

Carpe Librum: Seize the (YA) Book

#BlackLivesMatter: When Real Life and YA Fiction Converge

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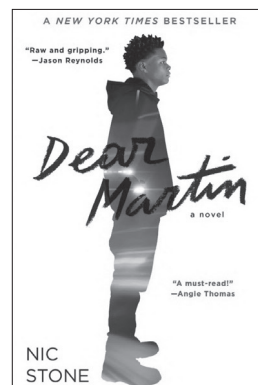
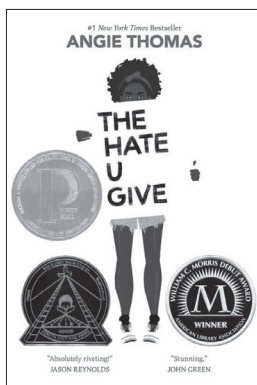
Column Editor's Note: Some books emerge and take the YA world by storm. Sometimes, it's luck. Sometimes, it's timing. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was written in response to horrific events (the deaths of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner

in New York City; and many others). The site of these deaths varied, but the fact that each victim was an unarmed Black man shot by police sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2012 (BlackLivesMatter.com). In the last year, trending news stories still echo racial tensions in our country: a Princeton professor, Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, received death threats after she delivered a graduation speech (Parent); basketball superstar LeBron James had his home vandalized with the N-word (Buckley); and a noose was found in the segregation section of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC (Williams and McGlone). Clearly, we are not living in a postracial society, and our young people need books that will help them navigate this world.

Our conversations about this book started informally—over coffee, texting, and emails—but we knew we wanted to share our thoughts with a larger community. Our conversations took shape within the context of a Twitter chat framed in questions found at www.heinemann.com/blog/taking-a-closer-look-at-the-hate-u-give/ and archived on Storify at storify.com/triciaebarvia/teachhateugive. This column is a collaborative effort between two teachers of color (Kim

and Tricia) who teach students from a variety of backgrounds and a white teacher educator (Pauline) who hopes to encourage her preservice teachers to think deeply about the issues represented in *The Hate U Give* and similar YA texts, such as *All American Boys*, *Piecing Me Together*, and *Dear Martin*.

Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* starts off like any YA text: with a high school party complete with music, dancing, and drinking. Tensions among teenagers are present; but, about 20 pages in, the main character Starr and her old friend Khalil leave the party and the story becomes anything but ordinary. Khalil is murdered by a White police officer and Starr is the only witness. As events unfold, Starr finds herself having to defend Khalil's humanity while also having to decide if speaking the truth is worth her own safety.



This debut novel is sparking a movement all its own: students, teachers, and readers—all mesmerized and uncomfortable—are reading this tale and grappling with the implications about our society. Below we discuss the value of *The Hate U Give* and the power that “literatures of resistance” can have for our students.

Tricia: When people ask me about *The Hate U Give*, I often don’t know where to start. As a Filipina American, I could especially relate to the moments when Starr had to negotiate her multiple identities between her school and neighborhood. I was one of only a handful of students of color in my parochial school. I spent more time celebrating St. Patrick’s Day than any other holiday. Growing up, I longed to fit in and, like Starr, I could never fully be in one world or the other. It wasn’t until I was in college that I started to come to terms with some of these issues. Looking back, I know that a book like *The Hate U Give* would have been a gift to me.

Kim: I felt like I *knew* Starr as I began reading. She was funny, honest, struggling to fit in. She was like most young folks I know and work with daily. When Khalil is shot, though, I had to put the book down. My heart raced, my palms were sweaty. I knew how it was going to end because I’d read some online criticism, but I wasn’t expecting to *feel* the shooting so viscerally.

In the aftermath of Khalil’s death, I kept thinking that these are young

people I know, who experience trauma regularly and are told to get over it, or to deal with it, or are told nothing at all. I admired Starr’s resistance to let Khalil’s story be told falsely, and I particularly was drawn to the nuanced characters Thomas crafted throughout. Finally, this is a book that takes on particular angles of living in urban areas from an assets-based perspective. Starr is a character that so many young people need. As a Black woman working with Black girls, particularly, *T.H.U.G.* is critical to helping them create counternarratives of what it might mean to be a Black girl in these times, full of Black girl magic.

Pauline: This story immediately broke my heart; there were several moments where I had to put it down and walk away to process how best to share this novel as a teacher educator. I left the reading with more questions than answers, and sometimes that can be uncomfortable for us as educators.

Tricia: The novel has tremendous power to transcend boundaries. Too often, we may fall into the trap of thinking that only certain “types” of readers will like certain “types” of books. We segregate books into “boy books” and “girl books.” Perhaps we also do this with books that deal with race and culture. I teach in a large suburban, relatively affluent school district; most students are more or less insulated from

the issues that Starr faces. Philadelphia is a 25-minute drive away, but students often see #BlackLivesMatter through sound bites. It would be easy to assume (wrongly) that my students may not connect to a novel like this.

