

Building ‘Diverse’ Spaces in YA Fantasy: Publishers, Readers, and Media Adaptations

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of

PhD in Information Studies

2022

Declaration

I, Ikram Belaid, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis examines ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. This topic is explored from the perspectives of YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers, as well as from the perspectives of YA fantasy readers. The thesis also demonstrates the role and impact of screen adaptations on the representation of marginalised characters in this genre. The research gathers relevant data from multiple sources and in different formats, namely: qualitative semi-structured interviews with YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers; a quantitative online survey with YA fantasy readers; and a qualitative case study of Netflix’s screen adaptation of Leigh Bardugo’s bestselling *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* YA fantasy series. This thesis uses a mixed-method approach to investigate the research questions thoroughly. Findings indicate that various participants in the publishing communication circuit of YA fantasy, such as publishing professionals, readers, and social media influencers, are interested in seeing more authentic representations of marginalised groups in the genre. The findings also indicate that some readers are still unable to see themselves represented accurately and authentically in the YA fantasy books they read. Through an analysis of some popular YA fantasy tropes and trends across different media, this thesis demonstrates that including representation of marginalised characters does not, in itself, achieve the goals of ‘diversity’ and inclusion. For this reason, it is crucial to consider the contexts of these tropes and the real-life implications of the types of roles that marginalised characters occupy. The ultimate objectives of this thesis are to disrupt and dismantle some problematic representations and contribute to building safer and more inclusive spaces for these characters and for the readers who see themselves through them.

Impact Statement

This thesis is a contribution to the fields of YA Studies and Publishing and Book Studies that improves the understanding of ‘diversity’ and the representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy fiction. This research uses a mixed-method approach to gather empirical data from various perspectives—such as publishers, social media influencers (bloggers and Youtubers), readers, texts, and media adaptations—to explore new insights and reach a deeper understanding of the construction of ‘diverse’ YA fantasy stories through narrative tropes and trends. Building on the works of YA scholars, including Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, Kim Wilkins, and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, this thesis addresses the gap in YA fantasy research by placing ‘diversity’ at the core of the inquiry and offering new holistic insights and knowledge using the gathered empirical data about the representations of marginalised characters across different media and the experiences of readers. Throughout this research, I consistently discuss the need to look beyond the surface and consider the types of spaces these characters occupy in YA fantasy. I use a combination of traditional and creative methods to disrupt YA fantasy trends and tropes by questioning the contexts within which these tropes are rooted. For instance, I introduced the use of hypothetical vignettes—which is a method that is often used in the medical and education fields—to YA Studies and Publishing and Book Studies. My contribution to knowledge enables individual readers to become more aware of the implications that some popular trends and tropes can have and equips them to challenge, disrupt, and make change happen. It also benefits the content creators, such as authors and media producers, encouraging them to become more intentional about including underrepresented aspects of their characters’ identities in an authentic and empowering way. Insights from this thesis can also inform executive decisions at various levels of the publishing industry, from recruitment to commissioning, marketing, and front cover design. For example, the findings for this thesis highlight the need to have a more

inclusive workforce that would feel more comfortable acquiring ‘diverse’ books and carrying them through the various stages of the publishing process. The findings of this research demonstrate that there is a general push towards including more representations of ‘diverse’ characters, which will bring more authenticity to YA fantasy and ensure that more readers are able to see themselves represented in different roles. This research highlights the importance of the Crew Hero trope, an already frequently adopted trope in fantasy fiction, as it intrinsically provides room for ‘diversity’ and more opportunities for identification. The notion of the crew is also critical in the bigger picture because the goal of ‘diversity’ can only be achieved through the collaboration and cooperation of different agents who are involved in the process. There is still a lot of work to be done but it is my hope that this thesis can inspire further research on this topic.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the marginalised, the silenced, and the ones who were never chosen.

Words cannot express how thankful I am to my supervisors, Prof. Samantha Rayner and Dr Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, for their expertise, excitement, guidance, and unwavering support from the start of this PhD. Working with them has truly been an immense privilege. I would like to thank the Department of Information Studies at UCL, particularly Prof. Annemaree Lloyd and Prof. Elizabeth Shepherd. This experience would not have been the same without my friends and peers at UCL Leontien Talboom, Marco Humble, Helena Hollis, Bethany Johnstone, Kirsty Fife, and George Cooper. I would like to thank the publishing professionals, social media influencers, and readers who participated in this research and took the time to share their opinions and expertise with me. Thank you to Dr Leah Phillips and the YALMCA family, who welcomed me with open arms to the YA community when I first moved to the UK and started this PhD. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues at Usborne Publishing for their support, particularly Sophie Thresher and Stella Nash for their kindness and encouragement. I also acknowledge my gratitude to Nicola Usborne, who saw something in me and gave me the opportunity to use insights from my research to make a difference. I want to thank the Algerian Government for funding the first three years of this project. I am eternally grateful for my crew of family and friends. My parents, Dr Djamel Belaid and Prof. Lilia Abdelhamid, have been the best role models and taught me everything I know. Thank you to my sister Imene who made sure I always had books to read, and my little brother Walid for all his enthusiasm and support. Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my husband, Ali Nasri for always believing in me even when I doubted myself. I could not have made it this far without you.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

YA	Young adult fiction
NA	New adult fiction
MG	Middle grade fiction
SFF	Science fiction and fantasy
WNDB	We Need Diverse Books organisation
POC	People of colour
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and people of colour
BAME	Black, Asian, and minority ethnic
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CLPE	Centre for Literacy in Primary Education
PoV	Point of view

Introduction: “*Brick by brick*”

This thesis investigates various elements that influence and contribute to the formation of YA fantasy stories featuring representations of marginalised characters and interrogates the spaces that these characters occupy. This thesis looks at ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy from various angles, including the publishing industry, digital spaces, texts, audiences, and screen adaptations. My original contribution to knowledge consists of improving the understanding of ‘diversity’ and the representation of socially marginalised groups in YA fantasy with the aim to inspire constructive change in the future of this genre. In this thesis, I argue that even though YA fantasy has made significant efforts to become more ‘diverse’ and inclusive over the last decade—with the support of various agents that are involved in the process—some of the representations of marginalised characters remain problematic because of issues such as stereotypes, racism, Orientalism, erasure, and other biases. This research makes it apparent that rewriting or reorienting the spaces that socially marginalised characters occupy in YA fantasy is driven by various agents in the publishing circuit and can only be achieved collaboratively and progressively. Therefore, this research uses a mixed-method approach that combines traditional and creative methods, including a qualitative set of semi-structured interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers (i.e. bloggers and Youtubers), a quantitative online survey with YA fantasy readers, and a case study examining Leigh Bardugo’s bestselling YA fantasy series and Netflix adaptation. Bardugo’s *Six of Crows* (2015) and *Shadow and Bone* (2012) are instrumental in this research and will appear multiple times throughout the thesis. For instance, the quotation used in the title of this introduction, “*Brick by brick*” (Bardugo, 2015, p.70) (emphasis in original), is from Leigh Bardugo’s YA fantasy novel *Six of Crows*. In the context of the book, this is a promise of destruction. One of the main characters, Kaz Brekker, has been cheated by a conman named Pekka Rollins and lost his brother as a result.

Kaz promises himself that he will destroy this man's empire "*brick by brick*" (Bardugo, 2015, p.70) (emphasis in original). This motto represents a driving force that motivates Kaz to accomplish his revenge because it is a "promise that let him sleep at night, that drove him every day" (Bardugo, 2015, p.70). Kaz's promise echoes the two main objectives of this thesis: to dismantle various problematic tropes regarding the representations of marginalised characters and to contribute to building safer and more authentic 'diverse' spaces in YA fantasy, one brick at a time. One. Word. At. A. Time.

Positionality: situating myself in the research

Positionality is a term used to refer to a researcher's worldview and the position they orient themselves towards in terms of the social and political context of the research topic (Foote and Gau Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013; Rowe, 2014; Holmes, 2020). In other words, positionality "reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, p.71). Furthermore, being self-reflexive is crucial to articulating the researcher's positionality and contribution to the research (Holmes, 2020). Malterud (2001, p.484) notes that:

Reflexivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences, pre-study beliefs about how things are and what is to be investigated, motivation and qualifications for exploration of the field, and perspectives and theoretical foundations related to education and interests.

Therefore, to understand the foundation that this research is built on, it is relevant to know how my interest in YA was first ignited. I grew up in a small town in Algeria called Tazoult, where we did not have easy access to books, fiction books in English particularly. In 2010, I stumbled across a YouTube video of someone reviewing *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008). I then proceeded to watch several other similar videos about the book. I was

very intrigued by *The Hunger Games* and wanted to read it, but the problem was that I was not able to find a copy of it anywhere. Bookshops did not sell many English fiction books, with the exception of classics.¹ Ordering a book from Amazon, for example, was a possibility, but the cost of shipping alone was more expensive than the book itself.² Additionally, the shipping times were extremely long, and there was a chance that the book would never even arrive for many different reasons. Realising I was not going to be able to read the book, I had to settle for the next best thing: experiencing the book through the people who had read it. The easiest way to do that was to watch BookTube videos about it. I quickly discovered video discussions, which were more in-depth reviews intended for the people who had already read the book. I started watching these spoiler videos and discussions and slowly putting together the plot of the book I had not been able to read. The story was like a giant puzzle, and when I had finished putting the pieces together, I decided that *The Hunger Games* was my favourite book, even though I had not read it yet. I had stumbled across this wholesome corner of YouTube dedicated to books and readers called BookTube. I continued watching this type of videos about books for many years after that, and because these videos were mainly featuring YA books, I became increasingly invested in this field.

Fast forward to a few years later, when I finally gained access to these YA books—because my sister moved to France and started sending me books—reading them was a completely different experience from what I expected. I did thoroughly enjoy the books; however, I realised that up to that point, I had seen these books through the perspective of White teenage girls from the US and what they would describe as ‘relatable’—or what I would later understand to mean that they saw themselves accurately represented in the

¹ There are a few new independent bookshops that opened in the last couple of years after I left, such as Ktoobs and Shakespeare Bookstore, that now sell some YA books in English.

² In the last couple of years, The Book Depository started shipping for free to Algeria, which is a very encouraging development. However, this was not available when I lived there. One remaining issue is that shipping time can take up to two months for a book to arrive, which is not ideal but still better than having no access.

books—was not necessarily applicable to me. Up to that point, I had unconsciously inserted myself into the gaps and missing pieces of the story. When they said the main character was relatable, I imagined a version of Katniss Everdeen that shared aspects of my identity. However, after reading the complete version of the book, I struggled to relate to her. That was when I finally started to form my own opinions about YA books. I started thinking critically about these narratives. I saw aspects of myself but never truly saw myself represented. Rudine Sims Bishop highlights the importance of being able to see yourself in books in her influential work *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors* (1990). Indeed, not being able to see yourself — your culture, your identity, your struggles—represented in fiction makes you feel like you do not exist beyond your own experience or that you do not matter enough to be the hero at the centre of a story. For underrepresented and misrepresented readers, the windows are sometimes frosted, the sliding glass doors locked, and the mirrors warped. For this reason, research around the topic of ‘diversity’ and representation of socially marginalised groups in YA publishing is crucial to be able to generate change that impacts people’s lives. These experiences encouraged me to strive to be part of this change, and this is how the idea for this PhD was born.

In addition to situating myself in terms of the subject and context of the research, it is also helpful to acknowledge my status as a publishing professional and a reader/fan of YA fantasy. Therefore, my position regarding the participants of this research is that of an insider because I have been working as a publishing professional at a Children’s and YA publisher in the UK for the last four years, and I have also been consuming YA fantasy stories over the last decade. This insider status informed some of my methodological choices, such as coming up with hypothetical vignettes that reflect the 2010-2020 YA fantasy market (please see the Methodology Chapter p.104 of this thesis for more details).

Scope of the Study

Focus on YA fantasy

The focus of my analysis in this thesis is YA fantasy fiction from the perspectives of different agents in the publishing circuit. This thesis draws upon studies of YA, Adult fantasy, and Children's fantasy; however, the main topic under investigation is YA fantasy published specifically from 2010 to 2020. Figure 1 illustrates the different research areas that overlap in this research, including the publishing industry, YA fantasy readers and fans, media adaptations of YA fantasy stories, and different narrative tropes and trends that govern the genre. One of the reasons that led me to focus on YA fantasy is that this is a genre in which nearly everything is possible: a vampire can sparkle, a warlock can stay nineteen years old for hundreds of years, a witch queen can have retractable iron teeth and claws, and a human can shapeshift into a sea dragon.³ However, despite all of these possibilities that are inherent to the genre, safe, authentic, and empowering representations of BIPOC, queer, dis/abled, and otherwise marginalised characters remain scarce.

YA fantasy is considered to be “highly visible in popular culture,” which is a result of its multiple trend-setting successful books, high levels of engagement with online platforms, communities, and discussions, and being well suited for various adaptations to other media (Wilkins, 2019, p.65). Furthermore, Kim Wilkins also notes that the “combined textual, social, and industrial features associated with fantasy fiction and with young adult fiction are supercharged when they are combined” (2019, p.65). Therefore, addressing issues relating to the lack of representation and the problematic representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy can have an echo beyond the genre.

³ These refer to Edward Collins in Stephenie Meyer's (2005) *Twilight*, Magnus Bane in Cassandra Clare's (2007) *City of Bones*, and Manon Blackbeak and Lysandra Ennar Ashryver in Sarah J. Maas's *Heir of Fire* (2014) and *Empire of Storms* (2016), respectively.

In my analysis of various YA fantasy tropes and trends in this thesis, I focus on popular tropes that are often featured in bestsellers. I have used these tropes as the basis to develop the hypothetical vignettes that I used to interview some publishing professionals and social media influencers, such as bloggers and YouTubers (please see Chapter 2 p.104, Chapter 3 p.148 , and Chapter 4 p.188 for more details). Bestselling books can have a significant impact on the publishing industry (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021). Publishers often “acquire books by other authors that are similar to bestsellers: the so-called ‘readalikes’” (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.56). Therefore, raising awareness about issues that are featured in current bestsellers could have a snowball effect on the acquisition decisions for future YA fantasy books.

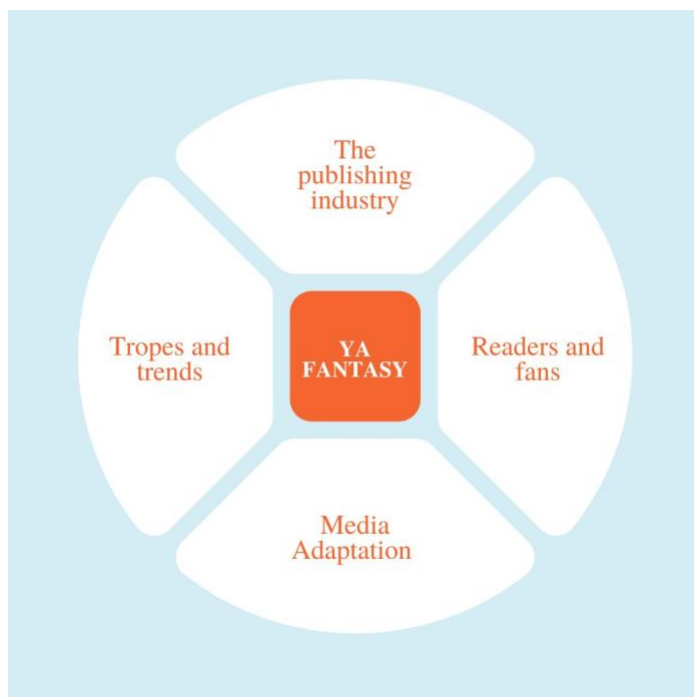


Figure 1: Research areas for this thesis

Focus on publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK

While the YA market is proliferating in both the US and the UK (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018a), this research mainly focuses on the UK publishing industry for data collection. The constraints of location, ethics, travel, and feasibility all contributed to the decision to situate the interviews of this research in the UK. While this research contextualises the issues of

representations of marginalised groups within the broader Anglo-American research, collecting data from publishers and social media influencers was conducted in the UK with participants who were based in the UK at the time of the interview. The following reasons outline why I did not conduct interviews with participants based outside of the UK:

- 1) I moved to the UK for this PhD on a Student Visa, which meant that there were unnegotiable restrictions as to how long I was allowed to spend outside of the UK. This meant that I was not allowed to stay outside of the UK for extended periods of time to conduct interviews and collect data.
- 2) My ethics application to interview working professionals in the UK was straightforward, whereas conducting research outside of the UK would have required a much more extensive and complex application in which I would have needed to justify why this was necessary.
- 3) Finally, having no connections or network with publishing professionals in the US would have made it much more difficult to find professionals willing to participate in my interviews.
- 4) In addition to these logistical reasons, focusing on the UK was beneficial because the UK is the “birthplace and homeland of English language literature for young people” (E. E. Thomas, 2020, p.8) and “there is an under-representation of creative works that reflect the changing nature of British identity and society” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.4).

Focus on adult readers

In my online survey analysis, I focus on YA fantasy readers that are aged eighteen and older. Because YA’s traditional target audience is often assumed to be between twelve and eighteen (Cart, 2016), there is a gap in the research focusing on adult readers of YA fantasy, as I explain in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis (please see p.104). It is worth

highlighting that YA, in general, is also read by many adults (Publishers Weekly, 2012; Howlett, 2015). Furthermore, my own experience as an adult reading YA, more specifically as someone who only started reading YA as an adult, also reinforces the need for research that focuses on adult readers of YA fantasy, a genre that is often assumed to be aimed at a different demographic. Finally, ethical implications also contributed to the decision to focus on adult readers because including younger readers that are under eighteen years of age would automatically require a more extensive ethics application that requires more time to be approved.

Focus on 'race' issues

While this research attempts to cover the representation of various aspects of 'diversity' such as BIPOC, dis/ability, class, gender, and sexuality, it engages more deeply with issues of 'race' than the rest of the 'diversity' categories. My own status as part of an ethnic minority with Indigenous North-African heritage contributed to this orientation. The concept of a "unique voice of color" is explored in Critical Race Theory, and it maintains that being part of a minority "brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.11). However, I would like to note that while some of the issues I discuss in this thesis are not #OwnVoices, they were included in the spirit of solidarity and allyship, as Sara Ahmed articulates:

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (2014, p.189)

Furthermore, another reason that led me to focus on racial issues in this thesis is that there is a history of gently dodging the subject of 'race', as Rukmini Pande points out:

The rhetorical strategy of maintaining that of course race is an essential axis of identity to be considered, but never with the same urgency as sexuality and gender, is frequently used in introductions to books, anthologies, and conference presentations. (2018a, p.188)

Additionally, this focus on racial issues was also determined by the direction that the data was pointing towards. For instance, findings from this research reveal that YA fantasy readers are looking for more authentic representations of ‘race’ and ethnicity more so than they are for other categories of ‘diversity’. Furthermore, the case study of the *Shadow and Bone* Netflix series revealed that the most significant changes that were implemented from the books to the adaptation consisted of racebending, i.e. changing the racial identity of the main character Alina Starkov as well as other characters from a dominant group to a marginalised group.

Focus on Netflix adaptations of YA fantasy

The growth in popularity of the YA field through its bestsellers over the last two decades led to an increase in interest from scholars, critics, fans, and media producers (Fitzsimmons and Wilson, 2020). This is what Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson refer to as the YA “hypercanon” (2020, p.ix). This increased interest in YA from film and TV producers can be seen in the case of the streaming video on demand (SVoD) platform, Netflix. Ramdarshan Bold notes that this “new emphasis on young adult programming on Netflix demonstrates the influence of the YA audience, and developments in the way they consume culture,” which could offer “a much-needed stimulus to the YA market” (2021, p.9). Although the YA “hypercanon” (Fitzsimmons and Wilson, 2020, p.ix), which mainly consists of YA fantasy, does not reflect the entirety of YA, it still contributed to “commercialise the field of YA, giving it a more global reach and wider audience” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2021, p.8).

What YA fiction and Netflix have in common is that they both value nostalgia and relatability. Indeed, adapting YA offers a perfect combination of nostalgia and relatability while also providing an opportunity to rewrite the stories in a different medium. Kathryn Pallister notes that: “Whether it’s ‘Throwback Thursday’ or ‘Flashback Friday,’ the streaming juggernaut Netflix fuels and is fueled by audience desire for nostalgic content” (2019, p.1). Examples of this include Netflix’s highly successful *Stranger Things* series, which is set in the 1980s and influenced by the popular culture of that time. Netflix is simultaneously “a producer of nostalgia and an access point for nostalgic responses to previously circulated content” (Pallister, 2019, p.2). Therefore, I argue that YA adaptations fulfil this desire for nostalgia in two ways: 1) YA adaptations revisit stories that the audience has experienced in the past in another medium, and 2) for adult viewers, these YA adaptations take them back to their teenage years’ experiences and/or remind them of the books they read (and hopefully loved) when they were teenagers, thus fulfilling their desire for nostalgia. Therefore, in recent years, Netflix has acquired several Children’s and YA books for film and TV show adaptations, including but not limited to: *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006) by Lemony Snicket, and *13 Reasons Why* (2007) by Jay Asher (adapted in 2017); *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2014) by Jenny Han and *Dumplin’* (2015) by Julie Murphy (adapted in 2018); and *All the Bright Places* (2015) by Jennifer Niven, *Cursed* (2019) by Thomas Wheeler, *Tiny Pretty Things* (2015) by Sona Charaipotra and Dhonielle Clayton, *Dash & Lily’s Book of Dares* (2010) by Rachel Cohn and David Levithan, and *The Baby-Sitters Club* (1986-2000) by Ann M. Martin (adapted in 2020); *Shadow and Bone* (2012) and *Six of Crows* (2015) by Leigh Bardugo (adapted in 2021); and *The Selection* (2012) by Kiera Cass (upcoming).

With the use of its algorithms, Netflix has proved its power to not only predict but also influence what people watch (Beer, 2021, 2013a). For instance, in 2021, 111 million

people watched the same Korean Drama show, *Squid Game*, which turned out to be their “biggest TV show launch of all time” (Hirwani, 2021). Thus, by utilising the concept of “classificatory imagination” (Beer, 2013b, p.146), Netflix has significant control over what content gets to be popular. David Beer points out that: “If we think of Netflix as a vast archive of TV and film, the way it is organised through metadata decides what is discovered from within it” (2021). Netflix has thousands of hidden categories,⁴ including 146 categories with variations of the prefix: *based on book*, such as the categories: “Action Sci-Fi & Fantasy based on Books,” “Fantasy Movies based on Children’s Books,” “Imaginative Fantasy Movies based on Books,” “Suspenseful Sci-Fi & Fantasy based on Books,” and “Coming-of-age Dramas based on Books” (Moore, 2021). Additionally, the term “teen” appeared in 29 Netflix categories, including the categories “Teen TV Shows” and “Sentimental Teen Coming-of-age Movies” (Moore, 2021). Netflix uses these hidden categories to provide very specific recommendations to its users (Beer, 2021). All of these categories offer a plethora of opportunities for Netflix’s algorithm to promote YA adaptations, which could explain the proliferation of these adaptations over the last few years. The *Shadow and Bone* series, for example, is classified under “Fantasy TV programmes”, “TV Programmes Based on Books”, and “Teen Programmes”.

Statement of the Problem

Over the last decade, particularly since 2012, which appears to be a turning point for YA fantasy in terms of the gradual inclusion of more “diversity of imaginary worlds, characters, and stories” (Phillips, 2020, p.130), YA fantasy has acquired the reputation for being a ‘diverse’ genre. Because of this reputation, which was emphasised by the success of the works of Leigh Bardugo, Tomi Adeyemi, Sabaa Tahir, and Natasha Ngan, to name a few,

⁴ Netflix’s genre classification categories are often referred to as “secret codes” because they are in the metadata, and users might not always realise the specific genres they are watching (Moore, 2021; Beer, 2021).

it can appear that all is well in the world of YA fantasy. However, throughout this thesis, it becomes increasingly more apparent that this illusion quickly starts to dissipate when analysis goes beyond the surface level.

The Young Adult Library Services shared a post in 2015 on its blog, *The Hub*, titled *Diversity YA Life: Diverse Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*, writing:

Readers of fantasy, science fiction, and horror also like to see themselves in these books. If people of color can survive slavery and oppression and poverty, they can also survive zombies and maniacal kings and dragons. So, where are the black Hermiones? (Abron, 2015, para.2)

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas identified a significant “*imagination gap*” in Children’s and Young Adult stories across different media due to the lack of authentic representation of marginalised characters (2019, p.5) (emphasis in original). This is echoed by various calls from scholars, critics, industry professionals, and readers for YA fantasy to be more inclusive. This thesis examines multiple issues relating to the lack of representation and the problematic representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. While it can seem that if we just ignore these issues, they might just disappear, throughout this thesis, I demonstrate why it is of the utmost importance that these issues are discussed as well as what can be done to improve the current situation. Ahmed explains the implications of embarking on such a journey, writing:

We begin with a table. Around this table, the family gathers, having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic. You are becoming tense; it is becoming tense. How hard to tell the difference between what is you and what is it! You respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what they have said is problematic. You might be speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel ‘wound up,’ recognising with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. In

speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. *You become the problem you create.* (2010a, para.3) (emphasis added)

Throughout this thesis, I describe various problems relating to ‘diversity’ and the problematic and damaging representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. The arguments I present in this thesis aim to offer solutions and to have relevance within the YA fantasy context and also beyond. As Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires explain:

The range of people and organisations who interact with books—publishers, readers, schools, librarians, reviewers, technology companies, academics and so on—form not only part of the object but also the audience and potential beneficiaries for research into contemporary book culture. (2020, p.139)

Thus, it is essential to describe and highlight these problems of representation in YA fantasy because they are problems that need to be addressed and not ignored,

Because we *should* all balk when we see a nondisabled actor playing a disabled character; we *should* all be upset when the only black character in a show is a one-dimensional stereotype; we *should* all be exasperated when the heretofore strong independent female lead ends up needing to be rescued by a man with whom she then falls in love. But that doesn’t mean that recognizing problematic elements in a text or in our world negates our capacity for pleasure. (Schalk, 2018, p.143) (emphasis in original).

Indeed, as Sami Schalk notes, describing these issues does not take away the ability to read and enjoy the genre (2018). It is possible to be a fan of YA fantasy (or any other genre) and still expect it to do better and rise above its problematic representations of the characters that inhabit it.

Objectives

This thesis has two main objectives: to disrupt some of the existing problematic representations of marginalised groups within YA fantasy and to contribute to building safer, more authentic narrative spaces for socially marginalised characters in YA fantasy. The disrupting side of this thesis consists of taking a magnifying glass to the current issues of representation and social inequalities in YA fantasy through analysing the implications of popular tropes of the genre across different media (please see Chapter 3 p.148 and Chapter 5 p.225) as well as considering the perspective of the audiences of the genre (please see Chapter 4 p.188). On the other hand, the building side of this research emerges from the awareness and deeper understanding of ‘diversity’ issues and consists of the goal to continue to build ‘diverse’ spaces in YA fantasy, which can only be achieved progressively, or “*Brick by brick*” (Bardugo, 2015, p.70) (emphasis in original).

Research Questions

As previously mentioned, this research examines ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy narratives across different mediums. Furthermore, this research also explores the ways in which readers perceive ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy novels that are currently being published in the UK. In order to be able to engage with its goals, this thesis answers the following three research questions:

- 1) What are some of the stories that YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK seek, and how ‘diverse’ are these stories?
- 2) How do YA fantasy readers perceive ‘diverse’ representations, and to what extent do they see themselves in these stories?
- 3) What is the role of screen adaptations in reflecting the representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy?

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters: a Literature Review Chapter, a Methodology Chapter, and three Discussion Chapters. These are outlined in the following sections.

Chapter 1: Literature review

The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview that examines the topic of ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups through a review of the existing relevant literature drawing mainly from YA Studies, Publishing and Book Studies, Audience Studies, and Adaptation Studies. The interdisciplinary nature of the topic for this research means that this literature review covers a wide range of interconnected elements that all contribute to the formation of the YA fantasy genre. This chapter helps identify the genre’s current state regarding ‘diversity’. The identified gaps in the existing literature build the foundation of this research and inform my research questions. Chapter 1 seeks to map out the existing literature in the field, thus planning the trajectory of the rest of the thesis. In this chapter, I explore the main areas of investigation for this research.

Chapter 2: Methodology

After identifying some of the relevant gaps in knowledge in YA Studies, Publishing and Book Culture about ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups, Chapter 2 Methodology situates this research and myself within these fields and dives into the details of the methods used to address my research questions. This chapter explores the mixed-methods approach that I adopt in this thesis. Using this approach allowed this research to collect relevant data from various key sources using a combination of traditional and creative methods. These methods consist of a set of qualitative semi-structured interviews using hypothetical vignettes with publishing professionals and social media influencers, a quantitative survey that also includes the same hypothetical vignettes with YA fantasy

readers, and a Critical Content Analysis case study of a media adaptation of a bestselling YA fantasy series. The following three discussion chapters appear in order of data collection.

Chapter 3: Perspectives of publishing professionals and social media influencers on YA fantasy tropes and trends

Chapter 3 identifies key themes for this research by analysing a set of twelve qualitative semi-structured interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers. It discusses YA fantasy narrative tropes and publishing trends with the aim to explore the kinds of stories that these participants are interested in and to examine some issues of ‘diversity’ and the representations of marginalised groups within these stories. This chapter presents and discusses the findings from interviews that explore the experiences of these experts, as well as their thoughts on the hypothetical YA fantasy stories presented in the form of vignettes. These findings are then coded and analysed using thematic analysis. In this chapter, I draw conclusions regarding the implications that popular YA fantasy narrative tropes and publishing trends can have. I argue that various agents who are involved in the formation of YA fantasy are looking for alternatives to some of the stereotypical tropes and moving towards a more inclusive approach, such as narratives featuring collective and ‘diverse’ heroes. Findings from this analysis demonstrate that there is a general push from these YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers towards including and championing more authentic representations in this genre.

Chapter 4: Representations and the perspective of YA fantasy readers

This chapter builds on Chapter 3 to examine the opinions of YA fantasy readers and how they perceive ‘diversity’ in terms of identifying with the characters that they read and seeing themselves in these books. I draw from scholarship in the fields of Fandom Studies, Audience Studies, Cultural Studies, and Publishing and Book Studies, and present and discuss the findings from my quantitative online survey that uncovers the reading habits and

preferences of YA fantasy readers regarding the representations of socially marginalised groups. This chapter draws conclusions around themes such as YA fantasy readers seeing themselves in the books that they read and the different categories of ‘diversity’ that these readers are interested in seeing more of in the future. This chapter demonstrates that some YA fantasy readers, particularly readers who are part of a marginalised group, are still disproportionately more unlikely to see themselves represented authentically in the books they read. Thus, these readers are still looking for more stories that they can identify with. Furthermore, readers who do not identify as being part of a marginalised group are also seeking more ‘diverse’ narratives in YA fantasy.

Chapter 5: Are we doing better yet? ‘Diversity’ and Representation in YA Fantasy screen Adaptations

This chapter extends and deepens the analysis of the various YA fantasy tropes through a case study of the book-to-screen Netflix adaptation of the *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* series by Leigh Bardugo. This adaptation did not aim to replicate but instead to rewrite and reimagine the story in a way that reflects the world we live in more authentically. This chapter utilises Critical Content Analysis to examine the main themes that arise in this chapter, such as racism, Orientalism, darkness, monsters, the Chosen One trope, and counter-narratives. This detailed case study aims to examine the role of transmedia storytelling in addressing ‘diversity’ and representation issues in the original text. It interrogates the impact of reorienting and reimagining the spaces that marginalised characters occupy in YA fantasy when adapting these stories to a different medium. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how these adaptations can offer a unique opportunity to rewrite YA fantasy stories. However, I argue that this practice can also bring unexpected problematic implications. Finally, I suggest alternative approaches to diversifying YA fantasy stories drawing from Critical Race Theory,

as well as principles from Cultural Studies, Representation Theory, Phenomenology, Postcolonial Theory, The Dark Fantastic Theory, and Monster Theory.

Conclusion

This section of the thesis ties together the various threads of discussion to reach a better understanding of ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. This section also points towards further research that could build on this contribution in the future.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins develop the concept of “genre world” (2018, pp.998–1000), based on Howard S. Becker’s *Art Worlds* (1982, pp.14–15), which moves the focus away from the “gifted” content creators and towards the “radiating networks” around them. This concept “describes the collective activity that goes into the creation and circulation of genre texts, and is particularly focused on the communities, collaborations, and industrial pressures that drive and are driven by the processes of these socio-artistic formations” (2018, p.998). Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins (2018, p.997) note that a genre is composed of three main areas: “the publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts”, and observe that the focus of research has been predominantly on the text. Wilkins (2019) further explores the “genre world” concept in the context of YA fantasy in her influential book *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Conventions Originality, Reproducibility*. According to Wilkins, genre is a flexible and ever-changing construction that can be studied through “an analysis of not only the texts, but also potentially its audience, its marketing, its book design, its paratexts, and so on, because these are all part of the complex process by which the genre is formed” (2019, p.3). In more recent scholarship, this concept is further developed and explored in Wilkins, Driscoll, and Fletcher’s (2022) *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture*. In this thesis, I adopt this broader definition of genre to explore YA fantasy from different angles. In other words, I outline a broader scope that allows me to investigate the genre, particularly ‘diversity’ within the publishing trends and narrative tropes associated with it, drawing from YA fantasy texts as well as the different perspectives of publishing professionals, social media influencers, readers, and transmedia adaptations. Indeed, the concept of “genre worlds” opens the door for “new insights and a fuller, richer understanding of how genre fiction operates.” (Fletcher et al., 2018, p.998).

This literature review chapter summarises the scholarship around the topic of ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. It situates the research within the existing body of knowledge. This literature review is divided into five main areas of investigation:

- 1) defining YA fantasy,
- 2) ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy,
- 3) the role and impact of the digital age on YA fantasy,
- 4) transmedia adaptations of YA fantasy books, and
- 5) narrative tropes and publishing trends in YA fantasy.

In the first section, I outline the definition issues that often arise while attempting to come up with a universal understanding of YA fiction, fantasy fiction, and YA fantasy as a genre. The second section focuses on a common thread that binds all the other elements of the thesis together, which is an interest in ‘diversity’ and the representation of socially marginalised groups in YA fantasy. The following section explores the role and impact of the digital age on the relationship between authors, publishers, and readers of YA fantasy focusing on fandoms and cancel culture. Following that, I take a closer look at transmedia adaptations, specifically the case of Netflix film and TV show adaptations of YA fantasy books in recent years. The last section explores the different narrative tropes and publishing trends that have been governing the genre.

Note on Terminology

This research must be prefaced with a note on terminology. The term YA is used in this report to refer to Young Adult fiction, a term with fluid boundaries and use within publishing. The definition and scope of this field of media, culture, and literature will be explored in more depth in this Literature Review (please see p.36). The terms ‘diversity’, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), PoC (People of Colour), and BIPOC (Black,

Indigenous, and People of Colour) are used throughout this research. It is worth highlighting that the term ‘diversity’ can imply a problematic notion of Otherness (Saha, 2018; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a). For this reason, I use inverted commas for the term ‘diversity’ throughout this thesis. Thus, this research acknowledges the complexity of these terms; however, for the purpose of this study and because these terms are often used in research as well as in industry discourse without a negative connotation attached to them, they will be used mindfully in this thesis. This research adopts the *We Need Diverse Books* definition of ‘diversity’ which states that this term consists of “all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of colour, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities” (*We Need Diverse Books*, 2019). I use ‘queer’ as an inclusive term to refer to all sexual and gender minority identities. Because of the ableist connotations, the term ‘colour-blind’ is only used in this thesis as part of direct quotations from other research. Therefore, I prefer to use the term ‘postracial’ instead of ‘colour-blind’. I use the term ‘dis/ability’ spelt with the slash to “unsettle the notion that there is a discrete binary between disability and ability” (Polish, 2021, p.182). The *We Need Diverse Books* organisation announced in June 2021 that it will no longer use the term ‘Own Voices’ due to the problematic implications the term has been associated with in the context of cancel culture (Lavoie, 2021). The *We Need Diverse Books* organisation states that they:

will no longer use the term #OwnVoices to refer to children’s literature or its authors and we have removed mentions of #OwnVoices from previously published blog posts. Moving forward, WNDB will use specific descriptions that authors use for themselves and their characters whenever possible (for example, “Korean American author,” or “autistic protagonist”). (Lavoie, 2021)

In this research, I will continue to use the term mindfully when appropriate, while specifically mentioning the Own Voices category I mean each time to avoid any vagueness or

confusion. I use the term ‘problematic’ throughout this thesis. Over the last few years, this term has acquired an additional cultural meaning of mishandling or perceived mishandling of ‘diversity’ and inclusion. In the context of this study, I often use the term to describe representations of characters from marginalised groups that raise or present a potential problem in terms of ‘diversity’ and inclusion, for example when referring to issues of racism, Orientalism, or erasure in YA fantasy. Finally, I also use inverted commas for the term ‘race’ throughout this thesis because my understanding aligns with Stuart Hall’s (1996) description of ‘race’ as a discursive category as opposed to a category based on biological differences.

Defining YA Fantasy

Defining YA fantasy is a challenging task, mainly due to the inherent difficulty in articulating its constituent parts, YA fiction and fantasy fiction, respectively. This research does not aim to reach a universal, all-encompassing definition for the genre, as there are at least three main problems that arise when attempting to define YA fantasy: both YA fiction and fantasy fiction are relatively young fields that are still in a continuous state of change (although fantasy fiction is much more established compared to the more recent field of YA), they both have shifting boundaries that separate them from other genres, and they also have debatable starting points and timelines. Taking these issues into consideration, I will give a brief overview of the scholarship regarding the definition of YA fantasy through the following sections: 1) What is fantasy fiction? 2) What is YA fiction? 3) What happens when YA fiction meets fantasy fiction? After examining these elements, I will conclude this section by building a working definition for the purpose of this research.

What is fantasy fiction?

The publishing behemoth that is fantasy fiction is—and has been for a long time—a force to be reckoned with, from a commercial and a literary perspective, but attempting to define what exactly fantasy is can be difficult. Perhaps the first step to better understanding

this could be achieved by identifying its authors. It is worth highlighting that when it comes to fantasy, some authors and works tend to be viewed as being more significant than others (Attebery, 1992; Moran, 2019). J.R.R. Tolkien, for instance, is still considered by many as one of the most important figures in constructing and influencing fantasy as we know it today, and while he was not the first person to write fantasy, he was nonetheless able to show how far the genre could go by proving that it could be a profitable business (Moran, 2019). To Brian Attebery—an American academic expert in Science Fiction and Fantasy—Tolkien represents a “mental template” that maps readers’ perception of fantasy, and *The Lord of the Rings* represents the core of the genre (1992, p.14). Ken Gelder even claims that “every fantasy writer after Tolkien is, in spite of themselves, a Tolkienian” (2019, p.18). In addition to Tolkien, other quintessential fantasy authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, Ursula K. Le Guin, C. S. Lewis, Ray Bradbury, Lewis Carroll are also key to any discussion about fantasy, as well as more recent—but perhaps equally as influential—authors such as George R. R. Martin, Patrick Rothfuss, Robert Jordan, Diana Gabaldon, and J. K. Rowling, among many others⁵.

Much of the existing literature about fantasy, up until the last few years, was predominantly focused on “defending and defining” the genre (Levy and Mendlesohn, 2016, p.1). The following section explores a brief overview of the scholarship surrounding the definition of fantasy fiction. Some scholars have a broad approach when it comes to identifying what constitutes Fantasy, such as John Clute (2011), Michael Saler (2012), and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019), while others have a more niche-focused approach, such as Lin Carter (1973), and Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James (2012).

⁵ A 2020 Goodreads listing titled *The 100 Most Popular Fantasy Books on Goodreads* provides further examples of influential fantasy books and authors (Sharon, 2020).

The broader versions of the definition claim that the genre might include fairy tale, legend, myth, science fiction, horror, folktales, supernatural, and more. Clute, for example, uses the term ‘Fantastika’ to encompass a wide selection of works in this field: “Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are *understood* to be fantastic” (2011, p.20) (emphasis in original). Tzvetan Todorov (1975) seeks to define ‘the fantastic’ as a mode. According to him, there are three distinct but related categories that hinge on hesitation to believe, namely: ‘the uncanny’, ‘the marvellous’, and ‘the fantastic’. However, it is important to note that he did not seek to define fantasy as a genre, though his category of ‘the marvellous’ aligns neatly with Tolkienian fantasy as cited above. Thomas (2019, pp.7–8) uses the term “fantastic” and notes that it “includes fantasy fiction but goes beyond it to include all stories-about-worlds-that-never-were, whether they are marketed, shelved, or classified as fairy tales, horror, superhero comics, ‘soft’ science fiction, alternate histories, or otherwise”. Thomas further notes that “the fantastic captures the wonder of stepping into a world-that-never-was, and immersing yourself in it in a way that speculative fiction does not” (2019, p.8). Fantasy has also been described as “a capacious category that subsumes subgenres such as science fiction and the supernatural” (Saler, 2012, p.3).

Other scholars, however, prefer to distinguish fantasy from its neighbour genres such as science fiction: Mendlesohn and James claim that major fantasy theorists “all agree that fantasy is about the construction of the impossible whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely, but is grounded in the scientifically possible”, however, these theorists do not agree on much more, as they have distinct definitions and are often biased towards what *they* think *should* be valued texts in fantasy (James and Mendlesohn, 2012, p.257). Other scholars also attempt to draw narrower lines around the genre as Carter notes:

What I mean by the word ‘fantasy’ is a narrative of marvels that belong to neither the scientific nor the supernatural. The essence of this sort of story can be summed up in one word: magic. (1973, p.6)

Similarly, Clute and Grant suggest that: “a fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms.” (1997, p.338) Moran, in an attempt to identify a fantasy canon, draws attention to the question: “who gets to decide what fantasy is?” (2019, p.7), and concludes that the “various entities that have a say in elaborating the genre and its canon (authors, readers, critics, publishers) have different agendas and are not necessarily interested in coming up with a single coherent definition of what fantasy is” (p.11). Mendlesohn and James attempt to reconcile the different perspectives of defining fantasy by considering the genre as “a multiplicity of terms that recognizes academic, reader and commercial understandings of fantasy as equally valuable.” (2012, p.2). The perspective of the reader can also be critical when trying to identify a genre. Goodreads,⁶ for example, allows its users to create categories such as ‘fantasy’ and classify books according to these categories. According to Moran (2019), websites such as Goodreads and Wikipedia can even be used in the construction of canon. Attebery takes a different approach and describes fantasy and genres in general as ‘fuzzy sets’,⁷ claiming that they should be “defined not by boundaries but by a center” (1992, p.12). Wilkins (2019, p.4) subscribes to the uncomplicated and straightforward “we know it when we see it” definition of fantasy fiction writing:

Those who are invested—writers, readers, publishers, and even academics—can recognise fantasy without a checklist: it is written like fantasy, it is packaged like fantasy, it circulates like fantasy, and it reads

⁶ Goodreads is a social media platform and an app used by readers around the world to share their opinions on books. It launched in 2007, and it is now described as “the world’s largest site for readers and book recommendations” (Goodreads, 2017). It was bought by Amazon in 2013 (Olanoff, 2013).

⁷ ‘Fuzzy set’ is a mathematical term first introduced by Lotfi A. Zadeh and Dieter Klaua to describe a set with elements that have degrees of membership, and while the centre of these elements can be identified, the edges remain fuzzy.

like fantasy from the perspective of those writing it, packaging it, circulating it, and reading it. (p.4)

While a significant portion of the scholarship about fantasy is concerned with issues of defining the genre, such as the works of Attebery, Clute, Grant and others, some more recent scholarship, such as works by Gifford (2018) and Palmer-Patel (2019), explicitly distances itself from it and aims to move deeper into the field. Attempts to define fantasy fiction and distinguish it from other genres have been described as “stagnant conversations” because they tend to lead to dead-ends and hinder research from moving deeper into the subject matter (Palmer-Patel, 2019, p.1).

Attebery points out that: “Fantasy is the lie that speaks truth” (Attebery, 2022, p.9). The lying aspect of it consists of the magic, creatures, and imaginary worlds, and the truth of it can be identified in three different ways namely: mythically, metaphorically, and structurally (Attebery, 2022). Fantasy can be mythically true when it mirrors the traditional beliefs and the ways in which people have explained the world in the past (Attebery, 2022). Moreover, fantasy can also be metaphorically true, as Attebery puts it: “Many of the core functions in fantasy—which is to say, the magical operations—can be read as literalized metaphors” (2022, p.10). Finally, fantasy can be structurally true when it represents “the shape of the world, and especially the shape of change” (Attebery, 2022, p.12). This element of structural truth in fantasy speaks to the authenticity that much of this thesis is concerned about. Indeed, while representation in fantasy can sometimes be more metaphorical than accurate, the structural dynamics remain similar to our world. This offers an opportunity to explore various aspects of ‘diversity’ with the potential to result in real change.

What is YA fiction?

As its name indicates, young adult literature was initially meant to be written for young adults; however, the mere concept of being a young adult or a teenager was almost

non-existent until around the early 1900s, when teenagers were first recognised as belonging to their own separate group as a social demographic (Hafford, 2017). The reason for this is that “until 1900 we were a society with only two categories of citizens: children and adults” (Cart, 2016, p.4). This liminal category between childhood and adulthood was first examined by G. Stanley Hall in his *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904). The term ‘Young Adult’ was later used in 1957 by the American Library Association with the creation of their Young Adult Services Division (YASD) (Cart, 2016, p.7).

In the traditional sense of the term, YA fiction is literature that is geared towards a young readership and is written from the viewpoint of young people (Nilsen et al., 2014). Furthermore, “YA is recognisable as YA because its narratives are focalised overwhelmingly through teenage protagonists” (Wilkins, 2019, p.7). Additionally, YA fiction provides “frameworks for living and being” (Phillips, 2018, p.47). However, clearly defining YA, and identifying whom it is written for, can be difficult because this definition has been continuously changing over the years (Trites, 2000; Coats, 2010; Nilsen et al., 2014; Cart, 2016; Hunt, 2017; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). YA has been described as “a nebulous term” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.22), and defining this term has been compared to “nailing Jell-O to a wall” because of the unstable nature of the field and its target audience (Cart, 2016, p.3). At first glance, it might appear that YA might be a category of fiction that perfectly fits between Children’s fiction and Adult fiction; however, the reality is much more complex. Children’s fiction, YA fiction, and Adult fiction often overlap as there are no clear borders to separate the three. One significant factor that contributes to this issue is the fact that YA, in the past, has often been absorbed into the more established field of Children’s literature or used as a tool to understand the more mature literature of Adult fiction, which inevitably “elides the fact that adolescence disrupts the binary opposition between adult and child”

(Phillips, 2015, p.45). However, in the last decade, there has been a steady push to consider YA as a “destination literature” and as a field of research in its own right (Coats, 2010b, p.317).

Furthermore, YA is sometimes described and referred to as a category rather than a genre:

YA is not a genre, but a category, defined by its intended market rather than any particular features of the texts. Implicit in this is the assumption that ‘genre’ is defined by features of the texts, while ‘category’ is defined by intended market. (McAlister, 2021, p.4)

It is possible to separate the three categories of Children’s, YA, and Adult fiction according to the age of their target audiences, the age of the characters, the themes they portray, or according to their publisher’s marketing strategy. Although this can give us a rough idea of what category books could belong in, it is worth highlighting that there will be exceptions for each classification of this kind. The case of the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling is an excellent example of this. The first instalment in the series *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*⁸ (Rowling, 1997) was first published in the UK and marketed as a Children’s novel. It was placed in the Children’s section in bookstores, and it featured main characters that were around 11 years old. The original cover (see Figure 2) features bright colours and a hand-drawn illustration of a young Harry Potter glancing curiously at a magical train, the Hogwarts Express. As the series progresses, characters and readers grow older, and this is when it becomes unclear where the series fits in terms of genre. By the time we reach the fourth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Rowling, 2000), the main characters are teenagers with teenage issues, and the cover illustrates Harry being chased by a menacing fire-breathing dragon. The last book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly*

⁸ *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (Rowling, 1997) was released under the title *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* in the US.

Hallows (Rowling, 2007), seems to be targeted at a much more mature demographic. The novel is significantly longer and more complex. The main characters are 17 years old, and the novel features darker themes such as death, power, and failure. The publisher, Bloomsbury, also decided to create Adult fiction versions of the *Harry Potter* series covers to emphasise the idea that these books could appeal to an older audience as well. The covers mostly feature black and white photography with hints of colour, representing symbols from the novels that portrayed a very different atmosphere from the juvenile illustrations of the original covers (see Figure 3). Similarly, another example that shows how flexible YA's boundaries are is the *Throne of Glass* series (2012-2018) by Sarah J. Maas, which blurs the line between YA and Adult fiction. This series starts with the main character, Celaena Sardothien, being 18 years old (2012), and ends when she is 20 years old in the final book, *Kingdom of Ash* (2018). The last three books in the series feature violence and relatively explicit sexual scenes that make its place in the YA section questionable.

Another category, 'New Adult',⁹ which was first named by St Martin's Press in 2009, is sometimes used to describe books that fall between YA and Adult fiction (McAlister, 2021). Amy Pattee (2017) defines New Adult as: "a literary category dependent on a relationship between the books in this category and a particular audience that has been constructed, of late, as 'emerging adults'" (p.219). The relationship between YA and New Adult is evident, partly because the term 'New Adult' "is not especially legible without reference to 'young adult'" (McAlister, 2021, p.15). Thus, in this context, it is almost implied that New Adult is the new Young Adult or that it is the new, older version of YA. However, it is worth noting that the meaning of New Adult "has shifted dramatically over the decade or so that it has existed" (McAlister, 2021, p.1). Therefore, similarly to YA, clearly defining New Adult can be difficult, as McAlister explains:

⁹ The New Adult category seems to be a US-centric category and is not generally used in the UK.

a single, fixed definition cannot encompass the term, and to attempt to provide one would not only do a disservice to the category but also would fail to recognise the complex and changing ways that genres emerge and develop in the contemporary literary marketplace.

(McAlister, 2021, p.7)

Thus, McAlister (2021) prefers to examine the evolution of New Adult at three different periods of time because of this continuous shift in the meaning of the term over its lifetime. McAlister (2021) demonstrates the evolution of New Adult “from being a satellite category of young adult fiction to becoming a sub-genre of romance fiction” (p.8). The New Adult category has mostly been dominated by romance novels featuring mature content that is usually not found in YA (Pattee, 2017). Therefore, if we take this category into consideration, it could be argued that the *Throne of Glass* series might, in fact be better suited as a New Adult novel. All these categories of fiction, Children’s, Middle Grade, YA, New Adult, and Adult, represent a spectrum. While some works are easy to classify on this spectrum, others can be challenging. The *Harry Potter* series and the *Throne of Glass* series both challenge the boundaries of YA, the former sitting at the edge between Children’s and YA, and the latter between YA and Adult.

