them both. This empowering statement signals her growth as a person from someone needing saving to someone doing the saving. It also serves as an inspiring mentality to relate to young readers, showing them that they should and need to value their own worth and aspirations. She showed her ability to move on, and truly turn her weaknesses into strengths.

Similarly, Katniss Everdeen is another woman that goes on a journey to find herself and in that journey ends up finding her purpose in becoming a symbol for the people. Both of these women act as symbols for the youth reading these dystopian fantasy novels, giving an example of a role model to look up to and relate to. Although Katniss shows "distaste for being exploited, controlled, and used on others' terms," she understands her importance and turns the weakness of being treated and used like an object into strength and empowerment (Jones 232). She is

described as being capable of doing more as a symbol of peace and takes on the role that no one else can. Although inspired by other characters within the novel, Katniss realizes her importance as not only a “soldier, fighter, or an independent rebel” but also as the “Mockingjay” herself (Jones 232). Just as Katniss was originally reluctant to take on the name “Mockingjay,” Inej too found herself questioning the nickname given to her. However, both realize that the names they were given meant more than themselves and show selfless qualities that highly contradict that of the adults within their respective novels as well as how boys seem to be represented. Mockingjay is a name of peace and a name that the government fears, which holds similarity to the meaning of Inej’s nickname the Wraith. This fulfills the idea of adolescent empowerment, thrusting these women into roles that greatly symbolize strength. Inej is illustrated as such when she states that she might still die in the Dregs with gang activity all over the place, but that only means she died standing with a blade in her hand (Bardugo 89). Her emphasis on staying on her feet instead of living on her knees under the control and oppression of another encompasses the rebellious idea that she would die fighting if she had to, no matter what. This also is a turning point in her growth, showing that she will value her own beliefs and her own life.

Inej’s character highlights the contrast with Jan Van Eck as someone with malicious intentions, fueled by greed and power only. Furthermore, Jan Van Eck use of Inej as both a hostage and a bartering chip instills an existing stereotype that views women as objects. In the final scenes of *Six of Crows*, Kaz and Inej are betrayed and Inej is eventually defeated and taken due to Kaz’s love for her becoming his weakness. Jan Van Eck is represented as an adult who views people as nothing more than objects below him, and thus, treats Inej no differently. In order to get what he wants, he takes Inej captive and uses her to threaten Kaz. Ultimately, despite her display of strength till the very end, she is taken and treated as an object of trade. In this

manner, Inej's origins and the ending of this novel come full circle, being taken and traded like an item to be sold and bartered. Jan Van Eck's narrow-minded and selfish views emphasize the disgusting nature of the existing society. He becomes the representation of an oppressive society in need of change, not only in the novel but in the real world as well. And while this is being illustrated, Kaz is not only coming to terms with his own values and beliefs but also is showing strength to make decisions despite being under duress. Bardugo writes, "Vengeance for Jordie, all Kaz had worked for, was slipping away. He didn't care" (Bardugo 452). Everything that had once driven Kaz all the way to where he is now is overshadowed by something more important. This is enough to make him realize his own priorities and what matters the most to him. His people and Inej. However, despite the current situation being dire, Kaz is still not portrayed as someone in complete distress. Rather, this incident actually rewrites and fortifies his resolve into something more by saying. He thinks, "Inej could never be his, not really but he would find a way to give her the freedom he promised her so long ago. Dirtyhands had come to see the rough work done" (Bardugo 456). The importance of Inej's freedom, safety, and aspirations is above everything else, even if it meant becoming a monster without feeling, therefore, ruining his chances of being with her. This idolizes self-sacrifice yet again, as well as having the strength to face adversity while also being able to place loved ones' lives and happiness above all else.

Six of Crows among other YA fiction illustrates youth as factors of change necessary for a society to grow or reform. Adolescent protagonists are using their mistakes and learning from them in order to grow, adapt, and enact change through rebellion and accelerated transitions to adulthood. They can serve as empowering tools for adolescent readers to accept or find their own identities and discover their beliefs. Youth need relatable outlets that interest them in order to work toward their developing these identities. In many YA dystopian novels, these authors not

only provide entertaining and fun reads for those needing these types of stimulants, but they can also inspire their readers' growth. This inspiration could be encouraging them to discover themselves in ways they thought were not possible, or exploring different routes and identities. Discussions of the varieties of identity benefit children's perception of themselves and the world around them, emphasizing the importance of not only finding what they identify with but also finding their purpose in the world. More than anything, being able to explore the various interests and abilities that they might have through these novels progressively introduces them to concepts that may be otherwise hard to digest. In this manner, YA fiction serves as a tool to discuss and reveal various truths about the world without any condescending or righteous tones; this is especially true for dystopian fiction, as protagonists are portrayed as being in the right despite breaking the rules.

YA protagonists are symbols of the upcoming youth, giving them an outlet to escape from reality until they're ready to take what they've learned back to rediscover their resolve to grow and overcome. Novels and stories such as these serve as mentors for children that may not have any other reliable teachers in their lives. *Six of Crows* is no different, easing readers into adult topics that, in most cases, they've already been subjected to in one way, shape, or form. This novel acknowledges the many morally gray issues that exist within society, as well as what corruption looks like within a society that might be too weak to enact change. Without being shown a universe in which change is possible and feelings of rebellion are normal, children might find it harder to face isolation and come to understand their own selves. Closing our eyes to the issues we face versus being ignorant of them are two separate things entirely, and it is with the belief that shedding ignorance will lead children toward the path of problem-solving and independent beliefs that they themselves will develop.

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