Yet the first students who picked up the book were many of my White female students. Since adding it to my classroom library, I haven’t been able to keep it on the shelves. Students tell me how “relatable” the book is. The desire to fit in, the struggles of first love, the pressure from family to succeed, how to stand up for yourself—these are universal issues. At the same time, students finish the novel and “want to do more.” Literatures of resistance, like *The Hate U Give*, offer students an important window into experiences that they need—and want—to learn more about. Our school’s student book club has read it; teachers and administrators have read it. The book has sparked much-needed conversation.

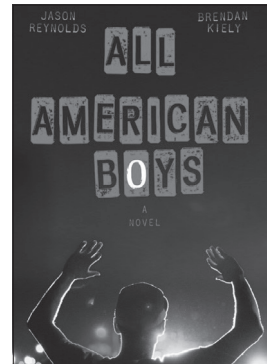
Kim: I’ve used this book as a classroom library selection and as a book club. My students had similar reactions to Tricia’s: they wanted to read it immediately, and it’s been one that I cannot keep on the shelves, either. From the moment I introduced it as a book club selection and we read the first few pages together, my students were hooked. “This is hip,” one said, while a peer agreed.

My school can be categorized as a well-resourced urban school. The school tracks heavily, meaning that most White, middle- and upper-middle-class students take Honors and Advanced Placement classes, while all other students take College Prep courses. I've always been concerned with the literacy experiences of all students, but the ones for students of color and other underserved young people trouble me the most. For too many, they never read a book that is written by a person who shares their background—they often don't even know those books exist. Thus, getting *The Hate U Give* into their hands is an imperative. More importantly, for young people who are reluctant readers, accessibility and relevance are oftentimes the hinge that makes them want to keep reading. This book is, for many of them, the lives that they live every day as they struggle to be noticed, to be validated, and to be heard.

This book works as part of a robust classroom library, offering Rudine Sims Bishop's windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. It also works well as a book club selection that students can choose to read with their friends. My students love when I read parts of the novel aloud, pausing for us to talk about what we're reading. They can't help but make connections as they go, and I'm able to use those connections as links to broader conversations and themes.

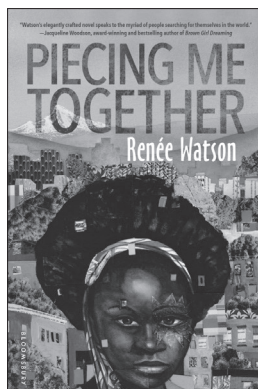
Tricia: Because *The Hate U Give* has such wide appeal, it's also sparked student interest in reading related titles. Perhaps the most important thing that literatures of resistance can do is make heard voices that have been systematically marginalized. Like Starr in *The Hate U Give*, Jade in Renee Watson's *Piecing Me Together* must learn to navigate a world of unspoken rules at her prep school. And like Thomas, Watson gives us another richly developed Black girl's voice to listen to and learn from. The more stories we can have beyond any "single story," as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us, the better.

Pauline: Like *The Hate U Give*, *All American Boys* (Reynolds and Kiely) deals with an incident involving police brutality but recounts the events from alternating narrators. One point of view is that of a Black teenager who is unfairly suspected of wrongdoing and is beaten; the other perspective is that of the White student who witnesses the incident. My preservice teachers generated some interesting discussion points when they read *All*




American Boys, along with *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee) and John Lewis's graphic novel, *March*, this semester. They wondered if there would be pushback from parents or school boards to include texts that could be seen as controversial. They wondered how the texts would be received by more experienced teachers. They wondered about the value of pairing the classic text with the contemporary one to look at them through a historical lens, as well as the literary lens.

Kim: This book is really important for helping readers understand systems of White supremacy. Why is Garden Heights as it is? More specifically, surely it wasn't always a blighted urban community. What systemic factors are responsible? Yet Thomas also helps the reader to see the beauty of urban areas, the roses in the concrete. After all, people live there! People flourish there! We must pay attention and acknowledge that there is so much good, so much beauty, so much *resilience* that gets overlooked when we are reading headlines or buying into stereotypes.



Tricia: For further study, there are also many wonderful multimedia and multi-genre texts that would be helpful to both teachers and students. A collaborative effort to teach *The Hate U Give* in the classroom can be found at bit.ly/TeachHateUGive. In addition, NPR has two podcasts, *Code Switch* and *Other: Mixed Race in America*, that examine the intersections of race, culture, and language with current events.

Column Editor's Conclusion: This is a really exciting time for young adult literature. In a piece at Literary Hub, critic Emily Temple argues that "[YA] books may be *about* activism in some cases, but more importantly, they are actions in themselves. They show how it is, for different kinds of young people, right now, and that's what's going to make a difference. Young adults are uniquely

situated to marshal in the future" (*italics in original*). And we can't wait to see where they take us. 

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