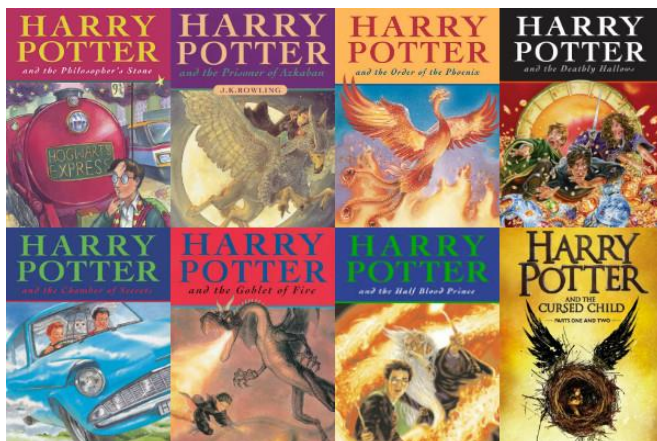


Figure 2: Harry Potter Original UK Bloomsbury Covers designed by Michael Wildsmith



Figure 3: Harry Potter Adult covers Bloomsbury designed by Andrew Davidson

Another element that adds to the difficulty of defining YA is its uncertain timeline. While novels written about and for teenagers have been on the market for a very long time (Cart, 2001; Coats, 2017), it is hard to identify with any degree of certainty what the first YA novel was. The question here is: what do we mean exactly by ‘the first YA novel’? Is it the first novel that was written for and about teenagers? Or is it the first novel that was coined as YA by its publisher? These are two different things. As previously mentioned, the term YA was only recently introduced (Edwards, 1954; Cart, 2016). For instance, novels such as *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (1951), *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton (1967), or the *Sue Barton* series by Helen Dore Boylston (1936-1952) were not marketed as YA when they were first published. In fact, they are still not marketed as YA today, but it can be argued that if those novels were written and being published in the current market, they would most likely fall under the YA category because of their themes, character ages, and target audience. Michael Cart is one of the few scholars who extensively explored the history of YA in the US, and he considers *Seventeenth Summer* by Maureen Daly, published in 1942 by Simon & Schuster, as the first YA novel (Cart, 2016). *Seventeenth Summer* (Daly, 1942) is a romance novel that explores the experience of a teenage girl’s first love story. It was published when the author was only twenty-one, which gave the novel an authentic voice that readers were able to relate to at that time (Cart, 2016). In the following sections, I explore a brief history of YA from the 1950s to the present day. This will provide useful insights into the development of YA from its early days to its current state and contribute to reaching a better understanding of the timeline’s influence on YA’s shifting definition. This influence has been predominantly led by the publishing industry and the way in which these books have been marketed and grouped into categories over the years.

In the 1950s, a more realistic approach to writing YA was adopted which included topics that would have previously been considered controversial (Cart, 2016). For instance, J.

D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) was first published for adults, but the voice, choice of first-person narrative, and coming of age rites-of-passage events make it "quintessentially adolescent" (Cart, 2016, p.30). Similarly, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) portrayed themes of adolescence and loss of innocence as it follows the journey of a group of school boys who are left without any adult supervision after a plane crash. Overall, during this time, heavier themes of hardship and loss replaced the lighter romance novels of the 1940s (Hayn et al., 2011).

The 1970s witnessed "the first golden age of young adult literature", which includes authors such as Judy Blume, Robert Cormier, and Walter Dean Myers, who published more realistic novels with heavier themes (Cart, 2016, p.34). The 1970s also marked the period in which YA authors "began to write about realistic, and previously taboo, topics such as drugs, sex and sexuality, and racism" (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.25). S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967) represents a "turning point for YA fiction" (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.25). Indeed, Hinton was able to push the field of YA in a completely new direction by challenging the expectations and the possibilities of books aimed at a teenage readership (Nilsen et al., 2014). According to Cart (2016), the secret of Hinton's success lies in her ability to create realistic characters who were dealing with the issues that teenagers at the time could relate to regardless of their socioeconomic status. Hinton, as opposed to most writers of that time, broke the stereotype of the typical teen novel and its typical themes by embracing the reality of teenage life including violence, abuse, and alienation (Egoff, 1980; Cart, 2016). Similarly, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974) experimented with more complex themes such as violence and identity. In addition to Cormier, other writers in the 1970s published highly influential YA books such as Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), M.E. Kerr's *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* (1972), Richard Peck's *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt* (1972), Lois Duncan's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1973), Walter Dean Meyers' *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and*

Stuff (1975), and Lois Lowry's *A Summer to Die* (1977). However, by the late 1970s, teens were no longer interested in these novels, as what was once new and innovative quickly became stereotypical, which led to the appearance of what would be called “the *problem novel*” (Cart, 2016, p.35) (emphasis in original). This type of novel sometimes features marginalised characters (Latham, 2007). It was described by Egoff (1980, p.196) as being:

very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than the telling. The topics—all adult oriented—sound like chapter titles from a text-book on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion and death.

As a reaction to the problem novel, US publishers in the 1980s decided to experiment with genre fiction, series, and mass-market paperbacks, romance and horror being the two most explored genres by writers during that time (Cart, 2016). This was, in a way, the resurgence of the genre fiction, mainly romance, from the 1940s and 1950s (Cart, 2016). Even though these novels were being criticised for “perpetuating heteronormative and stereotypical gender roles, they were staggeringly popular with teenagers” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.26). The first YA novel to appear on the *New York Times* bestselling paperback list was *Sweet Valley High super edition Perfect Summer* by Francine Pascal, which later expanded across multiple spin-offs and reached thirty-four million *Sweet Valley High* books in print in the US by the late 1980s (Huntwork, 1990, p.138). The success of the romance paperback novels was soon followed by the rise of the horror category, which was heavily promoted by publishers, such as the publication of the *Point Horror* series including Christopher Pike's *Slumber Party* (1985) and R.L. Stine's *Blind Date* (1986), both of which experienced significant levels of success (Cart, 2016).

The early 1990s represent a difficult time for YA, or what Cart refers to as the “Near-Death Experience” of YA (2016, p.55). YA was in danger of extinction because of the alarmingly low sales numbers, which led people in the publishing industry to wonder if this

was the end of young adult fiction (Epstein, 1990). Nevertheless, R. L. Stine with his *Goosebumps* series (1992-1997) and Jerry Spinelli, with his novel *Wringer* (1997) were among the few authors who were still successful during that time, which meant that the horror category was still thriving in the 1990s (Cart, 2016). According to Cart (2016), the *Miami Beach* conference in 1994 marked the start of the renaissance of YA at a critical moment when it was predicted to fade. During this time, YA novelists were able to achieve an emotional connection with their readers because they were not afraid to include taboo topics in their novels (Dresang, 1999). Serious issues such as addiction, suicide, sexual abuse, and more can be found in YA novels published in the late 1990s, such as Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), a coming-of-age story following a teenage boy, Charlie, as he tries to navigate his way through life. The late 1990s also gave birth to "one of the most extraordinary phenomena in the history of publishing": J. K. Rowling's (1997) *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone* (Cart, 2016, pp.115–116).

In the early 2000s, YA took a turn back towards science-fiction, fantasy, and horror, which can be linked to the phenomenal success of *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (2005), and *The Hunger Games* by Susan Collins (2008) (Cart, 2016). These two novels revolutionised the YA field by popularising YA paranormal and YA dystopian (Cart, 2016). The publishers of these blockbusters "promoted the author as a brand, something that already existed in the adult fiction market, and highlighted the crossover appeal, of YA, to adults" (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.27). *Twilight* (2005) is a four-volume series that follows the story of the main character Bella Swan and her star-crossed romance with glittery vampire Edward Cullen. The series was initially very well-received by its target audience (i.e. teenage girls), as it quickly reached the *New York Times* bestseller list; however, a plethora of negative reviews soon followed (Guanio-Uluru, 2015). *Twilight* has since been heavily criticised for being badly written and for a range of problematic themes, mainly for its powerless main character, Bella,

and for romanticising an abusive relationship (Ashcraft, 2012; Levy and Mendlesohn, 2016; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018a, 2019a). Despite the backlash, *Twilight* inspired a number of YA paranormal romance novels that came out soon after it (Levy and Mendlesohn, 2016). Examples of these novels include: *Blue Bloods* by Melissa de la Cruz (2006), *Vampire Academy* by Richelle Mead (2007), *Marked* by P.C. Cast and Kristin Cast (2007), *Fallen* by Lauren Kate (2009) and *Beautiful Creatures* by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl (2009). All of these also experienced a level of success. Similarly, *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2020) follows the main character Katniss Everdeen as she volunteers to save her sister from certain death in the annual arena games and her struggles for survival,¹⁰ also opened the door for other YA dystopian novels such as *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner (2009), *Matched* by Ally Condie (2010), *Legend* by Marie Lu (2011), and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011).

From 2010 to 2020, YA witnessed a progressive development of its genres as these continued to include a wider variety of themes such as: mental health, physical illness, ‘race’, dis/ability, body image, sexuality, and gender. Contemporary YA proliferated after the success of *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green in 2012 (Cart, 2016). It sold over 23 million copies around the world (Penguin Random House Children’s, 2017). Other successful contemporary YA novels that feature marginalised characters include: *To all the Boys I’ve Loved Before* by Jenny Han (2014), *Simon vs. the Homo Sapians Agenda* by Becky Albertalli (2015), and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017). YA fantasy has also grown during the last decade, in the form of trilogies, duologies, standalones, and series such as: *The Mortal Instruments*, *The Infernal Devices*, and *The Dark Artifices* series by Cassandra Clare (2007-2018), the *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* series by Leigh Bardugo (2012-2016), the *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series by Sarah J. Maas (2012-2018),

¹⁰ *The Hunger Games* was initially a trilogy until the prequel, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020), came out.

the *Red Queen* series by Victoria Aveyard (2015-2019), the *Caraval* trilogy by Stephanie Garber (2017-2019), and the *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy by Tomi Adeyemi (2018--). YA science-fiction novels followed a similar successful path during the last decade. Examples include the *Lunar Chronicles* series (2012-2015) by Marissa Meyer, the *Red Rising* series (2014-2018) by Pierce Brown, and *The Illuminae Files* trilogy (2015-2018) by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff.

In order to define YA, Ramdarshan Bold highlights the importance of also considering the paratextual elements of a book,¹¹ particularly when exploring this topic from a production and reception perspective, writing:

we must consider: how the book is marketed; the design of, and language used on, the book cover; who reviewed the book and where it was reviewed; and which authors provided a blurb for the front or back cover, etc. These paratextual elements work together to create an identity for the book and author, which helps the reader place it within a field of literature or genre. (2019a, p.24)

Wilkins (2019, p.6) adheres to the same “we know it when we see it” approach that she uses to define fantasy fiction in defining YA fiction. Furthermore, Wilkins distinguishes YA books from Adult books by considering three key differences: the average length of the book, the selling price point, and the way in which the books are distributed (2019, p.6).

What happens when YA fiction meets fantasy fiction?

YA fantasy merges elements from YA fiction and fantasy fiction. It takes some of the established fantasy tropes such as the Chosen One, the Dark Lord, and the hidden powers and frames them in a YA setting, usually following teenage characters and portraying coming-of-

¹¹ A paratext is defined as a ‘vestibule’ that offers a reader “the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” from the narrative (Genette, 1997, p.2). These elements can be directly connected to the text (the peritexts), like the book’s cover, the foreword, any acknowledgments, the blurb on the back, or be indirectly connected to the text (the epitext), such as the author’s website, reviews, draft versions of the book, etc.

age and romance themes. YA fantasy has been described as “a genre that currently is perhaps the most visible, successful, and beloved way of storytelling across the world” (Wilkins, 2019, p.66). Furthermore, authors such as Sarah J. Maas, Victoria Aveyard, and Leigh Bardugo have become trend-setters for the genre and the interdependent relationship between the different parts of the publishing process—the author, the readers, the publisher, and the role of social media and online spaces—also fuels the success of the genre in the twenty-first century (Wilkins, 2019).

It is worth highlighting that this research does not aim to create clear boundaries between fantasy and other neighbouring genres such as science-fiction, gothic, weird fiction, and horror; nor does it aim to create boundaries between Children’s fiction, YA fiction, and Adult fiction. As the scholarship mentioned above suggests, attempts to do so tend to fail at producing a universally agreed upon definition, as it varies depending on who is defining these terms. A reader, an author, a publisher, a librarian, a researcher, a critic, and a teacher might have slightly different criteria for distinguishing one genre or category of fiction from others because they have different perspectives and different aims. Thus, this research acknowledges the validity of these different perspectives and adopts Attebery’s “fuzzy set” model, moving the focus away from the boundaries of the genre to what lies at its centre instead. It is however useful for the purpose of this thesis to construct a working definition that clears up—or at least attempts to—some of the foggy areas around YA. For this thesis, the core definition is as follows: a YA fantasy novel is a fictional story that follows characters who *tend* to be teenagers. It *usually* features an element of magic or supernatural powers and/or creatures. It can be set in a fictional world or a fictionalised version of the real world (such as the case of Urban Fantasy). It is marketed as YA by its publisher, compared to other similar YA books, and it is *typically* between 300 pages to 1000 pages long.

‘Diversity’ and the Representation of Marginalised Groups in YA Fantasy

In the previous section, I explored the different dimensions of defining YA fantasy. In this section, I examine the relationship between the YA fantasy genre and ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups. This topic links the different elements of this thesis and will be explored in further detail in Chapter 3 through an analysis of the perspective of some publishing professionals and social media influencers, in Chapter 4 through an analysis of the perspective of YA fantasy readers, and finally in Chapter 5 through a case study of Netflix’s adaptation and re-imagining of a popular YA fantasy series.

We Need Diverse Books (<https://diversebooks.org/>) is an organisation that promotes inclusivity and representation in Children’s books and YA. There has been an ongoing discussion about the lack of ‘diversity’ and inclusive narratives for Children’s books and YA, including influential voices such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1919) who created *The Brownies’ Book*, a new Children’s periodical countering the problematic representation of Black people. Similarly, Nancy Larrick (1965), in *The All-White World of Children’s Books*, draws attention to the lack of representation of Black children emphasising the disparity between the statistics of Black children in books compared to the population. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) provides her influential *Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors* metaphor to highlight the importance of authentic representation for children so that all children are able to see themselves and see others represented in the books they read, writing:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then,

becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop, 1990, p.ix)

Furthermore, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about the stories she wrote as a seven-year-old in her TED talk '*The Danger of a Single Story*' (2009). Adichie explains that she grew up in Nigeria reading British stories. When she started writing her own stories, she noticed that:

All [her] characters were white and blue-eyed. They played in the snow. They ate apples. And they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. (Adichie, 2009)

Adichie (2009) explains that she had written those stories despite having lived in Nigeria where it never snowed, and people did not typically discuss the weather. Thus, she had been conditioned to think that “books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them, and had to be about things with which [she] could not personally identify” (Adichie, 2009). Much in the same way, Walter Dean Myers (2014, para.18) highlights the importance of representation and warns us of how damaging lack of representation can be for children, writing: “Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books?” His son, Christopher Myers (2014, para.4), also raises the ‘diversity’ issue in children’s publishing, writing:

The business of children’s literature enjoys ever more success, sparking multiple movie franchises and crossover readership, even as representations of young people of color are harder and harder to find.

‘Diversity’ and inclusion research

The scholarship around the representation of ‘race’ and racism in YA and YA fantasy has been growing, particularly over the last few years. Thomas, for instance, provides an in-depth examination of the representation of Black characters in Children’s books and YA (Thomas, 2016, 2019). In her book, *The Dark Fantastic*, Thomas (2019) explores this issue

of ‘race’ not only in the context of publishing but also in media adaptations of Children’s and YA stories. Thomas (2019) uses a case study approach to examine the stories of four Black girl characters in YA speculative fiction, namely: Bonnie Bennett from *The Vampire Diaries*, Gwen from *Merlin*, Rue from *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, and Angelina Johnson from *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling. Through her analysis of these characters, Thomas argues that the disproportionate violence that these characters endure in their fictional narratives reflects the ways in which Black people and people of colour are treated in the world (Thomas, 2019).

Furthermore, Melanie Ramdarshan Bold examines the topic of ‘diversity’ from various angles of the publishing industry in the UK, including production (publishers, authors, and illustrators) and reception (readers), and through other media such as zines and online spaces (book clubs and Wattpad) (Ramdarshan Bold, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021). Ramdarshan Bold (2019a) argues that counter-narratives are of the utmost importance because representations of BIPOC characters impact how BIPOC readers see themselves and influence the understanding of readers from dominant groups about ‘diversity’ and inclusion.

Jewel Davis—an Education Librarian—analyses the quality of the representation of BIPOC character in three recently published YA speculative fiction novels: Tomi Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone*, Laurie Forest’s *The Black Witch*, and Veronica Roth’s *Carve the Mark* using principles of Critical Race Theory (2020). This study also stresses the importance of counter-narratives to “challenge damaging misrepresentations” of BIPOC characters (p.17) so that BIPOC readers can see that “they, too can have adventure rooted in the very foundations of their cultures” (p.19).

Rukmini Pande explores the fandom side of this issue (the topic of fandom is explored further below and in Chapter 4, please see p.188) with the aim to decolonise Fan

Studies (Pande, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b). Pande (2018a) argues that it is possible to disrupt and decolonise fan studies by questioning the methodologies that are in place. Pande also highlights the problem that:

race, when mentioned at all within fan studies scholarship, is in the same breath disavowed or deferred. The rhetorical strategy of maintaining that of course race is an essential axis of identity to be considered, but never with the same urgency as sexuality and gender, is frequently used in introductions to books, anthologies, and conference presentations.
(Pande, 2018a, p.188)

More recently, Meghan Gilbert-Hickey and Miranda A. Green-Barteet (2021) edited a collection of chapters about ‘race’ in YA speculative fiction by multiple authors, including: Sarah Olutola (2021), with an analysis of racial Otherness and its intersection with social class issues in Victoria Aveyard’s *Red Queen* series, Sierra Hale’s (2021) examination of the postracial setting in Marissa Meyer’s *Lunar Chronicles* series, and Elizabeth Ho’s (2021) investigation of Whiteness and the representation of Eurasian masculinity in Cassandra Clare’s *The Infernal Devices* series.

As previously noted, the issue of the lack of ‘diversity’ in Children’s and YA fiction can be described as an “*imagination gap*” (Thomas, 2019, p.5) (emphasis in original). A concept that our imagination can sometimes be shaped by other cultures that Thomas explains through a case study of the representation of ‘race’ in YA franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Vampire Diaries* (Thomas, 2019). Thomas (2019) points out that this gap is not due to:

any failure in the imaginations of young people... Among children and young adults, storytelling and play are humming right along as always, as kids and teens all over the world are now using new media to inscribe themselves into existence... Our young people have certainly not failed us. (p.6)

This research aims to address this gap in imagination by reorienting the parameters within which YA fantasy texts and media operate. Chapter 3, in particular, takes a closer look at the tropes and trends that construct the YA fantasy genre and the ways in which publishing professionals and social media influencers could potentially contribute to building a more ‘diverse’ and inclusive space.

Furthermore, ‘diversity’ advocates also emphasise the parallel lack of representation in other areas such as body image, dis/ability, gender, and sexuality. For instance, Lindsey Averill (2016) questions the authenticity of body-positive representations in YA and highlights some of the issues that can be found in these YA narratives. Averill describes these stories as “imperfect but necessary” for YA to be able to move away from weight bias and towards the acceptance and empowerment of all body sizes (Averill, 2016, p.30). Alex Polish (2021) investigates the representation of ‘race’ and dis/ability in Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series. Polish (2021) notes that *Divergent* “displaces race and racism onto eugenics and dis/ability” and argues that the trilogy “perpetuates racist and ableist assumptions by uncritically conflating race and dis/ability” (p.165). Derritt Mason’s (2020) *Queer Anxieties* explores issues of gender and sexuality through various case studies of YA stories. These include Netflix’s controversial *Big Mouth* series, which explores the “the pleasures and horrors of adolescence” (p.105), the representation of the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s in David Levithan’s *Two Boys Kissing*, and queer sex and sexuality in Andrew Smith’s *Grasshopper Jungle* (Mason, 2020). Loren Barbour (2020) also explores the representation of queer and dis/abled heroes, villains, and monsters in YA through an analysis of Noelle Stevenson’s fantasy graphic novel, *Nimona*. Barbour (2020) argues that through this graphic novel, Stevenson “reinvents the fantasy genre as a site of inquiry that encourages self-reflection and asks all who engage it what we have overlooked in its traditionally straight world” (p.1). Victoria Singh Gill (2016) investigates the role of intersectionality in

challenging the reader's understanding of identity in the YA graphic novel *Ms. Marvel* by Willow Wilson, published in 2014. Through this intersectional analysis, Gill (2016) demonstrates how "Muslim American women are specifically marginalized in our society today" (p.69). Megan Brown (2020) interrogates the authenticity of dis/ability in YA peritexts and argues that:

Remaining authentic to the accurate culture of disability is not an easy task, but through time spent, experiences, and exposure to disabilities and the people who have them, the author's knowledge aids in their writing, even when the text is not in the realistic genre. (Brown, 2020, p.141)

It is also worth noting that book reviewers, such as members of the Diversity Jedi,¹² also play a crucial role in calling for more 'diverse' narratives and ensuring that these are portrayed authentically (Smith, 2019).

Thomas notes that the YA field—including all of its different genres—suffers from "a long-entrenched lack of diversity" (2019, p.4), a statement confirmed by statistics that show that "ninety percent of the twenty bestselling YA titles of 2006–2016 feature white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender main protagonists (human or otherwise)" (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018a, p.401). The *Re:Thinking 'Diversity' in Publishing* report also finds that "*writers of colour are disadvantaged during each key stage of the publishing process.*" (Saha and Van Lente, 2020, p.10) (emphasis in original). The report identifies three main problematic areas in the current state of 'diversity' in the publishing industry namely: the target reader is still assumed to be a White woman, publishers are not entirely convinced by the "moral and economic" value of 'diversity', and finally, publishers hesitate to publish writers of colour

¹² Diversity Jedi was coined by Dr. Debbie Reese and it emerged as a hashtag on Twitter as a reaction to people being called "Stormtroopers" when pointing out 'diversity'-related issues and damaging stereotypes about problematic books (Lindsay, 2018).

because they deem it a “commercially risky” decision (Saha and Van Lente, 2020, p.10). The report also points out that:

The core audience for publishers is white and middle-class. The whole industry is essentially set up to cater for this one audience. This affects how writers of colour and their books are treated, which are either whitewashed or exoticised in order to appeal to this segment. (Saha and Van Lente, 2020, p.2)

‘Diversity’ initiatives

A number of ‘diversity’-focused initiatives that promote inclusivity have emerged in the last few years, such as: social media campaigns (#WeNeedDiverseBooks, #OwnVoices, #DiverseYA, #ReflectingRealities...etc.), as well as initiatives from publishing companies in the form of ‘diverse’ imprints, workshops, and paid internships. *Kokila* (Penguin Random House), *Rick Riordan Presents* (Disney-Hyperion), and *Salaam Reads* (Simon & Schuster) are examples of ‘diversity’-focused imprints that aim to publish more inclusive narratives. Some publishers have started introducing paid internships and free workshops, sometimes for ‘BAME’ young people such as the *Usborne Academy*, or for underrepresented authors such as Penguin Random House’s *WriteNow* programmes. In 2019, Gollancz launched *The Gollancz and Rivers of London BAME SFF Award*, which aims to encourage writers from under-represented communities to write science-fiction, fantasy, and horror. While these initiatives represent a step in the right direction, they can still be problematic (Saha, 2018; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019). Saha points out that: “diversity initiatives rather than failing actually serve an ideological function that sustains the institutional whiteness of the cultural industries even while they claim (often genuinely so) to do something more inclusive” (2018, p.88). Ramdarshan Bold also points out this issue writing: “Many of the initiatives focus on giving under-represented groups access to gatekeepers and/or increasing quotas; however, the same structural inequalities persist.” (2019a, p.59). In addition to that, and despite the efforts

to make the publishing industry more inclusive, recent research shows that there is still a long way to go to achieve these goals. The CLPE Reflecting Realities survey of Ethnic representation within UK children's literature in 2017 reveals that a mere 4% of children's books, published in that year, included Black or Minority Ethnic (BAME) characters (Reflecting Realities, 2018), a percentage that increases to 7% in the following year's report (Reflecting Realities, 2019), and continued to increase to 10% in 2019 (Reflecting Realities, 2020). This percentage reached 15% in 2020 (Reflecting Realities, 2021). Another study analyses all YA titles published from 2006-2016 in the UK finding that only 8% of YA books published in that period were written by authors of colour (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018a). This study was later extended to the 2017-2019 period and found that the overall percentage of YA authors of colour in the UK had increased to 13.14% (Ramdarshan Bold, 2021). Ramdarshan Bold (2021) points out that "[w]hile these increases are positive, they are still small and are from a very low starting point" (p.28). Lovegrove reflects on what the lack of diversity within the publishing industry means and notes that "[i]f you don't have a diverse workforce or product, sooner or later you won't exist," (Lovegrove, 2018, para.18) predicting the future of publishers who continue to ignore the issue of representation in the publishing industry.

Another movement that aims to improve 'diversity' and representation in YA fiction is the Own Voices movement. The term was first used by YA author Corinne Duyvis with the hashtag #OwnVoices on Twitter (Duyvis, 2015). The Own Voices movement promotes the idea that if an author is writing about a marginalised group they should be a member of that same group themselves. In other words, if an author is writing a character of colour for example, they would need to be a person of colour themselves. It encourages authors to write about issues they have experienced first-hand with the ultimate aim being to achieve authenticity and accurate representations. The movement has become increasingly popular on

Twitter with the hashtag #OwnVoices, which is often used to promote authors from marginalised groups and the stories they depict. The movement has received criticism for indirectly pressuring authors to reveal personal information they might not be comfortable sharing otherwise and for pushing authors and publishers towards censorship (Rosenfield, 2017, 2019b). Because of the potential confusion surrounding the term and what it means, the *We Need Diverse Books* organisation decided to stop using the term, stating:

We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) will no longer use the term #OwnVoices to refer to children’s literature or its authors and we have removed mentions of #OwnVoices from previously published blog posts. Moving forward, WNDB will use specific descriptions that authors use for themselves and their characters whenever possible (for example, “Korean American author,” or “autistic protagonist”). (Lavoie, 2021)

While there are undeniable benefits to using specific descriptions, the term Own Voices can still be useful in some instances because the movement addresses important issues that are not necessarily focused on any specific title, but on the big picture in publishing, instead (Templeton, 2019). As I explain in the Note on Terminology section of this thesis p.34, I have continued to use the term throughout this thesis when appropriate.

What does ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy look like?

YA authors have different approaches to including ‘diversity’ and representations of marginalised groups in their novels. Some YA authors write so-called ‘issue novels’. In other words, they shine light on the ‘diverse’ element in the story, making it the focal point and conflict in the story. A good example of this approach is Becky Albertalli’s *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), which shows Simon’s journey to understanding and accepting his sexuality. Similarly, Carolyn Macker’s (2003) *The Earth, My Butt and Other Round Things* follows Virginia—the main character—and her journey towards body acceptance as

the main issue in the novel. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) is yet another example of this storytelling approach, as it exclusively focuses on racial prejudice and injustices against African-American people in the US. While this approach constitutes a large and important part of ‘diverse’ YA, there is a different approach that some YA authors like to explore, which is to write novels that include ‘diverse’ elements without these being the main focus of the plot. While these ‘issue novels’ are ubiquitous in contemporary YA, YA fantasy inherently leans towards the latter approach because it is often set in places that are not (or not entirely) in the real world. Therefore, this leaves an interesting place for ‘diversity’ to be present in the background. However, this is not meant to dismiss the role of this approach to telling ‘diverse’ stories in any way. When I say that ‘diversity’ is present in the background, I mean that it is not the main issue that the novel focuses on, but it is nonetheless an important part of the identities or experiences of one or more characters.

Prominent YA sci-fi and fantasy examples of novels that include ‘diversity’ as a metaphor or in the background include Tomi Adeyemi’s (2018) *Children of Blood and Bone*, which features the representation of Black characters and issues of ‘race’ and racism, but the main conflict of the novel is about bringing magic back to the land, which means that the issue of ‘race’ is addressed through a metaphor rather than being the main conflict of the novel. Marissa Meyer’s (2012) *Cinder* is another example as it gives a sci-fi futuristic twist to the stigma surrounding dis/ability, following a cyborg who is essentially a character wearing prostheses. Similarly, *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo (2015) explores different alleys of ‘diversity’—‘race’, sexuality, religion, dis/ability, socio-economic status—although it is not marketed as a ‘diverse’ novel, because its ‘diverse’ elements—such as dis/ability, ‘race’, sexual orientation, and body size—are not at the forefront of the novel. It is worth noting that this approach does not undermine the importance nor the impact of these ‘diverse’ novels, on the contrary, this subtle approach contributes to the normalisation of different types of

people, experiences, and bodies in fiction, which has for aim to increase the representation and, ultimately, to reduce biases and prejudice against marginalised groups. Regardless of the author's approach to including 'diverse' voices and narratives in their work, one of the main aims of doing so is to make it possible for more readers to see themselves represented on the page. This issue is explored in detail in Chapter 04 through an analysis of an online survey with YA fantasy readers on their views regarding 'diversity' and seeing themselves represented in the books they read (please see p.188).

The Role and Impact of the Digital Age on YA Fantasy

Robert Darnton's communication circuit examines the way in which the lifecycle of the printed book functions (1982). Darnton's (1982) chain features six main elements involved in the publishing process, namely: author, publisher, printers, shippers, booksellers, and readers. An updated version of Darnton's communication circuit, by Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires called the *Digital Publishing Communication Circuit*, considers the changes in the publishing industry that came along with the digital age (2013). With this new model, an emphasis on the reader appeared, illustrated by how the relationships reader/publisher and reader/device are much stronger than they used to be prior to the twenty-first century (Darnton, 1982; Ray Murray and Squires, 2013). Indeed, with the digital revolution, the role of the reader became more prominent because the publishing industry, which was previously focused mainly on authors and retailers, needed to focus on another element, the reader (Thompson, 2021).

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Goodreads, Instagram, YouTube, Wattpad, TikTok, and others, have been playing an important role in twenty-first-century publishing. These social networks have revolutionised the way in which the publishing sphere functions (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b). Ramdarshan Bold points out the differences in book publishing compared to the way it used to be before the emergence of social networks, writing:

“Publishers and authors can now directly communicate with readers and potential readers, through social media, and build author and book-related communities” (2018b, p.118).

Indeed, we can clearly see how these relationships have evolved over the last few years as there are now fewer intermediaries between the content creator(s) and the consumer(s). This not only makes it easier for authors to reach a wider audience than they would have otherwise, but also for readers to make their voices heard instantly and effectively by sharing their opinions online. As Simone Murray puts it:

the internet offers an abundance of what in earlier print- and broadcast-dominated eras was collectively termed “book talk”: book review websites, self-cataloging library networks, author home pages, publishers’ portals, online book retailers, archived writers’ festival panel sessions, and recorded celebrity author readings. (Murray, 2018, p.1)

Similarly, Bronwyn Thomas (2020) highlights the impact of the digital age pointing out that: “social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr have offered spaces for the production and dissemination of innovative creative works, as well as radically transforming modes of engagement with those works” (p.1). Social media research also shows that social media platforms have the power to grow and sustain the popularity of micro-celebrities, such as authors, by stretching their influence and reach to a wider audience (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Abidin, 2018). This digital revolution “has changed the very nature of the information environment within which publishing, along with other media and creative industries, exists” (Thompson, 2021, p.462).

Indeed, the way in which publishers, authors, and readers interact with and influence one another has significantly changed over the years, from Barthes (1977) proclaiming the death of the author to the current book fandoms and cancel culture¹³ on social media. YA

¹³ Cancel culture is defined as: “a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you” (Cambridge, n.d.)

fantasy publishers, authors, and readers exist in a symbiotic relationship that is largely facilitated by the use of social media platforms. These platforms have proved to be a strong marketing tool when used by authors and publishers to promote their books. Members of the online book community (such as YouTubers, Bookstagrammers, bloggers, and reviewers), as well as readers, also play an important role in this process by making the traditional word-of-mouth marketing grow exponentially within online spaces. Despite all the benefits that the book trade is reaping from the digital age, there is also a negative side that comes with it. Indeed, the YA community on Twitter has produced several scandals, such as the controversies surrounding some problematic YA fantasy novels, which I explore in detail below (please see p.81). Considering the relationship between YA fantasy authors, publishers, and readers, this section will identify the overall role and impact of the digital age focusing on three main areas of examination: 1) social media, 2) online fandoms, and 3) controversies and cancel culture. This section explores what each area means for ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy and how it shapes the relationship between publishers, authors, and readers.

Social Media and YA fantasy

Bronwen Thomas argues that “social media **platforms** such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr have offered spaces for the production and dissemination of innovative creative works, as radically transforming modes of engagement with those works” (2020, p.1) (emphasis in original). These platforms have a “profound impact” on various layers of the publishing process, including the “production and consumption of individual works by individual writers and readers”, as well as the “cultural intermediaries and industries” that construct what we know as literature (B. Thomas, 2020, p.1). Furthermore, these platforms have a clear impact on the role of readers in the publishing process, as Thomas points out that:

individual acts of reading not only interconnect with each other on these platforms, but also speak of a culture where readers and books are part of a complex media ecosystem in which the boundaries between media, texts, producers and consumers are much more fluid. (Thomas, 2021, p.9)

Ramdarshan Bold notes that this is a sign that “a new generation of, social media-savvy, influential and innovative writers are entering the publishing arena” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b, p.119). The use of these social media platforms means that there is direct communication between publishers/authors and readers, which can result in “direct sales” and “allow publishers and authors to gain better insight into reader needs and wants” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b, p.118). In the following sections, I explore some of the implications of the social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok regarding different aspects of the formation and consumption of YA. This research adheres to the belief that “social media makes it easier than ever to look beyond literary texts to examine the infrastructures and relationships that shape their creation, dissemination and perception” (B. Thomas, 2020, p.19).

YouTube.

YouTube represents a “space where young adults can produce, distribute, and respond to texts, relatively free of adult intervention,” and it also represents a space where “the creative products of an individual can be spread in ways that were once limited by gatekeepers in control of more traditional media distribution” (Rebellino, 2020, p.21). Thus, there is “no hierarchy of discourse” in YouTube because “clips of ordinary people, media people and celebrities are interlinked, in a single network” (Tolson, 2010, p.285). YouTube, over the last few years, became a “popular site for ‘**bookbloggers**’ and ‘vloggers’ who review literary texts” (B. Thomas, 2020, p.17) (emphasis in original). ‘BookTube’ is a term

used to refer to the “book community” on YouTube, including video creators as well as viewers, and it predominantly focuses on videos about YA books (Lo, 2020, p.613).

BookTubers, i.e. the content creators who are making book related videos on YouTube, share their opinions on the platform via uploading a variety of videos such as “book reviews, books hauls, book recommendations, book tags, and video blogs about book-related events.” (Lo, 2020, p.613). It is worth noting that publishers nowadays often reach out to these influencers for collaborations in order to be able to grab the attention of teens through these videos (de León, 2018). Examples of this marketing strategy include partnerships, paid sponsorships, or simply, to send them free books—either finished final copies or Advanced Readers Copies (ARCs)—in exchange for an honest review video or to potentially be mentioned in other types of videos such as book hauls, for example.

Interestingly, over the last few years, some of these BookTubers have in turn written and published their own books. This, once again, blurs the line between the different roles in the publishing process, as Thomas puts it:

One of the key features of Web 2.0 was the increasing blurring of the boundaries between content producers and consumers, between professional writers and artists and those who might previously have been seen as amateurs or DIY enthusiasts. (B. Thomas, 2020, p.32)

Christine Riccio, also known under her BookTube channel’s name *PolandbananasBOOKS* is currently the most subscribed to BookTuber with over 400K subscribers on her YouTube channel as of this writing (January 2021). Riccio started her channel in June 2010 and has been making book related videos ever since. In May 2019, Riccio published her debut contemporary YA novel *Again, but Better* (Riccio, 2019) with Wednesday Books, an imprint of Macmillan in the US. She has continued uploading book-related videos to her channel, adding writing-related videos where she explains her writing process and the struggles she goes through to write and edit her books. *Again, but Better* was

featured on the *New York Times* bestseller list almost instantly and was nominated for the Goodreads Choice Awards in the Best Young Adult Fiction category in 2019. In 2021, Riccio publishes her second novel with Wednesday Books, another contemporary YA with elements of magical realism, titled *Better Together* (Riccio, 2021). Similarly, BookTubers Sasha Alsberg and Lindsay Cummings co-wrote their YA science-fiction debut *Zenith* (2018). The novel was initially self-published then picked up by HarlequinTeen, a division of HarperCollins in the US, and was also featured on the *NYT* bestseller list.

While the previous examples are all YouTubers who focused on book-related content before writing their own books, this is not always the case. Other YouTubers have also been writing and publishing books. A significant example is the case of Zoe Sugg, a beauty and lifestyle UK YouTuber with over eleven million followers as of this writing (January 2021), also known as Zoella (her main YouTube channel name) and her *New York Times* bestselling contemporary YA novel *Girl Online* (2014). The novel was published by Penguin in the UK and Atria in the US and it quickly reached the *New York Times* bestseller list. However, Sugg did not initially mention that she had used the services of a ghost writer¹⁴ to help her write her book. It was only later revealed that Siobhan Curham had in fact written Sugg's novel (Flood, 2014). Zoella was heavily criticised for this as fans felt betrayed and expressed their anger—ironically—on social media. This is part of the reason why YouTube authors have gained a bad reputation for getting book deals for their fame instead of their writing and BookTube authors were no exception. While it makes more sense for a BookTuber who discusses book content on their channel to write a book compared to a lifestyle or beauty channel, there is a general sense of deception and unfairness when it comes to writing their books and securing book deals with publishers. These examples clearly show the growing

¹⁴ A ghost writer is a person who is paid to write a piece of content for it to be published under another person's name. They are usually hired by celebrities. Ghost writers often do not receive credit and are invisible to the audience, hence the 'ghost' title.

power of the reader in the publishing process today. Readers now have the power to heavily influence which books get published, and which ones get cancelled, altering the publishing dynamic in an unprecedented way.

Instagram.

Instagram was first launched in 2010, and is defined as:

a social networking service primarily associated with the sharing of photographs or videos, allowing users to locate the images through the use of **geotags**, and to choose from various filters to modify and customise their images, as well as connecting their images to those of others through the use of hashtags. (B. Thomas, 2020, p.16) (emphasis in original)

Bookstagram, the book community on Instagram, is similar to BookTube in many ways, but it focuses on the visual aspect of the book rather than the content-centred videos on BookTube (Lo, 2020, p.614). Thomas (2021) explores the #bookstagram that readers often use to share images of their current read and argues that “images of reading shared on social media celebrate not only books as material objects but the relationship of the body of the user with that object” (p.2). Similarly to BookTube, the content of Bookstagram is also predominantly focused on YA books (Kantor, 2017). As of this writing (January 2021), there are over 53 million posts using the #Bookstagram on the platform. It is used by authors, publishers, and readers and has become an efficient marketing tool that can quickly create buzz around a book (Kantor, 2017; Connolly, 2018; Pope, 2019; Lo, 2020). It has also created new opportunities for people who are involved in the book community such as: making it easier for authors to connect with their readers, creating more visibility for fanart artists, and helping reviewers get opportunities to receive free books from publishers. Much like BookTubers, Bookstagrammers also receive free copies from publishers in exchange for

featuring the book on a post (Pope, 2019). Bookstagram focuses on the book's aesthetic as Bookstagrammers are more likely to feature books they find aesthetically pleasing; therefore Bookstagram plays a role in impacting publisher's decisions about cover designs towards more colourful and more attractive covers (Connolly, 2018). However, Bookstagram has been criticised for its shallowness and for its unusual trends, such as poses where people are laying on top of open books, arguing that the books on Instagram are ideas of books rather real books and that their aim is merely to show you that the Bookstagrammers' "lives are prettier, more whimsical, and more creative than yours." (Kelly, 2018). Bookstagram, along with BookTube, are both viewed with a level of scepticism for their "sponsored—therefore, ostensibly dishonest—content," that is also accused of encouraging "the consumerism culture of books," (Lo, 2020, p.615). Furthermore, Thomas acknowledges that:

shared acts and displays of reading on social media could be said to convey romanticised, nostalgic conceptions of reading, as well as perpetuating potentially harmful gendering of reading tastes and spaces and excluding or alienating readers outside of the main demographic of younger, white women. (Thomas, 2021, p.9)

However, Thomas (2021) points out that there is more to Bookstagram than aesthetics, arguing that the body parts that are included in the images, hands in particular, "evoke a sense of an embodied connection between reader and book" (p.4). Furthermore, other benefits of Bookstagram are that "the images create a strong sense of reading as a situated activity that is especially associated with calmness, serenity and being close to nature" (p.4).

Twitter.

Twitter is a "microblogging platform which restricts users to posts of no more than 280 characters (140 until 2017)" (B. Thomas, 2020, p.13). Twitter, much like YouTube and

Instagram, has also gathered its own book community over the years. Important hashtags such as the #WeNeedDiverseBooks are used on Twitter as a “proactive statement that calls for change in the industry” (Lo, 2020, p.612). While Twitter’s impact on YA is sometimes linked to its role in cancel culture and Twitter mobs (as I will discuss in further detail later in this chapter, please see p.81), Twitter also has an important role in moving the diversity conversation forward and making real change happen. One of the many book initiatives that took off on Twitter is the #DVpit (i.e. Diverse Voices Pitch), which was started by literary agent Beth Phelan in 2016, and has since become an annual event on the platform (Lo, 2020). #DVpit is defined on the event’s website as a:

Twitter event created to showcase pitches from unagented, marginalized voices that have been historically underrepresented in publishing. This may include (but is not limited to): Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC); people living and/or born/raised in marginalized, underrepresented cultures and countries; disabled persons (includes neurodiversity and mental illness); people on marginalized ends of the cultural and/or religious spectrum; people identifying within LGBTQIA+; and more. Any decisions regarding eligibility are yours to make. Creators are not obligated to disclose anything they do not feel comfortable with and are not required to pitch only #ownvoices work, though that is certainly welcome! (#DVpit, 2016)

Some of the most successful YA fantasy books that came out of #DVpit include: *The City of Brass* by S.A. Chakraborty (2017), *The Candle and the Flame* by Nafiza Azad (2019), *We Hunt the Flame* by Hafsa Faizal (2019), *A River of Royal Blood* by Amanda Joy (2019), *These Witches Don’t Burn* by Isabel Sterling (2019), and *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna (2021).

Another benefit of Twitter is its power to bring the community together and encourage change. In the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor’s murders and the Black

Lives Matter protests of 2020, a wave of inequality awareness hit the publishing industry (Roberts, 2021). A number of important hashtags appeared on social media as a result of that, notably the #PublishingPaidMe which started on Twitter in June 2020. It was started by Black fantasy author L. L. McKinney to encourage authors, from both marginalised and non-marginalised backgrounds, to share how much they had been paid in advances for their book deals (Flood, 2020). The initial aim of this campaign was to draw attention to the disparity between Black and White authors (Flood, 2020). This hashtag received a significant response from marginalised authors as well as authors from dominant groups. A spreadsheet was circulated, and a large number of authors participated (sometimes anonymously)¹⁵. The findings took the book community by storm as they revealed significant differences between the advances that White and BIPOC authors received. There was a significant response to this campaign (as of this writing in January 2021, there are 2795 responses on the Google Docs spreadsheet),¹⁶ with authors such as Roxane Gay and Matt Haig getting involved (Flood, 2020). Malorie Blackman commented on this issue Tweeting:

I'm currently writing my 70th book. Though not all my books are in print anymore, I have never in my life received anything like the sums being posted by some white authors on #PublishingPaidMe.
(@malorieblackman, 2020).

N. K. Jemisin, a multiple Hugo Award winning Black science-fiction author, also added to the conversation on Twitter revealing that she had been paid \$40,000 for each book of her *Inheritance* series, and \$25,000 for each book of her *Dreamblood* and *Broken Earth*

¹⁵ It is not uncommon for book deal contracts to include an NDA (non-disclosure agreement) clause which could explain why many respondents preferred to stay anonymous while sharing how much they were paid in advances. This did not deter them from anonymously sharing the amount and some aspects of their identity—such as ‘race’, gender, sexual orientation, and dis/ability—if they felt comfortable doing so.

¹⁶ The Google Docs spreadsheet is still available online at the time of this writing (January 2021) and can be found here:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Xsx6rKJtfa8f_pr1YYD3zRxaXYVdPaPXbasvt_iA2vA/edit#gid=1798364047

series (2020). The spreadsheet also revealed that Natasha Ngan, a YA fantasy author of colour, was paid \$25,000 for her bestselling debut *Girls of Paper and Fire* (2018), while Katy Rose Pool, a White YA fantasy author, received \$333,000 for her significantly less popular debut *There Will Come a Darkness* (2019). According to Nielsen's Bookscan *Girls of Paper and Fire* sold 3,199 copies in the UK in the period from 2019 to 2020, while *There Will come a Darkness* only sold 258 copies in the same period. This can also be observed through Goodreads statistics. *Girls of Paper and Fire* has, as of this writing (January 2021), almost thirty thousand ratings on the platform, whereas *There Will Come A Darkness* has a little over five thousand ratings.

It is important to highlight the fact that advances are in no way a salary, since authors start receiving royalties after they earn out their advances; however, the figure is still important. It not only reflects how well the publisher thinks that book is going to sell, but it also reflects how much they are planning on spending in marketing and publicity campaigns, which ultimately impacts the sales of the book. Thus, this vicious cycle causes BIPOC writers to be at a clear disadvantage in this crucial step of the way in the publishing process and the #PublishingPaidMe has brought attention to these issues.

TikTok.

TikTok is another social media platform that has grown in popularity among young people in recent years (Merga, 2021). It includes a community dedicated to sharing and commenting on books and bookish content called BookTok (Merga, 2021). BookTok has been described as a “sanctuary for literature lovers of all kinds” (Lansom, 2022, para.1). Users of this platform create short videos (up to one minute in length) to share reviews or recommendations of the books they read. One of the features of this platform is

its celebration of appropriation, repetition and imitation, though this mimicry is often best received when it is done in a unique way, similar to how cover versions of songs can receive more acclaim than the originals. (Merga, 2021, pp.2–3).

As of January 2022, TikTok has 1 billion monthly active users (DataReportal, 2022). The #booktok has 46.8 billion views as of this writing (March 2022). Furthermore, the #YAbooks currently has 1.5 billion views making it one of the most popular categories of BookTok. This corner of the TikTok platform has been described as a “wholesome place reigniting faith in the internet” (Lansom, 2022, para.1). Although these videos are short in length, they still offer substantial content (Wang, 2020). Indeed, BookTok is shifting the ways in which booksellers promote their books and readers discover them towards a more digital approach (Bayley, 2022a). This has resulted in a boost in sales that has not been seen since Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books (Bayley, 2022a). Because of the recent rise in popularity of this platform, there is limited scholarship that focuses on TikTok and the BookTok community. Margaret K. Merga (2021) investigates the use of popular hashtags on the platform—such as #bookrecommendations #acotar,¹⁷ and #sixofcrows—and found that this tool helps to draw a maximum number of viewers to videos that use them. Thus, these popular hashtags on BookTok “build community and establish positive reader identities” (Merga, 2021, p.4). Merga also found that popular authors on BookTok are a select few, and that readers have a preference for series by one author such as Sarah J. Maas (2021). This is echoed by Flood who notes that:

BookTok content tends to focus around the five or so ‘hot’ books, which currently include the fantasy novels *Caraval* by Stephanie Garber, *Heartless* by Marissa Mayer and Sarah J Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series. (2021, para.16)

¹⁷ ACOTAR is an acronym that refers to Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015a).

While more research is needed on the topic, I would argue that this feature of BookTok presents potential limitations when it comes to promoting ‘diversity’. That is, if the same popular authors are encouraged and boosted by the TikTok algorithm, this leaves limited opportunities for debut authors and authors from marginalised groups to be discovered by viewers and to grow in popularity on the platform.

The revival of the author in the digital age

The relationship between two elements of the publishing process, the author, and the reader, has changed and evolved over the years, partly due to the emergence of the digital age (Murray, 2018; Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b). One consequence of this change is that “writing is slowly becoming more open and democratic and that traditional publishers are no longer the sole gatekeepers of written culture” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b, p.119). Murray notes that “‘literature’ to a large extent becomes what the digital literary sphere *deems* to be literature” (2018, p.20) (emphasis in original). Barthes, however, believed that the author and the reader of a text could not have the same importance, as he discredits the role of the author and glorifies the role of the reader, writing: “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1977, p.148).

However, Authorship Studies show that the concept of the ‘Death of the Author’ cannot realistically be applied to most current authors (Murray, 2018). Barthes’s idea was built on the assumption that the reader could (and should) go into a text without any contextual knowledge of the author’s person or intentions (Barthes, 1977). In the twenty-first century, however, many authors are active on social media platforms and have large numbers of followers. This makes it virtually impossible for readers to go into a book not knowing anything about the author and their views. Murray points out that:

The mainstreaming of digital communications, and especially Web 2.0–enabled social media after the turn of the millennium, has given authors unprecedented opportunities to directly shape and constantly micromanage their public image. (Murray, 2018, p.24)

As explored above, many YA authors have been using social media to promote their work and to gather a fanbase over the last few years. While some of them attempt to keep a distance between themselves and the work they produce, others prefer to stay engaged and influence the way that readers interpret their work. John Green, for instance, has published a number of successful contemporary YA novels including *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), and *Turtles All the Way Down* (2017). As well as being a *NYT* bestselling author, Green also has a large following on social media. In 2007, he and his brother Hank started a Vlog channel on YouTube called VlogBrothers. The channel, as of this writing (January 2021), has over three million followers on YouTube. In *The Fault in Our Stars*, we follow the journey of Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters as they try to find their favourite author and ask him what happens to the characters after the end of the book (Green, 2012). In the book, the fictional author, Peter Van Houten, refuses to give them any information about what happens after the end of the book, arguing that books belong to their readers (Green, 2012). Green himself mirrors this view by including a note at the beginning of the book to discourage people from reading the book autobiographically:

This is not so much an author’s note as an author’s reminder of what was printed in small type a few pages ago: This book is a work of fiction. I made it up.

Neither novels nor their readers benefit from attempts to divine whether any facts hide inside a story. Such efforts attack the very idea that made-up stories can matter, which is sort of the foundational assumption of our species.

I appreciate your cooperation in this matter. (Green, 2012)

However, Green's note did not manage to accomplish its goal, as readers who know that *The Fault in Our Stars* was inspired by the story of Esther Earl,¹⁸ often read the book with that context in mind.

While Green attempted to distance himself from his book, other authors have instead made efforts to become inextricable from theirs. A good example of this is the case of J. K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series. Rowling is now known for adding information and context to her stories that are not present in the text. In a special feature of her *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald*, she claims that there is a “sexual dimension” to the relationship between Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald (Martinez, 2019). Although Rowling announced on Twitter in 2007 that Dumbledore was in fact gay, there is still no indication of this in the text, even thirteen years later. More recently Rowling has been accused of transphobia¹⁹ and there has been a general call on Twitter for readers to ‘cancel’ her as a result of that. However, the popularity of her work makes this task difficult. Indeed, *Harry Potter* has been a formative text for a lot of people all over the world. According to the publisher, Bloomsbury, *Harry Potter* sold over 500 million copies worldwide and was translated into eighty different languages (Bloomsbury, n.d.). The incredible success of the *Harry Potter* series even led the *New York Times* to create a new category of bestsellers called *Children's Series* to avoid having different *Harry Potter* books taking over multiple spots on the bestseller list (Garner, 2008). Moreover, the *Harry Potter* series has a crossover appeal, i.e. it ended up being read by readers that were outside of the initial target audience, children (Martens, 2019). Therefore, *Harry Potter* can be described as a “genre-busting series, with the books behaving more like works of adult fiction than like

¹⁸ *The Fault in Our Stars* is dedicated to and inspired by Esther Earl, a friend of John Green who died of thyroid cancer in 2010 at the age of sixteen.

¹⁹ One of the Tweets that sparked these accusations about J. K. Rowling is: “If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth” (@jk_rowling, 2020).

books published for young readers” (Martens, 2019, p.2). It has been over 20 years since the first book was published but the franchise still has an ongoing presence and recognition in pop culture (Martens, 2019). Marianne Martens (2019) examines the role and impact of the participation of *Harry Potter* fans and readers on sustaining the franchise. For instance, Rowling’s fan site *Pottermore* contributed to keeping the series alive (Martens, 2019), readers and fans often identify as being part of one (or more) Hogwarts Houses, and some *Harry Potter* terminology has even been added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* such as the words ‘muggle’ and ‘Quidditch’. Martens further explains that:

From fan sites, to festivals, to fan activism, *Harry Potter* fans are inspired to participate in the *Harry Potter* universe, and their participation contributes to its success – and its longevity, as fans’ immaterial and affective labor continues to promote the universe and keep it in the public eye. (Martens, 2019, p.94)

Therefore, one of the issues with attempting to ‘cancel’ the author of a series as popular as *Harry Potter* is that it spans across a wide variety of media including but not limited to books, film, plays, and video games. If the emotional attachment that a lot of readers have for the *Harry Potter* story is added to that, it makes any attempts to boycott Rowling very difficult.

Online fandom and fan culture in YA fantasy

One of the consequences of the use of social media is the formation of online fandoms as the interaction between fans has been largely accelerated by these platforms. There is a cyclical relationship between genre and fandom, in which genres influence the formation of fandoms and these fandoms can then shape genres (Wilkins, 2019, p.27). Youth fandoms have expanded in the last few years within the online world, which contributed to bringing together the different elements of the publishing process i.e. authors, publishers, and readers (Martens, 2016, 2019). Martens highlights this idea further, writing:

Digital tools have blurred lines in the field between ‘authors,’ ‘readers,’ and ‘publishers,’ which means that authors now have to market their own works: they now have an intrinsic role in connecting with and maintaining relationships with fans by using social media to generate and build fan support for their own work. (2019, p.7).

Wilkins notes that “fandom is generally understood to mean fans of genre books, movies, games, comics, and so on.” (2019, p.35). Fandoms “far from being an individualistic mindless consumption of media, can have a potentially deep and meaningful impact on [fans’] values, identity, and potentially [their] behavior” (Plante et al., 2014, p.61). In YA fantasy, one of the reasons that make fandoms possible is the enthusiasm that fans must carry their interest in these stories across different media (Wilkins, 2019). As mentioned above, Martens (2019) examines the importance of the *Harry Potter* fan participation in the longevity of the franchise by explaining the relationship between fans and creator(s). The reader’s participation and response in fandoms take the stories beyond the books and bring them to life (Martens, 2019). This happens on digital platforms or in person and can take different forms such as: book reviews and ratings (e.g. Goodreads and Amazon), Fanfiction (e.g. on websites such as Wattpad, Fanfiction.net, Reddit, and Tumblr), fan art (DeviantArt, and Instagram), and events that encourage Cosplay (such as ComicCon, BookCon, YALC, and various book signing events). There are also several YA books that revolve around the theme of fandoms such as Rainbow Rowell’s *Fangirl* (2013), Ashley Poston’s *Geekerella* (2017), and Francesca Zappia’s *Eliza and her Monsters* (2017) which reflect YA’s self-awareness and its interest in fandoms. Jessica Pressman uses the term ‘bookishness’ and describes it as: “creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical” (2021, p.1).



Figure 4: *Six of Crows* fan tattoo by Nessa Luna (@octobertune, 2019) on Instagram



Figure 5: *A Court of Wings and Ruin* cover by Adrian Didach (Bloomsbury) based on fanart dress by Charlie Bowater (@charliebowater, 2017)

YA fantasy, via social media, has nurtured a number of large fandoms over the last decade. Some of the most popular examples include: Cassandra Clare's *Shadowhunters* fandom based on her four series (*The Mortal Instruments*, *The Infernal Devices*, *The Dark Artifices*, and *The Last Hours*), Leigh Bardugo's *Grishaverse* fandom based on her *Shadow and Bone* trilogy and *Six of Crows* duology, and Sarah J. Maas's fandom based on her *Throne of Glass* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series. Interestingly, some YA fantasy books even originated, or were inspired by, from the fanfiction of other books. For instance, Cassandra Clare's debut *City of Bones*²⁰ started off as a collection of *Harry Potter* fanfiction stories called *The Draco Trilogy* and Rainbow Rowell's *Carry On* is meant to be a satire of *Harry*

²⁰ Cassandra Clare faced a lawsuit in 2016 for "trademark infringement, copyright infringement, unfair competition, false advertising, and trade dress infringement," from Sherrilyn Kenyon for the similarities between her *Dark Hunter* series (first book came out in 1998) and Clare's *Shadowhunter* series (first book came out in 2007) (Biedenharn, 2016). Before her debut was published Clare's fanfiction was becoming increasingly popular, until she was accused of plagiarism by the community (Wilkins, 2019). Readers started noticing quotes from *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *Babylon 5* in her writing, which led to her getting banned from Fanfiction.net. While the line between originality and plagiarism are often blurred when it comes to fanfiction, detailed credit disclaimers are important to avoid such accusations.

Potter. Members of these YA fantasy fandoms, much like any other fandom, partake in activities such as creating and sharing memes, designing fan art, writing fanfiction, Cosplay, starting book clubs, and selling/buying merchandise. They also support the book and the author by writing book reviews, recommending it to other people, discussing the book, and sometimes even getting a quote from the book as a tattoo (see Figure 4). Wilkins explains that:

Young adult fantasy fandoms are particularly engaged forms of fandom, and reveal the social life of books that sales data can never capture: YAF fandoms prove unequivocally that people do more with books than simply buy them and read them. (2019, p.35)

A good example of the impact that fandom activities can have is the case of Charlie Bowater, a fan art artist who posts mainly on DeviantArt and Instagram. Bowater quickly grew in popularity on social media to the point that publishers started reaching out to her. Bloomsbury, for example, loved Bowater's fan art of Feyre, the main character in Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, so they asked if they could use the dress design for the cover art of the third book in that series (please see Figure 5). The artist was since commissioned to design the covers for a number of other high-profile YA science-fiction and fantasy books such as the covers for Shveta Thakar's *Star Daughter*, Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff's *Aurora Rising*, Margaret Rogerson's *Sorcery of Thorns* and Brandon Sanderson's *Skyward*. This illustrates how social media can also facilitate a switch from consumer to creator through fandom activities, which was less likely to happen before the digital age.

As explored in this section, social media allows the possibility to “look beyond literary texts to examine the infrastructures and relationships that shape their creation, dissemination and reception” (B. Thomas, 2020, p.19). When examining the current state of fandoms and fan studies, one issue arises, which is that “[t]he neutral internet user is still presumed to be straight, white, and male, as well as located in the Global North,” (Pande,

2018a, p.51). Pande (2018a, 2018b) explores the experiences of fans of colour and examines the topic of ‘race’ within online spaces calling for the need to decolonise the field of Fan Studies. Ahmed (2010a) introduces the notion of ‘the feminist killjoy’ and what it means to belong to a community as well as the consequences of disrupting the community’s stability and happiness writing:

To be unseated by the table of happiness might be to threaten not simply that table, but what gathers around it, what gathers on it. When you are unseated, you can even get in the way of those who are seated, those who want more than anything to keep their seats. To threaten the loss of the seat can be to kill the joy of the seated. How well we recognize the figure of the feminist killjoy! How she makes sense! Let’s take the figure of the feminist killjoy seriously. One feminist project could be to give the killjoy back her voice. (2010a, p.2)

Pande borrows this concept and adapts it to the discussion around ‘race’ in fandoms labelling it the “fandom killjoy” (2018a, p.13). Pande explains that:

To be a fandom killjoy as a nonwhite fan is a deeply alienating experience, as it involves either the internalized acceptance that certain pleasures and explorations are simply unavailable, or the identification of being someone who consistently brings unwanted drama to fan spaces.

In the following section, I build on this discussion and explore some aspects of this “unwanted drama” and how it unfolds on social media with a particular focus on YA fantasy controversies.

Controversies and cancel culture in YA fantasy

YA has seen several scandals and controversies in the last few years that have sometimes led to the temporary or permanent cancellation of books (Rosenfield, 2017, 2019b; Benedictus, 2019; Dishmon, 2019; Senior, 2019; Singal, 2019; Templeton, 2019;

Waldman, 2019). YA books are sometimes pulled from publication—by the author, the publisher, or through an agreement from both sides—because of problematic representation issues. One example worth highlighting in YA fantasy is the debut novel *Blood Heir* (2019) by Chinese-American author Amélie Wen Zhao. The novel follows the main character, a princess named Anastacya Mikhailov, who was born with terrifying powers—powers she shares with the enslaved population in this fictional world (Zhao, 2019). The main character ends up being framed for the murder of her father, which forces her to run away from the palace and attempt to clear her name with the help of a con man (Zhao, 2019). The novel is loosely based on the animated musical *Anastasia* by 20th Century Fox studios, which was itself a retelling of the legend of Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia. Zhao’s version of the story includes a ‘diverse’ cast of characters, and was pitched as “Anastasia meets *Six of Crows*” (Knapp, n.d.). Zhao sold *Blood Heir* in a “major deal” with Delacorte Press, a Penguin Random House imprint (Knapp, n.d.). The novel was initially scheduled to be published in June 2019, and in January of the same year, six months prior to its publication date, the publisher started circulating a few proofs²¹ of the book to readers and social media influencers to review it before its publication. The publisher did not, however, anticipate the backlash that would soon follow. A number of reviews and Twitter posts, including a particularly influential—now deleted—Twitter thread by Ellen Oh²²—a co-founder of the *We Need Diverse Books* organisation and an established YA writer from Asian decent herself. Oh claimed that being a person of colour did not automatically make writers immune to bias and racism (Rosenfield, 2019a). The reviews pointed out a few issues with *Blood Heir*, and the most significant claim against the book is that it was racially problematic (Flood, 2019). Readers, as well as YA people who had not yet read the book, were extremely

²¹ Proofs are uncorrected copies that are not for sale. They are also known as Advanced Readers Copies (ARCs). Publishers use these as a marketing tool to boost the publicity of a book before its release date by sending them primarily to reviewers and social media influencers (bloggers/YouTubers/Bookstagrammers).

²² Ellen Oh also received backlash and even death threats because of this conversation.

angry about the author's depiction of slavery and her alleged decision to kill May, a Black character, so that the White protagonist could survive and be viewed as a hero. This trope has previously been used in YA, as Thomas (2019) illustrates with the example of the Black character Rue in Collins's (2008) *The Hunger Games*, whose death gave the White main character, Katniss, the power to inspire a rebellion. Similarly, Rachel Dubrofsky and Emily Ryalls write about the death of Rue: "The uprising in the film animates a racialized trope: Katniss as the great white savior" (2014, p.204). They further describe Katniss as "the person who gives Rue's death meaning, and who inspires an entire district to rebel against its oppressors" (2014, p.204). Zhao, following the uproar, apologised in a letter that she posted on Twitter to her readers in a Tweet and announced that in the light of all the criticism, she had decided to ask her publisher to stop the publication process of her debut novel (@ameliewenzhao, 2019). Zhao writes in this letter addressed to the book community:

It was never my intention to bring harm to **any** reader of this valued community, particularly those for whom I seek to write and empower. **As such I have decided to ask my publisher not to publish Blood Heir at this time, and they have agreed.** I don't wish to clarify, defend, or have anyone defend me. This is not that; this is an apology.
(@ameliewenzhao, 2019) (emphasis in original)

Zhao emphasised the fact that she herself was a person of colour who was trying to bring more 'diversity' to the genre and that her depiction of slavery was based on her Asian background and not on American slavery (@ameliewenzhao, 2019). Zhao writes in the same letter:

I emigrated from China when I was 18. Drawing on my own multicultural upbringing and the complex history of my heritage that has incidences of bias and oppression, I wrote *Blood Heir* from my immediate cultural perspective. The issues around Affinite indenturement in the story represent a specific critique of the epidemic

of indentured labor and human trafficking prevalent in many industries across Asia, including in my own home country. The narrative and history of slavery in the United States is not something I can, would, or intended to write, but I recognize that I am not writing in merely my own cultural context. I am so sorry for the pain this has caused.
 (@ameliewenzhao, 2019)

However, a few months after that, the author got back in touch with her editor after making some revisions to her novel. Zhao felt that her story should, after all, be published and it was, in November 2019 (Alter, 2019). This controversy fuelled the ongoing discussion about cancel culture in YA (Alter, 2019). Although some believe that these conversations are “too cutthroat” or even “intolerant”, others argue that this is a necessary step in addressing ‘diversity’ and representation issues in publishing (Alter, 2019).

Eve Ng notes that cancel culture “demonstrates how content circulation via digital platforms facilitates fast, large-scale responses to acts deemed problematic, often empowering traditionally marginalized groups in the moment, but it also highlights the dearth of considered assessments and debate” (2020, p.625). A few other YA books have experienced a similar fate to *Blood Heir*, such as the YA fantasy novel *The Black Witch* (2017) by Laurie Forest that some readers described as “bigoted” (Alter, 2019). Another example is Kosoko Jackson’s YA debut *A Place for Wolves* (2019), which was criticised for its distorted representation of the Kosovo War and its problematic portrayal of Muslim characters (Alter, 2019). Similarly, Keira Drake postponed the publication of her debut *The Continent* (2017) when it was criticised for racial insensitivity and for its use of the White Saviour trope (Flood, 2019). In a Vulture feature, Kat Rosenfield, a published YA author, writes: “Young-adult books are being targeted in intense social-media callouts, draggings, and pile-ons — sometimes before anybody’s even read them” (2017). The author emphasises the fact that people who have not read the book can still rally against it (Rosenfield, 2017).

This phenomenon has been described as a “Twitter Mob” (Singal, 2019). In 2019, the New York Times posted an article titled *When Social Media Goes After Your Book, What’s the Right Response?* in which two authors Keira Drake and Jonah Winter share their experiences with the social media backlash they received for their respective books, writing: “Twitter callout culture is a shameful stain on the young adult book community, and yet these incidents happen again and again, typically before a book is even published” (2019, para.20).

Overall, this section explored the role of social media in the publishing world which has developed significantly with the rise of the digital age. This meant a growth in the role of the reader, who used to be a consumer but who now has the power to influence trends in the publishing world. Readers have shown that they can rally on social media platforms to either promote a book or criticise it, and as a consequence have a significant impact on the publisher’s decisions about that book. While readers can form fandoms and be an incredible tool to uplift a particular text or author, they can also come together to bring down a text or an author that they view to be offensive or problematic. These power dynamic changes have altered the way in which books are created and consumed to become, now more than ever before, a collective work. The role of the reader is further explored in Chapter 4 of this thesis through a quantitative analysis of an online survey of YA fantasy readers (please see p.188).

Transmedia Adaptations

The dawn of Adaptation Studies is usually traced back to George Bluestone’s (1957) *Novel into Film*, which analysed the process of turning a book into a movie through a few case studies and influenced the field over the following decades (Murray, 2020). Murray (2012) notes that adaptation studies around 2005 witnessed a big change and transformation. By this time, “the sense of a discipline reconfiguring itself, shaking off inherited assumptions and re-examining all aspects of its self-conception was unmistakable” (Murray, 2012, p.2). The works of Robert Stam—*A Companion to Literature and Film*, *Literature and Film: A*

Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation (2004), and *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation* (2004)— as well as Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), and Julie Sanders’ *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005) represent a key contribution to the field of Adaptation Studies (Murray, 2012). This wave of Adaptation Studies adopted concepts from post-structuralism, post-colonialism, feminism, and cultural studies and “opened up adaptation studies to concepts of audience agency” (Murray, 2012, p.9). Murray “rethink[s] adaptation” (2012, p.16) and offers a different approach to adaptation studies that moves away from the traditional text-based examinations and towards answering production-based questions. Murray views adaptation as “a *material* phenomenon produced by a system of interlinked interests and actors” (2012, p.16) (emphasis in original).

Yet another approach to adaptation, highlighted by Wieland Schwanebeck (2022), is the concept of revision in the cases of adaptations that deviate from the original stories.

Schwanebeck points out that:

Canonization always entails a degree of selective re-reading, as the cultural prestige of a text can rest on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this produced a particular kind of adaptation that reads its source material ‘against the grain’, to challenge its problematic aspects and to propose counter-narratives, often by subjecting the material to transcultural displacements: revisionist adaptations. (2022, p.2)

The common pattern that can be noticed in this type of adaptations is that they retell, or rewrite the story from a different perspective (Schwanebeck, 2022). Therefore, “[v]illainesses... emerge as tragic heroines, and marginalized or subaltern individuals are finally granted a voice of their own” (Schwanebeck, 2022, p.3). However, it is important to note that these revisions do not necessarily result in a more inclusive version of the original story (Schwanebeck, 2022). Donna Hancox (2018) explores the way in which transmedia

storytelling can contribute to activism and social change. Hancox notes that: “Transmedia activism is the logical progression of transmedia and reflects the many traditions, philosophies, and practices that precede it” (2018, p.338). Chapter 05 of this thesis explores a case study of an adaptation that aimed to revise and address the lack of ‘diversity’ in the original text of Bardugo’s *Shadow and Bone* (2012). In Chapter 05, I dive into the implications that revising or reimagining a story can have on the representation of marginalised groups.

Adaptations of YA books

Murray notes that nowadays, “it is clear that adaptation – namely, the transfer of content from one media format to another – has become ubiquitous” (2020, p.126). YA fantasy is no exception because its texts have been adapted to TV, film, podcasts, fanfiction, video games, board games, graphic novels, and other media. Examples of this include: *Embers of Memory*, a board game inspired by the world of *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Maas, the *Shadowhunters* TV show adaptation of *The Mortal Instruments* series by Cassandra Clare, Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone* adaptation of the *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* book series by Leigh Bardugo, and the recent *Demon in the Wood* (Bardugo, 2022) graphic novel, which was initially a prequel short story set in the *Grishaverse* and told from the perspective of the Darkling (before he became the Darkling).²³ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000, p.15) note that the role of new media adaptations can be understood through the way in which they “honour, rival and revise” the original media form. Furthermore, “the appetite for adapting book content has been a huge boon for the publishing industry” because if a consumer enjoys the screen adaptation, for example, they are more likely to be drawn to the original book (Murray, 2020, pp.126–127). Murray also points out that:

²³ *Demon in the Wood* (Bardugo, 2022) follows the story of Eryk and his mother Lena as they are being hunted for their Grisha powers. The events of this story take place before Eryk created the Shadow Fold and became the Black Heretic. He also goes by the name the Darkling in *Shadow and Bone* (Bardugo, 2012).

The adaptation process may unfold sequentially, but the ideal scenario is for all the related products within a content franchise to exist for the consumer simultaneously, so that the book and its incarnations in other media cross-promote each other synergistically. (Murray, 2020, p.128)

According to Jenkins, “[t]ransmedia storytelling is the art of world making” where the reader—or the consumer—pieces together parts of the narrative from different platforms “to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience” (2006, p.21). Jenkins also suggests that the term can be used to refer to the adaptation of a story between different platforms, and to refer to narratives and fictional worlds that stretch beyond their original medium (Jenkins, 2006). Ken Gelder examines the adaptations of fantasy bestsellers, namely: J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, pointing out that “the source text itself, the original creative work, doesn’t disappear in the process” (2019, p.14). Similarly, Murray also notes that “the aura of the book” does not usually disappear completely from the adaptation, and when the adaptation is successful, it often has a positive impact on the original text (Murray, 2020, p.128). Gelder further explains that adaptations in general build “*relationships* to their source text; they both cite it and transform it” (2019, p.14) (original emphasis). Wilkins (2019, p.48) points out that YA fantasy brings together YA’s “legacy of seriality” and fantasy’s “legacy of storyworlds” that transcend the text writing:

When young adult fiction and fantasy fiction are combined in YAF, their industry and audience orientations amplify each other, disposing the texts towards storyworlds that proliferate across series and across platforms, potentially spawn franchises, and inspire widespread digital sociality (both official and unofficial). (Wilkins, 2019, p.48)

Wilkins also notes that the development of the transmedia franchise in YA fantasy is mainly due to “fandom’s willingness to follow its interests in proliferative texts about fantasy worlds and lore across platforms,” as well as the “habits of youth audiences” (2019, p.48).

Furthermore, Lo points out that: “[w]hile not every screen adaptation will have the same influence, there is a possibility that, when done well, the right book at the right time has the potential to affect the publishing landscape” (2020, p.616). A survey conducted by the Nielsen Company,²⁴ which included around two thousand young adult participants interested in YA screen adaptations, reveals that there is a steady increase in YA books being made into movies (2014). It stratified fans into four categories, namely: “Content Connoisseurs”, “Trend Ambassadors”, “Sentimental Dabblers”, and “Adrenaline Seekers” (The Nielsen Company, 2014, p.3). The same study also identified a correlation between bestselling YA authors (according to a Nielsen Bookscan list) and YA authors who have book to movie adaptations (p.4). Years after this survey, the trend seems to remain accurate, as Martens (2019) notes that popular YA books can often be found on different platforms including screen adaptations. Examples of YA fantasy adaptations include: The *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* series by Leigh Bardugo, which were adapted into a TV show by Netflix, and *The Mortal Instruments*²⁵ series by Cassandra Clare, which has been the subject of multiple adaptations (first turned into a movie, then into a TV show by Constantin Film). Another example of YA adaptations is the *Twilight* saga by Stephanie Meyer which was adapted to five movies by Summit Entertainment.

Netflix’s Shadow and Bone adaptation

Leigh Bardugo is an American #1 *New York Times* bestselling YA fantasy author. Her debut novel *Shadow and Bone* was published in 2012 by Henry Holt, Macmillan in the US

²⁴ The Nielsen Company is also known for its Bookscan service that provides data about book sales in a few countries.

²⁵ Also known as *Shadowhunters*.

and by Orion, Hachette Children's Group in the UK. According to the publisher's website, she now has over 3 million copies of her novels sold in the world (US Macmillan, 2019), and her novels have been sold in over 50 countries and translated into 22 languages (Ritz, 2015). Bardugo created an imaginary fantasy universe that involves science and magic and named it the *Grishaverse*. It was introduced as a setting for her *Shadow and Bone* trilogy²⁶ (2012-2014), which includes: *Shadow and Bone*, *Siege and Storm*, and *Ruin and Rising*. Bardugo later expanded her *Grishaverse* world by introducing the *Six of Crows* duology²⁷ (2015-2016), which includes: *Six of Crows* and *Crooked Kingdom*. After finishing these two series, Bardugo decided to explore the mythology of the world in the collection of short stories and folklore called *The Language of Thorns* (2017). The most recent addition to the *Grishaverse* is the *King of Scars* duology (2019-2021), which includes *King of Scars* and *Rule of Wolves*. In 2021, Bardugo announced yet another addition to the *Grishaverse*, the *Demon in the Wood* graphic novel, which is planned for publication at the end of 2022.

As previously mentioned in this section, the *Shadow and Bone* series and the *Six of Crows* duology have been adapted as a series by Netflix called *Shadow and Bone*. I analyse this adaptation and its implications in terms of 'diversity' and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy in detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis (please see p.225). The show is written by the show runner Eric Heisserer; in addition to that, Shawn Levy, and Leigh Bardugo were involved as executive producers (Andreeva and Petski, 2019). Season one had a total of eight episodes—"A Searing Burst of Light", "We're All Someone's Monster", "The Making at the Heart of the World", "Otkazat'sya"²⁸, "Show Me Who You Are", "The Heart is an Arrow", "The Unsea", and "No Mourners"—and was available to watch on Netflix in April 2021 (Asatryan, 2020). The TV series overlaps the two timelines

²⁶ The *Shadow and Bone* trilogy is also sometimes referred to as the *Grisha* trilogy.

²⁷ *Six of Crows* is currently a duology; however, Bardugo has mentioned her plans to eventually write a third instalment in the future.

²⁸ Otkazat'sya translates to 'to abandon' in Russian.

while in the books *Six of Crows* happens two years after the end of the *Shadow and Bone* series. The blurb on the Netflix website states: “Sinister forces plot against a young soldier when she reveals a magical power that might unite her world” (Netflix, 2020). One area I am particularly interested in when it comes to this adaptation is the way in which ‘diversity’ is handled and the decisions that were made to improve that in the show. The show cast Freddy Carter as Kaz Brekker, Ben Barnes as the Darkling, Jessie Mei Li as Alina Starkov, Amita Suman as Inej Ghafa, Danielle Galligan as Nina Zenik, Sujaya Dasgupta as Zoya Nazyalensky, and Kit Young as Jesper Fahey. This ‘diverse’ cast of actors choice departs from the dominant identities initially represented in the *Shadow and Bone* (2012) book. In an interview about her work, Bardugo states:

My first book, *Shadow and Bone*, is a very straight, very white book, and I think that’s because I was a new author echoing a lot of the fantasy I’d read. But when we write books populated only with straight, white, cisgendered, able-bodied characters, we’re doing actual damage. We’re reinforcing the idea that adventure and romance and revolution only belong to a very specific group of people, and that’s not something I want to be a part of. (Leary, 2016, para.10).

The *Shadow and Bone* show, in a way, gave Bardugo the opportunity to revisit her first trilogy and make some changes. For example, in the show Alina Starkov is Shu (Asian), while in the book she was Ravkan (White). This change in the ethnicity of the main character illustrates the move away from the classic White Chosen One and towards a more inclusive narrative. I explore this point in detail in Chapter 5 of this thesis (please see p.225).

Narrative Tropes and Publishing Trends in YA Fantasy

Genre

Understanding narrative tropes in YA fantasy is closely linked to understanding genres and the ways in which they operate. There is a multitude of ways that critics and

scholars over the years have defined and considered genres. In this section, I explore some of the ways that genres have been conceptualised and link that to the approach I adopt in this research. In the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye (1957) describes literary texts through a classification of genres, archetypes, and modes, identifying four different genres: epos, fiction, drama, and lyric. Frye uses a system of archetypes to describe texts and the ways in which they intersect, as he explains:

the purpose of criticism by genre is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a larger number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them. (1957, pp.247–248)

Vladimir Propp (1968), in his book *Morphology of the Folktale*, developed a list of thirty-one narrative tropes—or what he refers to as ‘function’—from an analysis of a hundred Russian folk tales. Tzvetan Todorov’s *Fantastic* (1975) critiques Frye’s taxonomy and focuses on the relationship between genre and text, disagreeing with the idea that genres are static categories. Furthermore, according to Jacques Derrida, “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (1980, p.56). Derrida also points out that texts do not necessarily belong to a genre, but instead, they participate in one or more genres, as he explains: “there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (1980, p.65). Gérard Genette notes that a genre consists of “the whole of the paratext and, more broadly, by the relation between text and paratext” (1997, p.41).

Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin considers the social dimension and describes genres as “relatively stable thematic, compositional, and stylistic types of utterances” (1986, p.64). Bakhtin (1986) also describes two types of genres: primary genre, which includes day to day communications, and secondary genre, which includes novels. Similarly, Thomas O. Beebee

also emphasises the social and ideological nature of genres writing: “Genre gives us not understanding in the abstract and passive sense but use in the pragmatic and active sense” (1994, p.14). Furthermore, Beebee also notes that “the ideology of genre is always split, for the use-value of any single genre depends on our recognition of other genres that oppose it” (1994, p.263). John Frow broadens his understanding of genre by considering other sources. He writes:

[G]enre theory is, or should be, about the ways in which different structures of meaning and truth are produced in and by the various kinds of writing, talking, painting, filming, and acting by which the universe of discourse is structured. (Frow, 2006, p.10)

Rick Altman examines genre within the film industry and highlights the role of audiences and critics in constructing genre, arguing that “the film industry, responding to audience desires, initiates clear-cut genres that endure because of their ability to satisfy basic human needs” (1999, p.29).

Claire Squires notes that “[g]enre, including the genre of literary fiction, is a marketing concept in publishing: a definition not for its own sake but one which has commercial implications” (2007, p.5). Building on the works of Squires, Jodi McAlister argues that: “every category/genre is, effectively, a marketing category, whether that category is shaped by implied audience, implied plot trajectory or some other combination of metrics” (2021, p.5). Wilkins notes that genre is “a dynamic access point for understanding how texts work in the world” (2019, p.11). Moreover, genres “can be used as a form of resistance and change” (Bawarshi and Reiff, 2010, p.13). As previously outlined at the beginning of this chapter (please see p.33), this research adopts Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins’s broader “genre world” approach (2018, pp.998–1000) by examining YA fantasy tropes and trends from different angles, i.e. from the text as well as the perspectives of the publishers, readers, social media influencers, and media adaptations. This approach focuses on the big picture to

“yield new insights and a fuller, richer understanding of how genre fiction operates” (Fletcher et al., 2018, p.998).

The following section examines the existing scholarship around YA and fantasy narrative tropes and publishing trends. This examination leads to a better understanding of how YA fantasy is constructed through its restrictions and the expectations of its readers. This research is particularly interested in the way in which YA fantasy—through its trends and tropes—can restrict the possibilities of who is allowed to be a hero and how we can challenge these boundaries. Anis Bawarshi notes that:

...generic boundaries are not simply constraints within which writers and speakers function; rather, these boundaries are social and rhetorical conditions which make possible certain commitments, relations, and actions. Just as natural ecosystems sustain certain forms of life, so genres maintain rhetorical conditions that sustain certain forms of life—ways of discursively and materially organising, knowing, experiencing, acting, and relating to the world. (Bawarshi, 2003, pp.8–9)

This ecosystem metaphor reflects the elements that come together to construct a genre such as YA fantasy, which helps us determine how this ecosystem can be altered and adapted to include more ‘diverse’ experiences of life.

Tropes and trends

This section explores some of the publishing trends and narrative tropes that make up the ecosystem of YA fantasy, as well as the ones that disrupt this ecosystem and encourage the genre to expand beyond its boundaries and possibilities. Indeed, in this ecosystem, narrative tropes, publishing influences, and social conversations are inextricable and work in symbiosis; as Wilkins notes that “[g]enre tropes spill out of books and into social discussions; social discussions pressure publishers to change the contents of books; and market success influences the choices writers make about how to use or combine genre elements” (2019,

pp.11–12). Davis agrees with this view that the stories we read and our lived experiences are inextricable, writing: "Even though these stories frequently take place in worlds that are not our own, the genre nevertheless reflects and comments on our world's history, current issues, dreams, and fears" (2020, p.7). Similarly, Eugenia Yizhen Lo highlights the link between narrative tropes and the evolution of publishing trends and the pop culture environment at any given time in YA, writing:

The kinds of books that are being published and in demand are evolving, and it's not just due to the technological advancements that brought us eBooks and audiobooks. Books that are chosen to be published reflect the zeitgeist, including the social, cultural, and technological progresses in popular culture that dominates our cultural dialogue. One sector of book publishing that is especially shaped by and reflective of these progresses is the young adult sector. (2020, p.611)

Furthermore, publishers can be considered "financial investors and risk-takers," which means that they provide financial resources that are essential to creating and publishing books (Thompson, 2021, p.455). This commercial dimension is crucial because there are costs to making and disseminating books or, as Thompson puts it: "it takes time and uses up materials, and someone at some point has to foot the bill" (2021, p.455). As the scholarship above suggests, the reflective nature of the publishing process makes it utterly impossible to publish books without being influenced by the ecosystem to which they belong. In other words, social, cultural, and commercial elements largely influence and determine which books get published and which ones do not.

The fandom wiki tvtropes (<https://tvtropes.org>) gathers and catalogues a wide selection of tropes, including YA tropes and fantasy tropes. Tvtropes defines a trope as: "a storytelling device or convention, a shortcut for describing situations the storyteller can reasonably assume the audience will recognize. Tropes are the means by which a story is told

by anyone who has a story to tell” (tvtropes, n.d.). Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) introduces the concept of the ‘Hero’s Journey’, the sequence of events that archetypal heroes go through again and again in different stories. Furthermore, tropes have sometimes been humorously parodied over the years, such as in Carrie Dirisio’s *Brooding YA Hero: Becoming a Main Character (Almost) as Awesome as Me* (2017), which started as a Twitter personality @broodingYAhero and later published as a self-help book to help the reader become a YA main character, exploring all the cliché YA tropes; and Diana Wynne-Jones’s *Tough guide to Fantasyland* (1996), a travel guide/handbook which pretends that all fantasy stories are set in this place called Fantasyland, examining an extensive list of Fantasy tropes. Despite these parodies, tropes are still prominent in many genres, including YA fantasy.

However, this research does not, in any way, suggest that YA fantasy books can be reduced to a set of tropes combined to create various stories. Instead, tropes can be viewed as the ingredients to use while preparing a story batter. The ingredients may be similar but what makes the difference between making waffles and making pancakes lies in the tools we use and the toppings we add. In other words, using the same tropes can result in two very different stories depending on key elements such as: writing style, character voice, and cover design. In a similar way that waffles and pancakes have different tastes, YA fantasy stories use the same tropes in different ways. Narrative tropes in YA fantasy can be divided into character tropes (such as the Chosen One hero, the orphan, or the Dark Lord); worldbuilding tropes (such as Medieval setting, magical land, elemental magic); and relationship tropes (such as love triangles, enemies to lovers, or the lost heir). These tropes appear over and over again in YA fantasy stories. Wilkins (2019) examines three main high fantasy tropes, framing them in the context of YA, namely: “The Cruel Past” (p.14), “The Chosen One” (p.19), and “Tests and Institutions” (p.22). Wilkins (2019) illustrates her argument using YA fantasy

case studies such as the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas, *The Mortal Instruments* series by Cassandra Clare, and *the Red Queen* series by Victoria Aveyard. YA fantasy novels, such as *Throne of Glass* are often set in a historical setting, or “a past that has a cruel inflection” (Wilkins, 2019, p.15). These settings often illustrate a tradition of medieval backdrops or the so-called ‘gritty Middle Ages’, which can be traced back to the influences of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* and George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (Wilkins, 2019, p.15). Settings such as these, in a YA context, enhance the teenage characters’ agency in the story, because they are not constantly supervised by adults and not necessary treated as teenagers (Wilkins, 2019).

Another common fantasy convention that has been adopted by YA is the Chosen One trope (Wilkins, 2019). Chosen One characters are inherently special and exceptional, and can be recognized by “a mark, prophecy, auspicious birth, or a wise soothsayer.” (Chowdhury, 2006, p.107). As Douglas Adams notes: “It’s one thing to think that you are the centre of the universe; it’s another thing entirely to have this confirmed by an ancient prophecy” (tvtropes, n.d.). However, regardless of how these Chosen One characters were selected—whether they were chosen by a higher power such as Celaena Sardothien in the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas, chose themselves, such as Katniss Everdeen volunteering in *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, or were even chosen by the villain, such as *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling—they are the only ones who can save the world. In YA fantasy, unlike traditional fantasy narratives, the Chosen One is often female (Cruger, 2017). One of the main characteristics of this special girl character is that she is not like other girls, as Katherine Cruger argues:

The message is painfully clear: there is only room in the story for one amazing girl, there is only one way to be a girl or a woman, and perhaps most troublingly, it’s impossible for girls to have meaningful friendships with one another. (Cruger, 2017, p.117)

Wilkins (2019) links the Chosen One trope to the love triangle trope using the example of Bella Swan in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, who grabs the attention of both “sparkling, gorgeous vampire Edward and sexy, capable werewolf Jacob” (p.21). Many other examples of love triangles can be found in YA fantasy that replicate the paradigm of the special girl with special powers who gets the attention of two, usually men, love interests. Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* trilogy includes a fans' favourite love triangle between special warlock Tessa Grey, and the two best friends Will Herondale and Jem Carstairs. Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* also uses this love triangle trope between the powerful Sun summoner Grisha²⁹ Alina Starkov, her lifelong best friend Mal, and the story's villain, the Darkling. These complicated romance subplots reinforce the Chosen One's status, as they show that these special female characters “manage both intimate relationships *and* great quests and battles; *particularly* great quests and battles” (Wilkins, 2019, p.22) (original emphasis). I explore the Chosen One trope as well as its implications for characters from marginalised groups in detail in Chapter 5, (please see p.244).

'Diversity' and YA fantasy tropes

Davis (2020) analyses the quality of the representation of 'race' and ethnicity in YA speculative fiction through a case study of three novels, two of which were identified as having problematic representations, *Carve the Mark* by Veronica Roth (2017) and *The Black Witch* by Laurie Forest (2017), and one counter-story,³⁰ *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018). Davis (2020) examines the three texts through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to identify “elements of bias” (p.5) and emphasise the importance of counter-stories. The three main tropes that emerge from this research are: “BIPOC characters as dark

²⁹ Sun Summoners, in Bardugo's *Grishaverse*, are a special and powerful kind of Grisha who can manipulate light. Alina Starkov is the original and most powerful Sun Summoner.

³⁰ The concept of counter-narratives originates in Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1989).

aggressors, the construction of systems of oppression in worldbuilding, and the transformation of characters encountering racism” (Davis, 2020, p.9). This study finds that the “dark aggressor” character is: “commonly non-white, dark in skin color, and described using dehumanizing violent, animalistic, or unnatural characteristics” (Davis, 2020, p.9). Davis explores the complexity of this trope by analysing and comparing how it unfolds in a racially insensitive story (*Carve the Mark*), compared to a well-executed counter-story (*Children of Blood and Bone*). Thus, the problem is not necessarily the trope itself but the way it is handled. As Davis puts it:

When the trope is constructed and then countered through humanizing interactions and characters who call out and challenge misrepresentations, we are able to see how the trope is employed and how it can be challenged and subverted to highlight the actual aggression conducted without consequences by dominant racial groups. (Davis, 2020, p.11)

The second trope that emerges from Davis’s study focuses on the worldbuilding aspect of the stories and the way in which power dynamics are constructed based on “supremacist ideology, oppression, and colonization and imperialism” (p.12). Davis (2020) finds that the worldbuilding systems in the three novels parallel real world systems that oppress BIPOC, and highlights the importance of providing these characters with agency, i.e. giving them a narrative perspective so that the reader can see the story from their point of view. The third and final trope that the study analyses focuses on character development, specifically the transformation that characters go through after facing elements of racism in the story (Davis, 2020). Davis (2020) compares the progression of the arcs of the main characters in *The Black Witch* (Forest, 2017) and in *Children of Blood and Bone* (Adeyemi, 2018) after these characters encounter aspects of racism in the story, and finds that:

What *Children of Blood and Bone* provides that *The Black Witch* does not is the impact of an ally's shifting group alliance and the harm felt by those groups when their allies betray them to make easier choices for their own self-preservation or internal conflict. (p.16)

As previously noted, Thomas (2019, p.5) describes the issue of the lack of representation of characters of colour in Children's books and YA as an "*imagination gap*" (emphasis in original) and argues that the problem goes deeper and expands to the quality and the authenticity of the representation. Indeed, there is an issue with the lack of representation of characters of colour, but also as Thomas explains: "Often, the characters of color that *do* appear on the page or screen are stereotypes or caricatures" (Thomas, 2019, p.7) (emphasis in original). This point further highlights the importance of involving Own Voices authors and sensitivity readers³¹ in the publishing process to achieve an accurate representation of characters of colour and challenge damaging stereotypes. Thomas (2019) uses the term "dark fantastic" to refer to the "role that racial difference plays in our fantastically storied imaginations" (p.7). Through an analysis of the representation of Black female characters such as the case of Rue in *The Hunger Games*, and the case of Bonnie Bennett in *The Vampire Diaries*, Thomas (2019) argues that "racial innocence is one of the reasons why it has been difficult to racially integrate the fantastic" (p.12), and highlights the fact that Black female characters are "uniquely subjected to *violence* even in a horror narrative" (p.13) (original emphasis).

In order to understand who gets to be a hero in fantasy narratives, it is crucial to investigate who the monsters typically are in these stories. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory* (1996) introduces seven theses of monster culture:

- 1) "The monster's body is a cultural body" (p.4);

³¹ Sensitivity readers are readers who share aspects of a marginalised identity with characters of a book. They provide editorial services to authors who are not Own Voices and who would like to ensure that their representation is authentic and not offensive or problematic in any way to the communities involved.

- 2) “The monster always escapes” (p.4);
- 3) “The monster is the harbinger of category crisis” (p.6);
- 4) “The monster dwells at the gates of difference” (p.7);
- 5) “The monster polices the borders of the possible” (p.12);
- 6) “Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire” (p.16); and
- 7) “The monster stands at the threshold... of becoming” (p.20).

Thomas (2019) responds to Cohen’s theses by examining monster theory through the lens of the monster; and concludes that “the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monsters*” (p.23) (original emphasis).

It is important to acknowledge that fantasy tropes have a real impact on readers, as Thomas (2019) observes: “When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they are empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that can be elusive within the real world” (p.23). However, when BIPOC readers enter this same world, they are often faced with the misrepresentation of characters that look like them, which inevitably reinforces stereotypes and damaging narratives (Thomas, 2019). Thomas further explains:

...because we consume fairy tales and fantasy in the dream space of the secondary world, our emotions lead us to index dark characters primarily within contexts of enslavement, empire, conquest, colonialism, and abiding second-class status. The impossibility of Black heroism, agency, and beauty is the result. (Thomas, 2019, p.93)

For this reason, it is of the utmost importance to publish a wide variety of stories for readers from all sorts of cultures and backgrounds to be able to see themselves accurately represented. Davis concludes her study by highlighting the importance of counter-stories in expanding the possibilities of our imagination, writing:

Speculative fiction counter-stories are vital and show BIPOC readers they, too, can have adventures rooted in the very foundations of their cultures. BIPOC readers should have starring roles in texts and see their magic is beautiful, their futures are limitless, and their stories matter. (Davis, 2020, p.19)

Barbour (2020) examines the case of Noelle Stevenson's fantasy graphic novel *Nimona* (2015). Using Bawarshi's (2003) genre ecosystem metaphor, Barbour argues that *Nimona* "co-opts and reorients the genre of the fantasy hero in order to disrupt its ecosystem and expand its possible forms of life" (p.1). Indeed, Nimona, the main character, embraces her monster status as a shapeshifter and challenges the parameters of the genre and the binary opposition of good and evil in fantasy as she shifts reader's sympathy towards the designated villain of the story and highlights the flaws of the designated hero figure (Barbour, 2020). As Barbour (2020) points out: "From start to finish, Nimona's existence has had a destabilising effect on what would otherwise have been a traditional fantasy hero narrative" (p.9); therefore, the text "leaves readers just as disoriented as the characters who encounter her within the story" (p.11). Barbour (2020) goes back again to Bawarshi's concept of genre ecosystems to describe the impact that a character like Nimona can have in disrupting the fantasy genre, as she concludes:

Nimona barges into the ecosystem of the fantasy hero and utterly queers it—and, by extension, the way we are able to relate to it. She asks us what and who we have overlooked or misrepresented within this traditionally straight narrative and invites a reimagining of what it might allow. (p.11)

Therefore, the tropes that are often associated with the fantasy hero are challenged in *Nimona* in an attempt to "imagine the human outside the parameters of what the genre allows the human to be" (Barbour, 2020, p.2). In other words, characters who do not fit the usual White, able-bodied, heterosexual, man image of the hero offer alternatives to the traditional

hero narrative, thus expanding our understanding and our expectations of the genre. By changing and expanding these expectations, this process will ultimately feed back into the genre as the tropes and trends change, and the ecosystem adapts. Barbour also draws attention to the villain character in *Nimona*, writing:

the fantasy villain is the necessary counterpart to the fantasy hero. Contained properly, villains end up supporting the traditional narrative's formulation of patriarchal power by enabling heroes to position themselves as defenders of normative society. (Barbour, 2020, p.5)

In *Nimona*, the villain named Blackheart was once training alongside the hero to become a knight himself. However, Blackheart ends up losing an arm in a dual and gets expelled from the Institution, and effectively turned into a villain figure. As a dis/abled character, Blackheart no longer fits the profile of the typically able-bodied hero, as Barbour puts it: “individuals who do not embody normative identity become monstrous and are subsequently regarded with fear” (2020, p.8). This echoes Cohen’s thesis about the monster’s inherent difference: “The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (1996, p.7).

One of the aims of this thesis is to make readers question the parameters that govern genres such as YA fantasy, because this questioning can lead to a better understanding of the implications that tropes and trends, that are often accepted unequivocally, can have. As I explore in Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5, by adjusting the readers’ expectations of who will be a hero, who has agency, and who has a point of view and a voice in YA fantasy, a snowball effect can happen. This chain reaction can have real consequences at every step of the publishing process, and ultimately lead to real change in literature and in the publishing industry.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the existing literature around the topic of ‘diversity’ and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. This allowed me to identify some of the current gaps in the literature and the areas that needed further investigation. These gaps became the foundation that I built my research questions upon as I will explore in this chapter. This methodology chapter also details the research process I followed. My research draws from Publishing and Book Studies as well as Cultural Studies and Media Studies because of the interdisciplinary nature of the topic. This chapter begins with an examination of my research questions as well as an exploration of the rationale behind my research design and data analysis. In this chapter, I explain my worldview as a researcher and situate myself in this research. After that, I introduce and explain my mixed-method approach and the research methods I have chosen for this project, namely: a set of qualitative semi-structured interviews with YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers; a quantitative online survey with YA fantasy readers; and a case study that examines Netflix’s YA fantasy screen adaptation of the bestselling *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* series by *New York Times* bestselling YA fantasy author, Leigh Bardugo. In this chapter, I also explore the limitations of each method and explain the reasons for selecting them as well as the sampling techniques I used for recruiting my participants. After that, I take a closer look at my data collection processes and analysis. The next section details the ethical considerations that went into this thesis. Finally, the conclusion of this chapter points forwards to the three discussion chapters of this thesis in which I analyse and discuss the findings of this research.

Research Questions

As mentioned in the introduction section, this research aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are some of the stories that YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK seek, and how ‘diverse’ are these stories?
- 2) How do YA fantasy readers perceive ‘diverse’ representations, and to what extent do they see themselves in these stories?
- 3) What is the role of screen adaptations in reflecting the representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy?

Epistemology

As I have previously explained in the introduction of this thesis, my position as a reader who does not often see herself represented in YA fantasy, fan, researcher, and publishing professional motivates and informs this research. Thus, before going deeper into this research, it is helpful to acknowledge my view of the world and what we know about it, i.e. my epistemological position to frame this research. Ontological and epistemological issues have been described as “a skin not a sweater,” meaning that they are inextricable from research (Marsh et al., 2017, p.17). Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify four main paradigms of research namely: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism. They describe a paradigm as a “set of *basic beliefs*” (original emphasis), and explain that it can reflect “a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world,’ the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts,” (original emphasis) (1994, p.107). Every paradigm can be explained through a response to three key questions: “the ontological question”, “the epistemological question”, and “the methodological question” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.108). Thus, it is important to situate this research within a research paradigm to understand my worldview as a researcher, as this

will shape the framework for this research. These four paradigms can be summarised as follows: positivism heavily relies on an objective view of the world and facts, as it seeks to portray a “‘true’ state of affairs” (p.109), usually using experimental methodology and quantitative methods; postpositivism also assumes the existence a ‘true’ reality, but that it is impacted by imperfect human interpretation and therefore flawed; critical theory—including a set of other paradigms such as Marxism, feminism, materialism, and participatory inquiry—is described as a subjectivist worldview that assumes reality to be constructed with the help of external elements and through the communication between the researcher and the subject of the research; constructivism, shows a clear “move from ontological realism to ontological relativism” (p.109) and believes that knowledge is constructed by individuals or groups of people (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This research situates itself within the critical theory paradigm. According to Crotty, critical theory describes a research that “challenges”, and “seeks to bring about change” by understanding reality through power relations (1998, p.113). This research, by raising awareness about issues regarding the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy, seeks to bring about transformative change to this area of Publishing and Book Studies by improving the understanding of ‘diversity’, authenticity, and inclusion in YA fantasy.

Research Methods

Rationale

As detailed in the Literature Review Chapter (please see p.33), Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins (2018) developed the concept of the ‘genre world’. This concept encourages the use of various methods, such as interviews with people involved in the publishing process, examining and analysing the text, and utilising publishing data in order to paint a clearer picture of the way in which a genre is constructed (Fletcher et al., 2018). Furthermore, through this research, I attempt to mitigate issues relating to the large scope of the topic and

its multidisciplinary nature by clearly identifying the scope of what I consider to be *current* YA fantasy tropes and trends for this research (that is, the time period from 2010 to 2020) as well as drawing from different disciplines such as Publishing, Book Studies, Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and Fandom Studies for my analysis. Therefore, in order to be able to investigate these different elements, I chose a mixed-method approach as it offered flexibility that aligned with the needs of this research. Each element of the YA fantasy ‘genre world’ included in this research required an appropriate approach and method of data collection and analysis to reach conclusions and address my research questions. For this reason, I opted for using qualitative interviews to be able to gather data from publishing professionals and social media influencers, a qualitative case study to explore the implications of adapting YA fantasy beyond the text, and a quantitative online survey to investigate the perspective of YA fantasy readers and their needs. Furthermore, my own contribution as a researcher is inextricable from this research (please see p.16 for more on this). The use of a mixed-method can add value to research for a few different reasons such as triangulation, to counterbalance the strengths and weaknesses of each method, to gather complementary data about various elements of a phenomenon, to produce better, more elaborate conclusions, and to guide research that is motivated by a social justice view (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016, pp.79–104). As explored above, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods fit the complementary nature of the different elements of the YA fantasy ‘genre world’ under investigation. Furthermore, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods provided the appropriate framework to undertake research about ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy by including a variety of participants, as well as examining the content.

Qualitative Interviews

Interviews are a commonly used qualitative research method that involves a discussion between the participant and the researcher in person, via phone or online (Wilson,

2012). Interviewing represents “the most widely used method in qualitative research, largely because of the flexibility it offers, and the term ‘qualitative interview’ is often used very broadly to capture the range of different ways in which researchers talk to their participants” (Clark et al., 2021, p.425). Furthermore, the interview is a key method used in social and scientific research. An interview can be used to gather in-depth information about the views and opinions of participants on a particular topic as it gives us insight into other people’s experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Therefore, interviews work well with research questions that are based on participants’ experiences, perceptions, constructions, or practices (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.81). Moreover, interviews have an important storytelling aspect to them, as Seidman (2019) notes: “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories” (p.7).

Some of the strengths of this method are that it can generate a plethora of data regarding the participant’s experiences, opinions, and practices; it only requires a relatively small sample size; and it offers a level of flexibility and control to the researcher over the interview questions and the data gathered (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.80). Robert Weiss, in his book about interviewing, *Learning from Strangers*, notes some of the reasons for choosing this method:

Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through interviewing we can learn about places we have not been and could not go and about settings in which we have not lived. If we have the right informants, we can learn about the quality of neighborhoods or what happens in families or how organizations set their goals. Interviewing can inform us about the nature of social life. We can learn about the work of occupations and how people fashion careers, about cultures and the values they sponsor, and about the challenges people confront as they lead their lives. (Weiss, 1994, p.9)

However, there are also some potential disadvantages and difficulties that come with using this method: for instance, it can be time-consuming for the researcher and the participant; it can be hard to generalise the findings because of the smaller sample size; and the lack of anonymity can cause reluctance in participation, especially for sensitive topics (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Location can be a crucial factor to take into consideration when planning an interview (Gubrium et al., 2012). In the case of face-to-face interviews, it is important to select a location where the participant feels at ease and where the researcher feels safe (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The selected location should also be relatively noise-free and distraction-free to ensure that the recording quality is as clear as possible (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This makes transcribing the interview easier and much more accurate.

Different Types of Interviews.

There are three main types of interviews: they can be structured, unstructured, or semi-structured (Gubrium et al., 2012; Bryman, 2016; Clark et al., 2021). Unstructured and semi-structured interviews are often associated with qualitative research, whilst structured interviews are linked to quantitative and survey research (Bryman, 2016, p.465). Each type of interview has its strengths and weaknesses and can be more or less suitable to investigate a particular topic and gather the needed data (Gubrium et al., 2012). A brief outline of each type of interview is explored in the following sections, along with my reasons for using or not using them.

Structured interviews.

Structured interviews are the most popular type of interview in quantitative research, and the questions for this type of interview are arranged and determined in advance by the

researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.78). Therefore, this type of quantitative interviews focuses on ensuring that reliability and validity are achieved so that the researcher can answer their research questions effectively (Bryman, 2016, p.467). Thus, by standardising the way in which questions are asked (i.e. using the exact same wording for all interviews) and the order in which they are asked, structured interviews allow the researcher to reliably aggregate the responses of participants (Bryman, 2016, pp.197–198). The questions asked during this type of interviews are often described as ‘close-ended’, which gives the participant a restricted number of answer possibilities (Bryman, 2016, p.200). For this type of interviews, data are “analyzed statistically at one point in time following the completion of data collection” (Gubrium et al., 2012, p.194).

Unstructured interviews.

Unstructured interviews are usually used in qualitative research (Gubrium et al., 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Bryman, 2016; Clark et al., 2021). In unstructured interviews, the researcher only has “a list of themes or topics to discuss with the participant, but the interview is strongly participant-led” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.78). This list of topics and themes is often referred to as an “aide-mémoire”, and this approach means that the wording and the order of the interview questions are adaptable and informal (Bryman, 2016, p.201). In this type of interviews, the researcher aims to “obtain the participant's perspective without ‘leading’ the participant (which is one of the major threats to the validity of the unstructured interview)” (Gubrium et al., 2012, p.194).

Semi-Structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are the most popular type of interviews in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.78). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher

prepares a list of questions in advance but there is still a possibility for participants to explore any other issues they deem relevant and important to the topic (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.78). This type of interviews is usually used “when the researcher knows enough about the topic or phenomenon to identify the domain...but does not know and cannot anticipate all of the answers” (Gubrium et al., 2012, p.197). Semi-structured interviews offer a degree of flexibility as researchers do not need to strictly adhere to the planned questions but rather utilise the context and allow some leeway to follow up on participants’ responses (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The questions for this type of interview should be “framed in an open way that allows and encourages the interviewee to articulate a fairly detailed response” (Clark et al., 2021, p.426). In this research, I selected this type of interview to be able to investigate the perspective of publishing professionals and social media influencers of YA fantasy as it offered the possibility to prepare an interview guide in advance while still being able to explore other themes and facets of the topic that participants might bring to the conversation.

Designing the interview guide.

An interview guide is defined as the “series of questions that will guide [the researcher’s] ‘conversation’ with the participant.” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.81). In semi-structured interviews, researchers prepare an interview guide that loosely outlines the topics they plan to touch on during the interview because “there must be flexibility in how the interviews are conducted” (Clark et al., 2021, p.428). However, these interviews are not restricted by their interview guide—in terms of the way in which the questions are asked or the order in which they appear (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This means that the researcher using a topic guide for a semi-structured interview has the opportunity to be flexible and to adjust the interview questions according to the interviewees’ responses (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Qualitative interview questions should be open-ended to give the opportunity to the

participant to express themselves “*using their own words*” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.79) (emphasis in original). Interview guides for semi-structured interviews do not need to be rigidly followed as the case with the prepared questions of structured interviews (Bryman, 2016, p.469). In order to formulate the questions for my interview guide, I followed the guidelines suggested by Bryman (2016, p.471):

- 1) Determining the general research areas (these are the themes that I used as a basis to come up with my interview questions)
- 2) Formulating specific research questions.
- 3) Formulating interview topics/questions that are not too specific to allow for flexibility during the interview.
- 4) Revising the interview questions.
- 5) Piloting the interview guide.
- 6) Identifying any issues that come up during the pilot
- 7) Revising the interview questions.
- 8) Finalising the interview guide.

Following these steps, I started the design of my interview guide with an outline of the general research areas that were relevant to my topic such as YA fantasy narrative tropes, publishing trends, ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy, and the genre expectations and restrictions of YA fantasy. The main research question I aimed to address with these interviews was my first research question: ‘**What are some of the stories that YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK seek, and how ‘diverse’ are these stories?**’. I then developed a list of questions that I planned to ask, ranked in no particular order to make sure that the interview could flow where the discussion took it. After that, I piloted my interview guide during my first interview with a publishing professional (see the Pilot Study section p.128 for more details on this). After the end of this pilot interview, I

finalised the questions and moved forward with the rest of my participants (please see Appendix Five p.325 for the full list of interview guide questions). This rigorous process meant that I went into the interviews with a clear idea about the data that I was looking to collect and that there were opportunities for participants to go beyond that scope and bring up any tropes or trends that they deemed relevant.

Semi-Structured interviews with YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers.

This research conducted semi-structured interviews with YA fantasy publishing professionals—publishers, literary agents, and literary scouts—and social media influencers—Bloggers and YouTubers. I chose to use interviews as a research method in this part of the research because its flexibility made it possible to gather an in-depth account of the complex experiences and opinions of YA fantasy experts concerning the stories that are currently being published and the state of ‘diversity’ within these stories. Other methods such as questionnaires or surveys would not have allowed the flexibility that was essential to capture these professionals’ thoughts and experiences regarding trends and tropes as well as the role of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy. Therefore, using semi-structured interviews allowed greater insight into the experiences and practices of YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers because the participants had the chance to explore different threads of the topic that they deemed most relevant. In order to be able to answer my research questions, participants needed to have the opportunity to express themselves freely without the constraints of a strictly framed set of questions. Furthermore, in semi-structured qualitative interviews, there is “an emphasis on interviewees’ own perspectives” (Bryman, 2016, p.466). Thus, this approach aligned with the needs of my research as the focus was on the opinions and perspectives of YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media

influencers. Indeed, the process of selecting what kinds of YA fantasy stories get published and how to market and present them to the reader—through the publisher’s marketing campaign or through the more informal influence of YouTubers and Bloggers—is best understood through the experiences of individuals who are actively involved in the process.

Using Skype for Interviews.

Skype, as a free and accessible software,³² offers the opportunity to conduct research interviews in an alternative way to the traditional face-to-face interview (Braun et al., 2017, pp.256–259). This tool allows researchers to avoid many limitations of face-to-face interviews including but not limited to: time, funding, and place-related issues, convenience-related issues, and safety-related issues (Bryman, 2016, p.492). Braun, Clarke, and Gray (2017, pp.259–261) identified five main advantages to using Skype in qualitative interviews:

- 1) “*Ease and flexibility of scheduling*”: because it avoids travel constraints, Skype offers an easier alternative to face-to-face interviews. Therefore, this type of interview is much more flexible in terms of scheduling or rescheduling (even last minute) according to the participant’s convenience and availability.
- 2) “*Virtual and visual interaction*”: the synchronous video and audio feed makes it possible to maintain the interviewer/interviewee rapport that is often considered highly important in any interview.
- 3) “*Ease of data capture*”: the interview can be recorded on the same device as an audio or a video file without the need for external recording equipment.

³² In retrospect, and after spending the last couple of years using Zoom and/or Microsoft Teams (which became popular as a result of most people switching to work from home due to the COVID-19 global pandemic), Skype does not feel like the most obvious option to use for online interviews anymore. However, during the time that these interviews were conducted (late 2019 and early 2020), Skype was still the go-to tool for academic/professional calls. It was also the tool I had proposed to use in my Ethics application for this project in the early stages of this PhD.

- 4) “*‘Public’ places and ‘private’ spaces*”: Skype provides an online space that is both ‘private’ and ‘public’; therefore avoiding any issues that participants might have in meeting the researcher in their home, workplace, or elsewhere.
- 5) “*Greater control for participants*”: finally, offering Skype interviews as an option alongside in-person interviews can make participants more likely to participate and feel at ease.

Another benefit to using Skype became apparent as the COVID-19 global pandemic started and lockdown restrictions were put into place in the UK. This unexpected and unprecedented situation propelled the need for online research methods as face-to-face interviews were no longer an option (please see COVID-19 impact section for more details, p.145).

Recruiting participants.

This research conducted a set of twelve interviews (please see below for a detailed explanation of how this number was reached). Eight interviews were conducted with UK publishing professionals who were working on YA fantasy within the editorial or marketing departments of their respective publishing companies, as literary agents or literary scouts. It was important for this study to include a wide range of people in this field who considered YA fantasy through different lenses and at different stages of the publishing process to adhere to the ‘genre world’ approach adopted in this research (please see Literature Review p.33). For this reason, participants were selected from different publishing companies and agencies. Another four interviews were conducted with social media influencers, such as online book bloggers and BookTubers who discuss YA fantasy on their respective online platforms as these people represent yet another element in the YA fantasy ‘genre world’. Bloggers and BookTubers play a role in the marketing process because they present the book

to a wider audience. Participants were contacted via email and were given the choice to conduct the interview in person or online (the impact of COVID-19 will be discussed further below, please see p.145).

The following three factors determined the sample size choice of twelve interviews:

- 1) Reaching saturation i.e. at the stage where no new insights or themes came up (Charmaz, 2006, p.113).
- 2) The fact that these qualitative interviews were part of a larger mixed-method research design and the time constraints linked to that.
- 3) The difficulty in getting more participants to respond and/or agree to participate in the study (please see the limitations section below for more details p.130).

To recruit participants for this research, I used a non-probability sampling technique combining purposive and snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). Purposive sampling “is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants” (Tongco, 2007, p.147). I reached out to potential participants using contacts from my professional network, as well as contacts from the department colleagues’ networks, then I asked my participants if they could recommend other YA fantasy publishing professionals or social media influencers who would be interested in taking part in the study to get more contacts. I developed an interview topic guide as a loose structure to outline the potential themes to be discussed during the interview (Bryman, 2016) (please see Appendix Five for the full topic guide p.325). Themes that were introduced in the topic guide included: ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy, genre expectations and restrictions, character arcs, YA fantasy trends/tropes, and YA fantasy fandoms. These themes were intentionally kept broad given the semi-structured nature of the interview, as this would allow for flexibility during the

interview (Bryman, 2016). This meant that during the interview I was able to ask the questions that I prepared in a different order each time. I was also able to adjust the wording of the questions depending on the context.

Conducting the interviews.

Each of the semi-structured interviews for this research started by presenting the participants with the set of four vignettes (more details about the vignette design process and objectives in the following sections, please see p.120). The vignettes, containing four made-up YA fantasy blurbs that I created, were presented to each participant one by one, taking the time to discuss each one and gauge their reaction to a particular vignette before introducing the next one. Participants responded to each vignette by identifying as many YA fantasy tropes and publishing trends as they could and sharing their opinion on each of those tropes and trends. When the participants were done responding to all the vignettes, they were asked to rank them from the story they were most likely to publish (for publishers), or most likely to read/review (for online influencers). Participants were also asked to justify their answers. For the second part of the interviews, I asked the questions developed in the interview guide in no particular order as and when they became relevant to the conversation (please see Appendix Five p.325 for the full list of questions). I then continued the interviews by building on the responses of the interviewees to ensure that their insights were fully explored on the topic of YA fantasy. The follow-up questions were specifically tailored to each participant according to what they decided to explore. The audio files of the interviews were transcribed manually soon after the end of each interview and prepared for coding (I explore the coding process in detail below, please see p.132). A table that contains details about my interviews in terms of the date of the interview, the location where the interview took place,

and the participant's name and role/affiliation³³ (except for the participants who chose to remain anonymous and/or preferred not to share their role/position) can be found in Appendix Four please see p.324 .

Transcribing can be very time-consuming as a one hour interview takes between eight and ten hours of transcription (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.91). For this research, I transcribed the interviews myself because that allowed me to become more familiar with the data and to reflect on and adjust my interview questions for the following interviews. I used an “orthographic” transcription style, i.e. I focused on transcribing words as well as other sounds that participants used in expressing themselves during the interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.162).

Vignettes: definition and use.

In this section, I explore the definition and use of the research tool that I used as part of my interviews: hypothetical vignettes. According to Evans et al. (2015, p.162), a vignette “is a brief, carefully written description of a person or situation designed to simulate key features of a real-world scenario”. Another definition further notes that:

A vignette can take many different forms. The most traditional—and perhaps most common—form of vignettes is a written hypothetical or fictional story that is presented to participants with a set of questions about it. (Gray et al., 2017, p.72).

Vignettes are often used to avoid ethical implications that can arise in research: for instance, while dealing with sensitive topics or vulnerable groups. In such cases, participants might be more comfortable discussing a fictional/hypothetical situation than their real-life experiences. Vignettes, therefore, provide a “sense of distance” between the participant and the topic

³³ Please note that the listed roles for the participants were correct at the time of the interview. Some participants have moved to different roles/companies since then.

discussed (Gray et al., 2017, p.75). This research tool has been used across various disciplines, such as social and health sciences, including but not limited to: studies regarding sensitive topics or vulnerable groups (Carlson, 1996; Crafter et al., 2014; Longo and Dedonno, 2018), studies on children and young people (e.g., Barter and Renold, 2000; Brown and Perkins, 2019), education studies (e.g., Åkerlind, 2005), health studies (Rahman, 1996; Hughes, 1998; Hughes and Huby, 2002), and social psychology studies (Alden et al., 2015). Although vignettes are used in both qualitative and quantitative research, they are predominantly used in quantitative research as the responses to them (i.e. the participant's attitudes and beliefs) are usually measured and recorded (Finch, 1987). In qualitative research, they are often used as part of a larger research design such as interviews (Rahman, 1996; Jenkins et al., 2010) or focus groups (Brondani et al., 2008). They are sometimes used as 'ice-breakers' or as a way to help the discussion begin or end on a particular topic but have also been used as a 'stand-alone' method where the researcher uses the vignettes independently from any other research design (Gray et al., 2017).

I decided to include vignettes in my research because a well-designed vignette can be a very diverse and creative tool due to its flexible nature. Vignettes can be in different formats such as narrative text, video, audio, photographs, illustrations, or games. They can also be used online or offline. In this research, I used vignettes as part of a semi-structured interview qualitative research design, illustrating a narrative text format presented in the form of cards. I used these vignettes to introduce the participants to short blurbs of made-up YA fantasy novels that I created. The use of vignettes in this research helped to avoid some potential ethical issues: for instance, publishers did not have to comment on already published titles that were either published by them or by competitors, both of which might have elicited a biased response, such as the difficulty to give a negative opinion about a book published by their company. Similarly, social media influencers (i.e. YouTubers and

bloggers) were not put in a position where they had to comment on published titles which might have affected their relationships with the authors or publishers. Therefore, the vignettes used in this study offered a safe space for participants to freely express their opinions on specific YA fantasy tropes included in the cards without any fear of repercussions from authors or publishers. Vignettes were also used to enhance the participants' responses during the semi-structured interviews, as the main aim of using this practical tool was to explore their expertise and get a deeper understanding of their thought process regarding narrative tropes and publishing trends in YA fantasy. Furthermore, the use of vignettes aligns with Driscoll and Squires' "Ullapoolism" article which encourages playfulness and mischief to not only "describe but actively creates bookish situations" (2020, p.140).

Vignettes can be used to answer different types of research questions such as those regarding "what participants would do" in a given situation (Gray et al., 2017, p.77), those regarding "how participants understand and make sense of the given (hypothetical) story or scenario," (p.78), or those regarding "how a particular *character* in the story *should* react to a particular situation and/or how *the participants themselves* should react to the situation." (p. 78) (original emphasis). This research was more concerned with the first two types of questions as it focused on what publishers and influencers would do in a particular publishing/reading situation, in order to fulfil the aim of establishing the participants' views and beliefs on the current tropes and themes included in the vignettes.

Vignettes design process.

I designed four card vignettes that each consists of a blurb for a hypothetical (made-up) YA fantasy story following the guidelines provided by Gray, Royall, and Malson (2017, p.85) (original emphasis):

- 1) "*Understanding the background*"

- 2) *“Deciding and writing the vignette scenario and questions”*
- 3) *“Deciding on a mode of data collection”*
- 4) *“Deciding on format”*
- 5) *“Piloting and revision”*
- 6) *“Collecting data”*

Being an avid YA fantasy reader over the last decade meant that I had a good grasp of YA fantasy tropes and trends over this period, thus informing my choices to design blurbs that sounded realistic and authentic. I included common YA fantasy tropes and publishing trends, drawing from popular YA fantasy novels published from 2010 to 2020. Table 1 illustrates the list of YA tropes I used and the YA fantasy novels that inspired the design of each vignette. The goal was to cover as many scenarios and YA fantasy tropes as possible. I decided to have four vignettes to be able to split them according to the number of heroes in each story i.e. a lone hero, a dual hero, multiple heroes, a crew hero. The difference between multiple heroes and crew heroes is that the former portrays a group of characters who have different motivations and who work towards different goals, while the latter has a group of characters who work together to achieve a common goal. Vignette A follows a lone hero and the story is told from this character’s point of view (PoV); Vignette B follows two heroes and is told from two perspectives; Vignette C follows multiple (four) heroes; and Vignette D follows a crew hero. These four dynamics cover the majority of YA fantasy heroes and can be used as the foundation to create four made-up YA fantasy novels that mimic books that are currently on the market. After dividing the vignettes according to the number of heroes, I introduced a set of commonly used tropes and conventions in YA fantasy from 2010 to 2020 and combined them into four blurbs for the four made-up YA fantasy novels. Each vignette is inspired by a group of YA fantasy novels that have similar conventions. These include conventions about heroes, authors, format, setting, and plot. I designed the vignettes in a form

of cards that were easy to use digitally for my online interviews and survey or be printed and used for my face-to-face interviews (please see Figure 6 below of the vignettes). The next step was to pilot my vignettes during a pilot interview to ensure that there was no ambiguity or confusion in the questions and that the blurbs were plausible. Finally, I started collecting the data. The vignettes were introduced to each participant at the beginning of the interview to start the conversation and spark ideas that were further discussed during the rest of the interview. The vignettes were labelled by letters at the back of each card as: ‘Vignette A’, ‘Vignette B’, ‘Vignette C’, and ‘Vignette D’.

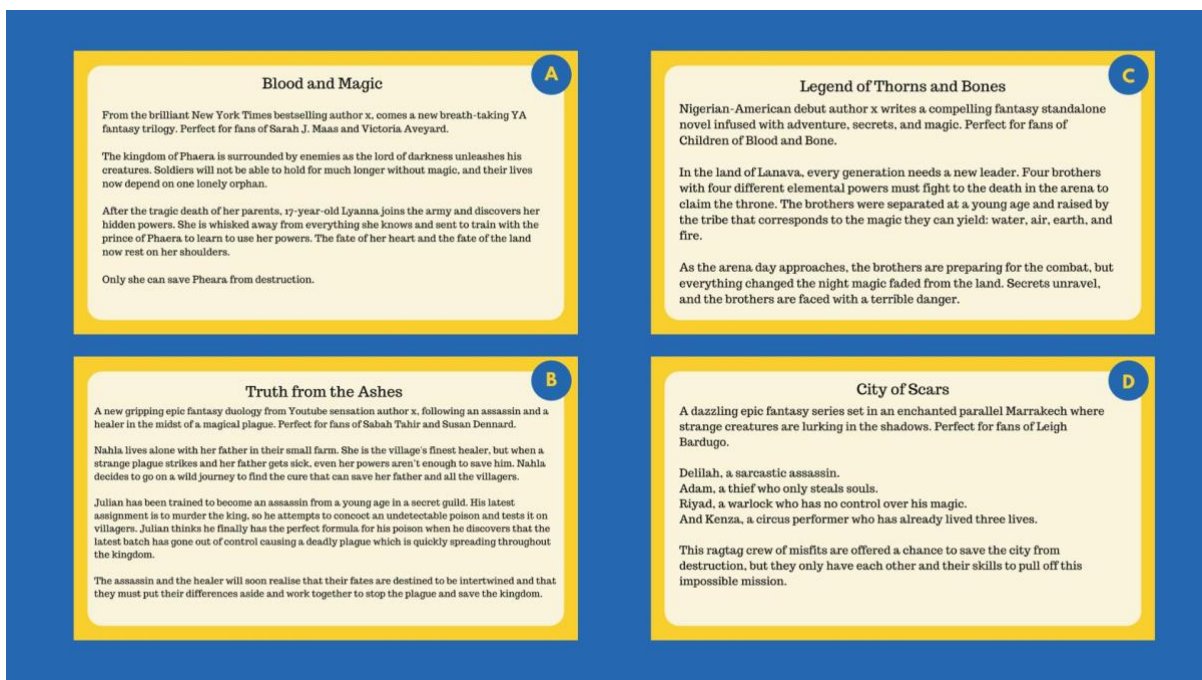


Figure 6: Vignettes A, B, C, and D

Vignette	Tropes included	Inspiration
Vignette A <i>Blood and Magic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lone hero/orphan • The Chosen One • The Lord of Darkness • Medieval setting 	<i>Shatter Me</i> by Tehereh Mafi (2011), <i>Shadow and Bone</i> by Leigh Bardugo (2012), <i>Delirium</i> by Lauren Oliver

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hidden powers (2011), <i>Grave Mercy</i> by • Magical training Robin LaFevers (2012), <i>Red</i> • Romance <i>Queen</i> by Victoria Aveyard • Trilogy (2015), and <i>Throne of Glass</i> • NYT bestselling author by Sarah J. Maas (2012).
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<p>Vignette B</p> <p><i>Truth from the Ashes</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual hero <i>An Ember in the Ashes</i> by • Duology Sabaa Tahir (2015), <i>The</i> • Youtuber author <i>Wrath and the Dawn</i> by • Assassin and healer Renée Ahdied (2015), • Magical plague <i>Truthwitch</i> by Susan Dennad • Small town setting (2016), <i>This Savage Song</i> by • A quest Victoria Schwab (2016), <i>We</i> • Anti-hero <i>Hunt the Flame</i> by Hafsah • Enemies to lovers Faizal (2019). • Political intrigue
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<p>Vignette C</p> <p><i>Legend of Thorns and Bones</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple heroes <i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> • Standalone by Tomi Adeyemi (2018), • Sibling rivalry and <i>Three Dark Crowns</i> by • Elemental magic Kendare Blake (2016). • Arena combat • Male heroes • BIPOC author • Debut author
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Vignette D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crew Hero 	<i>Six of Crows</i> by Leigh
<i>City of Scars</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Series 	Bardugo (2015), <i>A Darker</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found family 	<i>Shade of Magic</i> by V.E.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assassin 	Schwab (2015), <i>Strange the</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warlock 	<i>Dreamer</i> by Laini Taylor
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circus performer 	(2017), and <i>The Gilded</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enchanted city 	<i>Wolves</i> by Roshani Chokshi
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parallel universe setting 	(2019).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple Point of Views 	

Table 1: Vignettes design process

Titles of the Vignettes.

YA fantasy titles have the tendency to sound very similar to one another because they often use the same words and a similar structure. *Queen of Shadows* by Sarah J. Maas (2015b) and *Lord of Shadows* by Cassandra Clare (2017) are good examples to illustrate the similarity between YA fantasy titles, other examples include: *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor (2011) and *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi (2018); *Crown of Midnight* by Sarah J. Maas (2013) and *Three Dark Crowns* by Kendare Blake (2016); *King of Scars* by Leigh Bardugo (2019) and *The Wicked King* by Holly Black (2019); and finally, *A Flame in the Mist* by Renée Ahdieh (2017), *We Hunt the Flame* by Hafsah Faizal (2019), and *The Candle and the Flame* by Nafiza Azad (2019) also sound very similar. For this reason, vignette titles for this study were generated using words from other YA fantasy titles. I compiled a list of 55 common words that are found in more than one YA fantasy title and put them in a random order, as illustrated in table 2. I then asked four people to pick two or three

random numbers each, between 1 and 55, and used the words corresponding to the numbers they chose to create new titles.

1. Throne	15. Darkness	29. Midnight	43. Nightmares
2. Glass	16. Raven	30. Cruel	44. Tempest
3. Tower	17. Magic	31. Children	45. Scars
4. Blood	18. Frost	32. Crooked	46. Wicked
5. Dawn	19. Kingdom	33. Thorns	47. Lies
6. Queen	20. Storm	34. Empire	48. Game
7. Truth	21. Bone	35. Smoke	49. Legend
8. Prince	22. Shadow	36. Lord	50. Heir
9. City	23. Night	37. Flame	51. Lost
10. Princess	24. Ashes	38. Mist	52. Fate
11. Storm	25. Wolves	39. Saints	53. King
12. Lady	26. Strange	40. Dance	54. Daughter
13. Dreamer	27. Witch	41. Thieves	55. Crow
14. Red	28. Crown	42. Winds	

Table 2: Vignette title design process

I added prepositions and articles when necessary for the titles to make sense and came up with the following titles:

- Blood and Magic,
- Truth from the Ashes,
- City of Scars, and
- Legend of Thorns and Bones.

I then assigned each title with the vignette it best suited according to the story as follows: Vignette A: *Blood and Magic*, Vignette B: *Truth from the Ashes*, Vignette C: *Legend*

of *Thorns and Bones*, and Vignette D: *City of Scars*. The following table shows the final text used for each vignette that was generated based on the tropes mentioned in the previous section.

Vignette A	Blood and Magic
	<p>From the brilliant New York Times bestselling author x, comes a new breath-taking YA fantasy trilogy. Perfect for fans of Sarah J. Maas and Victoria Aveyard.</p> <p>The kingdom of Phaera is surrounded by enemies as the lord of darkness unleashes his creatures. Soldiers will not be able to hold for much longer without magic, and their lives now depend on one lonely orphan.</p> <p>After the tragic death of her parents, 17-year-old Lyanna joins the army and discovers her hidden powers. She is whisked away from everything she knows and sent to train with the prince of Phaera to learn to use her powers. The fate of her heart and the fate of the land now rest on her shoulders.</p> <p>Only she can save Pheara from destruction.</p>
Vignette B	Truth from the Ashes
	<p>A new gripping epic fantasy duology from YouTube sensation author x, following an assassin</p>

and a healer in the midst of a magical plague.
Perfect for fans of Sabah Tahir and Susan Dennard.

Nahla lives alone with her father in their small farm. At 17 years-old, she is the town's finest healer, but when a strange plague strikes their village and her father gets sick, even her powers aren't enough to save him. Nahla decides to go on a wild journey to find the cure that can save her father and all the villagers.

Julian has been trained to become an assassin from a young age in a secret guild. His latest assignment was to murder the king, so in order to do that, Julian attempts to concoct an undetectable poison and tests it on villagers. He thinks he finally has the perfect formula for his poison, but discovers that the latest batch of has gone out of control causing a deadly plague which is quickly spreading throughout the kingdom.

The assassin and the healer will soon realise that their fates are destined to be intertwined and that they must put their differences aside and work together to stop the plague and save the kingdom.

Vignette C**Legend of Thorns and Bones**

Nigerian-American debut author x writes a compelling fantasy standalone novel infused with adventure, secrets, and magic. Perfect for fans of *Children of Blood and Bone*.

In the land of Lanava, every generation needs a new leader. Four brothers with four different elemental powers must fight to the death in the arena to claim the throne. The brothers were separated at a young age and raised by the tribe that corresponds to the magic they can yield: water, air, earth, and fire.

As the arena day approaches, the brothers are preparing for the combat, but everything changed the night magic faded from the land. Secrets unravel, and the brothers are faced with a terrible danger.

Vignette D

City of Scars

A dazzling epic fantasy series set in an enchanted parallel Marrakech where strange creatures are lurking in the shadows. Perfect for fans of Leigh Bardugo.

Delilah, a sarcastic assassin.

Adam, a thief who only steals souls.

Riyad, a warlock who has no control over his magic.

And Kenza, a circus performer who has already lived three lives.

This ragtag crew of misfits are offered a chance to save the city from destruction, but they only have each other and their skills to pull off this impossible mission.

Pilot study.

Interview guide questions can be tested during a pilot interview or even during the first few interviews to check if the data generated addresses the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.85). Seidman (2019) highly encourages researchers using interviews to conduct a pilot study and test their interview design before moving forward with the rest of the interviews:

I urge all interviewing researchers to build into their proposal a pilot venture in which they try out their interviewing design with a small number of participants. They will learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision. They will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview. (Seidman, 2019, p.43)

Furthermore, according to Gray, Royall, and Malson (2017), piloting is a crucial step in conducting vignette research given that vignettes involve a ‘fixed’ data collection (p.86) i.e. there is no opportunity to modify the vignettes once the data collection process has started. For these reasons, I decided to conduct a pilot interview to check that my vignettes generated the kind of data needed for the research without any confusion. I conducted the pilot stage of my interviews with one participant from Usborne Publishing, a Children’s books and YA publisher based in London, UK. I interviewed Stephanie King, a commissioning editor at the company, who works mainly on YA and MG. I contacted my participant via email, and sent her an information sheet, with more details about my research topic and what to expect from the interview, to read and agree to before the interview. The interview lasted 45 minutes in total and was conducted at the Usborne Publishing offices in London.

I started the interview by introducing the vignettes as an ‘ice-breaker’ to create a more relaxed interview atmosphere. I presented Vignette A to the participant, asking her to read it and point out which YA fantasy tropes she could identify, then to give her general thoughts

on the story. I followed up with a few questions about whether the participant thought Vignette A had a chance of being published in the current YA fantasy market and what she thought were the strengths and weaknesses of the story. I then continued with Vignette B, Vignette C, and Vignette D, one by one following the same process each time, giving the participant enough time to read through the vignettes and identify YA fantasy tropes and give her professional thoughts on the blurb. After the participant had commented on all the vignettes, I asked her to rank them from the one she would be the most likely to publish to the least. I then asked her to justify her choice. After that, I asked a few general questions about YA fantasy and the role and importance of ‘diversity’ and inclusive narratives in YA fantasy. Then, I wrapped up the interview by asking the participant for feedback. The participant fed back that she found the interview questions clear and straightforward and the vignettes very interactive, interesting, and easy to engage with.

The audio recording was transcribed in Microsoft Word shortly after the interview was completed. I reflected on the interview by examining the data collected from it as well as the feedback provided by the participant at the end of the interview and concluded that the pilot interview did not indicate any clarity issues with the vignettes or the interview guide questions. Thus, I decided to include the pilot as part of the main interviews for this research and continue the rest of the interviews using the same vignettes and interview guide.

Limitations.

Interviews can be time-consuming and costly, which is why I decided to offer the participants the possibility to have an online interview via Skype to avoid any travel inconveniences and avoid wasting their time (Bryman, 2016; Braun et al., 2017). Using a non-probability purposive and snowball sampling technique has some limitations as it relies heavily on the researcher’s subjective judgment, and on the participants’ suggestions for

other participants, therefore not allowing for generalisation (Bryman, 2016). The key elements that I was looking for when recruiting participants were being able to find knowledgeable experts in YA fantasy and getting a range of different views. Because of the relatively small population of professionals in the field, it was a challenge to find participants. Another difficulty was that these participants often occupied senior roles in the publishing company and were therefore usually people with busy schedules and limited availability. I diversified my selection in terms of participants as much as possible. While the snowball sampling can be helpful to get other contacts within a particular industry, I also branched out and made sure to contact as many UK YA publishers and influencers as possible.

Using Skype to conduct interviews can also bring some limitations (Braun et al., 2017, pp.267–269). Internet speed plays a major role in the clarity of the audio and video feed, and interruptions due to poor connection from either the participant or the researcher's side can affect the quality of the sound and the data collected (Braun et al., 2017, p.267). It can put both the participant and the researcher in an uncomfortable situation where they might need to ask the other to repeat themselves, which can also lead to the interview taking longer than anticipated (Braun et al., 2017, p.268).

There seems to be an agreement among some researchers using vignettes that one of the main issues with this research tool is the discrepancy between people's beliefs and their actions, which could potentially have an impact on the interpretation of their responses (Faia, 1980; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; O'dell et al., 2012). In other words, what people believe they would do in a certain situation is not always what they would in fact do if that same situation were to be presented to them in a real-life setting. Hughes (1998, p.384) concludes: "we do not know enough about the relationship between vignettes and real life responses to be able to draw parallels between the two", while other researchers such as Gray, Royall, and

Malson (2017, p.86) claim that “there is little that can go very wrong with vignettes”. Despite these mixed views regarding the use of vignettes as a research tool, the fiction and publishing context in which they have been used for in this research lessened the impact of these limitations. Therefore, the benefits of using such a tool in this case largely outweighed the limitations. Vignettes introduced the participants to a set of made-up YA fantasy stories rather than using existing YA fantasy novels that were already published because doing so might have enticed bias—positive or negative—regarding any given title. Hence, using a hypothetical story was a more effective approach to receiving honest feedback from the participants. Given the subjective nature of the publishing and reading/reviewing context, there was no right or wrong answer, therefore there was no reason to think that participants’ beliefs, in this case, would not match their actions. In addition to that, vignettes in this study were not used in isolation, but rather as part of a larger research design which also contributed to further exploring participants’ responses to the vignettes and gaining a better understanding of their views on the themes and tropes discussed.

Analysis of Qualitative data using thematic analysis.

In this section, I explore my data collection and analysis process. To analyse the qualitative data from my semi-structured interviews, I used Braun and Clarke’s six steps of Thematic Analysis (2006, p.87):

- 1) Familiarising yourself with data
- 2) Generating initial codes
- 3) Searching for themes
- 4) Reviewing themes
- 5) Defining and naming themes
- 6) Producing the report

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), Thematic Analysis “provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (p.78). For this reason, I selected it to analyse my qualitative data as it offers the flexibility that this project requires. I considered using Grounded Theory because of its focus on generating meaning from the data rather than introducing biased ideas (Bryman, 2016, pp.572, 574–576). However, it became apparent that this project could not comply with the strict guidelines of classic Grounded Theory and its inductive approach. I went into this research with preconceived ideas which were the foundation of my vignette design. I used my knowledge in the field to gather a set of narrative tropes that I used in designing my vignettes. Braun and Clarke (2006) claim that: “thematic analysis means researchers need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded-theory analysis” (p.81). Thus, Thematic Analysis was the most adequate method for this research as it offered the possibility to examine the opinions and views of publishing professionals and social media influencers.

For the coding stage of the analysis, I adopted Johnny Saldaña’s (2016) coding process to code my qualitative interviews. A code, according to Saldaña, is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (2016, p.4). It is also important to note that the purpose of a code can be to “*summarize, distill, or condense* data, not simply *reduce* them” (Saldaña, 2016, p.5) (original emphasis). The qualitative data for this research consists of transcripts of twelve semi-structured interviews. I used coding to identify patterns with the aim to describe the “routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships” (Saldaña, 2016, p.6) of YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers and examine them through the lens of ‘diversity’. As Saldaña puts it: “To codify is to arrange things in a

systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize” (2016, p.9).

As a first step in the coding process, I read all the transcripts to further familiarise myself with the data. In order to be able to decide which coding technique would work best for this research, I tried three different techniques for coding my pilot interview: manual pen and paper, using Microsoft Word, and using the NVivo software. My initial attempt at coding was through a manual technique. I printed the transcript of my pilot interview in double-spaced format and kept a wide right margin for the codes and notes to be added as suggested by Saldaña (2016). I started coding using coloured highlighters to identify different codes. After that, I tried coding the same interview using the review feature on Microsoft Word, and finally, I coded the same interview again using the software NVivo. After trying the three different techniques, I selected Nvivo to conduct the rest of my coding as it was the most organised and least messy technique of the three. It offered the possibility to amend or rename codes as well as the ability to find all the quotes relevant to any given code in one place. Using pen and paper was a good introduction to coding, but it immediately became apparent that it could quickly become messy as it did not offer much flexibility. The review feature of Microsoft Word was also a good method, but as I started adding more and more codes, it started to look cluttered which made it difficult to retrieve codes or to organise codes in one place. For these reasons, I coded the rest of my interviews using NVivo.

During the first cycle of coding my interview transcripts, I took handwritten notes of my thoughts and initial analysis of each interview in the form of analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016, pp.44–53). I noted everything that raised to the surface and immediately stood out to me as relevant to this study. I also kept a record of my codes in a separate Excel spreadsheet, providing each code with a one-sentence definition—with clear inclusion/exclusion criteria—to avoid having multiple codes that meant the same thing (Saldaña, 2016, pp.27–28). I

organised my codes, classified them, and synthesised them into larger categories. As the coding progressed and as I moved to the second cycle of coding, I kept reflecting on and refining these codes by merging identical ones under one code and renaming the categories when necessary. My interview questions were not coded and that is because the main perspective this study focuses on is the participant's; therefore, my interview questions were "more functional than substantive" (Saldaña, 2016, p.17) in this case. My contribution here is shown through my analysis and interpretation of the participants' data rather than being part of the data via my interview questions.

Quantitative online survey

This section explores the second research method I used for this research, which is a quantitative online survey with readers. This online survey aimed to examine another key element in the YA fantasy 'genre world': the readers, with the aim of reaching a better understanding of their perspectives regarding 'diverse' representation and inclusive narratives in YA fantasy stories. Therefore, this survey aimed to answer my second research question: **'How do YA fantasy readers perceive 'diverse' representations, and to what extent do they see themselves in these stories?'**

The semi-structured interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers provided this research with an in-depth understanding of how the people who are involved in the publishing process view tropes and trends in YA fantasy and the kinds of stories they are currently looking for in the UK. This online survey explores the topic from a different lens to examine the perspective of the reader. As I mentioned in my review of the literature (please see p.81), the reader has acquired a certain degree of power when it comes to influencing trends and decisions in the publishing process. Indeed, social media platforms such as Twitter and Goodreads play an enormous part in providing readers with space to express their thoughts and opinions on any given book. This can be in a positive way, where

fandoms emerge and readers start to praise the book and recommend it to other readers. It can also be in a negative way when the so-called 'Twitter mobs' rally against a particular book to criticise it. Thus, the reader has an undeniable role to play in the publishing process.

Additionally, in a thesis that focuses on 'diversity' and representation issues, the reader's perspective is a key element. For these reasons, this research examined readers' thoughts on the topic of 'diversity' in YA fantasy through an online survey.

Self-administered questionnaire survey.

In self-administered questionnaires, (sometimes referred to as self-completion questionnaires) the respondents answer the questions themselves without the supervision of the researcher (Bryman, 2016, p.221). Because the researcher is not present to ask the questions, the questionnaires need to be easy to follow and straightforward to make it as easy as possible for the respondent to answer (Bryman, 2016, p.222). For this reason, self-administered questionnaires are usually succinct and often feature mostly close-ended questions (Bryman, 2016, p.222). Some of the main advantages of using this method are that it is cost-effective, easy to distribute quickly to a large number of people, avoids any influence from the researcher, offers the possibility to standardise questions, and it is very convenient for the respondents (Bryman, 2016, p.222). There are also some potential disadvantages to using this method such as: the inability to clarify any questions that the respondent might find ambiguous, and the risk of low response rate, especially with longer questionnaires (Bryman, 2016, pp.223–224). However, these limitations of the method can be overcome by keeping the questionnaire brief and piloting the questions to make sure they are easy to follow.

In recent years, web surveys have become the most popular type of self-administered questionnaires, given the increasing accessibility to software platforms (Bryman, 2016,

p.229). Web surveys are usually shared via a link that takes the respondent to a web page that contains the questions. One of the main advantages of using web surveys is that the responses are already coded which avoids the need to enter the data manually, thus saving time and reducing potential error risk (Bryman, 2016, p.231).

The online survey with YA fantasy readers ran from the end of June 2020 to the beginning of August 2020 and asked questions about the perspective of YA fantasy readers, including how often they see themselves represented in YA fantasy and how accurate they thought the representation was (please see Appendix Six p.326 for full list of questions). The link to the survey was shared on social media platforms i.e. Twitter, Instagram, and Goodreads pages (screenshots of the survey social media posts can be found in Appendix Seven please see p.329). All data from the survey was aggregated and anonymised. This survey included the same vignettes (A, B, C, and D) that were used for my semi-structured interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers (please see the vignettes section p.118), as well as other questions specifically tailored for readers. I selected this research method to be able to reach a wide audience and be able to gather data anonymously.

This survey was designed using the Opinio software (I picked this because UCL has a license). Opinio provided the option to create different formats of questions. Most of the questions for this survey were presented in a tick box format where the respondents could pick one (or multiple) options, a scale format where the respondent could choose an option based on a scale, radio buttons where the respondent could pick an option from a list, or a ranking format where the respondents could rank vignettes based on their preferences. The survey contained a total of ten questions. It was intentionally kept brief to minimise “respondent fatigue” and gather as many responses as possible (Bryman, 2016, p.222). The survey was divided into three sections which appeared on a separate page each. Page one

contained the information sheet and the consent form which was mandatory to access the rest of the survey. The consent form included two boxes to tick: 1) I consent to take part in this study, and 2) I confirm that I am 18 years old, or older. Page two contained most of the survey questions. Finally, page three contained the vignettes text and the questions linked to them. The Survey questions observed the following structure:

- Questions about the participant's reading preferences.
- Questions about the state of 'diversity' in YA fantasy.
- Questions about representation and seeing themselves in YA fantasy.
- Questions about the vignettes.

The advantages of using an online survey included: speed of response, no cost as Opinio was free with the UCL license, confidentiality for participants as it was possible to gather anonymous data, no geographical restrictions which allowed the survey to be accessible to more readers, and automated and accurate data which avoided the risk of data entry errors (Bryman, 2016, p.235). There were also some potential disadvantages to using an online survey including the fact that the survey was restricted to readers with internet access and the risk that some participants may be able to submit more than one answer (Bryman, 2016, p.236). However, the advantages of using this online method, in addition to the lockdown restrictions (please see the 'Impact of COVID-19 on this research' section p.145 for more details on this), clearly outweighed the disadvantages.

Sample.

The number of participants for this survey was not limited. I used non-probability volunteer sampling, which meant that participation relied on the respondent's decision to take part in the study (Vehovar et al., 2016, p.330). The survey was circulated online via my Twitter and Instagram accounts and was shared by people in my network. Every participant

who completed it was included in this study. Because of the quantitative nature of this survey, a large number of participants was needed to reach meaningful data with potential for generalisation.

Survey Analysis Using Microsoft Excel.

Survey results were downloaded from the Opinio software in an Excel spreadsheet format, which meant that the data was already coded according to the question numbers. Therefore, there was no need to manually input the data which saved time and also meant that there was less risk of errors because the data was not inputted manually. All the questions in the survey were close-ended and analysed statistically.

The number of stored responses was 328 and the number of completed responses was 308. The completion rate was 93.9%. There were 20 respondents (6.1%) that abandoned the survey before submitting their responses on the final screen. My hypothesis is that this could be due to the fact that these participants reached the final section that required them to read the four vignettes which had a lot more text than the previous questions and would potentially take slightly longer to answer than the other questions, therefore leading to “respondent fatigue” (Bryman, 2016, p.222).

The process of analysing the data was as follows. Firstly, I checked the spreadsheet for incomplete responses and deleted those where the participant did not click the ‘submit’ button at the end of the survey. There were 20 incomplete entries. After that, I checked the data for inaccuracies using the Microsoft Excel filters and the PivotTables feature. During this process, I found an issue with the first survey question which was “*How many YA fantasy novels have you read approximately in the last year?*”: the answer options ranged from 0 to more than 10. When the raw data was downloaded as an Excel file, it automatically converted these numbers into dates e.g. May 10th instead of 5-10. I replaced the dates with the correct

numbers using the ‘find and replace’ feature on Microsoft Excel. After cleaning up the spreadsheet, I determined the frequencies and percentages for the survey questions (e.g. how often the participants saw themselves represented in YA fantasy). Additionally, I used cross-tabulation to get a better understanding of the relationship between some of the questions (e.g. finding out if there was a correlation between readers who do not often see themselves represented in YA fantasy and readers who are part of a marginalised group). I then compiled the results and put together a report of the findings and used it as a basis to structure the discussion in Chapter 4 (please see p.188). I also linked the findings to the themes that I generated from my interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers, as well as the themes generated from my case study of the *Shadow and Bone* TV show adaptation to address my research questions.

Qualitative Case Study

The Shadow and Bone TV show adaptation.

This section explores a longitudinal case study that examines the *Grishaverse* world at different points in time and through different media. It examines the way in which ‘diversity’ translates across different mediums of YA fantasy narratives via a case study of the *Shadow and Bone* Netflix TV show adaptation of the *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* YA fantasy series by Leigh Bardugo. This part of the research adopts a case study approach to analyse this book-to-screen adaptation using a Critical Content Analysis method to examine the representation of marginalised groups with a particular focus on the changes made from the original text and the impact on the portrayal of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy. I use the findings of this case study to address issues of racism, erasure, and Orientalism that I discuss in Chapter 5 of this thesis (please see p.225).

Why the Grishaverse?

The first *Grishaverse* novel *Shadow and Bone* came out in 2012 and the TV show adaptation aired on Netflix in 2021, so there is an eight-year gap between the two. This period has been critical in the development of the awareness of the need for ‘diverse’ narratives in YA fantasy (please see the Literature Review Chapter p.33). Additionally, the show also included backstories of *Six of Crows* characters. For this reason, elements that were present in the original version of the *Shadow and Bone* story in terms of ‘race’, dis/ability, sexuality, gender, and body image, were sometimes portrayed differently in the TV show adaptation. This research aims to explore the changes between the original text and the adaptation, and examine how the representation of marginalised groups in this series translated to screen, and therefore, how they help us to reach a better understanding of how screen adaptations fit into and contribute to the YA fantasy ‘genre world’. This is the focus of my third and final research question: **‘What is the role of screen adaptations in reflecting the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy?’**

Critical Content Analysis.

Content Analysis is a research method that has often been used in literary studies to analyse Children’s and YA texts (Short, 2017). Content Analysis is used to make connections and draw conclusions about texts within the context surrounding them (Short, 2017). Critical Content Analysis “focuses on how discursive power operates within stories,” and it investigates “the broader contexts and systems from which stories emerge” (Pérez Huber et al., 2020, p.12).

Kathy Short (2017) developed a methodological step-by-step process of Critical Content Analysis specifically designed to address Children’s literature and YA. Short (2017) also encourages variations of this process to adapt it to the researcher’s specific area of

investigation. Short's (2017) methodology process starts with developing research questions and selecting the text to be investigated by immersing the researcher in the story as a reader first. After that, the next step consists of selecting and reading within a critical theoretical framework. The following steps are to explore scholarly literature around the topic and identify theoretical tenets to use for the analysis. Short's (2017) Critical Content Analysis encourages researchers to consider issues in the storyline including focalisation (the narrative perspective of the story), power dynamics and agency distribution, and the resolution and closure of the story. The final step is to build themes and organise the data accordingly using relevant quotations from the text. This section outlines the steps I followed to undertake a Critical Content Analysis, which is an adapted approach to the methodology illustrated by Short (2017):

- 1) Identifying, selecting and reading tenets of critical theory that are most relevant to the research.
- 2) First reading/viewing: immersing myself in the texts and TV show adaptation as a reader and as a viewer to be able to respond to them accordingly and take notes about the passages that most stood out to me.
- 3) Second reading: reading the texts and the adaptation script as a researcher, identifying themes and analysing them.

As the interest in 'diverse' narratives grows, Davis (2020) calls for the need to do more Critical Content Analyses that are focused on authenticity and representation problems in YA fiction. Davis (2020) also highlights the importance of Critical Content Analyses in YA speculative fiction given the lack of research in this field. I selected Critical Content Analysis because it aligned with the aims of the research. Indeed, it allowed me to investigate two other crucial elements in the YA fantasy 'genre world' (Fletcher et al., 2018), which are the text and the screen adaptation. After exploring the perspectives of publishing

professionals and social media influencers through semi-structured interviews and the perspectives of readers through an online survey, it was important for this research to also look at the text and the adaptation to get a fuller, more holistic, and clearer understanding of the topic. The critical lens of Critical Content Analysis “focuses on voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways” (Short, 2017, p.5). Therefore, by utilising Critical Content Analysis, this research examines a case of a YA fantasy series and TV show adaptation focusing on counter-stories and representation issues. I conducted a deductive Thematic Analysis of the texts and TV show script using a theoretical framework that aligned with my research, including Critical Race Theory, Cultural Studies, Representation Theory, Phenomenology, Postcolonial Theory, The Dark Fantastic Theory, and Monster Theory. I coded the text in the two books *Shadow and Bone* (2012) and *Six of Crows* (2015), as well as the script for the eight episodes of the first season of *Shadow and Bone* the Netflix show, focusing on tropes related to themes of racism, racebending, darkness, monsters, and the Chosen One. I coded the text manually using coloured post-it tabs on the physical copy of the book as that was the easiest way to be able to find page numbers. Then I coded the script using the NVivo software. I kept analytic memos while coding the books and the script as suggested by Saldaña (2016). While I had previously read both *Shadow and Bone* (2012) and *Six of Crows* (2015), I still followed the steps of reading it first as a reader, then a researcher. Chapter 5 of this thesis explores the analysis and discussion of these themes.

Limitations.

The main limitation of a using a case study is the issue of generalisation. Indeed, examining ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy series and its TV show adaptation does not reflect the state of ‘diversity’ in the rest of YA fantasy. However, being able to examine this topic on a larger scale within and beyond the text would require more time than is realistic for this PhD.

For this reason, only one YA fantasy series was selected to offer a better understanding of the role of TV adaptations in the representation of marginalised voices in this genre.

Attempts to interview Leigh Bardugo.

In the early stages of this PhD, I planned to include an interview with Leigh Bardugo as part of this case study. However, it eventually became clear that this would not be possible because, as I found out, “[e]xtreme fame makes some authors very difficult to persuade to participate in interviews”(Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.4). My first attempt was to reach out to Bardugo directly via her social media Instagram account in November 2018. This message was (perhaps unsurprisingly) never seen by Leigh Bardugo and drowned in the sea of unread Instagram DMs. My second attempt to reach Bardugo was in January 2019 and it was to message her publisher Henry Holt directly, which was the recommended way to go about requesting interviews with any of their authors on their Contact Us page.

I never heard back from the publisher regarding this email. For my next attempt, I used my professional network to try to reach Bardugo. One of my colleagues put me in touch with another publishing professional who knew Bardugo’s editor. This attempt was unlikely to succeed because of the number of intermediaries between me and Bardugo, but it was still worth trying. I did hear back this time but it was not good news as my contact emailed back saying: *“I asked [Bardugo’s editor] if Leigh would do an interview, but she felt Leigh was probably too busy”*. After all of these unsuccessful attempts, it became apparent that the main issue was the army of gatekeepers that my message had to go through to reach Bardugo, but that it might also be intentional from Bardugo’s side because “[s]aying no is easier if someone else can do it for you” (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.32). During the process of finding bestselling authors to interview, Wilkins and Bennett also received some rejections from gatekeepers and came to the conclusions:

(a) that bestselling authors are not working on their masterpieces alone in garrets; (b) that they are aware of industry-related responsibilities and engage with media and self-promotion when they can; (c) it should be expected that they are ‘very busy’; and (d) this ‘busy-ness’ is not exclusively related to writing new work. Being a bestseller involves storytelling that extends far beyond the act of putting words on a page. (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, pp.32–33)

My experience in attempting to interview Leigh Bardugo was similar to this. While it might seem that these authors are closer to their readers than any time before, they can be very difficult to reach. For the purposes of this research, I eventually decided to use some of Bardugo’s existing interviews that were available online to inform my discussion chapters and get a better understanding of Bardugo’s approach to ‘diversity’ and writing characters from marginalised groups.

Impact of COVID-19 on this Research

The COVID-19 global pandemic has undeniably impacted researchers around the world (and continues to do so), and this research is no exception. The first national lockdown in the UK started in March 2020 which coincided with my data collection process during my second year of this PhD. Luckily, my research design allowed some flexibility as I had already planned—pre-pandemic—for my interviews to be either in person or online. This plan was initially aimed to provide as much flexibility for participants as possible and save time, but then became necessary as lockdown restrictions took place in the UK. Similarly, my quantitative survey had also been originally planned to be conducted online. The reason for that was to be able to reach the largest possible number of readers and to be able to keep the data collected completely anonymous. In a similar way to my interviews, this online method became even more valuable as it meant that I could continue my data collection without any change in my research design or any serious amendments to my ethics application which could have delayed the research. Finally, my case study of the *Shadow and Bone* Netflix

show adaptation was also not significantly impacted by the pandemic as the filming had already wrapped up in Budapest in February 2020 i.e. before any local restrictions were put in place. This meant that the TV show could be out in time for me to include it in my research. Another impact that COVID-19 had on my research is that one of my vignettes (vignette B) coincidentally included themes of a magical plague that felt very similar to the situation in the world. This vignette was designed pre-pandemic and was not intended to be different from any other vignette, but because some of the interviews were conducted during the pandemic, this vignette generated some COVID-19-related comments. Overall, this research was not impacted in a significant way or by any major delays due to the pandemic.

Ethics

As this research project involved human participants, I considered ethical implications of data collection carefully from the early stages of the research process, and obtained UCL's necessary approval. A consent form and an information sheet were given to each participant to familiarise themselves with the topic and understand the aims and parameters of this research. The online survey was completely anonymous and did not record any personal information from the participants. The participants for my interviews were given the choice to be anonymous or to share their names and/or roles. Because these participants are industry experts (publishing professionals and social media influencers), knowing who they are could add value to the research. They were also given the choice of having the interview audio recorded or not. All participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and to withdraw at any moment during the research.

I discussed ethics with both of my supervisors, as well as with the department ethics coordinator and during departmental seminars and UCL Doctoral School courses. I submitted my ethics application and received approval for my project (reference: 16001/001); my

project is also covered by UCL Data protection Registration (reference No Z6364106/2019/05/187, social research).

Conclusion

This chapter has explored my methodology process and articulated the scope and rationale for this research. This methodology was a key element in structuring and guiding the rest of the thesis. It ensured that enough data would be collected and analysed and that the research would fit within the timeline for this PhD. This chapter examined the methods that I used in this research with the ultimate goal to bring about change to the way in which YA fantasy is constructed and perceived. Through using innovative tools, such as designing vignettes of hypothetical YA fantasy books, this research aimed to disrupt problematic, damaging, and stereotypical YA fantasy tropes and trends. The flexibility of the mixed-method approach made it possible to investigate different aspects of the genre using the most suitable methods. Thus, this chapter explores some aspects of the work that went into this research through situating myself as a researcher who is also immersed in the field, as well as in unpacking the process of selecting and designing appropriate methods to address my research questions for this thesis. In the following three chapters, I dive into the discussion of each element of this research. Chapter 3 examines some popular YA fantasy trends and tropes from the perspective of publishing professionals and social media influencers and highlights some issues that have emerged from these tropes and trends in terms of ‘diversity’. After that, Chapter 4 extends the discussion to the reader’s perspective, reflecting on the ramifications of the lack of representation and misrepresentation of characters from socially marginalised groups on the readers of the genre. Finally, Chapter 5 shifts the spotlight of analysis toward the role and impact of screen adaptations in re-imagining and rewriting YA fantasy stories to add ‘diversity’.

Chapter 3: Perspectives of Publishing Professionals and Social Media

Influencers on YA Fantasy Tropes and Trends

Introduction

In this chapter, I open up the discussion on YA fantasy narrative tropes and publishing trends and the ways in which they are negotiated between the text and the different people who are involved in the publishing process. I draw from my qualitative interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers to address my first research question: **‘What are some of the stories that YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK seek, and how ‘diverse’ are these stories?’** It is worth noting that I intentionally focus on questioning how ‘diverse’ the stories are and not how ‘diverse’ the participants are for the purposes of this analysis. Therefore, I utilise paratextual material, more specifically: the blurb³⁴, to reach a better understanding of the YA fantasy genre, how it is constructed, and the ways in which it can be challenged. Due to the large volume of manuscripts submitted to literary agents and publishers, the blurb is a key element that largely determines whether or not a story gets picked up for representation and/or publication. Similarly, social media influencers often select books that they would like to buy, read, review, or discuss via reading the blurb. As Alison Baverstock and Susannah Bowen note: “What appears [on a cover] is very important: it often forms the basis of a decision to buy, and this applies to both retailers making decisions to stock and consumers making decisions to purchase” (2019, p.114). As previously explored, I created a set of four vignettes in the form of YA fantasy blurbs.³⁵ The full text of the vignettes, as well as a detailed explanation of the design process, can be found in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis (please see p.118). In this chapter, I utilise these vignettes to analyse the narrative and

³⁴ In the UK, the term ‘copy’ is also sometimes used to refer to the blurb as some of my participants did.

³⁵ Louise Willder’s upcoming *Blurb Your Enthusiasm* (2022) aims to showcase the importance of blurbs and unpack the ways in which they affect readers, authors, and publishers.

publishing conventions that have been commonly used in YA fantasy over the last decade. I intentionally choose to focus on popular tropes because of the undeniable impact they have on the formation of genre, as Wilkins (2019) notes:

Genre tropes spill out of books and into social discussions; social discussions pressure publishers to change the contents of the books; and market success influences the choices writers make about how to use or combine genre elements. (pp.11-12)

My approach aligns with this symbiotic understanding of genre. Thus, I examine multiple perspectives regarding the use of popular YA fantasy tropes because genres “are negotiated between writers, readers, and institutions, and formed and reformed across texts, social groupings, and industrial practices” (Wilkins, 2019, p.65). This analysis is guided by my research questions and seeks to build on and extend the existing scholarship on YA fantasy writing and publishing.

This chapter demonstrates that some YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK are exponentially looking for more inclusive and ‘diverse’ narratives. Most of the participants interviewed for this research recognise the urgent need for more originality in this genre to be able to continue to thrive in the future as it did in the past. Ultimately, I argue that the YA fantasy genre is looking for alternatives to some of the stereotypical tropes and moving towards a more inclusive approach such as narratives featuring collective and ‘diverse’ heroes. In the subsequent sections, I analyse the four vignettes—*Blood and Magic*, *Truth from the Ashes*, *Legend of Thorns and Bones*, and *City of Scars*—I designed for my research to provide insights into the YA fantasy genre. This chapter interrogates the kinds of stories that publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK are currently interested in. This is achieved through a close examination of the expectations and limitations of tropes—that have been taken for granted—regarding ‘diversity’ and representation issues within this genre. Finally, I finish

this chapter with a discussion about the implications of these tropes and conventions for people who are involved in the publishing process. I suggest some tools and solutions going forward to write and publish more inclusive and ‘diverse’ YA fantasy narratives in the future.

Vignettes Analysis

To briefly sum up, the goal of these vignettes is to reflect and mirror some of the popular narrative tropes and publishing trends that are currently—and have been for the last decade—governing the YA fantasy genre. As Todorov (1975, p.3) notes:

When we examine works of literature from the perspective of genre, we engage in a very particular enterprise: we discover a principle operative in a number of texts, rather than what is specific about each of them.

As explored in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis (please see p.106), I have a few reasons for selecting the 2010-2020 period. For instance, the 2010-2020 period represents the post-*Twilight* era of YA fantasy. Furthermore, most of Leigh Bardugo’s YA fantasy books came out during this period, and these books are key to my analysis in this thesis. Another reason is that some of the most prominent ‘diversity’ campaigns and initiatives launched during this decade, such as *We Need Diverse Books* and *Own Voices*. Finally, 2020 was the most recent year when I was collecting data and was also an important year for the ‘diversity’ conversation due to the impact of the global Black Lives Matter protests.

The participants’ identities and backgrounds are not included as part of the analysis because most participants wished to remain anonymous. Furthermore, the relatively small number of interviewed participants (12 participants) would not allow me to draw conclusions regarding any correlation—or lack thereof—between the participants’ identities and their views on ‘diversity’, as that would require a much larger scale study. More details about the process of recruiting the participants and conducting the interviews for this research can be found in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis (please see p.115).

By analysing these conventions that determine the trajectory of the genre, it is possible to reorient these parameters to ensure a move towards a more ‘diverse’ and inclusive state in the field. However, in order to be able to disrupt YA fantasy conventions, we must first clearly identify the constructions that are in place. This analysis is not meant to imply that YA fantasy can be reduced to, or defined by, a list of tropes and trends because “[g]enres are not static and unchanging categories” (Wilkins, 2019, p.3). However, identifying commonly used conventions can give us insights into the genre at a particular point in time and provide a useful outline as a basis to construct new tropes that are fundamentally more ‘diverse’ and inclusive. In subsequent sections, I draw from principles of Whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Ahmed, 2007; Ono, 2010), defamiliarization (Schalk, 2018), and ‘in-group/out-group’ categorisations as a theoretical framework to analyse the implications of YA fantasy tropes used in the four vignettes and build my argument. For the purposes of this analysis, I pay particular attention to the initial reaction of my participants to the vignettes to see what immediately stood out to them after reading the made-up blurbs. The initial response is so critical in this analysis because, in a real-world setting, the initial response is often decisive.

Moran (2019) observes that “mainstream fantasy does tend to favour nostalgic narratives and worlds that perpetuate outdated and/or problematic values” (p.60). John Clute and John Grant (1997) refer to inherited outdated fantasy tropes—such as the predominance of Whiteness, stereotypical gender roles, and violence—as “maggots” (p.615). These “maggots” can be described as: “obsolete pieces of ideology which subsequent authors reuse without considering their problematic nature” (Moran, 2019, p.60). Problematically, some of these “maggots” can still be found in contemporary YA fantasy texts in the form of tropes that have been passed down and adapted to this genre. As Wilkins (2019) notes, many popular YA fantasy tropes—including the Chosen One, Trials and Tests, and the Cruel

Past—have been inherited from Adult high fantasy. Therefore, in order to critically engage with current YA fantasy tropes, it is important to consider this history. In this chapter, I demonstrate that some of these conventions have facilitated the process of relegating BIPOC, queer, dis/abled, and otherwise marginalised characters to the margins of the narrative in this genre. After years of relying on stereotypical tropes, the YA fantasy genre managed to create an echo room that bounces back the same ideas. This means that what once made YA fantasy so popular might be the same reason for its potential downfall because YA fantasy not only suffers from issues of lack of originality (Wilkins, 2019) but also a lack of ‘diversity’ and authentic representations of marginalised groups (Thomas, 2019).

Vignette A: Blood and Magic

In the wake of the success of YA fantasy blockbusters such as Clare’s *City of Bones* (2007), Bardugo’s *Shadow and Bone* (2012), Maas’s *Throne of Glass* (2012) and Aveyard’s *Red Queen* (2015), many subsequent YA fantasy novels followed in their footsteps by using similar tropes. Vignette A was designed to illustrate these established tropes that have often been replicated in YA fantasy and to reflect the YA fantasy market and interest at that time. In a similar way to many of these YA fantasy bestsellers published around the early 2010s, Vignette A features a teenage Chosen One hero who discovers that she has hidden powers and that she is the only one who can save the world. This vignette also hints at a romance subplot. These are all well-established and deeply rooted tropes that could describe many published YA fantasy novels such as Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling* (2008), Lauren Kate’s *Fallen* (2009), and Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince* (2018).

The initial responses I received for Vignette A were that many participants immediately pointed out that *Blood and Magic* not only features common YA fantasy tropes but that it heavily relied on them:

“That's delightfully tropey, isn't it?” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Haha, oh, the tropey-ness. It sounds interesting. Would I read it? Maybe.” [Anonymous Participant B, interview with a social media influencer 2020]

“Haha... yup, sounds like a lot of [tropes]” [Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

Wilkins (2019) notes that: “Reproducibility of success is an imperative across all industries, but especially in industries where success is unpredictable such as the publishing industry” (p. 57-58). Indeed, YA fantasy tropes such as those used in *Blood and Magic* have been reproduced and replicated ubiquitously, particularly over the last decade. However, the effects of this reproducibility can be observed through the initial responses to this vignette which was often accompanied by a chuckle or laughter. One explanation for this reaction might be that the story felt very familiar and perhaps slightly outdated to the participants. Many participants reported having the feeling that they had read this story many times before. Indeed, many continued to explain that the only reason they would consider Vignette A for publication or for review in the current market would be if it had a strong, unique selling point (USP), such as an outstanding writing style or very compelling and original worldbuilding.

Furthermore, while participants agreed on the heavy use of tropes in this story, they did not have the same responses to these tropes. Some participants mentioned that tropes such as the ones featured in Vignette A were one of the reasons why they enjoyed genre fiction so much. Familiarity is a common theme that came up for these participants as they welcomed

the predictability and the repetitive nature of these tropes because they found that to be comforting.

“I love tropes. That’s one of the reasons why I love genre fiction so much. It’s because there are so many tropes you can identify, and I love seeing the way people play with them and interpret them. Yeah, that one reads like a Sarah J. Maas all right, haha.” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

Other participants, however, felt that Vignette A lacked in originality—due to its use of common tropes—and would need to stand out in some way to be able to make it in the crowded and competitive current YA fantasy market. I argue that this aversion that some publishing professionals and social media influencers have to these common YA fantasy tropes is rooted in two interconnected issues: 1) these tropes were fundamentally designed and constructed to centre White, able-bodied, heterosexual characters; and 2) these tropes were continuously replicated, which lead to the saturation of the YA fantasy market and a desperate need for originality. A social media influencer shared her opinion on *Blood and Magic*, saying:

“I just think it’s a very boring book because I’ve read it a million times. The thing is, I’m over Chosen One narratives because they take away agency and I feel like a main character needs agency.” [Anonymous Participant F, interview with a social media influencer 2020]

While this vignette was designed to be faithful to some of the most well-known YA fantasy tropes such as the Chosen One trope, it ended up being the least appealing vignette out of the four to most participants. Some participants pointed out that while there was nothing inherently wrong with the story, its lack of originality made it clear that it was the weakest story out of the four. In fact, most of the participants ranked it last by the end of the interview. The most common explanation that participants provided for the decision to rank *Blood and Magic* last was that it was not special enough, because there was nothing about it

that would make it stand out from the rest of the many manuscripts that they have come across over the last few years.

“This is like a good kind of pitch, but it's such a flooded market in this area. You want to make sure the writing is spectacular. You'd really want it to be special because this is like... there are a lot of these books that you wouldn't necessarily think like top drawer entirely, anyway. You'd want to make sure this is absolutely, kind of, knock your socks off. It would have to be really good writing.” [Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“The thing here that would make me, perhaps, not take it forward is that there's no kind of USP, that's the unique selling point... I just can't quite tell whether it would stand out enough because it's got so many of the common tropes.” [Stephanie King, interview with Commissioning Editor 2019]

“It feels a little bit dated. I mean, obviously like really typical YA themes and tropes with the parents being dead. Obviously, I really like that there's a strong female in it, but the fact that she has to train with a prince feels a bit disempowering. It's like going to end up in the love story, which feels really five years ago.” [Anonymous Participant I, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

In order to examine the role that comparability plays in YA fantasy, it is important to look at the tool of ‘comping’, that is, to compare a book to other similar books or media. This is also referred to as the “X-meets-Y formulation” (Wilkins, 2019, p.2). In the context of the publishing industry, this formula is used to provide insight into the text, but it is also meant to “predict what the text *will do* among readers and in the publishing industry, including how it might circulate and sell, and which existing routes to market it might exploit” (Wilkins, 2019, p.2) (emphasis in original). Wilkins (2019) further notes that:

From acquisition, when the X-meets-Y formulation frames new texts, right through to point of sale, when Amazon informs us what ‘customers who bought this item also bought’, the ability to position texts within a matrix of other, similar texts has become a chief concern of the field. (p.65)

In vignette A, I used this technique, writing “Perfect for fans of Sarah J. Maas and Victoria Aveyard”. The importance of comping came through during the interviews, as Participant C explained:

“I would say, we use this a lot. When we comp it to other works. Which is great because fans go ‘oh, I love Sarah J. Maas. I’m going to love this next book too’. People say that it doesn’t work but it definitely does. I would like to think that it’s the copy but actually, we find that most people are trusting.”
[Anonymous Participant C, interview with a Marketing Manager 2020]

However, it became apparent that carefully selecting the most appropriate comps is crucial for this tool to be effective. In other words, the titles used as comps should not just be the most popular bestsellers in that genre, but instead, the focus should be on finding relevant examples that specifically relate to the book being pitched. As another publishing professional points out:

“The comps Sarah J. Maas and Victoria Aveyard would make me think that the agent didn’t know that much about YA. Because they’re two very, very big names, and they’re two very generic names that every agent slaps on a book that they think is going to be the next big YA. And obviously, Victoria Aveyard hasn’t come out with something totally new in a while. So yeah, this comp doesn’t really tell me anything about the story.” *[Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020]*

When asked to identify the tropes in this vignette, publishing professionals and social media influencers easily recognised many tropes and were able to name examples of other books that feature these same tropes such as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*.

“The orphaned girl who has a secret power and is the only one who can—It's the Chosen One narrative...sort of the isolated Chosen One, you see it in Harry Potter as well where he's isolated. He's the only one who can save the day.”
[Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

The following list summarises, in no particular order, the narrative tropes that were most commonly identified by the participants, interviewed for this research, for this vignette:

- 1) The Chosen One
- 2) The dead parents
- 3) The fact that this character is often isolated in some way
- 4) An all-powerful villain called the lord of darkness
- 5) Supernatural army or evil creatures
- 6) Being whisked away from the familiar to the unfamiliar
- 7) Discovering hidden powers and that the protagonist is the key to salvation
- 8) Being an apprentice
- 9) Training with a mentor
- 10) Romance with the prince

However, what remained unsaid in these discussions around *Blood and Magic* is the automatic assumption that the protagonist Lyanna is White, able-bodied, and heterosexual because participants claimed that Vignette A was not a ‘diverse’ story. For instance, even though the blurb only mentions that Lyanna will be training with the prince, many participants immediately concluded that there must be a romance going on between the two.

“There's going to be...if she's going to train with the prince...There's a royal prince who's got magic, you can already sense, how the love story is going to play out, I think.” *[Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]*

“Pretty sure she's going to fall in love with the prince.” [Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“And then it sounds like there is going to be a romance with the prince who's going to train her because it says ‘the fate of her heart and the fate of the land rest on her shoulders’, so there's obviously a little romantic element in here.” [Stephanie King, interview with Commissioning Editor 2019]

Our collective imagination seems to be restricted by the unconscious expectations we have about the genre based on what we have previously read. Without changing anything from the blurb of *Blood and Magic*, let us consider the following: Lyanna is actually a dis/abled and queer character of colour who is romantically involved with the prince's sister. Let's read Vignette A again with this piece of information in mind (please see p.126 for the full text of *Blood and Magic*).

Does the blurb now feel lacking, misleading, or even inadequate? Does it feel like the blurb should have mentioned those things? If so, why? The blurb did not mention anything about the identity of Lyanna, but unsurprisingly, the assumption tends to lean towards the norm, because the norm has the option—and the privilege—to be invisible. Turner (1967) argues:

As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture. (p.95)

Therefore, the way in which these tropes have been imagined in the past, strongly influence the way in which we perceive and interpret future stories that use the same tropes. Indeed, YA stories have often centred characters who are White (Thomas, 2019; Gilbert-Hickey and Green-Barteet, 2021), able-bodied (Polish, 2021), thin (Averill, 2016), and heterosexual (Jenkins and Cart, 2018; Mason, 2020); thus, providing the lens through which

we read stories featuring the same tropes. It is also important to note that the comps used in this vignette further reinforced these assumptions. Unsurprisingly, participants did not think Vignette A was a ‘diverse’ story. These YA fantasy tropes shaped their expectations of the possibilities of what this story could be. In other words, when ‘diversity’ is not explicitly indicated in the paratextual elements such as the blurb or the cover, we tend to assume that it is not there. Furthermore, “whiteness is unmarked; its ability to stay in power precisely draws from its ability to remain invisible and beyond reproach” (Saha, 2018, p.91). The invisibility of Whiteness has been socially constructed and widely accepted as the norm (Dyer, 1997; Foster, 2003). As Richard Dyer notes: “Other people are raced, [White people] are just people” (Dyer, 1997, p.1). Ahmed asks the question: “If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness?” (2007, p.149). Through my analysis, I intend to notice the Whiteness, able-bodiedness, and heteronormative nature of the YA fantasy tropes featured in this vignette with the aim to disrupt and challenge these norms.

Ahmed describes Whiteness as: “an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space” (2007, p.150). Framing this understanding within YA fantasy, the Whiteness of the protagonist—and the rest of the characters—is assumed and accepted as fact unless explicitly stated otherwise, as Dubrofsky and Ryalls put it: “Whiteness in popular media functions through its seamless taken-for-grantedness, the mundane ways in which it gains salience” (2014, p.400). Furthermore, Whiteness is often “centralized and preserved as undetectable, normative, and even hero-like and progressive” (Cramer, 2020, p.265). In this vignette, much like in many popular YA fantasy novels, “Whiteness cannot be located or specified, but we know it through its authentic-seeming appearance” (Dubrofsky and Ryalls, 2014, p.404).

Ahmed theorises that “spaces acquire the shape of the bodies that ‘inhabit’ them” (2007, p.156). If we consider this understanding in the context of the YA fantasy genre, the

tropes and the characters that make up the genre are ultimately the elements that shape this space. Therefore, if we keep using tropes that typically centre predominantly White, able-bodied, heterosexual characters, then these tropes acquire parameters pertaining to these identities, thus excluding and/or further marginalising characters that do not fit this profile. I argue that this explains the assumptions and expectations of participants regarding the identity of Lyanna. The Chosen One story is typically associated with dominant identities, but more importantly, the Chosen One story was designed and built around these identities. These parameters govern the genre, which ultimately leads to a vicious cycle in which these identities are represented because they are expected, and expected because they are represented. Following this logic, then the only way to break the cycle and reshape this space to be more inclusive would be to challenge, rethink, and reimagine the types of tropes that constitute the genre and design new spaces that fit BIPOC, queer, dis/abled, and otherwise marginalised characters. Schalk argues that for marginalised people, reading speculative fiction can represent “imagining a future or alternative space away from oppression or in which relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved” (2018, p.2). Therefore, tropes that maintain the real world’s power inequalities and systems of oppression can further solidify harmful representations of marginalised people. Schalk (2018) uses the term ‘defamiliarization’ to illustrate how “speculative fiction texts make the familiar social concept of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar in order to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of these categories” (2018, p.114). Through this process of ‘defamiliarization’, the expectations of speculative fiction readers about ‘race’, dis/ability, gender, and sexuality can be disrupted (Schalk, 2018).

Vignette B: Truth from the Ashes

Vignette B was designed to feature a type of author that was most popular around the mid-2010s: YouTube authors. In other words, authors who were initially known for posting

content—book-related or not—on the YouTube platform. The common thread that originally tied YouTube and YA fiction together can be considered to be the bestselling YA author John Green, given his success as both an author and a YouTuber; however, 2015 and 2016 witnessed a new wave of interest for this category of authors (Rebellino, 2020, p.20). For instance, Simon & Schuster launched a new imprint called Keyword Press in 2014, which has been dedicated to publishing YouTuber authors such as Zoe Sugg and Joey Garceffa (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

Vignette B was also designed to reflect a set of YA fantasy tropes that are based on binary oppositions such as good/bad, girl/boy, healer/assassin. It is within these tropes that I located this blurb. Similarly to Vignette A, participants also felt that Vignette B used familiar tropes, saying:

“I feel like I’ve read this book like seventeen times, haha.” [Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020].

“Yeah, that’s another tropey one, isn’t it?” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020].

However, unlike the initial responses for Vignette A, Vignette B was met with mostly positive feedback from the interviewed participants, with the exception of one issue that was flagged by some of them. Their main cause of concern regarding this vignette was that a YouTuber author wrote it. As I explored in detail in my Literature Review Chapter (please see p.65), YouTube authors have become a controversial topic in the publishing sphere over the last few years. While these authors often have a large online following that could potentially translate into more significant sales for the book, they have acquired a reputation for low-quality books and for not writing the books themselves i.e. using the services of

ghost-writers. Some participants noted their concern about this issue immediately after reading the first line of the vignette, as, for example:

“Um, I don't personally respond well to YouTubers, which is a bit... We do represent a YouTuber, but luckily, her writing is fantastic. But I do have some reservations when it comes to YouTubers. Even though, they obviously have a fanbase. They do have a commercial appeal. I just think, I think we're getting a bit kind of tired of... there's a level of scepticism when someone comes out as a YouTuber and they've written a book.” [Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“The... YouTube author thing is something that may or may not put me off something depending on who it was, I suppose.” [Anonymous Participant G, interview with a book blogger]

“Okay, from the beginning, YouTube sensation leaps out, because it means that the author already has a following. It wouldn't necessarily make or break whether I was going to buy it because it would have to be a really, really big following on YouTube to make a difference. Unless they were like, specifically in the areas of books or YA publishing or fantasy or anything like that. And I think a couple of years ago, YouTube was the big thing in publishing, but now it's moved on to other areas. We've realised that it doesn't make as much of a difference as we wanted it to, a lot of the time unless you've got lots of other things going on.” [Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“It's written by a YouTuber, haha. Although I think Youtubers are really talented, not many of them actually write their books. They're written by somebody else, with them putting some input in, I would assume that this would be this type of books.” [Stephanie King, interview with Commissioning Editor 2019]

“I feel very anxious about the fact that it's the YouTube sensation author, because we haven't really seen—apart from Zoella and her kid brother whatever he's called—we haven't seen that translate into really meaningful sales.”

[Anonymous Participant I, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Um, you know... I... I think that there has been some success with, sort of, social media influencers coming into the sort of book market, whether it's YA or MG or whatever. Um, it's kind of... it's not a given, again it would sort of depend on how many followers they really had and whether they could get those followers to buy the book. Um, from my perspective as an agent, I would have to look into that as like a selling point for myself. I don't think that it's... you know... for me anyway, and it's possibly because I'm old. The writing is still what matters most to me. And I think that if the writing isn't there, ultimately, the books don't sell as well.” *[Kristina Perez, interview with Literary Agent 2020]*

On the other hand, other participants felt that the benefits to take on a YouTuber author would ultimately outweigh the negatives, saying:

“There's the stigma that a YouTuber can't write books. And I don't necessarily agree with that.” *[Anonymous Participant B, interview with a social media influencer 2020]*

“Okay, straight away. The fact that it's a duology and that it's written by a YouTube sensation is going to give it more of, like, clout when it comes to being published because people know who the author is. So, I've just read the first sentence, but already that's captured my attention more than the first card.”

[Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Strengths-wise, this comes from like an author that's described as a YouTube sensation. So somebody with a platform and slightly younger as well, and so

more likely to appeal to like a targeted YA audience, instead of like an older audience of fantasy fans who still read YA.” [Anonymous Participant J, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

Participants then went on to identify the YA fantasy tropes they recognised for *Truth from the Ashes*. The following list summarises, in no particular order, the main narrative tropes that were identified for this vignette:

- 1) Enemies to lovers romance
- 2) The magical plague
- 3) The assassin
- 4) The healer

Levy and Mendlesohn identify two fundamental elements in YA stories: “the belief that one is special, with special problems; and a related belief that one’s intimate relationships are essentially more important than the great quests or battles that are taking place in the world” (2016, p.197). Furthermore, romance plays an essential role in YA fantasy as it became “one of the dominant themes in teen fantasy,” by the early 2000s (Levy and Mendlesohn, 2016, p.201). One of the tropes that participants were quick to point out in this vignette is the enemies to lovers romance trope. Many participants shared that they thoroughly enjoyed this trope. This story type starts with the two characters on opposite sides, then somewhere along the journey, they find their way together and become romantically involved. This narrative trope has become increasingly popular after the general fatigue and dislike for some other romance tropes that are usually associated with YA fantasy, such as the love triangle trope and the insta-love trope, i.e. when there is an obvious romantic interest between two characters as soon as they meet without any natural build-up. Part of the problem with the love triangle trope is that it usually features a White, attractive young woman who has to choose between two attractive men: typically, a privileged White man, and a racialised Other. Examples of this trope in YA fantasy are ubiquitous. For

instance, *Twilight*'s Bella Swan has to choose between sparkling, White vampire Edward Cullen and Indigenous werewolf, Jacob Black. Another example is the popular *Infernal Devices* series by Cassandra Clare in which beautiful, White, special, shapeshifter Tessa Gray has to choose between White, Welsh, Will Herondale and Eurasian, opium addict Jem Carstairs. Spoiler alert: they typically pick the White love interest first, while the racialised Other waits in the background.³⁶ The problematic nature of these romance tropes is palpable. Therefore, as authors, publishers, and readers became more attuned to this, there was a shift towards more realistic and organic romances. This led to the popularisation of the 'enemies to lovers' trope. This trope offers an alternative to the love triangle and the insta-love romances.

Another element that participants reported enjoying about Vignette B is the fact that it is part of a duology, i.e. a book series that only contains two books. They pointed out that YA fantasy fiction has traditionally been associated with trilogies and longer series, and that duologies offered a different format that can make it easier to consume a story.

"This is a duology, which is more unusual. So two books that come together."
[Stephanie King, interview with a Commissioning Editor 2019]

"I like that it's a duology; that's always fun. They're getting more and more common at the moment." [Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

"You know, it being a duology is also a selling point. Publishers are kind of looking for duologies right now. There's been a lot of trilogy fatigue." [Kristina Perez, interview with Literary Agent 2020]

³⁶ For example, after becoming a Silent Brother, Jem waited for over a century to be reunited with Tessa. In the meantime she married his best friend Will and stayed with him until he died.

Participant G explained that part of the appeal of the duology is that it offers the YA reader the satisfaction of finishing a series quickly. There is usually a one-year gap between the publication of each instalment in YA fantasy series, so when a reader commits to, say, a seven-book series, they will be waiting at least seven years to get the final resolution of the story, while stand-alone novels can sometimes leave readers feeling that they want more from the story, duologies seem to offer the perfect balance.

The response for this vignette was slightly side-tracked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Little did I know when designing this vignette pre-pandemic that the magical plague I featured as a trope would become eerily similar to the real-world situation. I discuss the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on this thesis in more detail in the Methodology Chapter; please see p.145). While the data generated from this was unexpected, I believe it is still relevant as it clearly impacted the way publishing professionals and social media influencers viewed this trope.

“And also, the idea of a magical plague is something I have not seen before. And obviously, with Coronavirus right now, it's very relevant. And so I think that has a really huge potential just from that first line.” [Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

*“I think that um *nervous laugh* the idea of a plague is a little bit close to the knuckle now so, that may or may not be a selling point six months from now, depending on how things go.” [Kristina Perez, interview with Literary Agent 2020]*

“I only ranked B last because, you know, plague is a little bit close to home.” [Anonymous Participant G, interview with a book blogger 2020]

Vignette C: Legend of Thorns and Bones

Vignette C, titled *Legend of Thorns and Bones*, was designed to mirror some of the tropes that were popularised more recently in YA fantasy. For instance, it features a multiple heroes dynamic (four brothers as the main cast) and a non-Western setting. Vignette C is a standalone novel and it is written by a debut Nigerian American author. One of the main inspirations I used to design this vignette is Adeyemi's (2018) *Children of Blood and Bone*, which has been identified as a YA fantasy counter-story (Davis, 2020). *Children of Blood and Bone* is set in an imaginary world called Orisha, which is inspired by real locations in Nigeria and Nigerian culture and all the characters of *Children of Blood and Bone* are coded as Black. This counter-story effectively challenges some problematic tropes such as the Dark Aggressor trope, as Davis (2020) notes:

When the trope is constructed and then countered through humanizing interactions and characters who call out and challenge misrepresentations, we are able to see how the trope is employed and how it can be challenged and subverted to highlight the actual aggression conducted without consequences by dominant racial groups. (p.11)

Vignette C reflects counter-stories such as *Children of Blood and Bone* that are written by Own Voices authors of colour, and aim to disrupt the predominantly White world of the YA fantasy genre. The initial response to this vignette was positive overall as most participants felt that it had a place in the current YA market. One of the main tropes that participants interviewed for this research noticed immediately about this vignette is that it featured four teenage boys as the main cast of characters, which is unlike most YA fantasy stories. Responses to this were varied: some participants expressed that they enjoyed the novelty and originality of this different type of hero, while other participants felt concerned about this, as they believed it might put off some YA fantasy readers who might be more used to reading from the perspective of a teenaged girl.

“And the fact that it's all brothers I like as well because we don't see that many stories where all the main characters are family.” [Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“That one strikes me as unusual because I haven't seen personally much YA where the entire main cast is male.” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“I like that it's about boys as well, because a lot of YA fantasy is very female cantered, which is, you know, fine, but it's nice to see something a little bit fresher and different.” [Anonymous Participant G, interview with a book blogger 2020]

“I quite like that it's four brothers. But then I also would probably want a woman.” [Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“I think there's no mention of any female characters in this at all and that might be a problem in taking it to market.” [Stephanie King, interview with Commissioning Editor 2019]

“The only thing I would say is: why is it just brothers? I wish it was maybe three brothers and a sister and then maybe she's going to be the one that surprises everyone and takes them all down.” [Anonymous Participant C, interview with a Marketing Manager 2020]

Some participants immediately spotted the potential of this story in the current YA fantasy market, which is increasingly looking for more ‘diverse’ stories. Many noted that the fact that this is written by a debut author is also a positive point, given that YA is always

looking for the next bestseller by prioritising debut authors, especially in marketing.

Furthermore, the story being set in a non-Western setting was also considered to be a strong USP for this vignette, as there is an overwhelming lack of these stories in YA fantasy.

Literary agents interviewed for this research, in particular, highlighted the strengths of *Legend of Thorns and Bones*, saying:

“Legend of Thorns and Bones would be one I can see as an easier pitch. I can see it as something that publishers would come out for a lot easier. I think it will be something because of how much people want to be actively publishing diverse novels and they want to be doing... they want to be seen to be doing... honouring those promises that they keep making on Bookseller articles and stuff. I can see this could be something that would be very easily picked up.”
[Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“I think this pitch has more in it that would excite me as an agent. A) it's a standalone, and you know, that's what people are looking for a lot right now. Um, I think the fact that it is a presumably Own Voices or at least, sort of inspired by their background's mythology is definitely a plus, because I want to promote marginalised voices, and non-western mythologies and I think that publishers also want to do that now. They've... you know... sort of figured that out finally.” *[Kristina Perez, interview with a Literary Agent 2020]*

While it is important to include more racial ‘diversity’ in the content of the books that are published, it is also crucial to examine the quality of the representation featured in these books. Olutola notes that “although examinations of race in YA literature within the publishing world call for more racial diversity, we must also discuss the numerous ways these narratives reflect dominant racial ideologies” (2021, p.32). Furthermore, Thomas points out that “the reason our culture does not often notice the ways that race, difference, and darkness are hailed in the fantastic is because we have been carefully taught not to notice it” (2019, p.30). Subsequently, some YA fantasy narratives retain “lingering anxieties over the presence

and place of the racial other in the social order” (Olutola, 2021, p.21). One explanation for these anxieties might be the fear of repercussions inflicted by the cancel culture zeitgeist, particularly for authors who write identities that are, in some ways, different from their own. Additionally, the majority of YA novels published in the UK are written by White authors (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018a, 2021), thus contributing to further feed these anxieties regarding the spaces that BIPOC characters occupy in YA fantasy. One thing to consider here is that there is virtually no *tabula rasa* when it comes to writing racially ‘diverse’ YA fantasy stories, given that “whiteness is the invisible frame through which stories on minorities are produced” (Saha, 2018, p.91). As a result of these anxieties, many YA speculative fiction novels published over the last decade embrace the idea of postracism and operate within its parameters. According to Ono (2010), postracism is “a fantasy that racism no longer exists” (p.227). More specifically, it “suggests historical racism and colonialism have been remedied or eliminated or perhaps never were that bad to begin with” (Ono, 2010, p.228). Ono (2010) further explains:

Postracism strategically draws attention away from existing racism. By suggesting racism no longer exists and has been solved, postracial discourse functions as a discourse of distraction, filling up blogspace, airwaves, and screens with visions and messages of progress, hence keeping legitimate information about contemporary and historical racism at bay. (Ono, 2010, p.229)

There are numerous examples that illustrate the issue of postracism in YA fantasy. For instance, Olutola (2021) examines the case of Victoria Aveyard’s *Red Queen* (2015) and determines the role that ‘race’ plays in YA dystopian, writing:

much of speculative fiction from the nineteenth century onwards had endeavoured to produce fantasies of futures supposedly unencumbered by racial politics. Yet, the racial coding in these narratives suggests that

the specter of colonial racial politics exists nonetheless, insidiously reaffirming European constructions of the racialized body. (p.18)

Similarly, Ho (2021) explores the neo-Victorian setting of Cassandra Clare's *Infernal Devices* trilogy (2010-2013), which relies on an erasure of some aspects of the Victorian era to align with the postracial agenda of this narrative. Ho (2021) further explains that these novels "suggest that [Clare's] characters and her readers have moved beyond race thanks to the advances of the civil rights movement, the decline in racism, an increase in interracial relationships, and people who identify as mixed race" (p.148). Yet another example of postracism in YA fantasy is Victoria Schwab's *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*. The story follows a French teenager, Addie, who becomes immortal through a Faustian bargain. However, Addie realises that she is now cursed to be forgotten by everyone she meets forever. While we see Addie travel parts of the world over the span of 300 years from the eighteenth century onwards, there is a noticeable strategic erasure of important events in history such as slavery and colonialism.

There are also parallels that can be drawn with YA Science-Fiction, as Sierra Hale (2021) critiques Marissa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles* (2012-2015) series, which addresses 'race' issues through its metaphoric representation of cyborg oppression. Hale (2021) demonstrates that although this story "features an implicit message supporting diversity and antiracism" (p.113), this message ends up being problematic because of the story's "racialized ethnoscapas and colourblind ideology" (p.113). Hale (2021) notes that:

Postracial settings in SF necessarily create problematic ethnoscapas. They depict a raceless generic idea of difference that writers assume readers will equate specifically to racial difference, but the obfuscation of race often prevents this from happening. These spaces also tend toward problematic ethnoscapas that contradict antiracist messages the author attempts to convey. (p.112)

Hale (2021) argues that using metaphors to address ‘race’ issues “obscures and potentially undoes any positive message about race contained in the text by preventing fruitful connections from being made between the oppression in the text and oppression in society” (p.120). However, I would argue that there are some instances where discussing ‘race’ through a metaphor can be useful, notably in counter-narratives, such as Adeyemi’s *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). By featuring an all-Black cast of characters and discussing ‘race’ through magic (magical people being the oppressed), *Children of Blood and Bone* departs from the traditional representation of ‘race’ in YA fantasy. Although it operates within the parameters of racial hierarchies and systems of oppression, *Children of Blood and Bone* provides an opportunity to challenge these ideologies by giving the oppressed “the agency to begin to uplift themselves” (Davis, 2020, p.14). Therefore, such narratives do not erase or ignore ‘race’-related issues; on the contrary, they emphasise the salience of ‘race’ and address these issues through their narrative without undermining the underlying racial message. As Lapointe (2020) points out:

By using fantasy as a metaphor for exploring and redefining current realities, people can observe the subtle ways that racial thinking contributes to influence everyday life. (p.136)

This highlights the importance of opening the door for more counter-narratives, which are “necessary to shift the focus onto BIPOC stories and to challenge damaging misrepresentation” (Davis, 2020, p.17). Furthermore, YA fantasy’s audiences have the power to challenge and disrupt damaging representations, thus influencing the future of the genre (as I explore in further detail in chapter 4, please see p.188).

Vignette D: City of Scars

Vignette D was designed to be part of a series and to feature the Crew Hero trope in YA fantasy. This trope consists of a group of teenage characters who might not get along at

first and have different motivations but ultimately unite to achieve a common goal. One of the main YA fantasy inspirations I used to design this vignette is Bardugo's (2015) *Six of Crows*, which offers a quintessential Crew Hero dynamic that features a group of misfits who are described as: “[a] gambler, a convict, a wayward son, a lost Grisha, a Suli girl who became a killer, a boy from the Barrel who became something worse” (Bardugo, 2015, p.332). Furthermore, my understanding of the Crew Hero trope in YA fantasy aligns with what Turner (1969) terms “*communitas*”, using the Latin term to make a distinction between this “modality of social relationship” and other communities (p.96). Turner defines “*communitas*” as:

a nonstructured relationship, or, better, a spontaneously structured relationship which often develops among liminaries, individuals in passage between social statuses and cultural states that have been cognitively defined, logically articulated, and endowed with jural rights and obligations. (Turner, 1975, p.22)

Thus, the inherent coming of age nature of YA—or what Arnold Van Gennep (1960) describes as rites of passage—represents a key element in the formation of the crew, as its members are in a state of transition from: child to adult, victim to empowered, marginalised to central. McDaniel (2019), in his study about ‘diversity’ in Netflix’s *Stranger Things* series, examines the way in which such *communitas* are formed within the adolescent context, pointing out that: “Because the liminal phase removes distinctions that cause cultural divisions, those sharing the liminal experience develop a special kind of camaraderie” (McDaniel, 2019, p.208). Most importantly, within these *communitas*, “everyone has an important contribution to make, whether solving mysteries or dealing with racism, and no one person’s contribution is more important than anyone else’s” (McDaniel, 2019, p.211). Thus, this egalitarian aspect of the Crew Hero trope—as portrayed in *Six of Crows* and *Stranger*

Things—facilitates the construction of a more inclusive space, as I will explore in this section.

The responses of the participants interviewed for this research to Vignette D were overwhelmingly positive, compared to the responses for the first three vignettes. In fact, most participants ranked it first by the end of the interview because it was their favourite out of the four blurbs. There are a few different reasons why Vignette D was generally the participants' favourite vignette. Most notably, many participants were very keen to read about a Crew Hero³⁷ story, saying:

“I think that people always like a kind of misfit gang.” [Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Oh, it's a found family one. That one's always fun.” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“The ragtag band of misfits who will save the day even everyone thinks they'll fail. And they realise that they have bonds together even if they don't like each other at the start, haha. That's a good narrative trick. I love it.” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“That's really cool. And everyone wants a good heist. Everyone loves a good gang of like misfits who come together, who don't get along, and then find friendship along the way.” [Anonymous Participant B, interview with a social media influencer 2020]

³⁷ While I use the term 'Crew Hero' throughout this research, my participants used a variety of other terms to describe this trope, such as found family, D&D, misfit gang, ensemble cast, etc. Nonetheless, these terms all refer to a similar dynamic.

“I do like the trope of a group of you know, ragtag misfits getting together to try and save each other, I'd hope there would be a lot of humour in it.” [Anonymous Participant A, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

One element that is associated with the crew story is that it is often told from multiple narrative perspectives, thus allowing the reader to experience the story from the perspectives of different characters and expanding the possibilities of representation. This is especially important when the story features the representation of minorities and marginalised groups. For instance, in *Six of Crows*, we experience the story from the perspectives of the members of the crew, including Kaz Brekker, a dis/abled character who walks with a cane. Kaz sustained his injury from jumping off of a roof and breaking his leg after robbing a bank when he was fourteen (Bardugo, 2015, p.401). As the story progresses, we learn more about Kaz's dis/ability by reading chapters from his perspective. Kaz explicitly rejects the offer of having his leg healed by Grisha powers, as he views it to be an inextricable part of himself:

[His cane] became a declaration. 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. The cane became a part of the myth he built. (Bardugo, 2015, p.401)

This representation aligns with Schalk's (2018) theorising of 'defamiliarization', as it challenges the reader's expectations about dis/ability and what it entails by portraying it as a strength rather than a weakness that needs to be fixed. Schalk (2018) argues that:

By representing realist disabilities in nonrealist contexts, these fantasy texts push readers to understand disability from the perspective of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes. (Schalk, 2018, p.119).

In *Six of Crows* (2015), readers also get to experience the story from the perspectives of characters of colour Inej Ghafa and Jesper Fahey. Thomas observes that for BIPOC

readers, “rarely is the narrative focalized through [their] eyes,” (2019, p.24). Thus, focalising the story through a marginalised character’s perspective plays a crucial role in telling counter-stories that disrupt and challenge stereotypes and damaging representations of BIPOC characters. Stephens and McCallum (2009) argue that:

If there is a single narrator or single focaliser, and that speaking voice (opposition of perception) is positioned within the dominant culture, then participants from other groups cannot be represented from ‘inside.’ Focalised from without, they are effectively denied subjectivity. . . .If actions, events and attitudes are focalised through the perspective of the majority culture, ethnic otherness is implicitly depicted as deviating from a norm and therefore becomes other and lesser (p.132).

Davis also highlights the importance of multiple point-of-view chapters in her examination of Adeyemi’s (2018) *Children of Blood and Bone*, writing: “the multiple narrators provide an examination of the complexities of privilege, agency, and activism under an oppressive system” (2020, p.14). Furthermore, participants for this research also agreed that this mode of storytelling is of particular interest to them, saying:

“This is what I especially would enjoy from this. It’s telling me it’s an epic fantasy series, multi-point of view, like, I definitely want to see it from every single angle, but it’s cleverly structured so that there’s some deception of the reader going on.” [Anonymous Participant J, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“And I think the thing is, like, when you have these, kind of, group dynamic narratives, even if you are only attached to one member of them, you will really, really root for them and that will go a long way towards making that narrative overall stand out. And even if the writing is perhaps not everything, and it’s not massively novel, I would... if the voice is strong enough, I would be, like, yeah, this is really interesting.” [Anonymous Participant J, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“I think that's something that's trending quite a lot at the minute, even with shows like Stranger Things. And I think that that's very popular. And when you combine that with the magic and the circus performer and all these kind of potentials for backstories, again, that could be really strong.” [Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

As previously mentioned in this section and as Participant D points out, examples of the Crew Hero trope can also be found in media, such as Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016-2022). McDaniel (2019) argues that the *Stranger Things* series “uses the progressive potential inherent in the liminality of the youth horror genre to offer alternatives, to the exclusionary psychological and narrative structures characteristic of typical teen films” (p.206). Furthermore, the Other status of the crew of main characters in *Stranger Things* “offer[s] a vision of adolescent development that is more flexible and more inclusive than rites of passage in traditional teen films” (McDaniel, 2019, p.206). Thus, the Other status of the crew members—in terms of gender, body size, racial, dis/abled, and queer identities—in narratives featuring the Crew Hero trope, provides an alternative space that is inherently more inclusive. Indeed, this narrative structure “rejects the notion of one ‘normal’ experience intended to construct ideal bodies” (McDaniel, 2019, p.210), therefore becoming “less about showing a ‘true’ coming of age experience and more about exposing the problems with the dominant narratives we tell ourselves about adolescence and diversity” (p.219). Ironically, the YA horror genre as portrayed in Netflix's *Stranger Things* “builds a *safer, less stigmatized* space for exploring the core concerns of adolescence,” because the monsters in this setting can be a metaphor to represent the hardships of adolescence, particularly regarding the various identities of marginalised adolescents (McDaniel, 2019, p.211) (emphasis added). By the same token, YA fantasy literature, media, and culture—despite its inherent grittiness and violence—can provide a safe and welcoming space for marginalised

characters to explore a version of adolescence that is not necessarily based on a White, able-bodied, heterosexual experience.

This multiple PoVs aspect also means that there are some parallels that can be identified with fantasy tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), particularly *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*. For instance, Participant J linked Vignette D's tropes to *D&D*, saying:

“Amazing. This is my favourite trope. I absolutely love this. I tend to call it in my head...I don't know what kind of technical term you're defining it in your research but I do tend to call it the D&D trope.” [Anonymous Participant J, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

While *D&D* draws from many different sources of inspiration, Tolkien's imaginary world, Middle-earth, remains the main inspiration (Lapointe, 2020). *D&D* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson (1974) and became an influential element in the construction of Western pop culture (Lapointe, 2020). The success of *D&D* “established it as a model for other fantasy tabletop and online role-playing games” (Lapointe, 2020, p.138). Furthermore, Antero Garcia (2017) notes that:

as the harbinger of an entire genre of codified tabletop play and video game tropes, *D&D* has significantly shaped the landscape of pop culture as portrayed in books, on screens (big and small), and via gaming consoles. (Garcia, 2017, p.232).

D&D and the Crew Hero trope have some apparent similarities, including the ensemble cast dynamic and the fantasy setting. However, in this research, I draw a distinction between what I call the Crew Hero trope and *D&D*. While the crew, as portrayed in *Six of Crows*, foregrounds ‘diversity’—in terms of ‘race’, dis/ability, body size, gender, and sexuality—*D&D* deals with some lingering problematic issues. For instance, “*D&D*'s rules encourage simplistic understandings of good and evil” (Lapointe, 2020, p.144). I acknowledge that a significant characteristic of tabletop RPGs is “the potential fans have for

influencing game production and play” (Lapointe, 2020, p.140). However, while players can make decisions regarding the creation of characters, “the resources provided for them tend to reinforce reductive racial identities through stereotypes” (Lapointe, 2020, p.141). As Garcia further observes:

players extend and build from the tools of narrative construction they are provided in order to collaboratively extend problematic representations embedded within this system. (Garcia, 2017, p.241).

While players can still challenge the racial identities present in *D&D*, it is rendered more difficult due to the “game’s mechanics” (Lapointe, 2020, p.143). Contrastingly, the Crew Hero trope in YA fantasy fundamentally and intentionally distances itself from damaging and problematic representations of marginalised identities. Thus, this trope aligns with the “progressive model” of story structure as identified by McDaniel for the case of youth horror (2019, pp.209–210). While this model shares some similarities with traditional models of storytelling, it also provides “new, unfamiliar, and more inclusive qualities” (McDaniel, 2019, p.211). This model also puts forward “a way of understanding intersectional identity and its fluidity within diverse youth”, as well as a move away from the past while still recognising its undeniable impact (McDaniel, 2019, p.211).

The psychology theory of ‘in-group/out-group’ categorisation can also provide a useful framework in understanding the importance of Crew Hero narratives in YA. As previously explored, seeing ourselves in the books we read is a powerful experience as we can easily identify with those characters that we relate to (Bishop, 1990). In other words “we have more empathy for those we see as like us” (Prinz, 2011, p.226). Indeed, my own understanding of identification aligns with these views. Furthermore, Hogan (2011) argues that:

In-group/out-group divisions are, of course, pervasive in real life. But they are also pervasive in literary works. Racial, religious, ethnic, national and other ideologies are widespread in literature. Thus literary works may not only foster an openness to empathy; they may also foster an inhibition of empathy through identity categorization (p.70)

Therefore, Crew Hero narratives such as Vignette D and *Six of Crows* offer a valuable opportunity to create an ‘in-group’ category that is ‘diverse’ and inclusive. This creates a sense of belonging within the story that also expands beyond it, as Victor Watson argues: “The sense of a fellowship within the stories is inseparably enmeshed with the sense of fellowship outside in the social life where other readers share it” (2000, p.8). Thus, the Crew Hero narrative allows more readers with marginalised identities to identify as part of the ‘in-group’ themselves. This might seem like a small shift, but it is significant considering that marginalised readers, more often than not, have felt as part of the ‘out-group’, which is often synonymous with the Other, the villain, or the monster. As Cohen (1996) notes in his thesis about the monster’s identity:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectal Other...the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. (p.7)

One of the prominent characteristics of the crew members is that they were not chosen by a higher power or prophecy, such as the case for the Chosen One hero (Chowdhury, 2006). Instead, these characters are expendable and replaceable. Bardugo illustrates this point, writing:

No mourners, no funerals. Another way of saying good luck. But it was something more. A dark wink to the fact that there would be no expensive burials for people like them, no marble markers to remember their names, no wreaths of myrtle and rose. (Bardugo, 2016, p.266)

Participant C identified this type of hero, saying:

“So it’s heroes who maybe don’t fit that normal superman mould anymore... Heroes who actually don’t want to be heroes. They’re kind of rejected from society normally and not seen as fitting in and they have the chance to kind of prove themselves and come together and save everyone else who’s been mean to them.” [Anonymous Participant C, interview with a Marketing Manager 2020]

Findings from my interviews revealed that some YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers in the UK are increasingly looking for Crew Hero narratives that allow for more ‘diversity’ and inclusion. Lapointe points out that:

Fantasy is subject to racial prejudices. Hierarchies suggest who is respected or despised based on race: gnomes are good and trolls are bad. Race is a metaphor of difference and is often used as a reductive identifier to determine friend or foe. (Lapointe, 2020, p.138)

However, as Lapointe (2020) further explains: “it is not enough to flip the expectations; having evil elves and heroic giants does not solve the problem that racial identities are their first characteristic rather than personal identities” (p.139). In the context of YA fantasy, one solution can be identified in the shift of interest from tropes associated with Chosen One heroes to tropes associated with Crew Heroes as the latter aligns with the parameters of ‘diverse’ narratives. Ultimately, I argue that the Crew Hero fundamentally provides an opportunity for marginalised characters to reimagine the spaces they inhabit in YA fantasy.

Towards ‘Diversifying’ YA Fantasy Tropes

In the previous sections, I have demonstrated through an analysis of the four vignettes some of the YA fantasy tropes and trends that publishing professionals and social media influencers are currently looking for in the UK, as well as the ones that they would be hesitant about. I then built on those insights to examine the potential problematic implications

of some of these tropes, as it is important to recognise and acknowledge the role that these tropes have in perpetuating systems of oppression and damaging representation of characters from marginalised groups. In order to be able to move towards constructing more ‘diverse’ and inclusive tropes, we must publish ‘diverse’ YA fantasy books that transcend problematic representations.

Achieving this requires nuanced approaches. Although the ultimate goal would be to equip everyone in the publishing industry as well as the authors with the required knowledge and to open the door for them to be able to create books that do not perpetuate damaging representations of marginalised groups; the reality is still far from that. Ramdarshan Bold (2019a) identified some of the most common obstacles in the YA market that authors of colour face, including: “The under-representation of gatekeepers from marginalised groups”, and “[n]ot enough backing/marketing once the authors of colour’s books had been published” (p.147). Regarding this issue, Thomas suggests that the solution “requires mentoring diverse talent, actively acquiring new stories, and then moving toward culturally sustaining visions of editorship, marketing, reviewing, librarianship, book retailing, and literacy education” (2019, p.169). Ramdarshan Bold (2019a) demonstrates that an increase in the number of editors of colour alone might not be enough to increase ‘diverse’ representation in the books they publish. Furthermore, Squires argues that:

There is no simple equation to be made between diversity of workforce (both commissioning editors and writers), diversity of content and diverse readerships. We read to see ourselves and our culture reflected, but also to find out about other experiences, cultures, places, and periods; BAME editors will not always want to commission writers of colour, for example; and both writers of colour and white writers will want to create characters and scenarios which are outside their own direct experience. (Squires, 2017, p.6)

In their study about ‘diversity’ in trade fiction and publishing, Saha and Van Lente note that:

it is only when publishers rethink ‘diversity’, which goes beyond the question of workforce composition and instead focuses on catering for the full diversity of the nation, that we will see more writers of colour published, and published well. (2020, pp.10–11)

Thus, the aim of Saha and Van Lente’s study was to “*rethink ‘diversity’* by shifting the debate from a sole focus on the *quantity* of minorities who work in publishing to the *quality* of the experience,” (Saha and Van Lente, 2020, p.2) (emphasis in original). When asked about their predictions for the future of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy, many participants interviewed for this research shared the hope and expectation that the future of YA would sustain its interest in ‘diversity’:

“I think that we will see increasing diversity across the board.” [Kristina Perez, interview with Literary Agent 2020]

“I think it's only going to get more diverse. And I think Children of Blood and Bone has, kind of, opened the barriers. So I'm hoping we see a lot more books for, like, Indian culture and Middle Eastern and Asian and all kinds of different cultures and kind of drawing from different historical myths and culture. And yeah, I'm hoping it will just get more and more diverse. I don't think it's going to go backwards and get less diverse anytime soon.” [Anonymous Participant D, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Gosh, I think, I hope that it will become a more thoughtful process and that you will see more voices and more experiences represented. And I hope it's done sensitively... And I hope they make space for people to tell their Own Voices stories, but where they're not telling Own Voices stories, there's space for them to explore that in a way that is sensitive and considerate to the people around them.” [Anonymous Participant E, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

“Um, I don't think it's ever going to, like... plateau. I think it's almost going to stop being a conversation. This is obviously a kind of Utopian, happy image in my head, but I don't think it's ever going to like go back. Pandora's box is open now, we're getting all these new exciting stories and publishers are learning that they make money, and they also get to feel good about themselves and feel like they're doing good books and stuff, and also like I know we always have these images... the kind of faceless corporate machine. But at the end of the day, the majority of editors are good people who want to bring in good stories, they want to feel like they're making the world a better place with these books, so being able to publish more diverse books, reach more readers, represent more readers, make everybody feel they're part of this world a bit more than they're used to. [Anonymous Participant H, interview with a publishing professional 2020]

While this consensus among these experts in the field of YA fantasy paints an optimistic picture, we must ask ourselves what some of the practical and concrete tools are that can be implemented to ensure that future YA fantasy books are ‘diverse’ and inclusive and that the representation of marginalised people within these narratives challenges and disrupts hegemonic tropes. To achieve these goals of real change, Thomas (2019) suggests:

we must move beyond the charted territory of known fantastic worlds to what the writers of fantasy have thought of as terra incognita ‘the undiscovered country’, to the places in the waking dream where the lines disappear on the maps and we step out into places unknown (p.165)

Aligning with this view, I suggest that part of the terra incognita of the publishing industry might consist of roles that are not typically common in the publishing industry. Thus, one solution to the lack of ‘diversity’ and to the representation issues might be to introduce a new position that could be beneficial to the process of improving the representation of marginalised groups. This role would be that of a Product Manager. A publishing professional who would be responsible for overseeing the lifecycle of the book from

acquisition to publication. This publishing Product Manager would specialise in ‘diversity’ and inclusion. In general, a Product Manager “works with the people who make a product, those who use the product and those who manage the business to ensure that the product is meeting everyone's needs” (AGCAS editors, 2020, para.1). Therefore, a publishing Product Manager would collect and analyse feedback from sensitivity readers and experts on the representation topics featured in the book. Their analysis would closely examine various aspects of ‘diversity’ and representation of marginalised people such as: interrogating the kinds of roles that BIPOC, dis/abled, and queer characters occupy; the language used to describe these characters; and the spaces they inhabit in the story. Part of their job would be to have connections with a wide network of sensitivity readers that specialise in different areas of ‘diversity’ to be able to find the right expert for each book. This Product Manager would have regular meetings with other professionals—such as cover designers, editors, and marketers—who are involved in the publishing process to ensure that issues relating to the representations of marginalised characters are at the forefront of the conversation. The Product Manager would also have meetings with the author and share some of the insights gathered from sensitivity readers and experts about a topic featured in the book. The author would still be the one deciding what ultimately remains in the book and what gets amended or deleted; however, this process will ensure that they are able to make an informed decision with the help of comments that they might not have considered otherwise. In the same way that publishing any book requires a certain degree of collaboration—between the author, literary agent, editors, designers, marketers, and more—publishing diversely and inclusively requires a collaboration between people who are knowledgeable about the specific issues that a given novel deals with to be able to advise the author accordingly. Adding this additional step in the publishing process, not only takes some of the pressure and anxiety away from the

author but also ensures that the publisher has taken the necessary steps to provide ‘diverse’ and inclusive stories to their readers.

As many participants agreed, ‘diversity’ is expected to play a large role in the future of YA fantasy. I believe that adding this crucial step and adopting this role in the publishing industry would dramatically reduce ‘diversity’-related issues. Given that YA has been at the forefront of the ‘diversity’ conversation, I suggest that this could potentially be the next step to move away from cancel culture and be able to publish more ‘diverse’ stories confidently by raising the standards of the representation of marginalised groups.

Conclusion

Tropes and trends by their very nature are constantly in flux; therefore, any study attempting to pinpoint these elements can only offer a glimpse at a specific moment in time from the perspective of a specific set of people. This means that generalisations regarding this topic are difficult to make. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter was not to imply that every YA publishing professional and social media influencer shares the same views, but instead to gain insight into the thought process of some publishing professionals and social media influencers, at a specific moment in time, that can in combination with the rest of the data gathered and analysed in this thesis, paint a big picture of the YA fantasy ‘genre world’.

This chapter aimed to consider YA fantasy tropes from the different perspectives of people who are involved in the publishing process to be able to reach a fuller, richer understanding of the expectations and the restrictions that govern the genre. For this purpose, I analysed the tropes featured in the vignettes I designed for this research. My discussion in this chapter focuses on various YA fantasy tropes and their implications in the ‘diversity’ conversation. I build on existing scholarship and expand the discussion to interrogate the spaces occupied by marginalised characters in YA fantasy. This chapter demonstrates that some of the people who are involved in the publishing process of YA fantasy in the UK are

looking for more inclusive, ‘diverse’, and original content. In other words, stereotypical and problematic tropes are now viewed through a more critical eye.

If we consider popular YA fantasy conventions with ‘diversity’ and inclusion in mind, we realise that some of the traditional tropes were not designed with marginalised characters as a focus. In chapter 5, I demonstrate how the Chosen One character clashed with the racebending of the main character Alina Starkov in Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone* (please see p.244). In this chapter, I further explore this idea by examining more YA fantasy tropes and the implications that these have for marginalised characters, by using the data gathered from insightful interviews with YA fantasy publishing professionals and social media influencers based in the UK. In the next chapter, I explore the perspective of YA fantasy readers drawing from my quantitative online survey to further examine the impact of the representation issues in YA fantasy.

Chapter 4: Representations and the Perspective of YA Fantasy

Readers

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined some of the popular publishing trends and narrative tropes of YA fantasy from the perspective of publishing professionals and social media influencers. In this chapter, I extend my analysis to another crucial element of the publishing circuit and the YA fantasy ‘genre world’: the readers. As Darnton (1982) highlights, “the parts do not take on their full significance unless they are related to the whole” (1982, p.67). Therefore, this chapter aims to address my second research question: **‘How do YA fantasy readers perceive ‘diverse’ representations, and to what extent do they see themselves in these stories?’** For this purpose, I draw from my quantitative online survey with YA fantasy readers as well as scholarship in the fields of Fandom Studies, Media Studies, Cultural Studies, and Publishing and Book Studies.

In recent years, the role of the reader in the publishing journey has been highlighted via the rise of social media, fandoms, and cancel culture. Furthermore, “writers are, almost without exception, readers first” (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.23). Wilkins and Bennet also note that: “No matter how much writers may attempt to refute the influence of the market while producing new work, they reveal themselves to be neither blind nor immune to its expectations” (2021, p.36). Thus, the reader can be considered the point at which the publishing journey begins and ends. My research gathered data from YA fantasy readers regarding their perception of ‘diverse’ representations and their experiences seeing themselves represented (or not) in this genre.

This chapter demonstrates that YA fantasy readers are looking for more ‘diverse’ representations to be able to see themselves in the books they read, which illustrates the need to improve ‘diverse’ and inclusive representations in YA fantasy because there is a plethora

of stories that have not been told yet, as well as stories that have not been told authentically. Change can emerge from readers because they have the power to determine the direction that the market takes. Readers, particularly with the help of social media, have acquired a growing role in dictating which books get published and which ones get cancelled, as I included a few examples in the Literature Review Chapter of this thesis (please see p.81). Indeed, readers have the power to uplift, support, and champion any story. Equally, readers also have the power to dismantle, shame, and cancel any story they deem problematic or unworthy of publication. Sometimes, this can be the same story at different points in time (please see Literature Review Chapter p.81 for more details on this).

While it is difficult to foretell which trends will become popular next in YA fantasy, it is however possible to examine the general trajectory and direction that the market is going in, particularly, in terms of goals. Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate YA fantasy's push towards more 'diverse' and inclusive narratives. Despite some significant obstacles, writers, readers, publishers, researchers, and media producers are taking steps to ensure that we keep doing better in the future. The topic of the representation of marginalised groups—or lack thereof—is an essential thread that links the three discussion chapters of this thesis. For instance, Chapter 3 explores various YA fantasy trends and tropes that determine who gets to be represented and in what way. Chapter 5 examines how the representations of marginalised characters translate to screen adaptations and the implications that can arise from adding 'diversity' that was not built in the initial text. Finally, this chapter dives into the implications of the lack of representation and misrepresentation of marginalised groups by examining the perspective of the surveyed YA fantasy readers regarding these issues.

Representation and Seeing Ourselves in YA Fantasy

Readers are no longer considered an inactive element of the publishing journey as they were in the past (Darnton, 1982). On the contrary, readers are an important element of

the communication circuit (Darnton, 1982). Ray Murray and Squires (2013) examine the changes in the role of the reader in this circuit in the digital age (please see the Literature Review Chapter for more details p.62). In light of the rise of social media, reading can be considered a “collective writing process, which recasts the role of the author and the reader” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, p.128). Darnton describes reading as “the most difficult stage to study in the circuit followed by books” (1982, p.74). Further research that highlights the role of the modern reader includes studies on the digital literary sphere (Murray, 2018), Wattpad (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018b), Goodreads reviews and ratings (Thelwall, 2017; Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2018; Maity et al., 2018), social media (Templeton, 2019; Lo, 2020; B. Thomas, 2020), and book clubs (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019b; Norrick-Rühl, 2019). The power of audiences can also be shown through their impact on the production of bestsellers, which then determines to some extent what other stories get to be published (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021). Wilkins and Bennet explain that bestselling authors are “mostly experts on the market: its trends, its demands, and its indisputable place as the context in which they write and reach their readers” (2021, p.33). Furthermore, while these authors claim that they write according to their interests, they are still very much aware that “they write within a context replete with market pressures” (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.39). In other words, while it is true that bestselling authors hold a lot of power in dictating genre expectations, it is equally true that they are restricted by the directions that the market takes.

Thomas describes a process which demonstrates the role of the readers and fans in storytelling, called “restorying”, as “the complex ways that contemporary young people narrate the word and the world, analyze their lived experiences, and then synthesize and recontextualize a multiplicity of stories in forming new narratives” (Thomas, 2019, p.159). Restorying comes in different forms, including identity (such as racebending and queerbending), place (i.e. changing location), mode (i.e. transmedia storytelling), perspective

(i.e. counter-storytelling), metanarrative (such as collective storytelling), and time (such as alternate history) (Thomas, 2019, pp.159–164; Thomas and Stornaiuolo, 2016, pp.318–322). Racebending, a concept that I explore in the context of screen adaptations in chapter 5 (please see p.244 for more on this topic), is also relevant to the fandom conversation. Warner describes “racebending” as a way in which “online fan communities attempt to reinscribe Black women into central roles that previously rendered them invisible” (2015, p.39). Warner further explains that this practice is used in fan fiction, “when writers change the race and cultural specificity of central characters or pull a secondary character of color from the margins, transforming her into the central protagonist” (p.39).

In this chapter, I identify some of the issues that YA fantasy readers experience when they try to find aspects of their identities reflected back at them, and analyse some of their expectations as well as the restrictions of the YA fantasy genre. Before diving into the analysis, it is useful to clearly understand what representation means and the impact it can have on readers. To put it simply, representation “connects meaning and language to culture” (Hall et al., 2013, p.1). Hall et al. further note that representation is:

the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer to* either the ‘real’ world of objects, people or events, or indeed imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall et al., 2013, p.3) (emphasis in original)

The importance of representation and seeing ourselves in the books we read cannot be overstated, particularly for young adults. As explored in further detail in the Literature Review Chapter of this thesis (please see p.52), there is extensive scholarship and commentary highlighting the importance of readers seeing themselves in the books they read, including but not limited to: Bishop (1982, 1990, 2007, 2012), Myers (2014), Thomas (2014, 2016, 2019), and Ramdarshan Bold (2019a). Furthermore, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche warns

of the “danger of a single story” that results from the lack of ‘diversity’ in the stories we create and consume (Adichie, 2009). Christine A. Jenkins and Michael Cart argue:

young people have a particularly urgent need to see their own faces reflected in the pages of a book and find the corollary comfort that derives from the knowledge that one is not alone in a vast universe, that there are others ‘like me’. (2018, p.3)

The BookTrust report in 2019 showed that one of the main barriers to having more inclusive children’s book creators is the “[u]nder-representation of people of colour in the children’s book industry and the systemic issues this can cause” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019c, p.10). Furthermore, the 2020 *National Literacy Trust* report revealed that 32.7% of the surveyed 58,346 children and teenagers (aged 9 to 18 years old) said they did not see themselves represented in the books they read (Best et al., 2020, p.1). The same report also revealed that: “More children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds than White backgrounds say that they don’t see themselves in what they read (40% vs. 30.5%)” (Best et al., 2020, p.1). On the same topic, the CLPE *Reflecting Realities* (2020) report points out that:

learning to read is a social process, to be successful you need to connect with your reading material, you need to be able to see yourself, in some way, in what you read. The under-representation of Black, Asian or minority ethnic characters means that readers from a range of backgrounds do not always have the opportunity to make those connections. (p.3)

Darren Chetty shares his experience with the children he taught about an assignment to write a story, observing that most of the students from minority groups decided to use English names for their characters. Chetty observed that his students, when asked to write a story, gravitated towards writing “a story featuring characters with ‘traditional’ English names who speak English as their first language” (2016, p.97). Chetty's attempts to incite

students to write stories, in which they could see themselves represented, have been met with resistance, not only from some other teachers but also from the sheer reluctance of students who were so used to seeing people who looked—and spoke—like them pushed to the periphery of the narrative, that they had a hard time picturing themselves at the centre (2016, pp.97–98). Similarly, Walter Dean Myers (2014, para.18) draws attention to the importance of representation asking the question: “Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books?”

In the following sections, I examine and analyse the participants’ responses to the online survey and discuss some of the implications that YA fantasy representations can have on these readers.

YA Fantasy Reading Habits

The survey asked YA fantasy readers (n=308) about some of their reading habits: such as the approximate number of YA fantasy books they had read in the previous year (Figure 7), as well as their preferred type of YA fantasy books in terms of how recently it was published, i.e. whether they preferred older publications or more recent releases (Figure 8). As illustrated in Figure 7, a little over half of the survey respondents (51.30%) claimed to have read more than ten YA fantasy books approximately in the previous year. The rest of the respondents were almost equally split between approximately ‘one to five’ (23.05%) and ‘five to ten’ (24.03%) YA fantasy books read in the previous year. Finally, a very small percentage (1.62%) of the survey respondents stated that they had not read any YA fantasy books in the previous year. The fact that most participants for this survey read at least five or more YA fantasy books in the previous year indicates that these readers have a good grasp of the genre and an understanding of its common tropes. However, it is worth noting that the opinion of those who have read less than five YA fantasy in the previous year is also valuable

as it can provide insight into the needs of occasional readers of the genre and highlight the potential gaps in the genre in terms of what it is currently offering to these readers.

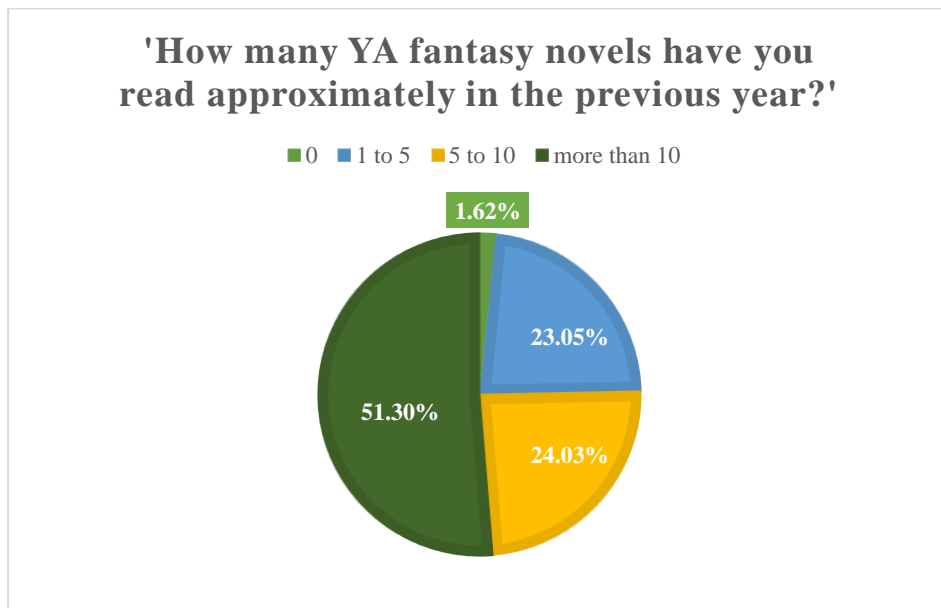


Figure 7: Number of YA Fantasy books read in the previous year

The survey respondents were then asked about their YA fantasy preferences, namely, if they preferred reading YA fantasy books that were published years ago or if they preferred reaching for the new releases. As illustrated in Figure 8, the great majority of the survey participants (83.44%) stated that they usually read a mix between newly released books and older publications of YA fantasy. Only 9.42% of the survey respondents preferred to read primarily new releases, and a mere 7.14% gravitated towards reading mainly older publications of YA fantasy. Therefore, while some participants had a preference in terms of how recent the books they read are, the majority of these readers enjoy both. Thus, this means that most of them have a good understanding of both recent YA fantasy tropes as well as the ones that were popular in previous years.

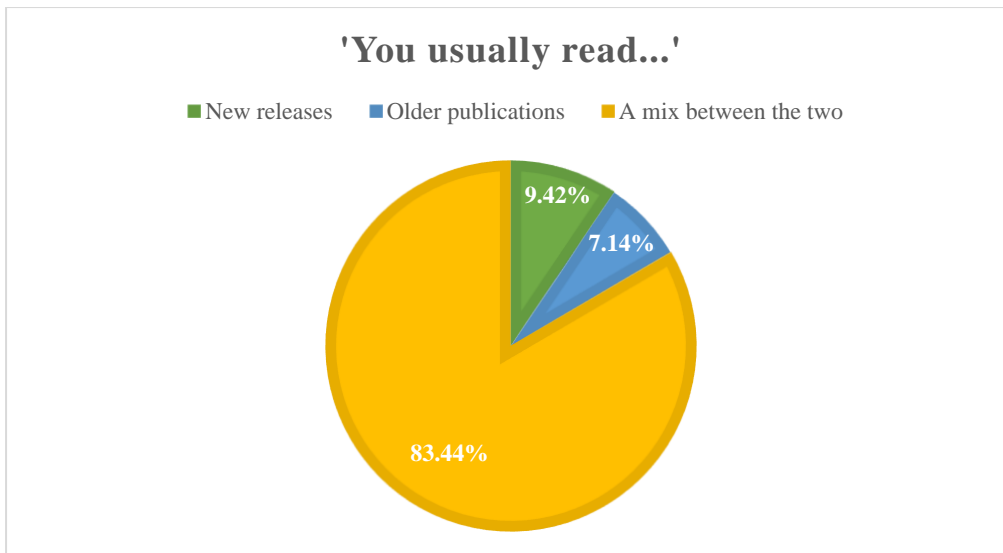


Figure 8: Reading preferences of YA fantasy readers

Because of the fast-changing nature of the genre and all the development that took place in terms of ‘diversity’ over the last few years (please see the Literature Review Chapter p.52 for more details on this), having participants that were familiar with both the current and previous popular tropes and trends meant that they would have a big picture view of the genre and its trajectory. That being said, participants who exclusively read newer releases of YA fantasy can also offer a unique perspective on the most recent trends that currently govern the genre. One explanation might be that these readers are looking for more ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy or that they are no longer interested in reading overused tropes and are instead craving more originality in recent publications, perhaps in search of the next popular trope in YA fantasy. Equally as important is the perspective of readers who exclusively read older releases of YA fantasy as they can offer an account into the tropes and trends that first made YA fantasy so popular. Perhaps, these readers are holding on to something that they might feel is missing in the more recent releases.

YA is known for its tendency to chase the next big thing. While the YA industry sometimes focuses its marketing on debut authors, most of the respondents for this survey shared that they were equally interested in reading new and older publications. This trend can

partly be explained by the influence of social media. For instance, Adam Silvera's contemporary YA book *They Both Die at the End* which was first published in 2017, boomed in sales in 2021 because it went viral on TikTok (Bayley, 2022b).

Marginalised Readers and Fans of YA Fantasy

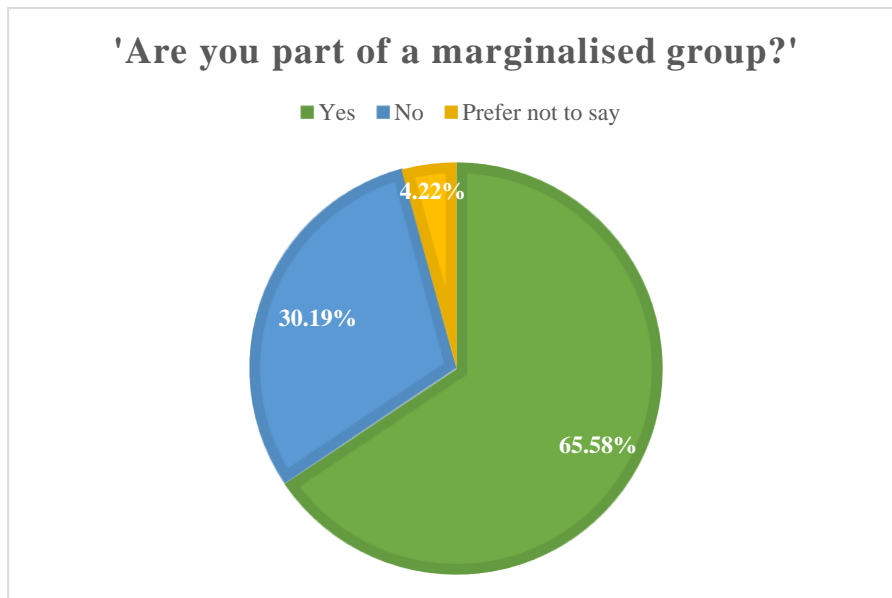


Figure 9: Identity of the surveyed YA fantasy readers

More than half of the survey respondents (65.58%) self-identified as being part of a marginalised group as defined by the *We Need Diverse Books* organisation

Figure 9). Another 30.19% reported that they did not identify as being part of a marginalised group. Finally, 4.22% of the surveyed participants preferred not to say whether or not they identified as part of a marginalised group. Therefore, marginalised readers of YA fantasy represent the majority of respondents for this survey. One possible explanation for this might be that readers from marginalised groups are inherently more likely to respond to a survey about the topic of 'diversity' than non-marginalised readers. Another explanation could be linked to the imaginary and escapist nature of fantasy that readers from marginalised groups are more likely to see themselves in. Yet another explanation is the explicit push towards 'diversity' in YA fantasy over the last few years, thus drawing more readers from marginalised groups to the genre in general. This could also be a simple reflection of the

people in my own social media circle and the people who follow me online, who were thus more likely to see the call for participation for this survey when I shared it. Furthermore, there are of course several possible reasons as to why 4.22% of the respondents preferred not to share information about their identity, ranging from they just did not feel it was relevant information, to fear of being perceived as biased in any way. However, it is also important to consider that the long history of eliding audiences and fans from marginalised groups might play a role in this, as Pande points out:

the default assumption of whiteness in [fan] spaces, though never made explicit, means that for the most part, fans who come from other racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds are hesitant to label or identify themselves in such ways. (Pande, 2018a, p.28)

Thus, it is possible that survey respondents who preferred not to share this information did not feel comfortable doing so because of this tradition of erasure of marginalised readers from fan spaces and conversations.

Representations of 'race'

Mel Stanfill considers “the fan as a concept proliferating in the internet era” (2019, p.3). Unsurprisingly, YA audiences and fans in general are also “more likely to be on the internet” (Wilkins, 2019, p.37). Foucault’s (1990, 2003, 2008) understanding of biopolitics explores the way in which governments influence their populations. Stanfill (2019) notes that while Foucault’s biopolitics is different from how the media industry operates, this concept can still be useful to reach a better understanding of the relationship between the industry and the fans. Stanfill (2019) further explains that:

metrics like Nielsen ratings, page hits, and advertising impressions permit industry to operate in terms of aggregates. This is why these processes cannot be understood by studying fans as individuals or cultures; industry does not engage them that way. (p.10)

Stanfill builds on Foucault's understanding of power and discourse and argues that: "discourse around fans reflects and reproduces a norm, a structuring ideal that identifies particular people and modes of behavior as correct, expected, desired—that is, normal" (2019, p.8). In her study about weight bias in YA, Averill describes the "norm" as "defined by that which is afforded regular representation and affirmed with positive feedback in terms of acceptability" (2016, p.30). Therefore, these norms are "inherently exclusionary" (Stanfill, 2019, p.9). The norm is also simultaneously "what makes some actions socially possible or desirable and what makes others impossible or undesirable" (Stanfill, 2019, p.9). Problematically, the proliferation of the notion of the 'norm' ultimately leads to the elision of marginalised identities within these fandom space (Stanfill, 2018). Stanfill argues that it is of the utmost importance not to "continue to elide race in fandom and fan studies" (2018, p.306). Furthermore, Gatson and Reid point out:

Not to speak about race, gender, class, sexuality—or being pressured not to speak—in a fandom space ends up creating the image of a "generic" or "normalized" fan. Such a fan identity is not free of race, class, gender, or sexuality but rather is assumed to be the default. (Gatson and Reid, 2011, para.4.1)

As explored in further detail in the literature review chapter of this thesis (please see p.77), fandoms reflect the potential power that readers can have on the stories they consume. However, as Woo observes: "There is a yawning void in fandom studies where a serious, on-going conversation about race ought to be" (Woo, 2017, p.245). Similarly, Stanfill notes that: "Fan studies, as a field, currently does not have a robust engagement with race" (Stanfill, 2018, p.305). Stanfill further argues that: "it is the whiteness of both fandom and fan studies that encourages this inattention to race" (2018, p.305). Nevertheless, there is important scholarship that highlights issues related to marginalised voices within audiences and fandom spaces (Stanfill, 2010, 2013, 2018; Gatson and Reid, 2011; Benwell et al., 2012; Young,

2014; Wanzo, 2015; Warner, 2015; Woo, 2017; McDermott, 2018; Pande, 2018a, 2020a, 2020b; Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a, 2019b).

The stereotypical Other status that has often been associated with fan identities, at least before fans became mainstream, brings some problematic implications. For instance, Kristen Warner (2015) notes:

I am troubled by the notion that fandom wholesale operates as Other—especially when considering the fact that many fans are part of dominant identity groups—White, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. (p.36)

Warner (2015) points out that: “While the stereotype of women in fandom generally precludes women of color as participants and producers of content, it is nevertheless true that Black and Brown female bodies do exist in fan communities” (2015, p.34). Warner (2015) shares insights about “women of color, who strive for visibility in a landscape that favors a more normative (read: White) fan identity and that often dismisses and diminishes the desires of its diverse body to see themselves equally represented not only on screen but in the fan community at large” (p.34).

Fantasy in general “has always had a privileged relationship with fandom” (Wilkins, 2019, p.35). In her analysis of a fan website dedicated to fans of George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (*Westeros.com*), Young (2014) notes: “While the diversity of the [fantasy] genre, prominent authors, the cultures that inspire them and audiences is increasing, it is still remarkable for its whiteness, particularly in those works which gain mainstream popularity” (p.737). Young considers fantasy audiences to be as important as the authors of these stories in terms of genre (2014). Furthermore, Lapointe points out that: “By using fantasy as a metaphor for exploring and redefining current realities, people can observe the subtle ways that racial thinking continues to influence everyday life” (2020, p.136). Young notes that: “One way in which the whiteness of fantasy fandom is maintained is through

policing acceptable ways of reading a given fictional text or world” (2014, p.738).

Furthermore, “the conventions of fantasy texts and habits of the genre often, but not invariably, make whiteness in fantasy communities invisible” (Young, 2014, p.739). Young (2014) explains:

The roots of popular fantasy’s lack of racial diversity – in terms of authors, audiences and textual content – are very deep. Authors whose work is foundational to the genre, notably Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft, held racist views which imbued not only their own writings but also the conventions of the genre which they helped create. (p.738)

In 2009, there was a significant controversy about ‘race’ within fandoms in science fiction and fantasy, now known as RaceFail ’09. This controversy is described as:

Racefail ’09 refers to critical race and antiracist work being done in offline and online fandoms. Discussions by fans of color in a variety of online spaces, both private and public, dedicated to antiracist work, activism, education, and support, report ten or more years' worth of work spent confronting racism in science fiction/fantasy fandom online and off. (Gatson and Reid, 2011, sec.2.4)

The RaceFail phenomenon was significant for many different reasons including that: “it marked the first time in online fandom’s history when SF/F’s racist and imperialist characterizations were debated in a forum where authors and editors of SF/F magazines and journals had to engage with those questions” (Pande, 2018a, p.33). Furthermore, RaceFail was also “the first time that alliances between nonwhite fans were made across forums and platforms” (Pande, 2018a, p.33). The RaceFail ’09 conversation had a big impact on the genre because it explored a wide range of issues including: the implications and consequences that White authors including or excluding characters of colour from their writing can have, the ways in which these characters are written, the ways in which readers of colour feel about these representations, and more (Stanfill, 2018, p.306). Moreover, N.K.

Jemisin (2010) points out that “**RaceFail was a good thing**. In fact, I think it was a necessary thing — not just for me and other writers/fans of color, but for the SFF field as a whole”

(emphasis in original). Jemisin (2010, para.10) further notes:

The way I see it, RaceFail was the big thaw for the SFF field. Fans of color, and white fans who were tired of the old ways, literally heated things up with an outpouring of long-pent rage. That fury was *utterly necessary*, because it shocked the whole genre enough to make it pay attention. Without that, SFF would have remained resistant — frozen — against such radical ideas as *why are all these futuristic stories full of white people, when they're already a minority on the planet now? and y'know, maybe erasing the brown people from your fantasy continent, or making them allegorical orcs, is a bad idea*. (emphasis in original)

Seeing Yourself Represented in YA Fantasy

One of the questions that the online survey asked YA fantasy readers was ‘how often do you see yourself in YA fantasy?’ It is worth noting that the idea of seeing yourself in a book can mean different things to different people. When readers say they see themselves in a particular novel, what is it exactly that they see? There is no right or wrong answer to this question, as readers see themselves represented in different ways. Some readers might mean that they saw an aspect or more of their identities such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, body type, dis/ability, or religion represented in the book and therefore identify with these aspects. Others might relate to an emotion or to a particular experience that the characters are going through. It might also be through the connections among characters such as family dynamics, friendships, or romantic relationships. The two concepts of identification and parasocial relationships can be useful in understanding the importance of these virtual connections between audiences and characters (Hall, 2020). One interpretation of identification is that it “consists of a sense of affinity toward a character, an affinity characterized by empathic feelings and understanding of the motives and adopting the goals of the character” (Cohen et

al., 2018, p.507). According to Alice Hall (2020), identification is “a form of perspective-taking that involves experiencing a story from the perspective of a character within the narrative”, whereas a parasocial relationship (PSR) is “a sense of virtual relationship”, i.e. a feeling that the character could be a person that the reader knows, but they do not perceive the character as a reflection of themselves (p.2). Cohen (2001) notes that identification goes deeper than just consuming the story, writing:

When reading a novel or watching a film or a television program, audience members often become absorbed in the plot and identify with the characters portrayed. Unlike the more distanced mode of reception—that of spectatorship—*identification* is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them. (p.245)
(emphasis in original).

Rita Felski uses the term identification to “describe an affinity that is based on some sense of similarity” (2020, p.81). Felski continues to explain that because audiences are able to identify with magical creatures or even animals, this shows that “semblances are often metaphorical rather than literal” (2020, p.83). Murray Smith notes that the concept of identification is “more of a portmanteau word referring to a range of phenomena rather than a singular notion” (1994, p.34). Felski (2020, pp.94–111) builds on some of the ideas of Smith and identifies four main strands of identification. 1) “alignment” (p.94) refers to the narrative perspective and the focus of the story which have the power to determine to some extent the audiences who will resonate with the story. 2) “allegiance” refers to ethical and political affinities, that is, “whenever we find ourselves siding with a character and what we take that character to stand for” (Felski, 2020, p.96). 3) “recognition” on the other hand, refers to “an experience of coming to know: of being struck by some kind of insight about the self”

(Felski, 2020, p.101). Finally, 4) “empathy” is all about “sharing someone’s feelings and responding with concern to these feelings” (Felski, 2020, p.105).

As the scholarship above suggests, identification can mean different things to different people; therefore, for the purpose of this research, the interpretation of what it means to ‘see yourself’ was left open to the respondents to decide for themselves what they personally would describe as ‘seeing themselves’ in this genre. The pie chart in Figure 10 represents the percentages of the responses to this question (i.e. frequently, sometimes, rarely, and never). Felski defines the concept of ‘attachment’ and what it means for the relationship between art and audience, writing that: “to be attached is to be affected or moved and also to be linked or tied” (2020, p.1). Felski further explains that the reason why works of art matter is that “they create, or cocreate, enduring ties” (2020, p.1). Thus, writing authentic narratives and counter-narratives that reflect the experiences of people from socially marginalised groups is essential to create attachments and solid ties with audiences who see themselves in these books.

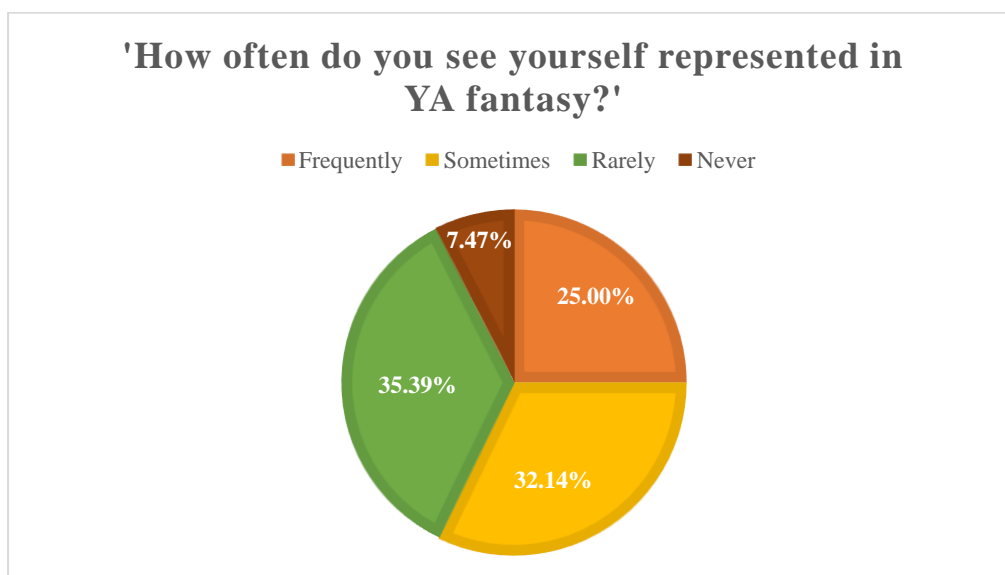


Figure 10: Seeing yourself in YA fantasy

Over a third of respondents for this survey (35.39%) revealed that they only *rarely* see themselves represented in the YA fantasy books they read (Figure 10). Furthermore, another

third (32.14%) of all the respondents said that they *sometimes* see themselves in YA fantasy. A quarter (25%) of survey respondents shared that they *frequently* see themselves in the YA fantasy they read. Finally, 7.47% of respondents reported having *never* been able to see themselves represented in these books. These statistics are reminiscent of the previously noted “*imagination gap*” (Thomas, 2019, p.5) (emphasis in original). These numbers not only highlight the current gap in ‘diversity’ and inclusion within the genre, but also demonstrate the need to write, publish, and support stories that explore cultures, settings, and ideas that have not been included in the YA fantasy genre yet. The following pie charts in Figure 11 illustrate the distribution of this question according to the identity of the survey respondent. Figure 11 shows that the most common answer from people who did not identify as being part of a marginalised group is that they frequently see themselves represented (58.06%), followed by 30.11% who reported seeing themselves sometimes. Only 9.68% reported rarely seeing themselves and 2.15% stated they had never seen themselves. This trend is almost flipped completely for the case of readers who identified as being part of a marginalised group. Indeed, almost half of these respondents (47.03%) stated that they only rarely see themselves in YA fantasy. This is followed by 34.16% who said they sometimes see themselves in these books. 9.90% of these participants never saw themselves in YA fantasy and only 8.91% of these respondents reported seeing themselves frequently. For the case of respondents who did not identify with either marginalised or non-marginalised groups, 38.46% reported seeing themselves frequently, another 38.46% see themselves rarely. Finally, 15.38% of these participants sometimes see themselves and 7.69% said they had never seen themselves in the YA fantasy books they read.

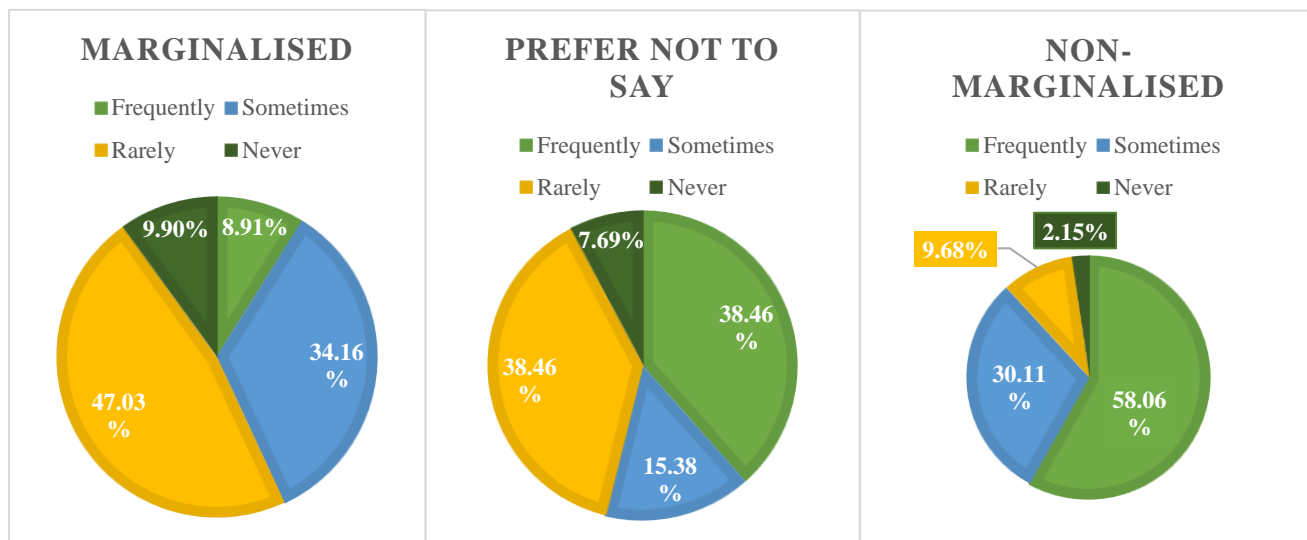


Figure 11: Seeing yourself in YA fantasy according to your identity

Therefore, the majority of respondents from non-marginalised groups see themselves represented frequently in YA fantasy and most respondents from marginalised groups rarely see themselves. These findings highlight the point that even though YA fantasy can appear to be a genre that is oriented towards ‘diversity’ and inclusion, it still has a long way to go before most of its readers are able to see themselves represented authentically and accurately. This is significant because of the implications it has on people’s lives as Hall notes: “patterns of representation can shape real-world expectations and behaviors” (2020, p.1). Hall further explains that “if portrayals of members of a particular social group are rare, it can convey or reinforce perceptions that the group lacks importance or status” (2020, p.1). Additionally, if marginalised groups rarely see themselves represented in a positive way, “they can miss out on the positive benefits that these models can bring” (Hall, 2020, p.1). Furthermore, being able to identify with characters is important because it has a “contribution to the development of self-identity” (Cohen, 2001, p.246). In other words, the way we see ourselves and the way we see others is impacted by the virtual connections we make with characters from the books that we read which further emphasises the need to ensure that more readers are represented on the page.

Seeing Others Represented in YA Fantasy

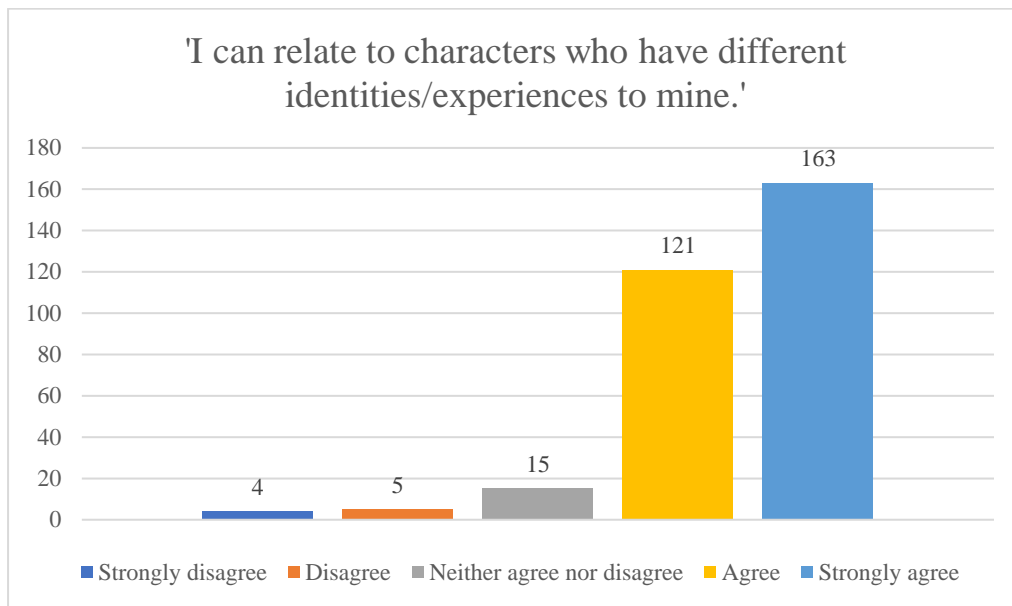


Figure 12: Relating to characters from different identities

In the previous section, I examined the opinions of survey respondents about seeing themselves represented in YA fantasy. In this section, I extend my analysis to explore their views on seeing characters who have different identities and experiences from their own. For this purpose, the survey respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I can relate to characters who have different identities and experiences to mine'. As illustrated in Figure 12, most survey respondents felt that they were able to relate to characters who have different identities and/or experiences to their own. Indeed, 121 readers (39.28%) agreed and a further 163 readers (52.92%) strongly agreed with this statement. Additionally, 15 respondents (4.87%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Only 5 respondents (1.62%) disagreed with the statement, and 4 more respondents (1.30%) strongly disagreed with the idea of being able to relate or identify with characters who are different from themselves. This statement is equally distributed across the different identities (marginalised, non-marginalised, and those who preferred not to say) with most readers agreeing or strongly agreeing. This is illustrated in the three pie charts in Figure 13.

Bishop's (1990) *Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors* metaphor also highlights the importance of seeing others in the stories we read. However, Hall demonstrates that:

although audience members can and often do form vicarious connections with media characters that are demographically different from themselves, in real-world contexts this might be less common than forming connections with demographically similar characters. (Hall, 2020, p.3)

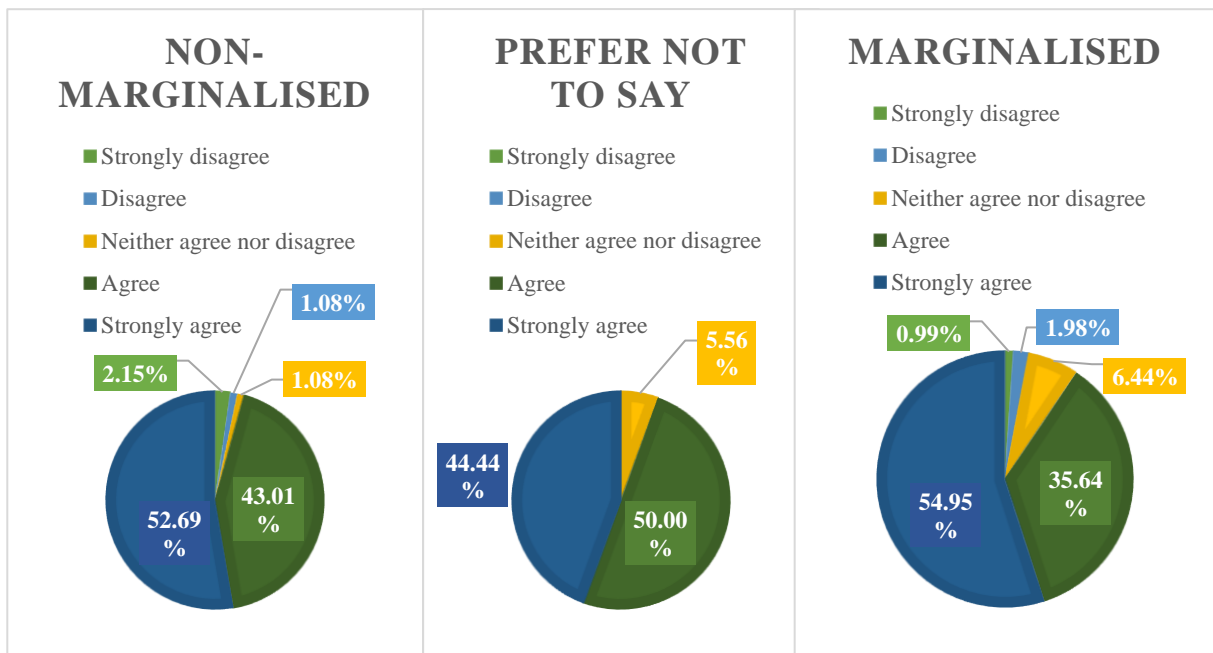


Figure 13: Relating to characters according to readers' identities

Empowering vs. Damaging Representations

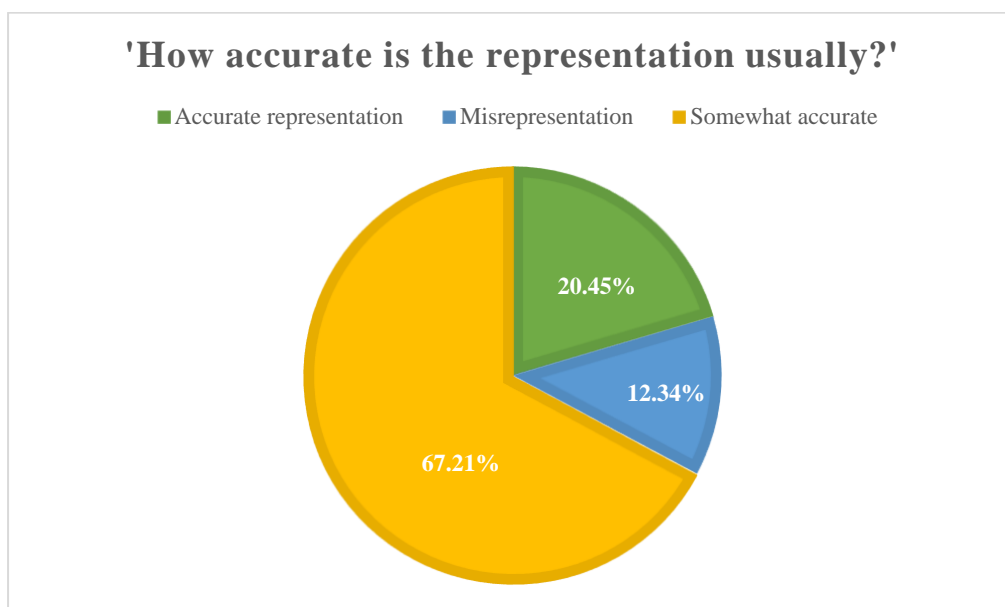


Figure 14: Accuracy of representations in YA fantasy

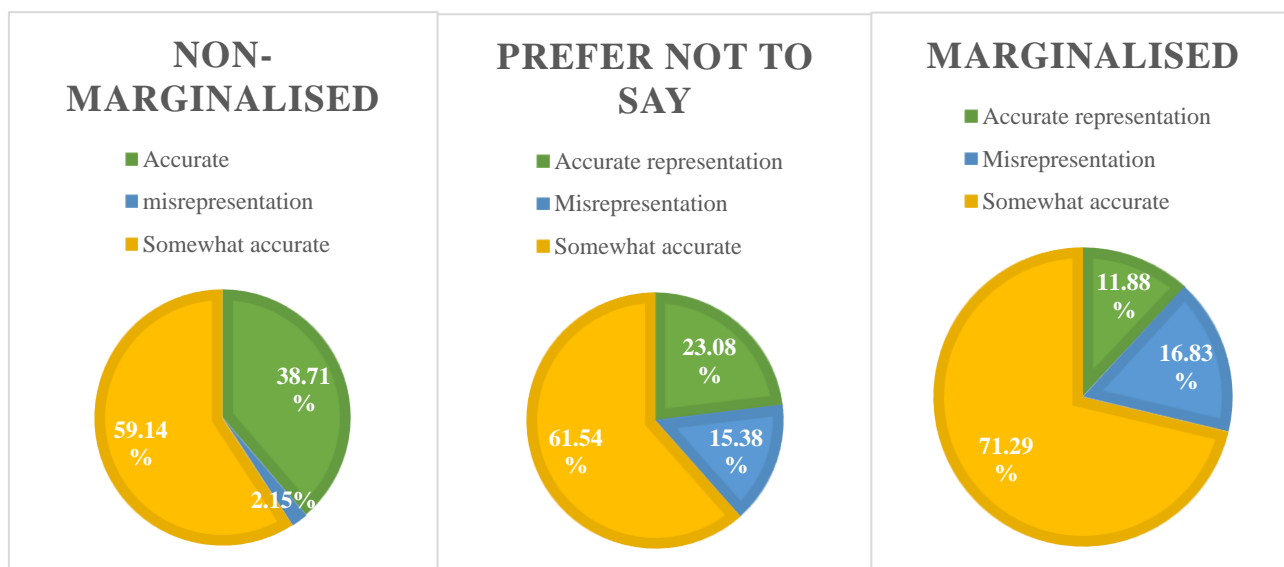


Figure 15: Accuracy of representation according to readers' identities

Of course, representation alone is not enough, as the ultimate goal of 'diverse' stories and Own Voices stories is to achieve authentic and accurate representations of marginalised identities. Therefore, the survey asked respondents about the level of accuracy of the representation they found in the YA fantasy stories they read, as illustrated in Figure 14. This question aimed to gather insights into how these readers felt about the representation they did find (if any) in these books. The majority of the survey respondents (67.21%) revealed that

they would describe the representation of their identities as *'somewhat accurate'*. Furthermore, 20.45% of the survey respondents felt that the representation in YA fantasy was *'accurate'*. Finally, 12.34% of survey participants described the quality of representation of their identities within this genre as *'misrepresentation'*. To take this analysis further, I looked at the distribution of these percentages across different identities i.e. marginalised readers, non-marginalised readers, and those who prefer not to share their identity. The findings demonstrate that readers who self-identified as being part of a marginalised group are more likely to be misrepresented in the YA fantasy stories they read than their non-marginalised counterpart. That is 16.83% of marginalised readers described the representation quality as *'misrepresentation'*. On the other hand, only 2.15% of non-marginalised readers felt that they were misrepresented in YA fantasy. Furthermore, 38.71% of the non-marginalised readers felt that the representation of their identity was *'accurate'*, while for marginalised readers this was a lower percentage (11.88%). For marginalised, non-marginalised and those who preferred not to say, the highest percentage was that of *'somewhat accurate'* representation (71.29%, 59.14%, and 61.54% respectively).

The findings reflect how readers from marginalised groups are disproportionately more likely to have aspects of their identities misrepresented in YA fantasy fiction. This misrepresentation can appear in different forms; for instance, the damaging and stereotypical kinds of roles that people from marginalised groups often occupy. As explored further in Chapter 5 (please see p.237), the roles of marginalised people are often relegated to the Other status. For instance, Thomas (2019) focuses on the roles of Black characters, writing:

The very presence of the Dark Other in a text of speculative fiction, across genre and mode, creates a profound ontological dilemma. This dilemma is inescapable, for readers and for writers, and must be reconciled. It is most often resolved by enacting symbolic and/or actual violence against the Dark Other. This is what readers and hearers of the

fantastic expect, for it mirrors the spectacle of violence against the endarkened and the Othered in our own world. It is a familiar template, an archetype that comforts, especially when the position of the Other in the real world is uncertain. (p.24)

To this, I would add that because this familiar dynamic “comforts”, it is particularly difficult to challenge or disrupt in any way. Furthermore, bell hooks notes that: “the field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people” (2015, p.3). As a result of the repeated misrepresentation and the unbalanced treatment of characters from marginalised groups, tropes were formed. Some of these tropes are documented in the fandom Wiki *tvtropes* including: “Black Dude Dies First” (*tvtropes*, n.d.), which I explore in further detail in chapter 5, please see p.233), “Bury Your Gays” (*tvtropes*, n.d.), and “Bury Your Disabled” (*tvtropes*, n.d.). These three tropes have one element in common, which is the disproportionate and blatant expendability of the lives of characters from marginalised groups compared to characters from dominant groups.

As we have witnessed over the last few years, the lack of representation and problematic representations can both result in mass online uproar and backlash from readers and fans. In the Literature Review chapter of this thesis (please see p.81), I explore a few of the most prominent cancelling campaigns that affected the YA fantasy genre including Zhao’s (2019) *Blood Heir*, Forest’s (2017) *The Black Witch*, Jackson’s (2019) *A Place for Wolves*, and Drake’s (2017) *The Continent*. Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips note that: “In YA, as a reflection of contemporary Western culture, White, nondisabled, cisgender and heterosexual characters receive regular representation and affirmation, at the expense of others—another function of the norm” (2019, p.4). This is also important because “[e]xposing young people to diverse and inclusive narratives is important because this generation of YA readers has the potential to be, and already are, activists” (Ramdarshan

Bold and Phillips, 2019, p.6). Ramdarshan Bold and Phillips argue that: “Activism, enacting positive change, can happen only when we all work together to ensure representations of and for everyone in the literature we produce and consume” (2019, p.6).

We Need More ‘Diverse’ Books in YA Fantasy

The survey then moved on to ask respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement ‘we need more ‘diverse’ YA fantasy novels’. The findings for this question are illustrated in Figure 16. This statement elicited an overwhelming response in favour of more ‘diverse’ books in YA fantasy: 201 out of the 308 participants (65.26%) strongly agreed, and 77 respondents (25%) agreed that we need more ‘diverse’ YA fantasy stories. Another 20 survey respondents (6.49%) were undecided about this statement and neither agreed nor disagreed. Only 5 respondents (1.62%) disagreed and another 5 respondents (1.62%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Thus, these findings suggest that there is a general push from these readers of YA fantasy towards more ‘diversity’ in the genre. These findings align with the data gathered during my qualitative interviews with publishing professionals and social media influencers, explored in detail in Chapter 3 (please see p.148). In other words, despite the significant barriers to writing and publishing ‘diverse’ YA stories (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019a), there is a willingness from readers and some members of the publishing sphere to encourage more ‘diversity’ in the future of YA fantasy.

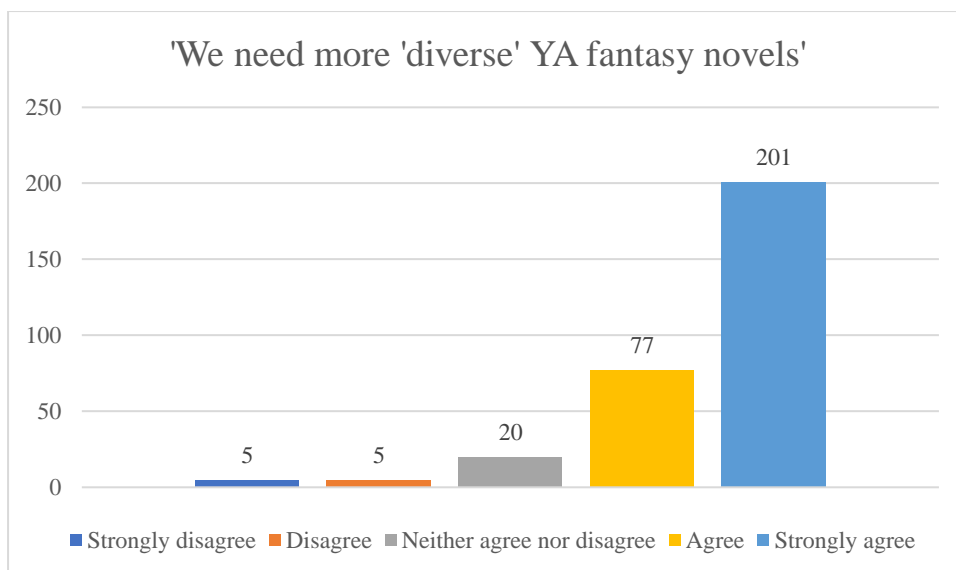


Figure 16: 'We need more 'diverse' YA fantasy novels'

After determining the number of participants agreeing or disagreeing with the statement 'we need more 'diverse' YA fantasy novels', it is insightful to observe the correlations of readers' identities and their views on this topic. The following charts in Figure 17 illustrate the number of survey respondents who agreed or disagreed with the statement according to their identities. The findings revealed that a little less than half of the non-marginalised respondents (47.31%) strongly agreed with the statement and 34.41% agreed. However, 3.23% strongly disagreed and 2.15% disagreed with the statement that we need more 'diversity' in YA fantasy. Finally, 12.9% of these respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that we need more 'diverse' books in YA fantasy. For the case of marginalised readers, the majority (73.76%) strongly agreed, and a further 20.79% agreed. 0.99% of these readers disagreed and a further 0.99% strongly disagreed. Finally, 3.47% of these participants neither agreed nor disagreed. Similarly, for the case of readers who preferred not to share information about their identities, over a half (61.54%) strongly agreed that we need more 'diverse' YA fantasy books, 23.08% agreed, 7.69% of them disagreed, and another 7.69% neither agreed nor disagreed. Finally, none of these participants strongly disagreed with the statement.

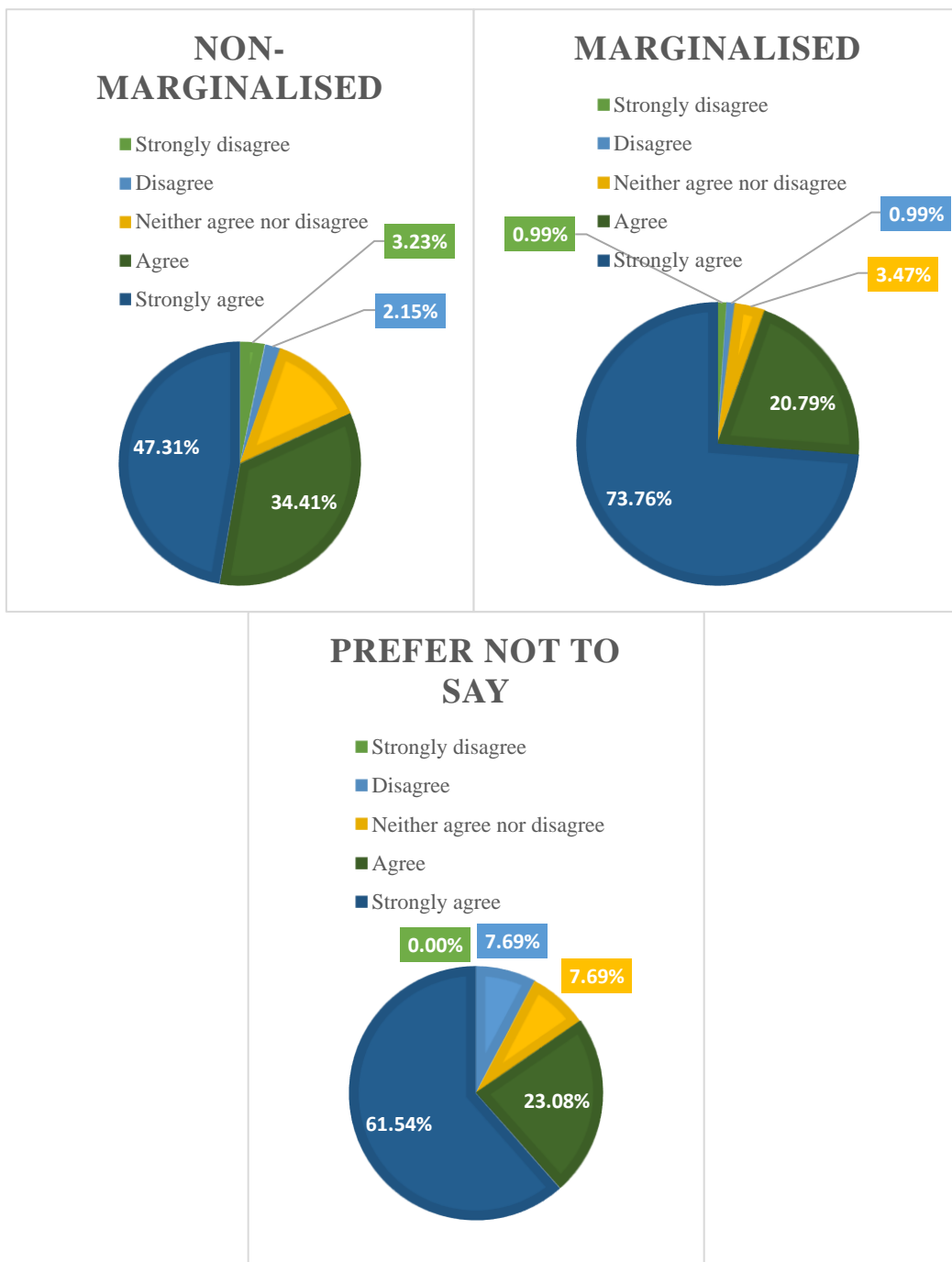


Figure 17: 'We need more 'diverse' YA fantasy novels' according readers' identities

The Role of Own Voices

One of the movements that aim to improve 'diversity' and representation in YA fiction is the Own Voices movement. The term was first used by YA author Corinne Duyvis with the hashtag #OwnVoices on Twitter (Duyvis, 2015). The Own Voices movement

promotes the idea that if an author is writing about a marginalised group they should be a member of that same group themselves. In other words, if an author is writing a character of colour for example, they would need to be a person of colour themselves. It encourages authors to write about issues they have experienced first-hand with the ultimate aim being to achieve authenticity and accurate representations. The movement has become increasingly popular on Twitter with the hashtag #OwnVoices, which is often used to promote authors from marginalised groups and the stories they depict. The movement has received criticism for indirectly pressuring authors to reveal personal information they might not be comfortable sharing otherwise and for pushing authors and publishers towards censorship (Rosenfield, 2017, 2019b). It is worth highlighting that the movement addresses important issues that are not necessarily focused on any specific title, but on the big picture in publishing, instead (Templeton, 2019).

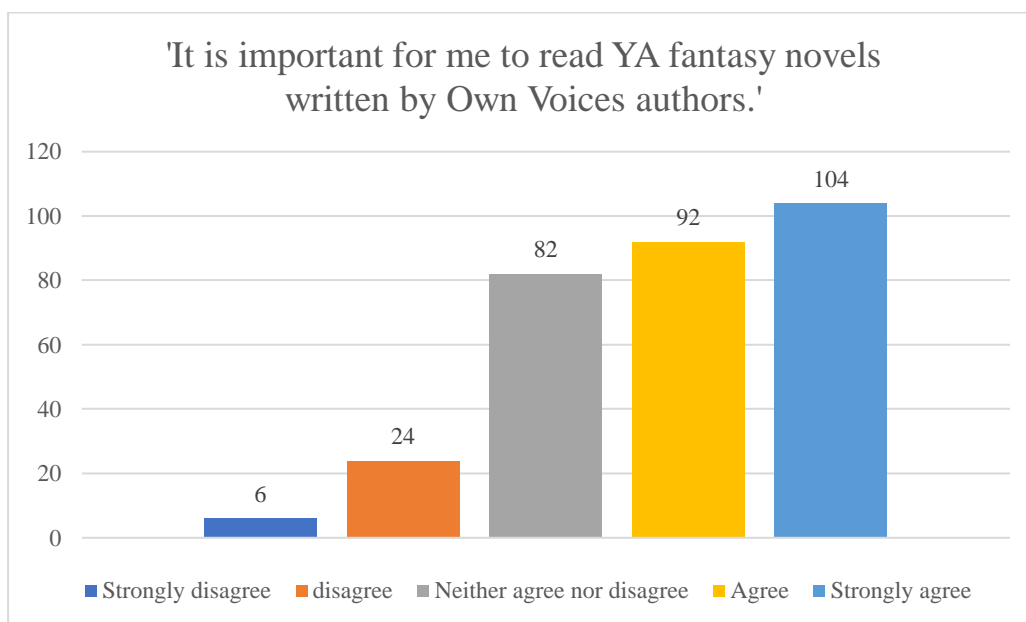


Figure 18: Importance of Own Voices authors

This research gathered data about the perspective of readers on the Own Voices concept as they were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement 'it is important for me to read YA fantasy novels written by Own Voices authors'. Most survey respondents agreed that it was important for them to read YA fantasy books that were written by Own

Voices authors with 104 respondents (33.77%) strongly agreeing and a further 92 respondents (29.87%) agreeing. A significant number of respondents were unsure about this statement with 82 respondents (26.62%) neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Finally, 24 survey respondents (7.79%) disagreed and a further 6 respondents (1.95%) strongly disagreed with the statement as it is not important for them to read YA fantasy books written by Own Voices authors.

While being Own Voices can clearly benefit the story, it is worth noting that it might not always be possible. For example, as I have explored in the previous chapter, the Crew Hero trope offers the opportunity to include more ‘diversity’ through the multiple hero characters. However, given that authors cannot possibly have first-hand experience with the various identities of the Crew characters, it can be helpful to use the services of sensitivity readers. While the author can of course be Own Voices regarding one or more aspects of the characters’ identities, they can ensure that the identities that are not their own are also written authentically by involving experts or people who have experience with the identities that are represented in the story.

The Importance of ‘Diversity’ in Book Covers

The survey then asked readers about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with this statement: ‘I would pick up a YA fantasy novel without reading the blurb if it has a ‘diverse’ cover’. This question was aimed to shed some light on the impact of visual representation such as the cover design on the representation of marginalised groups in this genre. Many survey respondents felt conflicted about this issue as 105 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed. For 89 respondents, visual representation of ‘diversity’ alone is enough for them to decide to pick up the book as they either agreed (17.53%) or strongly agreed (11.36%) with the statement. However, the visual representation of ‘diversity’ alone was not

enough for the remaining 114 respondents who disagreed (27.92%) or strongly disagreed (9.09%) with the statement.

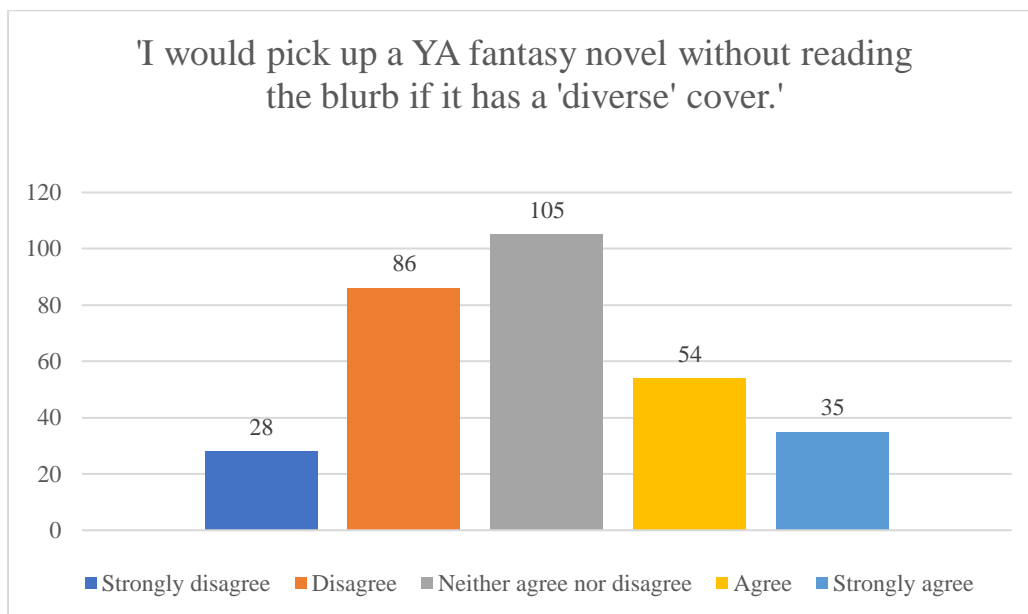


Figure 19: the importance of 'diversity' in book covers

Inclusivity in YA Fantasy Novels

Readers were also asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'YA fantasy novels are more inclusive today than they were in the last ten years'³⁸. This question was aimed to gather information about the perspective of YA fantasy readers on the evolution of 'diversity' in the genre over the last decade, as illustrated in Figure 20. The vast majority of the survey respondents i.e. 187 readers (60.71%) agreed or strongly agreed with 89 readers (28.9%) that YA fantasy today was more inclusive than it was. There were 24 participants who neither agreed nor disagreed (7.79%). Only 6 readers disagreed (1.95%) and 2 more readers (0.65%) strongly disagreed with this statement.

³⁸ To be clear: this question does not imply that the reader must have read YA fantasy books 10 years ago, only that these books were originally published 10 years ago.

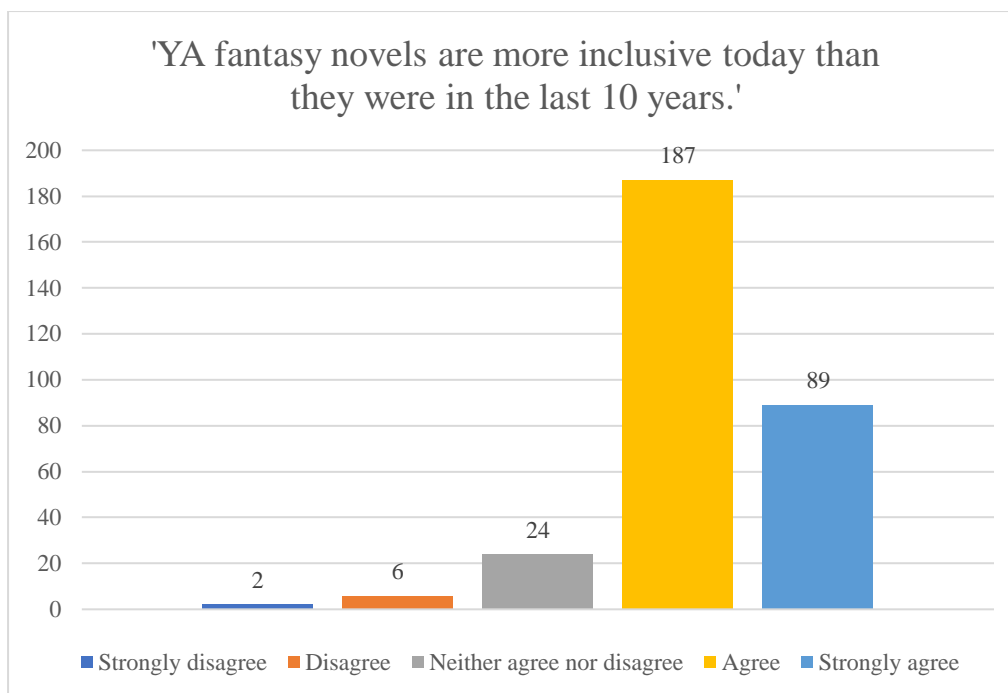


Figure 20: The progression of YA fantasy and inclusivity over the last ten years

Representation Categories

The next section of the survey asked readers which categories they would like to see more 'diverse' representation in. For this question, survey respondents were allowed to select multiple choices. The findings for this question are illustrated in Figure 21. The majority of respondents foregrounded the need for all types of 'diverse' narratives as 168 of them voted for 'all of the above'. A minority of respondents (7 readers) revealed that they were not looking for more 'diverse' representation in any of the named categories. The 'race/ethnicity' category was the most popular category with 160 votes, closely followed by the 'mental health', 'body image', and 'dis/ability' categories (148, 141, and 135 votes respectively). The 'sexual orientation', and 'gender' categories received slightly less enthusiasm for more 'diverse' stories (118 and 97 votes respectively). Finally, 'religion' ranked last with only 89 votes for more representation in this category. One explanation for the lower votes for 'sexual orientation' and 'gender' can be linked to the findings from the interviewed participants in the previous chapter, who noted that most of the 'diverse' representation they see in the current market is focused on queer identities. Therefore, this reflects how readers felt they did

not need more representation in the 'sexual orientation' and 'gender' categories as these two are already covered more than the other categories. Thus, this does not necessarily mean that there is less interest in reading these narratives. Additionally, the lowest number of votes for the 'religion' category can be explained by the fact that fantasy often has its own religious systems and it is not always possible to include accurate and non-problematic representations of religion in these imaginary worlds.

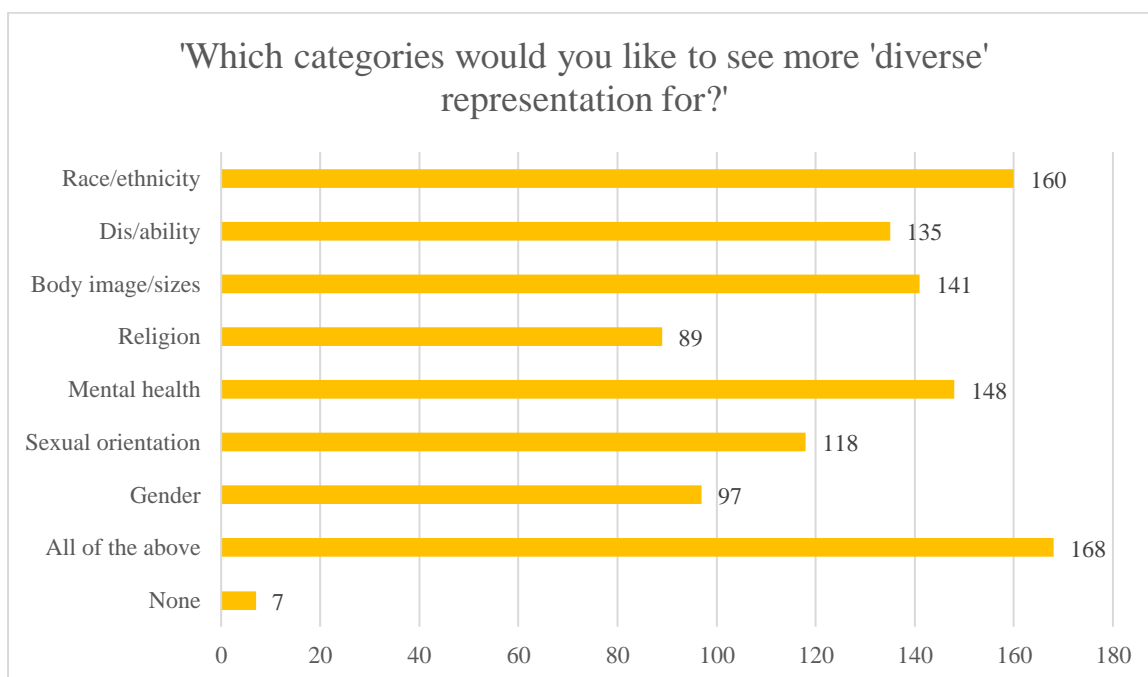


Figure 21: Representation categories of YA fantasy to include more 'diversity'

Vignettes

The surveyed YA fantasy readers were asked to read the same vignettes previously used in my interviews and rank them according to their level of interest in each one. The full text of the vignettes as well as a detailed explanation of the process can be found in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis (please see p.120). In the previous chapter, I examined the reaction of publishing professionals and social media influencers to these four made-up blurbs. In this chapter, I extend my analysis by taking a closer look at the perspective of YA fantasy readers on the same vignettes. This is illustrated in Table 4 as well as in Figure 22, Figure 23, Figure 24, and Figure 25 below. The findings of the online survey revealed that in

a similar way to publishing professionals and social media influencers, overall readers were most likely to prefer Vignette D, which features a Crew Hero dynamic. Most of the survey respondents were only somewhat interested (114 readers, 37.01%) or interested (81 readers, 26.30%) in Vignette A which features a Chosen One hero. There were 50 readers (16.23%) who reported being very interested in Vignette A, and 63 readers (20.45%) who reported not being interested in this story at all. The survey respondents were mostly interested (103 readers, 33.44%) or very interested (91 readers, 29.55%) in Vignette B, which features a dual hero story. Furthermore, 77 readers (25%) reported being only somewhat interested in this story, while 37 readers (12.01%) reported not being interested in Vignette B. Readers were also mostly interested (126 readers, 40.91%) or very interested (110 readers, 35.71%) in Vignette C. Additionally, 48 readers (15.58%) were somewhat interested in this story, while 24 other readers (7.79%) were not interested in it. Finally, the majority of readers were very interested (163 readers, 52.92%) or interested (84 readers, 27.27%) in Vignette D. There were 43 readers (13.96%) who said they were only somewhat interested in this story. Vignette D also received the lowest number of readers who were not interested in it (18 readers, 5.84%).

	Not interested	Somewhat interested	Interested	Very interested
Vignette A	63 readers	114 readers	81 readers	50 readers
Vignette B	37 readers	77 readers	103 readers	91 readers
Vignette C	24 readers	48 readers	126 readers	110 readers
Vignette D	18 readers	43 readers	84 readers	163 readers

Table 4: The level of interest of readers for each vignette

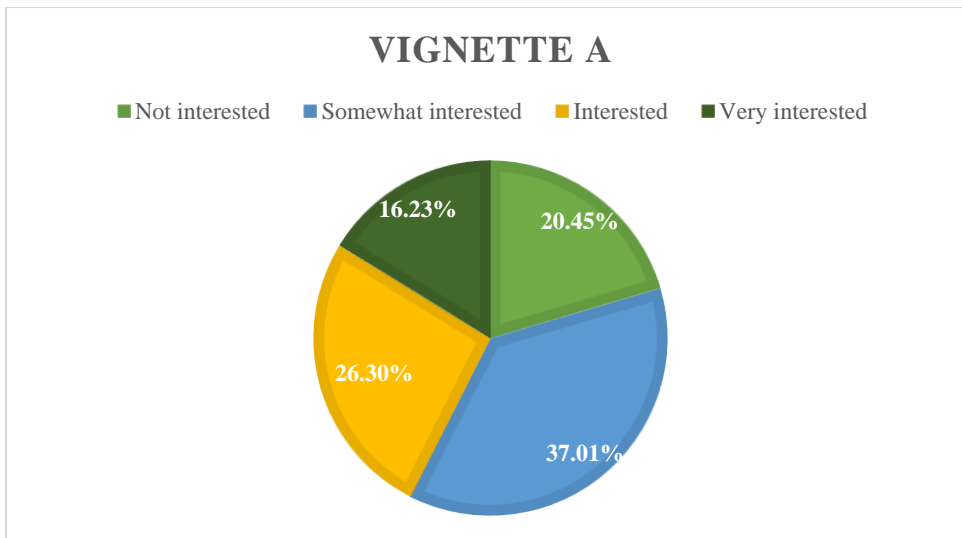


Figure 22: Readers' level of interest for Vignette A

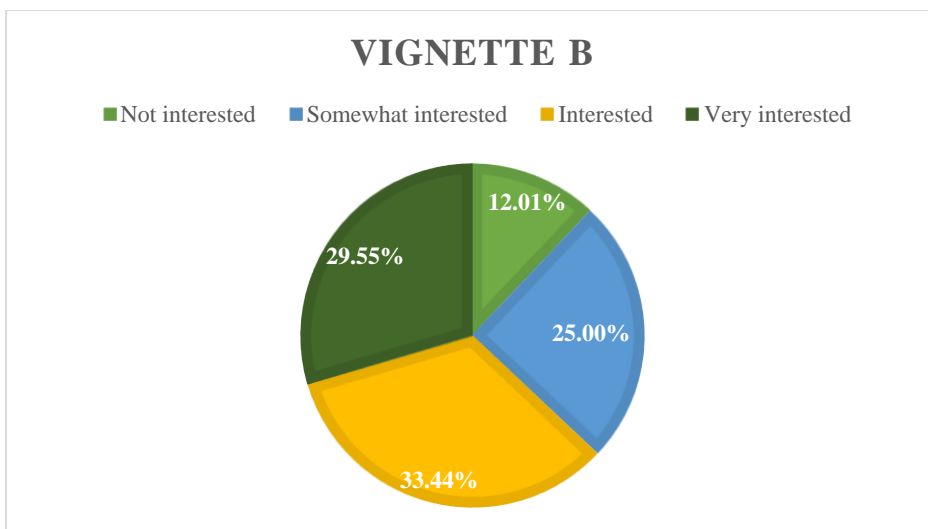


Figure 23: Readers' level of interest for Vignette B

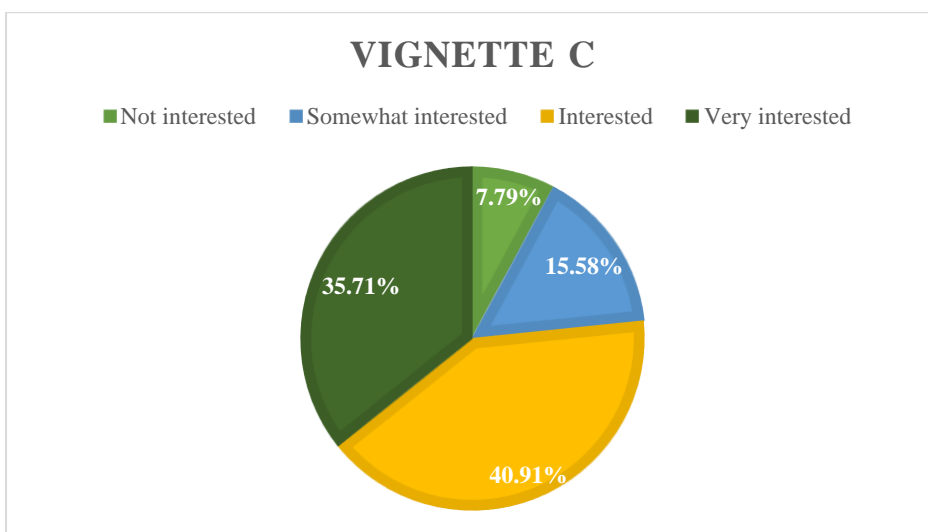


Figure 24: Readers' level of interest for Vignette C

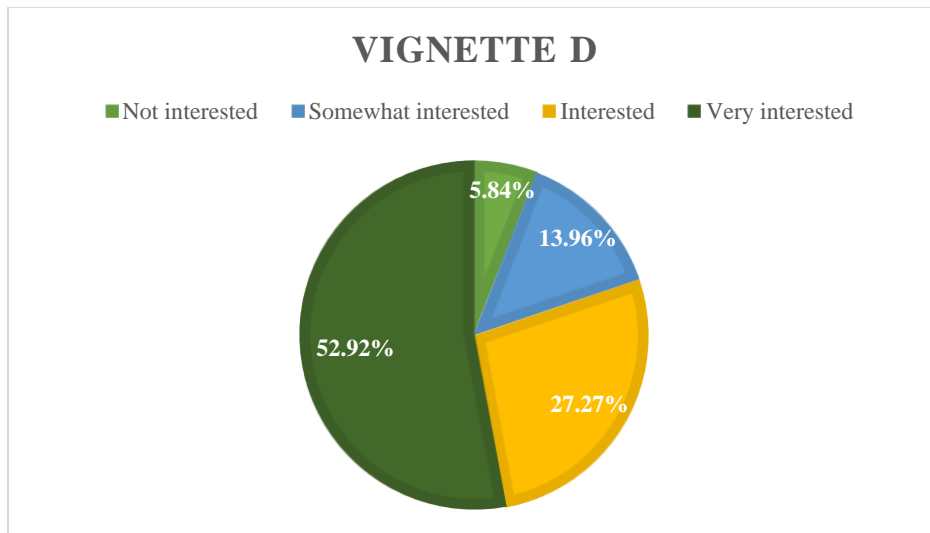


Figure 25: Readers' level of interest for Vignette D

The same trend can be seen through the readers' answers to ranking the vignettes from one to four according to their level of interest (one being the best story and four being the worst). Readers mostly ranked Vignette D first (158 readers, 51.3%), Vignette C second (104 readers, 33.77%), Vignette B third (119 readers, 38.64%), and Vignette A last (162 readers, 52.6%).

	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th
Vignette A	32	54	60	162
Vignette B	43	90	119	56
Vignette C	78	104	79	47
Vignette D	158	60	50	40

Table 5: Vignettes ranking

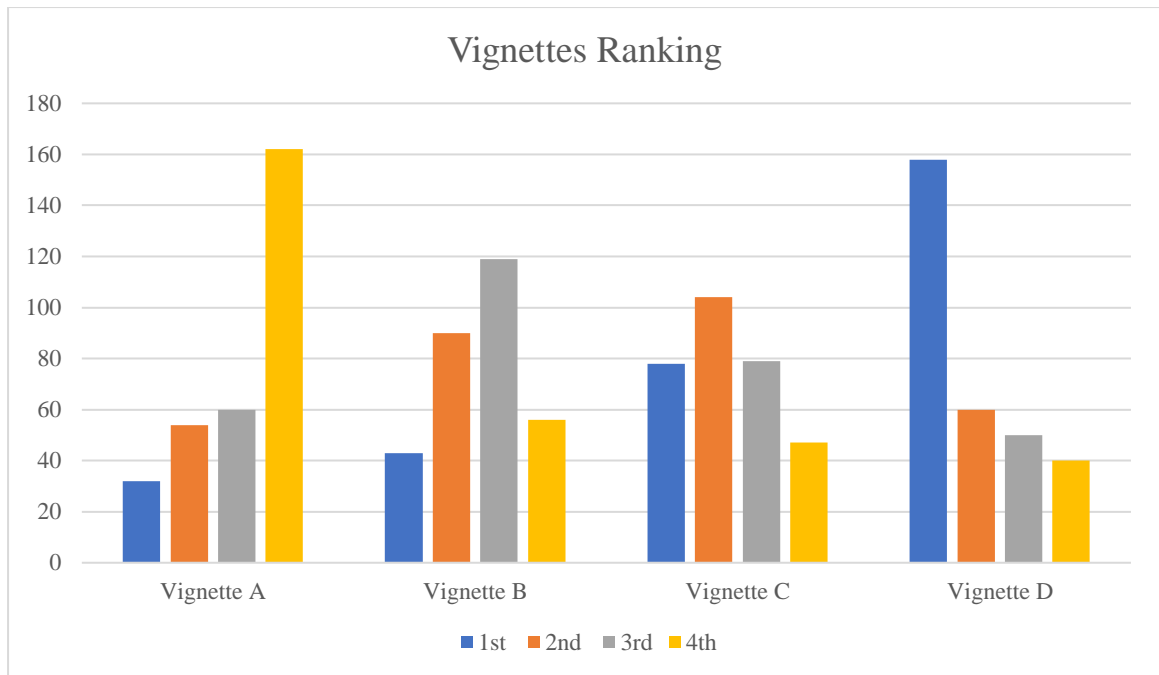


Figure 26: Vignettes ranking

The inherent ephemeral nature of trends and tropes makes it difficult to predict what the next popular trope in YA fantasy will be. Authors, critics, publishers, and researchers would all be interested in knowing the secret recipe to produce a book that will appeal to a large audience. However, many factors come into play from current affairs, political events, trends in other media and other genres, marketing, and timing, to name but a few. Therefore, it is important to note that this research does not in any way claim to predict the next trends or tropes in YA fantasy. In fact, the years it took to complete this thesis witnessed many different trends. However, through an analysis of some of the most well-known trends in the genre from different lenses, this research points out existing storytelling structures and tropes that provide space for ‘diversity’ the ones that inhibit it. As previously explored in this chapter and in Chapter 3, Vignette D and its Crew Hero dynamic offer an encouraging environment for inclusivity and ‘diversity’, while Vignette A and its Chosen One hero dynamic implies many barriers to ‘diversity’. The Crew Hero trope offers readers the possibility to engage simultaneously with multiple strands of identification that Felski (2020) outlined. For instance, if we have multiple narrative perspectives, readers can be *aligned* with

any of the PoV characters. Similarly, readers and viewers will be more likely to *empathise* with one or more characters from the group and feel *allegiance* to another character. Finally, audiences are more likely to *recognise* aspects of a character that feels familiar to them when there is a group of heroes and not just one. The fact that most survey respondents favoured the Crew Hero story and generally disliked the Chosen One story confirms and aligns with the rest of the findings from this survey which is an overall move towards more authentic representation and more ‘diversity’ in the YA fantasy genre. That is not to say that it is impossible to find, for instance, a ‘diverse’ story with the Chosen One trope, or a problematic story featuring a Crew Hero trope. However, I argue that there is value in having awareness about what these structures can offer and to what extent they can impact the stories we produce and consume.

Conclusion

Tropes and trends are impacted by the opinion of readers. Although they are not completely altered, it is difficult for them to stay static facing the influence of the reader. As I have mentioned in the Literature Review chapter of this thesis (please see p.33), I adhere to the idea that genre is a ‘world’ (Fletcher et al., 2018; Wilkins et al., 2022) and that many relationships within this world are symbiotic (Wilkins and Bennett, 2021, p.2). This influence can manifest itself in different ways. It could be a fleeting inspiration from reading a review, or it can also be a significant and sudden change caused by cancel culture for example. In this chapter, I examine the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy fiction from the perspective of the readers. Through a quantitative analysis of an online survey with 308 YA fantasy readers, I determined the general interest in ‘diverse’ narrative structures such as the Crew Hero narrative. It was important for this thesis to include a chapter solely focused on YA fantasy readers because of the key role they are able to play in the formation of genre. Therefore, any attempts to disrupt or challenge existing paradigms of storytelling ultimately

start and end with readers. As Ahmed (2010b) notes: “Every writer is first a reader, and what we read matters” (p.19). This chapter interrogates some of the gaps in research on the topic of readers of YA fantasy and how they perceive ‘diverse’ representations in the YA fantasy books they read. I examined the extent to which YA fantasy readers are able to see themselves represented in the books they read. I also looked at the different kinds of representation they would like to see more of in the future. This analysis represents a starting point to think about areas that can be improved in terms of ‘diverse’ representations of marginalised people in YA fantasy. Ahmed explains the importance of representation, writing:

we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon. A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created.
(2006, p.16)

However, therein lies the problem. If we keep walking the same path by representing the same identities that have always been represented in YA fantasy, the cycle cannot be broken. This chapter demonstrated that some readers of YA fantasy are still unable to see themselves represented authentically in the books they read. This chapter also highlights the general enthusiasm of YA fantasy readers to find various ‘diversity’ categories in the books they read. Findings from this research can be used as a blueprint to map out the areas that need to be addressed in future YA fantasy stories. The impact of readers and fans on the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy goes beyond the text. In the following chapter, I extend my analysis to investigate how these representations translate to screen adaptations through a case study of Bardugo’s *Shadow and Bone* (2012) and *Six of Crows* (2015) series.

Chapter 5: Are We Doing Better Yet? ‘Diversity’ and Representation in YA Fantasy Media Adaptations

Introduction

This chapter continues the discussion of the previous chapter by exploring the adaptation element of the YA fantasy ‘genre world’ through the lens of ‘diversity’ and representation. While I acknowledge that there are many different elements that fall under the umbrella of the Grishaverse storyworld such as video games, graphic novels, maps, and websites, to name a few, this chapter focuses specifically on the book to Netflix adaptation because of the intentional diversification of some of the characters, who were coded in the book as White. This process made the adaptation particularly relevant to this research. Therefore, I focus on the issue of ‘diversity’ and representation of marginalised groups, drawing from my Critical Content Analysis of the *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* book-to-screen adaptation. I consider themes such as racism, darkness, monsters, the Chosen One trope, and counter-narratives. Thus, this chapter addresses my third and final research question: **‘What is the role of screen adaptations in reflecting the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy?’** I demonstrate that media adaptations of YA fantasy books offer an opportunity to diversify the original text by revisiting some of the creative decisions that were initially made. However, I argue that while this process underlines the importance of authentically reflecting the world that we live in, it can bring about some unavoidable problematic implications. Through my analysis, I offer an alternative approach to diversifying stories that originally centred White, able-bodied, heterosexual voices. This approach cautions against maintaining the Chosen One story structure as we move marginalised characters towards the centre of this story. Instead, I suggest reorienting the centre towards the margins and uprooting the story structure instead of uprooting the marginalised character. I build on the works of Critical Race Theory (CRT), as well as

principles from Cultural Studies, Representation Theory, Phenomenology, Postcolonial Theory, The Dark Fantastic Theory, and Monster Theory as a theoretical framework to conduct a critical content analysis of the *Shadow and Bone* book-to-screen adaptation. More specifically, this chapter draws from three key tenets from CRT: the idea of the normalisation of racism, the idea that ‘race’ is socially constructed, and the notion of storytelling and counter-storytelling (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Given that CRT “challenges dominant narratives by intentionally centering analysis on the marginalized voices” (Cook and Dixon, 2013, p.1243), this chapter focuses on analysing BIPOC representations in the *Grishaverse* books and Netflix adaptation.

To be clear: this chapter does not imply that Bardugo’s *Grishaverse* should be considered the starting point of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy. There are many YA fantasy books that are also worth examining to get a richer understanding of ‘diversity’ and representation in YA fantasy texts, such as Adeyemi’s (2018) *Children of Blood and Bone*, Forna’s (2021) *The Gilded Ones*, Ngan’s (2018) *Girls of Paper and Fire*, and Faizal’s (2019) *We Hunt the Flame* to name a few. However, the popularity of the *Grishaverse* books and their crossover into a successful TV show adaptation combined with the publication timeline—*Shadow and Bone* book in 2012, *Six of Crows* in 2015, and the Netflix *Shadow and Bone* show in 2021—makes this series an appropriate case study that can give us insight into the evolution of the YA fantasy genre expectations and limitations over the last decade. Leigh Bardugo’s involvement in both the TV Show adaptation as an executive producer and the books as an author, makes it possible to examine the two versions of *Shadow and Bone* (books and adaptation) as one story. However, in this chapter, I refer to material from the *Shadow and Bone/Six of Crows* books and from the Netflix adaptation separately to highlight the differences between the two forms of the story.

This chapter examines indicators of ‘diversity’ found in the adaptation—focusing on the main changes made from the original text to the TV show adaptation—to get a richer understanding of the role that transmedia adaptations of YA fantasy books can have in the YA fantasy ‘genre world’. In subsequent sections, I highlight four major themes that emerged as a result of the intentional diversification of *Shadow and Bone* in the TV show version of the story, namely: darkness, monsters, Others, and the Chosen One story. Through my analysis, I demonstrate that while the *Shadow and Bone* adaptation does disrupt the traditional YA fantasy conventions of the role of the hero, it still operates within its parameters. Finally, I conclude this chapter with some remarks on the role of Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone* adaptation in shifting or reorienting our expectations and understanding of book-to-screen adaptations of YA fantasy.

Writing and Rewriting the *Grishaverse*

The Grishaverse

The following table (Table 6) outlines a brief summary of the plot and main characters elements of *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo.

Title	Major Characters	Brief description
<i>Shadow and Bone</i> (Bardugo, 2012)	Alina Starkov (protagonist narrator)	The story of the <i>Grishaverse</i> starts in <i>Shadow and Bone</i> as the magical world has been fractured by a swathe of darkness called the ‘Shadow Fold’ or the ‘Unsea’, which split Ravka into two parts and terrorised the entire country. <i>Shadow and Bone</i> follows the story of Alina Starkov, an orphan and a soldier of the

First Army³⁹ who works as a cartographer.

When her best friend Mal is injured during a monster attack on the Shadow Fold, Alina discovers that she has the powers of a Grisha Sun Summoner⁴⁰. As Alina uses her powers for the first time, she is noticed by the leader of the Second Army, the Darkling, who decides to take her to the royal court to train her to use her powers and destroy the Shadow Fold.

<i>Six of Crows</i> (Bardugo, 2015)	Kaz Brekker (protagonist narrator) Inej Ghafa (protagonist narrator) Nina Zenik (protagonist narrator) Matthias Helvar (protagonist narrator) Jesper Fahey (protagonist narrator) Wylan Van Eck	Another story set in the <i>Grishaverse</i> is <i>Six of Crows</i> which takes place two years after the end of, <i>Ruin and Rising</i> (2014), the final instalment in the initial trilogy. <i>Six of Crows</i> is a heist fantasy story following a crew of characters—Kaz, Inej, Nina, Matthias, Jesper, and Wylan—who decide to attempt an impossible mission to infiltrate the Ice Court ⁴¹ and capture the scientist who holds the secret to a deadly drug called ‘Jurda Parem’ ⁴² . It is set in an Amsterdam-inspired capital city,
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³⁹ The Grishaverse has two armies: The First Army is made of human soldiers, and the Second Army is the army of the Grisha soldiers who use magical powers.

⁴⁰ Sun Summoners are a very rare type of Grisha who have the ability to summon and manipulate light. They belong to the order of the Etherealki.

⁴¹ The Ice Court is a well-protected military fortress located in Djerholm, the capital of Fjerda (please see Figure 27).

⁴² Jurda Parem is a highly addictive drug when used by a Grisha. It enhances their powers but the withdrawal from it is usually deadly.

called Ketterdam, situated on the small island of Kerch. (please see map in Figure 27)

Table 6: Summary of Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* books

As previously mentioned, the *Grishaverse* is an imaginary world created by Leigh Bardugo and spans seven books (as of this writing). The map in Figure 27 (Thompson, 2015) illustrates the locations of the countries/nations within this world. *Shadow and Bone* (2012-2014) is the first series set in the *Grishaverse* and it mostly takes place in Ravka, which is located between Fjerda and Shu Han. The *Six of Crows* series (2015-2016) is set predominantly in Ketterdam, the capital of Kerch—an island located in the True Sea—and Djerholm, the capital of Fjerda in the north. In an interview with *Barnes & Noble Teen Blog*, Bardugo revealed her inspiration for the *Grishaverse* countries saying:

Ravka is inspired by Tsarist Russia of the early 1800s, and Fjerda uses Scandinavia as a cultural touchstone. Kerch is a little more complex. It's heavily influenced by the Dutch Republic of the 1700s, but it's also got a little New York (New Amsterdam), Las Vegas, and Victorian London mixed in there. (Hill, 2015)



Figure 27: *Grishaverse* map illustrated by Keith Thompson from *Siege and Storm* (Bardugo, 2013)

The magic system in the *Grishaverse* is called the ‘Small Science’ and those who have magical powers are called the ‘Grisha’. ‘Small Science’ is based on the concept that matter cannot be created but can instead be manipulated by Grisha at the fundamental level (Grishaverse, 2019). While ethnicities in fantasy books can sometimes be ambiguous and difficult to code in terms of real-world ethnicities, it is different when it comes to screen adaptations because “characters are most often embodied by actors that audiences can categorize as being a particular gender or as belonging to a particular racial group” (Hall, 2020, p.3). This will ultimately contribute to the perception that the audience members have of the characters “even if the race, ethnicity, or gender the character within the story is indeterminate or fictional” (Hall, 2020, p.3).

The *Shadow and Bone* adaptation was executively produced by Eric Heisserer, Leigh Bardugo, Pouya Shahbazian, Josh Barry, Dan Cohen, Shawn Levy, and Dan Levine. It was available to watch on Netflix on April 23rd 2021. Some of the changes that were made between the *Shadow and Bone* show and the original text aimed to diversify the story and make it more inclusive, which echoes Bardugo’s push towards more ‘diverse’ narratives for the last few years. As previously mentioned, Bardugo wrote *Six of Crows* (2015) as a reaction to the classic Chosen One hero story in *Shadow and Bone* (2012). In *Six of Crows*, Bardugo switches to a more inclusive and ‘diverse’ hero paradigm that translates into a Crew Hero dynamic that depicts a rich variety of perspectives. Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone* offered Bardugo the opportunity to revisit and rewrite her debut novel and make some changes to reflect the world that we live in more accurately. According to Gelder (2019):

Adaptations always create *relationships* to their source texts; they both cite it and transform it. The question of their faithfulness to the source text is open in some ways and closed in others; some adaptations might even make a point of stressing their *fidelity* to a source text, as if an

adaptation should at the same time be an act of reverence or homage.

(p.14) (emphasis in original)

However, to Bardugo, adaptations represent a unique opportunity for growth, because she rejects the stagnant expectations that the quality of an adaptation should be judged according to how faithful it is to the original material. As she puts it:

Here's the thing: I wanted there to be changes. I don't believe that a page-by-page adaptation is necessary or interesting. The real trick was finding a partner who I trusted to go on this journey with. I sat down with Eric Heisserer and I said to him, 'I am terrified of being locked out of my own house.' I've seen this happen with other writers. It happens all the time with women writers, and it particularly happens to women writers of YA. People have tremendous contempt for what we do, for the stories we write, and the people who love them. (Puckett, 2021, para.5)

This view is also supported by scholarship from Adaptation Studies, which suggests an alternative way of thinking about adaptation that emphasises the growth and evolution adaptations can offer, instead of the traditionally expected comparison between the original source material and the adaptation (Cardwell, 2002, 2007).

Bardugo insisted on being involved as an executive producer of the show. She was able to oversee and be involved in the changes that were made for it in terms of cast and narrative. Indeed, these changes were intentional and purposeful. Bardugo explains how Heisserer put together the writer's room for the show with 'diversity' and inclusion at the forefront of his criteria:

It was extremely important to me, since we were going to be telling queer stories, stories of mixed-race characters, that the writers reflect that, and he was absolutely the person who spearheaded that. A lot of people talk a good game about diversity and inclusivity, but he really made it happen. (Puckett, 2021, para.7)

Most notably, one of the producers of the show, Christina Strain, was involved in the decisions regarding the Alina's biracial identity and the depiction of racism as she drew from her personal experience being part-Asian (Truffaut-Wong, 2021). It is also worth highlighting the role that combining the two narratives—*Shadow and Bone* with a prequel⁴³ to *Six of Crows*—played in diversifying the story. For instance, the crew from *Six of Crows* not only brings together characters from different origins—Kaz and Wylan are from Kerch, Inej is Suli, Jesper is Zemeni, Matthias is Fjerdan, Nina is Ravkan—it also brings characters who do not fit the traditional YA fantasy profile. For instance, Kaz is dis/abled and walks with a cane, Nina is curvy, Inej and Jesper are characters of colour, and Jesper is bisexual. Therefore, the fact that the show combines the stories of *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* immediately adds layers of 'diversity' to the story, as Bardugo observes:

I love the fact that it made the world feel bigger. It gave a different kind of insight into the story. Alina's story is a chosen one story, it's something we're a little more familiar with. The Crows have a different background, they aren't people with royal blood, they aren't people who have grand destinies or prophecies that foretell their future. These are people that are caught in the crossfire of these epic events so I think it's meaningful to see those stories side-by-side and to see them come crashing into each other. (Bardugo, 2021)

The following section explores various similarities and differences between the different versions of the *Shadow and Bone* story focusing on four key themes: darkness, monsters, Others, and the Chosen One within this story.

⁴³ Because the story in *Six of Crows* (2015) is chronologically set around two years after the end of the events of the *Shadow and Bone* (2012-2014) series, it was necessary to include a prequel story using some of the backstory from the book but also adding original plot lines.

‘Race’ and the ‘Imagination Gap’ in the *Grishaverse*

Darkness

The pilot episode of *Shadow and Bone—A Searing Burst of Light*—opens with the lines: “When I was young, I was afraid of the dark. When I got older, I learned that darkness is a place, and it’s full of monsters” [Alina] (Heisserer, 2021a). Immediately, darkness is established as a central theme to the story in the show, and as a theme that is closely associated and linked to fear and monsters. Bardugo recounts the story of what inspired her debut book *Shadow and Bone* saying: “I couldn’t get this thought out of my head, this idea that no matter how old you get or how sophisticated you think you are, your fear of the dark really never goes away” (Puckett, 2021). Bardugo further explained: “And so I asked myself this question: What if darkness was a place? You couldn’t turn the lights on, and the monsters you imagine lurking in the dark were real, and you had to fight them on their own territory?” (Puckett, 2021). Thus, the theme of darkness was not introduced in the adaptation; rather it has been an essential and foundational element of the *Shadow and Bone* story since the very early stages of its creation. Through a Critical Content Analysis, this section explores the different forms that darkness manifests itself and the parameters within which it operates in this story.

We can see the theme of darkness appear in different forms in the *Shadow and Bone* book and the show. One prominent example of this is the linguistic choices that are made in this story, such as the names of places and characters: the Darkling, the Black Heretic, the Black General, and the Shadow Fold. Ferdinand De Saussure's work and his understanding of representation can provide a useful tool to examine the implications of these words. Saussure (1974, 1983) identified two elements that constitute any given sign: the ‘**signifier**’ (which refers to the actual word), and the ‘**signified**’ (which refers to the concept or idea that the signifier evokes in our mind). Therefore, if we consider these words—Darkling, Black

Heretic, Black General, Shadow Fold—to be signifiers, then the signified concepts or mental ideas we associate with these words could be: villain, evil, dangerous, and monstrous.

Therefore, this mental image that we have about these words and their associations is confirmed and solidified by the context in which they are used in this story. In other words, if the word darkness already signifies evil then it would make sense for the villain of the story to carry such names—Darkling, Black Heretic, Black General. Furthermore, Saussure also notes that we can only understand these signs in relation to other signs as he argued that signs “are members of a system and are defined in relation to the other members of that system” (Culler, 1976, p.24). Therefore, we can understand darkness not because it has an inherent meaning but because of its binary opposition to light. Similarly, we can understand the sign good because of its relationship to the sign evil. Thus, the hero cannot exist, or does not make sense without the existence of the villain. In *Shadow and Bone*, Alina’s light does not have any significance without the darkness of the Darkling. It is however important to note that: “There is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified.” (Culler, 1976, p.19). Applying this thinking to the portrayal of BIPOC characters in YA fantasy can help us understand the importance of authentic representation. Thomas notes that the “traditional purpose of darkness in the fantastic is to disturb, to unsettle, to cause unrest. The primal fear of darkness and Dark Others is so deeply rooted in Western myth that it is nearly impossible to find its origin” (Thomas, 2019, p.19). Therefore, if we continue to write BIPOC characters in the same stereotypical roles and tropes, we are cementing the concepts that people have in their minds. However, if we disrupt this understanding by telling authentic counter-stories, it is possible to alter the genre’s expectations and restrictions regarding BIPOC characters. What if Alina and the Darkling could switch roles? What if Alina had the powers to summon shadows and General Kirigan had the powers to summon light, instead? What if the Fold was a swathe of blinding light and the only way to survive it was to walk in the shadows?

As explored above, the linguistic signifiers (Darkling, Black general, Black Heretic), combined with the fact that this character only wears black, rides a black carriage and even bleeds black blood when wounded, and the fact that all these elements are meant to code this character as evil, aligns with Thomas's theorising of the Dark Fantastic. The Darkling's character is played by White English actor Ben Barnes; however, considering the show's intentional diversifying of the cast, a question comes to mind: could this character have been played by a Black actor? In other words, could the Black General actually be Black? Was he supposed to be Black in the first place? As Thomas puts it: "Even if darkness and light—or Black and White—seem to have exchanged places in the narrative, *the Dark Other is always already there. Darkness is the source that powers the fantastic*" (2019, p.29) (emphasis in original).

Monsters

Darkness also appears to be linked to the monsters of the story—the Volcra. The Volcra are dark monsters that inhabit the Shadow Fold and that have been terrorising human and Grisha characters alike since they were created by the legendary Black Heretic⁴⁴ hundreds of years ago. Thus, darkness in this story is often linked to evil and monstrosity. In his thesis about the monster's body, Cohen (Cohen, 1996) notes that the monster's body is a cultural entity, pointing out that:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy... giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monster's body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read. (Cohen, 1996, p.4)

⁴⁴ It is later revealed that the Darkling (General Kirigan) and the Black Heretic are the same person.

The imaginary world of the *Grishaverse* illustrates three main ‘races’: the human ‘race’, the Grisha ‘race’, and the Volcra ‘race’. Much like the Orcs in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, or the Dementors in Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, the Volcra ‘race’ is the dark ‘race’, and it represents the monsters of the world. This representation associating darkness to monstrosity is not inconsequential because the “Dark Other occupies the same space in reality that the monster occupies in fantasy” (Thomas, 2019, p.20). The violence, brutality, and monstrosity of the Volcra feed into the Dark Aggressor trope as they instil fear into the other ‘races’ of *Shadow and Bone*. Dark Aggressor characters are typically a “savage, uncivilized race or character used as a dangerous antagonist...commonly non-white, dark in skin color, and described using dehumanizing violent, animalistic, or unnatural characteristics” (Davis, 2020, p.9). Therefore, this thinking here also aligns with Thomas’s (2019) theorising about the dark fantastic. Cohen (1996) further defines the monster in his thesis about policing the borders of the possible:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (p.12)

Demonstratively, the Shadow Fold and the Volcra perfectly fit this description. The Fold represents the geographical borders not to be crossed, at the risk of being attacked by the monstrous Volcra, or even possibly becoming Volcra given that these monsters were also once human. The Fold prevents the people of Ravka from crossing East or West because of the danger that it represents but it is also their only way through as they are not able to go around it given the war with the neighbouring nations (Fjerda in the North, and Shu Han in the south).

Furthermore, the binary opposition of good/evil and hero/villain is challenged in the *Grishaverse*. This thinking offers an alternative to the traditional approach which is

illustrated by the Darkling's acceptance of his imposed villain status saying: "Fine. Make me your villain" (Bardugo, 2012, p.325). Indeed, the Darkling understands that every story needs a villain and he is willing to embrace this role so that Alina can fulfil her role of hero. This idea was further reinforced in the show by adding a backstory scene that did not exist in the book, where the Darkling is offered a flashback showing a glimpse of the story in which he once was the hero. As we see in these scenes, young Aleksander was only trying to save his country and his people—the Grisha—from being hunted down and killed by the King and his soldiers. Thus, the show explores his motivations by showing him as a vulnerable Grisha who was hunted just for existing. This self-awareness becomes apparent as he blames Alina for not sympathising with him as he tells her in episode 07: "I thought you of all people would understand what it's like to live in hiding for fear of being murdered simply for being" (Heisserer, 2021e). Therefore, when we experience the story from the Darkling's point of view, he becomes the hero and his actions become justified. This fluidity in the perception of fantasy character archetypes is recurrent in the *Grishaverse* as it can also be seen in *Six of Crows*, for example, when Matthias echoes this idea saying: "We are all someone's monster," (Bardugo, 2015, p.427), which also happens to be the title of the second episode in the show.

Others

In the first episode, an unnamed Black Grisha Inferni⁴⁵ character—played by Bermudian-born actress Genesis Lynea—is introduced for a few minutes before she is brutally murdered by Volcra during the scene of crossing the Shadow Fold (Heisserer, 2021a). It is also worth noting that this is the only Black character on the skiff during this scene. Contextualising this within the roles made available for Black characters in fantasy, highlights some significant representation issues. This is reminiscent of the previously mentioned *tvtropes.org* entry titled "Black Dude Dies First" (tvtropes, n.d.) which explains

⁴⁵ Inferni are a type of Grisha who have the powers to manipulate fire.

the trope that is often used in genres where many characters die, such as horror or SFF.⁴⁶ The premise of this trope is that historically, in a story where many characters are going to die, the Black character usually dies first. While the Black Inferni in the crossing scene does not in fact die first, her death is by far the most spectacular. Indeed, in this scene, most of the characters who die get quickly snatched by Volcra; however, when the time comes for the Black Inferni, she puts up a fight as the Volcra takes its time with her. As opposed to the quick deaths of the White characters on the skiff, we can clearly see the Volcra throwing the Black Inferni across the skiff, then burying its long claws into her limp body before finally taking her away. Perhaps without the context of the long tradition of emphasising Black suffering and trauma in fiction, the scene could seem inconsequential, as one interpretation could be that the character just happened to be Black. However, ignoring this context would be to ignore the invisible part of the iceberg, or as Stuart Hall (1997) puts it: “what is visually produced, by the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half—the deeper meaning—lies in *what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what is implied but cannot be shown*” (emphasis in the original) (p.263). I argue that what is implied here is not only the expendability of Black characters but that their disproportionate suffering compared to White characters is not only unchallenged but almost expected.

In order to fully understand the extent of the ramifications of this character’s death, it can be useful to rewind and examine the moments leading up to her death. We are first introduced to this character as she confidently walks through the skiff giving instructions and explaining the need to stay in the dark as they cross the Fold, because light would attract the attention of the monsters. Raisa, a White character steps in at that moment to ask perhaps the most poignant question: “But, you’re an Inferni, right? So why are you here if we’re

⁴⁶ While there is, to my knowledge, no academic research that explores the use of this trope in YA, Browne (2020) highlights the similar “Bury Your Gays” trope (p.2) and examines the connections between queerness and death in YA fiction.

supposed to keep things dark?” To which the Inferni simply replies: “for when the dark comes to keep you” (Heisserer, 2021a). This question of why the Black Inferni is there, on a surface level, seems inoffensive, as Raisa is only wondering why they would send someone with the powers to manipulate fire to a place where light can be fatal. However, on a deeper level this question also implies that the character was not supposed to be there. Why is she there when she was not in the book? Why is she there when her powers inherently make her a target? The answer is that she is there to die. Or more specifically, to sacrifice herself.

Thomas identifies this type of character as the ‘Dark Other’ and argues that:

Although the Dark Other is necessary for the fantastic, her presence is unsettling. She is not supposed to be there (although she *must* be), wreaking havoc on the order, harmony, and happiness of all that is right and light (and White). She must be contained, subjugated, and ultimately destroyed. (Thomas, 2019, p.26) (emphasis in original)

It is also worth noting the character’s self-awareness as she foreshadows her own fate when she explains to Raisa that the reason why she is there is to sacrifice herself when the “dark” i.e. the monsters, come to attack Raisa and the rest of the characters on the skiff (Heisserer, 2021a). Her final lines before she is attacked by Volcra: “Come at me! Come at me, you coward!” (Heisserer, 2021a) further highlights this conscious sacrifice. While the rest of the characters are trying to hide or run, she challenges the monsters as she calls for them while summoning her fire powers to fight them back.

Black characters dying or sacrificing themselves so that White characters can survive and complete their journeys is not uncommon in YA fantasy (or books and films in general). Perhaps one of the most prominent examples is the character Rue in Suzanne Collins’s (2008) *The Hunger Games*, who dies sacrificing herself so that Katniss Everdeen can fulfil her role as the White hero. Much like Rue, the Black Inferni character was only introduced in

the story to die. The fact that she does not have a name further underlines this point. She was not important enough or did not survive long enough in the story to warrant a name.

Nnedi Okorafor, a Nigerian American science-fiction and fantasy writer, tells the story of how she first came across the trope of the “Magical Negro” character and its meaning:

a black character—usually depicted as wiser and spiritually deeper than the white protagonist—whose purpose in the plot was to help the protagonist get out of trouble, to help the protagonist realize his own faults and overcome them... It is the subordination of a minority figure masked as the empowerment of one. (Okorafor, 2004, para.1)

On the surface level, this trope depicts a positive representation of Black characters; however, this representation also hides implicit racism (Hughey, 2009; Glenn and Cunningham, 2009). *Shadow and Bone*’s unnamed Black Inferni fits most of the characteristics of the “Magical Negro” character as identified by Okorafor (2004): she is Black in a predominantly White setting⁴⁷; she does not have a good reason for being there except to protect the rest of the characters on the skiff; she has magical Grisha powers; and she sacrifices herself and dies fighting off the Volcra to save the other characters.

Thomas identifies a recurrent pattern in the roles of Black characters in fantasy calling it the ‘Dark Fantastic cycle’ which consists of the five following stages: “spectacle”, “hesitation”, “violence”, “haunting”, and “emancipation” (2019, p.26). The Black Inferni character is alive for a total of four minutes in the show. A close examination of this character exemplifies the Dark Fantastic cycle. She walks into the story clapping her hands to get the attention of everyone as she explains the rules of the trip across the Fold—spectacle. Her presence is questioned by a White character—hesitation. Then, she is attacked by the

⁴⁷ The setting here being the skiff, not the entire *Grishaverse* as the latter does feature ‘diverse’ characters from multiple ‘races’ and ethnicities while the former is visibly predominantly White with the exception of Alina and Mal who are part-Shu.

monsters as she tries to fight them off—violence. She foretells her tragic fate when she explains that she is there to protect them when the darkness comes—haunting. The character does not, however, make it to the last step—emancipation—because she does not survive the first four stages of the Dark Fantastic. This is not surprising because the Dark Other character is usually trapped and rarely reaches emancipation (Thomas, 2019). This cycle has a damaging impact on BIPOC readers, viewers, and fans, as Thomas (2019, p.23) notes:

For many readers, viewers, and fans of color, I suspect that, at the level of consciousness, to participate in the fantastic is to watch *yourself* be slain—and justifiably so, as the story recounts. (emphasis in original).

Another example of the roles that are made accessible for BIPOC characters in YA fantasy is illustrated by the character Inej Ghafa. Inej, originally from the *Six of Crows* series, also appears in the *Shadow and Bone* show. Because of the timeline restrictions, the events of *Six of Crows* were not included in the show, instead, a prequel story was created to show the character's lives prior to the events of *Six of Crows*. Inej in the show is shown wearing a scarf when in the books she has often been described as wearing a hood. This subtle—almost unnoticeable—change can very easily be overlooked. However, I suggest that Inej wearing a scarf that closely resembles a Muslim hijab was included because it fits the religious Brown character aesthetic better than a hood. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) notes that: “[s]ocial divisions...exist at the level of representation, being expressed in images and symbols, texts and ideologies” (p.198). It is also important to consider the context that the veil has often been used to symbolise the oppression of women (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2008; Bilge, 2010; Mahmood, 2011; Gill, 2016). In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) highlights the tradition of sexual fantasy that is often found in the West's representation of the East, writing:

...harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys....The Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe...readers and writers could have it if they wished without necessarily going to the Orient. (Said, 1978, p.190)

The representation of this character—including elements such as: the scarf, the extremely long hair, the aerial acrobatics skills, combined with the fact that she is a victim of human trafficking sold as a sex slave to a brothel run by a White woman—all align with Said’s argument of Orientalism. Furthermore, the idea that a veiled Brown woman needs to be “saved” by a White saviour also reinforces ideas of White feminism and Orientalism (Khiabany and Williamson, 2008, p.77). Thus, some of these stereotypes that appear in the *Grishaverse* books and show contribute to perpetuating the exoticizing of ethnic minorities and solidifying damaging representation of BIPOC characters in fantasy, as Said argued that these tropes are rooted in the assumption of the superiority of Western culture (1978). In *Six of Crows* the menagerie is also referred to as the “House of Exotics”:

If you had a taste for a Shu girl or a Fjerdan giant, a redhead from the Wandering Isle, a dark-skinned Zemeni, the Menagerie was your destination. Each girl was known by her animal name—leopard, mare, fox, raven, ermine, fawn, snake. Suli seers wore the jackal mask when they plied their trade and looked into a person’s fate. But what man would want to bed a jackal? So the Suli girl—and the Menagerie always stocked a Suli girl—was known as the lynx. Clients didn’t come looking for the girls themselves, just brown Suli skin, the fire of Kaelish hair, the tilt of golden Shu eyes. The animals remained the same, though the girls came and went. (Bardugo, 2015, p.137)

In this version of the story, Inej is still owned by Tante Heleen and the Menagerie. Thomas (2019) examines the quality of the representation of BIPOC characters in fantasy and points out: “Very often, when you appear on the page or on the screen, you are a slave, a servant, or a prostitute—your body is not your own” (2019, p.24). Indeed, in line with

Thomas's observation and what has been referred to as "the spectacle of the 'other'" (Hall et al., 2013, p.215), Inej's body is not her own and she wears a peacock feather tattoo on her wrist as proof of that. She is not allowed to leave Ketterdam without the approval of Tante Heleen, and when she is summoned by the Menagerie, she must answer the call.

Tropes are by their very nature inter-textual⁴⁸—i.e. they demand to be read within the context of the texts within which they appear. Therefore, in order to fully understand the implications of the roles that are made accessible to BIPOC characters in YA fantasy, it is necessary to read these tropes considering the other instances they have been used in this genre. As Ahmed suggests: "I want to consider racism as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed, 2006, p.111). Thus, the negative connotation that is attached to the theme of darkness is not random, it is tied by an invisible thread to a long tradition of other texts in similar genres that coded darkness as monstrous, evil, and Other. Therefore, the Black Inferni character did not just happen to be Black. Much like a myriad of other Black characters in fantasy—who suffered disproportionately, who died first, or who died sacrificing themselves—did not just happen to be Black. Similarly, Inej did not just happen to be Brown. Much like the many other Othered characters in fantasy, who did not own their own bodies, did not just happen to be Brown. These characters are taking up the space that they have been allowed to take in fantasy and this space is often located at the shadowy margins of the story, as Ahmed observes:

The 'matter' of race is very much about embodied reality; seeing oneself or being seen as white or black or mixed does affect what one 'can do,' or even where one can go, which can be redescribed in terms of what is and is not within reach. (Ahmed, 2006, p.112)

⁴⁸ Inter-textuality is defined as "the accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of other images" (Hall et al., 2013, p.222).

That being said, representing and imagining BIPOC characters in roles and spaces which have often been outside of their reach is bound to be imperfect, as we move towards constructing new tropes and new parameters for BIPOC characters within YA fantasy fiction: as we dare to venture into the shadowy margins to tell the story from the perspective of the marginalised.

The Chosen One

In the original text of *Shadow and Bone* (2012), Alina Starkov is a typical Chosen One YA fantasy character: orphan, able-bodied, heterosexual, and assumed to be White⁴⁹. However, the Netflix adaptation show takes a different approach and changes Alina's racial identity to being part-Shu i.e. East Asian-inspired. Bardugo explains that Alina being part-Shu is plausible because she was born in a town at the borders between Ravka and Shu Han (Hernandez, 2021). Subsequently, the show runners cast Jessie Mei Li to play the role of Alina, as the actress is also biracial. However, such a significant change in the identity of the main character requires more changes to the original story. This practice of changing a character's 'race' or ethnicity is known in Fan Studies as 'racebending' which is a movement that was started by fans of the animated series *Avatar: the Last Airbender* as a reaction to the White-washing of the Asian coded characters in the Paramount film adaptation (Pande, 2018a). Racebending consists of altering the racial identity of a character from the original text to a different one in another medium (Pande, 2018a; McClellan, 2021). This process purposefully and consciously includes BIPOC characters into "canonical, white-dominated stories never intended for them" (McClellan, 2021, p.27). Additionally, Alina's racebending in the show offers a contrast to other previous blockbuster YA adaptations. For instance, Thomas (2019) examines the case of *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), in which Katniss

⁴⁹ While Alina's ethnicity is not explicitly mentioned in the books, Bardugo has confirmed that she initially intended for her to be White (Leary, 2016). This is not uncommon as it is often the norm to assume that a YA fantasy character is White unless stated otherwise.

Everdeen—the main character—was described in the book as having “straight black hair, olive skin,” (p.8) and “gray eyes” (p.8). However, Jennifer Lawrence, a blue-eyed, blond actress was cast to play the role of Katniss in the screen adaptation, thus, White-washing the character.

As a result of *Shadow and Bone*'s racebending, racism represents a significant theme in the show, while it was never mentioned in the original text. Indeed, the first four episodes of the show—‘*A Searing Burst of Light*’, ‘*We’re All Someone’s Monster*’, ‘*The Making at the Heart of the World*’ and ‘*Otkazat’sya*’⁵⁰—particularly depict Alina’s various experiences with racism and microaggressions. Thus, the most notable aspect of Alina’s identity in these first few episodes is arguably her Shu heritage and how that impacts her daily life as a child and later as a cartographer in the First Army. For instance, in the first scene of the show, Alina introduces herself saying: “I live in East Ravka but I’ve never been welcome here, because I look like my mother and she looked like the enemy” (Heisserer, 2021a). This immediately sets the tone of the show and informs the viewer that ‘race’ is going to play a salient role in this version of the story. In the first half of the show, we see Alina being denied served food. We also see other characters using racial slurs against her such as: “rice eater” and “half-breed” (Heisserer, 2021a). In the third episode, Genya—a Grisha Tailor—is sent to improve Alina’s appearance in preparation for her to meet the king of Ravka, and one of the maids suggests: “I’d start by making her eyes less Shu” (Heisserer, 2021d). In the same episode, the Queen’s initial reaction to seeing Alina is: “I thought she was Shu,” to which she quickly adds: “Well, I guess she’s Shu enough”. Furthermore, Alina is asked multiple times throughout the show the question “what are you?”. In episode 02, for example General Kirigan asks her this question multiple times, to which she replies that she is a map maker

⁵⁰ Otkazat’sya is a word in the Ravkan language that means abandoned or orphan. It is also used by the Grisha to describe someone who does not have Grisha powers.

(Heisserer, 2021f). We see this question pop up again in episode 03 when the queen asks a translator to say good morning to Alina in Shu. Alina quickly explains that she does not in fact speak Shu, to which the Queen replies: “then, what are you?” (Heisserer, 2021d). This loaded question that many biracial people often hear was intentionally included as producer Christina Strain insisted on highlighting its deeper significance (Truffaut-Wong, 2021). However, as the story progresses and as Alina takes full control of her Sun Summoner powers, the focus shifts to a new aspect of her identity—her Grisha powers. Episode 04 represents a pivotal moment in the show as Alina truly becomes the Chosen One. She is finally able to let go of everything that tied her to her past by asking Genya to remove the scar on her hand that reminded her of her best friend, Mal. Alina, now alone and free from any ties and relationships, can finally embody her Chosen One self.

Most significantly, this is the point where the microaggressions and instances of racism against Alina curiously disappear. Contextualising this within the long tradition of Chosen One characters in fantasy, I suggest that Alina—the Sun Summoner—does not, and cannot, experience racism simply because the Chosen One story was not designed with BIPOC characters in mind. Therefore, Alina’s biracial identity and all the struggles attached to it become obsolete as she completes her transformation into the Chosen One. This contrast becomes even more apparent in episode 06 (Heisserer, 2021c) when Alina—the Sun Summoner—escapes from the Small Palace and runs, incognito, in the streets. Immediately, Alina steps back into her biracial identity as the people on the streets do not recognise her as the Sun Summoner. Instead, they only see her as part-Shu and discriminate her for that by refusing to sell to her, and even attacking her. In another instance in episode 5 (Heisserer, 2021b), Alina is faced with the crew of performers rehearsing their Sun Summoner play for the Small Palace ball. Unsurprisingly, the performer playing Alina is White and has golden blond hair. This scene clearly shows that the Sun Summoner or the Chosen One in this world

is expected and assumed to be White. Considering this general assumption about the Sun Summer, it does not make sense for everyone to then accept Alina's racial identity unquestionably after she demonstrates her summoning powers. This results in an inconsistent portrayal of the way in which 'race' is constructed in the show, or as Alina puts it: "Well, this is awkward" (Heisserer, 2021b).

Therefore, I argue that changing Alina's racial identity from dominant Ravkan to marginalised Shu disrupts YA fantasy's traditional paradigm of the Chosen One hero, but it still operates within its parameters. More particularly, while this change—at the surface level—contributes to the 'diversity' and representation conversation in YA fantasy, I argue that it misses the opportunity to create a counter-story that effectively challenges the racism it depicts. Indeed, bringing a marginalised voice to the centre of the *Shadow and Bone* narrative undeniably represents a step in the right direction; however, the way in which racism is dealt with does not achieve the goals of counter-storytelling as outlined by Daniella Cook and Adrienne Dixon (2013):

- 1) "psychic preservation by not silencing the experiences of the oppressed and thus exposing neglecting evidence (counterstorytelling);
- 2) Challenging normative reality through an exchange that overcomes ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world one way;
- 3) Listening to the voices of people of color as the basis for understanding how race and racism function;
- 4) Purposefully attempting to disrupt liberal ideology." (p.1243)

This is not to say that including racism in a story is inherently damaging, as it can help move the 'diversity' conversation forward by bringing attention to it and calling it out. However, when this racism is not challenged—such as the case of the *Shadow and Bone* adaptation—it can perpetuate the same deeply rooted issues it was attempting to bring

attention to. If a show decides to diversify the story it is based on, it is important to ask the question: what value is this adding to the story? Including anti-Shu racism in the story without balancing it with detailed description of the beauty of Shu culture misses the point of counter-storytelling and authentic representation of marginalised groups. The Shu are only described as the enemy but the show does not explore the Shu identity beyond that. I suggest that this is the point where the show could have dealt with ‘diversity’ in a more constructive way, instead of echoing the same tropes that are often found in fantasy narratives that include BIPOC characters.

It should also be noted that other ethnic minorities are not shown to experience racism in the adaptation. For example, Black characters such as Nadia and Jesper do not experience discrimination related to their skin colour. However, if the show is going to depict the real world’s racism, should it not also address racism against Black people? It could be argued that Ravka is only at war with Shu Han and Fjerda, and not with Novyi Zem, for example, (where many Brown and Black characters are from). Thus, explaining the lack of racism against these groups as they are not Ravka’s enemy. Following this logic, if Shu people are only targeted because they are the enemy, then we should expect to see the same behaviours towards Fjerdan people, because they too are Ravka’s enemy. Yet, we do not see anyone suggest making a Fjerdan’s eyes less blue. Additionally, this also feeds into the idea that racism has a justification—that justification being war here. However, this oversimplification of racism ignores the fact that racism is often systemic and much more complicated than it appears on the show. Thus, this erasure and cherry-picking of racism from the real world only when convenient for the plot ultimately fails to challenge damaging representations of BIPOC characters and to produce an authentic counter-narrative.

The ‘imagination gap’

Based on the influential definition put forth by Thomas (2019), I identified an imagination gap in both the *Shadow and Bone* book and the TV show adaptation. Indeed, the book failed to imagine BIPOC characters as part of the world, as Bardugo puts it:

I am very proud of *Shadow and Bone* but it is laden with tropes. I think that was because I was echoing a lot of the books that I had grown up with. But as I wrote more, I gained confidence. I felt I could reflect our world more authentically. I look back and see mistakes that I wish I could alter. My world is not straight, white and homogenous. I don't want it to be. So why should my fiction look that way? (Cain, 2021)

Furthermore, the TV show adaptation also suffers from an ‘imagination gap’ as it failed to imagine BIPOC characters beyond their trauma and suffering. One of the main goals of representation is that it allows readers and viewers to see themselves in stories. However, I argue that it is crucial to pay attention to the ways in which they are being represented. In other words, when BIPOC viewers, who have rarely—if ever—seen themselves in YA fantasy adaptations, finally do see themselves, the only aspect of their identity they see represented is their pain. Thus, it is important to tell stories that also show the beauty of being BIPOC, because certainly, there is room for YA fantasy narratives in which BIPOC characters are thriving. It is also worth noting that I do not by any means suggest that fantasy stories of BIPOC characters should be devoid of conflict, because that is the core of storytelling. I suggest that BIPOC characters should not be subjected to the same attacks that they have to endure in their own lives while consuming a fantasy story. If we ground the conflict within the boundaries of the fantasy world, we expand our imagination and our expectations of which narratives BIPOC characters—and by extension BIPOC people—are allowed to be in.

The difference between discrimination that is rooted in the fantasy world and one that is heavily reliant on the real world is clearly illustrated through the Fjerda/Grisha and Ravka/Shu Han relationships. Fjerda, similarly to Shu Han, is also described as an enemy nation to Ravka because the Fjerdan are known to hunt Grisha and kill them. However, scenes that depict anti-Grisha hate are very different from the ones that show anti-Shu hate. For example, Grisha are also called slurs such as “drüsje” which is the Fjerdan word for witch, and they are considered to be evil, taken captive, and even killed. However, because this discrimination is rooted in the fantasy world, it manages to depict relatable and authentic representation of prejudice and its consequences without using triggering words that are used in real life racism. This offers a distance that allows readers and viewers to see themselves and their struggles in the story without feeling personally attacked or triggered by words they may have grown up hearing. Another layer that makes the Fjerdan/Grisha dynamic different is the fact that this discrimination is clearly challenged and balanced with detailed description of who the Grisha really are and their extraordinary abilities. However, this facet was not included to challenge the racism against Shu people. We are told that they are the enemy and we see multiple instances of hate and discrimination against Shu people, but we are not told anything about the Shu culture. Additionally, racism against Grisha is better executed than the one against Shu because the Grisha being persecuted was built into the foundation and the core of the story while the anti-Shu racism was added for the show, as Angeline Rodriguez—a writer and editor—points out:

The series misses a huge opportunity to interweave these elements of the worldbuilding by having Alina (and Zoya, Nadia, and the other ethnic extras they peppered the Little Palace with) find power and acceptance among the Grisha because they're a community with a history of persecution, and in fact are more racially diverse than the general population because of it. (Rodriguez, 2021)

Additionally, I argue that this ‘imagination gap’ is also responsible for more inconsistencies in the depiction of racism in Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone*. For instance, in episode 03 Alina is welcomed by a group of Grisha at the palace. During this scene, Zoya Nazyalenski—played by actress Sujaya Dasgupta—whispers to Alina “You stink of the orphanage, half-breed” (Heisserer, 2021d). This scene in particular feels inconsistent with the depiction of racism in the show for multiple reasons. Firstly, the fact that Zoya is also biracial⁵¹ herself as she is part-Suli, and secondly, the fact that the actress delivering the line is a person of colour make this scene confusing at best. One interpretation might be that Zoya attacked Alina based on her biracial identity because she knew how much that would hurt her having experienced the same herself. However, if this is true, it still does not explain why Zoya would hate Alina this much. Therefore, this inability to imagine the roles of BIPOC characters beyond the racism that they are expected to experience in the real world even from fellow BIPOC people aligns with Thomas’s (2019) understanding of the ‘imagination gap’.

(Re)Orienting YA Fantasy

Sara Ahmed’s (2006) understanding of the concept of ‘orientation’ provides a useful framework to examine the shift in Alina’s racial identity, as she notes:

If we know where we are when we turn this way or that way, then we are orientated. We have our bearings. We know what to do to get to this place or to that place. To be orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way. These are the objects we recognize, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing. They might be landmarks or other familiar signs that give us our anchoring points. They gather on the ground, and they create a ground upon which we can gather. (p.1)

⁵¹ Zoya’s biracial identity is only revealed in *King of Scars* (Bardugo, 2019).

Based on this thinking, being oriented in YA fantasy means being able to locate familiar landmarks—character archetypes, tropes, and landscapes—within the traditional boundaries of this genre. Therefore, an oriented Chosen One hero would fit the genre's prescribed parameters for this character. Thus, to change any important aspect of the identity of this hero (such as their 'race' and ethnicity) would inevitably disorient the familiar space that this story has occupied so far. Following this logic, Alina in the book is an oriented hero as she meets all the expectations and complies with many of the traditional tropes associated with YA fantasy heroes around the time of the book's publication i.e. White young woman, orphan, hidden powers, able-bodied, special, and desired by two men. In the show, however, Alina steps outside of the familiar by being biracial. Thus, the choice to change Alina's ethnicity from dominant Ravkan to marginalised Shu disorients the YA fantasy Chosen One narrative as it brings issues that the traditional YA fantasy Chosen One does not have to deal with. I suggest that this disorientation, along with the previously established 'imagination gap', are the two main causes for the inconsistent representation of racism throughout the Netflix adaptation. Indeed, Alina's identity as a BIPOC character with BIPOC-related issues and her identity as the Chosen One with Chosen One-related issues struggle to coexist within the same narrative. There is a clear shift in perspective between Alina embodying her part-Shu identity in the first half of the show, then switching to her Sun Summoner identity. One of the reasons why this is frustrating is that BIPOC people do not get to step in and out of their identit/ies the way Alina does so effortlessly. While at the surface level, Alina is still visibly BIPOC in the second half of the show, all of her BIPOC-related struggles have faded to the background. Thus, Alina reorients herself back within the familiar parameters of the Chosen One as her biracial identity becomes less relevant to the story.

The *Shadow and Bone* TV show brings a marginalised character to the centre of the narrative. Through this analysis, I suggest an alternative paradigm to approach diversifying a

story that originally centred White, able-bodied, heterosexual characters. Let's consider the narrative to be a lamp post shedding light on the Chosen One hero's journey. The world around the hero that falls outside the lamplight represents the spaces occupied by marginalised and endarkened characters. As bell hooks puts it: "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks, 2014a, p.xvii). One way to diversify this story would be by bringing a character from the shadowy margin and moving them under the light of the central lamp post: thus, the marginalised becomes central to the narrative.

Netflix's *Shadow and Bone* achieved this by changing White Alina to biracial part-Shu Alina. However, the show producers did not consider that the environment surrounding White Alina and the elements that make up the structure and the beats of her story remained quintessentially the same. This resulted in an inconsistent depiction of racism and the way in which 'race' is constructed in the show. Therefore, instead of bringing a marginalised character to the centre, I suggest bringing the centre to the margin. In other words, removing the lamp post from the centre and relocating it to the character's authentic environment and surroundings. Certainly, this task would be much more laborious and take more time, but in the end it sheds light on the marginalised character in a much more authentic way. Therefore, to truly diversify a story means to uproot the narrative and reorient it towards the marginalised character. The story must be constructed to fit the BIPOC character, instead of them having to stretch or squeeze themselves into spaces that were not designed to fit them. Only then will authentic stories from the perspective of the marginalised be told. hooks identifies the margins as a place of both oppression and resistance at the same time and views marginality as "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds" (hooks, 2014b, p.150). The question here is: are authors, editors, scriptwriters, producers, and other gatekeepers willing to dig out the lamp post and

take the necessary steps to relocate it? Are they willing to put in the effort to reorient the YA fantasy narrative—its tropes, its archetypes, its landscapes—to tell authentic stories about BIPOC and other marginalised characters?

Conclusion

This chapter interrogated the role of YA fantasy TV show adaptations in the representation of marginalised identities through a case study of Netflix's *Shadow and Bone* adaptation of Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* series. I argue that diversifying the *Shadow and Bone* story in the show disrupts and challenges the 'genre world' of YA fantasy by expanding the scope of its storytelling possibilities. *Shadow and Bone*'s transformation invites readers to reimagine the original story in a way that is aimed to reflect the world we live in more authentically and to imagine the Chosen One beyond the expectations and restrictions of traditional fantasy heroes. The decision to include a *Six of Crows* storyline shakes the traditional power dynamics within the YA fantasy genre as the focus is no longer merely on the Chosen One but instead moves back and forth from Alina's perspective to the *Six of Crows* crew's perspectives. Creating a hybrid narrative style that gives a more holistic view of the story than the original first-person narrative perspective used in the original text. Although *Shadow and Bone* did not manage to create a narrative free from damaging representation and harmful tropes, I suggest that it still plays a pivotal role in pushing the boundaries of YA fantasy's genre expectations and setting the tone for future YA fantasy adaptations.

Ultimately, I argue that TV adaptations of YA fantasy stories can offer a unique opportunity to revisit and rewrite the original text to improve the 'diversity' and representation of marginalised groups. However, these changes can also bring more issues to the table. What is key to my discussion is the understanding that this trial and error process is essential to moving the 'diversity' conversation forward. It is important to think critically

about the way in which marginalised characters are represented in *Shadow and Bone*. However, it is equally as important to recognise the impact that intentionally diversifying such a trendsetting series will potentially have on opening the door for the rest of YA fantasy, not only to be more inclusive but to normalise rewriting stories with the aim to create counter-stories. Thus, allowing room for mistakes by steering away from finger-pointing and cancel culture is key to the growth of this conversation. Changes like the ones in the *Shadow and Bone* adaptation represent a push that will allow the YA fantasy 'genre world' to eventually change direction. Otherwise, it will continue a similar trajectory. These instances that disorient the way we think of the genre and allow us to step into the unfamiliar are what will allow us to move forward. This is not to say that reorienting the genre to become more inclusive will happen in a straightforward manner. However, it is crucial to challenge our imaginations and expand them towards new trajectories because that is how we do better.

Conclusion

I began this thesis with concerns about the representations of socially marginalised groups in YA fantasy. Now that I have reached the end of this thesis, I still have concerns about the representations of socially marginalised groups in YA fantasy. However, the enthusiasm and determination of various people—including publishing professionals, readers, and social media influencers—who are involved in building YA fantasy, as well as the growth in scholarship and awareness around the topic of ‘diversity’ over the last few years, give me optimistic expectations that YA fantasy, not only, *can* do better but that it *wants* to do better. Throughout the years it took to complete this thesis, I have had the opportunity to examine YA fantasy from multiple angles and at different times. This has allowed me to reach a better understanding of the ways in which we can challenge existing issues within the genre to ensure that characters from socially marginalised groups are represented authentically.

As I have demonstrated through the findings outlined in this research, writing authentic YA fantasy stories that feature BIPOC, queer, and dis/abled characters is so much more than just adding these characters into the narratives. In this research, I have stressed that even the best of intentions—such as including ‘diversity’ in screen adaptations of stories that did not originally feature this ‘diversity’—can have problematic implications. Thus, for ‘diversity’ to make sense and to fulfil its goals, it must challenge, reorient, and adapt the whole narrative and the structures within which its tropes operate. Stories that are not mindful of the types of spaces that BIPOC, queer, dis/abled, and otherwise marginalised characters occupy run the risk of perpetuating problematic and damaging representations that can have real-life implications and repercussions on people from these groups. This is essentially why this research—which goes beyond the surface of including ‘diversity’ to interrogate the type of representations—matters. My original contribution to knowledge is to improve the current

understanding of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy stories by examining some interconnected elements that contribute to the formation of the genre, namely: publishing professionals, social media influencers, readers, and media adaptations. This interconnectedness is particularly crucial to YA Studies in the current cultural landscape because of the growing role that YA has in raising awareness about ‘diversity’ issues in the real-world and championing activism. In this conclusion, I provide a brief summary of the findings I reached in Chapter 3, Chapter 4, and Chapter 5 of this thesis. I also explore the significance and implications of this contribution to knowledge, the objectives the thesis has achieved, its limitations, and potential pathways and recommendations for further investigations.

Summary of Findings

This research interrogated various elements of the YA fantasy ‘genre world’ vis-à-vis their relationship to representations of marginalised groups. In this thesis, I have highlighted some issues that are often overlooked. Overall, the analysed findings indicated a general push towards including more ‘diversity’ and authentic representations of socially marginalised groups in YA fantasy. Consequently, this thesis argued that while YA fantasy has made considerable efforts to become more ‘diverse’ and inclusive over the last decade with contributions from people who are part of the publishing journey, the representation of marginalised characters remains problematic due to persistent issues of stereotypes, racism, Orientalism, prejudice, erasure, and other biases. While this thesis highlighted many issues within YA fantasy, it does not imply that there is something inherently wrong with the genre. Instead, this thesis encouraged questioning and rethinking some of the YA fantasy tropes to improve ‘diversity’ and ensure that characters from socially marginalised groups have safe narrative spaces to occupy. Throughout this thesis, I have examined and analysed some of these issues with the aim to disrupt their presence in the YA fantasy genre and lay the

groundwork to build a safer foundation for representing characters from socially marginalised groups.

Chapter 3 examined the perspective of publishing professionals and social media influencers of YA fantasy on various popular YA fantasy tropes and trends. This chapter addressed my first research question by demonstrating that some of these agents that are involved in the publishing journey of YA fantasy are seeking and expecting more authentic ‘diverse’ representations of marginalised groups. Therefore, in order to achieve this goal, the YA fantasy genre is increasingly looking for alternatives to some of the damaging and problematic tropes and moving towards a more inclusive approach, such as narratives featuring collective and ‘diverse’ heroes. Through an analysis of the four hypothetical vignettes that reflect the YA market of the last decade, I demonstrate how popular fantasy narrative arcs, such as the Chosen One story, can, like a trojan horse carry a heavy load of unspoken tropes with them. These implied rules determine which roles characters are expected to play—and the ones they are not—according to aspects of their identity such as ‘race’, dis/ability, body size, gender, and sexuality. In this chapter, I drew from a framework of principles of Whiteness, defamiliarisation, and in-group/out-group categories to question the roles that characters from marginalised groups occupy in YA fantasy. By gathering insights from twelve semi-structured interviews with key agents that are involved in the publishing journey of a YA fantasy book, this chapter highlights the need to disrupt popular tropes in order to build more ‘diverse’ spaces for YA fantasy characters from marginalised groups.

Chapter 4 looked at YA fantasy readers through their reading preferences and reading habits. Through an analysis of an online survey with 308 YA fantasy readers, I demonstrate that these readers are looking for more authentic ‘diverse’ representations of characters from marginalised groups, which illustrates the need to examine the quality of ‘diverse’

representation in YA fantasy. This chapter addressed my second research question by shedding light on the perception of YA fantasy readers about 'diverse' representations and interrogating the extent to which these readers are able to see themselves in the books they read. In this research, I considered the reader as one of the main driving elements to achieve the goal of change because of their power to impact the market, particularly with the use of social media. Through this chapter, I have shown that some of these readers are still unable to see themselves represented authentically in the YA fantasy books they read. The symbiotic relationship between readers and YA fantasy means that these readers have the potential to instigate change in the future. This chapter extends the analysis of the four hypothetical vignettes to the perspectives of YA fantasy readers. The findings revealed that the reaction of these readers aligned with that of the interviewed publishing professionals and social media influencers in Chapter 3. Readers also favoured Vignette D as the one they were interested in or very interested in reading the most out of the four stories. The findings also revealed that most of these YA fantasy readers were not interested or only somewhat interested in Vignette A, which featured a traditional Chosen One story. Furthermore, most of these readers ranked Vignette D first, Vignette C second, Vignette B third, and Vignette A last according to their level of interest in reading the stories. While it is challenging to predict tropes or trends in any genre, I suggest that there is potential for tropes that are inherently and structurally more inclusive, such as the Crew Hero trope, to continue rising in popularity in the following years.

Chapter 5 analysed the representations of marginalised groups in the *Shadow and Bone* Netflix adaptation of Bardugo's bestselling *Shadow and Bone* and *Six of Crows* YA fantasy series. Including *Six of Crows* in the *Shadow and Bone* adaptation was instrumental in introducing more 'diversity' to the original story. This change turned *Shadow and Bone* from a Chosen One story told from the perspective of the main character, Alina Starkov, to a more

inclusive narrative told from multiple perspectives, including characters from marginalised groups. This chapter addressed my third research question by demonstrating the role that screen adaptations can have in reimagining the representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. Thus, the findings outlined and analysed in Chapter 5 provide a greater understanding of the implications that screen adaptations of YA fantasy can have. This case study revealed that while it is possible for screen adaptations to rewrite and reorient traditional tropes—such as Chosen One narratives—to tell a more inclusive counter-narrative, this practice can also bring about problematic implications. When the original space was not built to be inhabited by a ‘diverse’ character, racebending the Chosen One character’s identity does not change the narrative space. This results in insensitive and uncomfortable situations caused by the dissonance between the character’s identity and their experiences. In this chapter, I explore the themes of darkness and monstrosity and the way in which they intertwine in the story through the portrayal of the monsters and the linguistic choices. In this chapter, I also examine the representation of an unnamed Black character who dies suffering disproportionately more than her White counterparts. I demonstrate how these—often dismissed—representations perpetuate damaging tropes about Black pain and suffering. Through this analysis, I have shown that it is crucial to consider various elements that contribute to the formation of the YA fantasy genre. Despite the issues that I identified in Netflix’s *Shadow and Bone* adaption, I suggest that it can still help move the ‘diversity’ conversation of YA fantasy forward. By disrupting the idea that adaptations have to be as faithful as possible to the original text, *Shadow and Bone* encourages other YA fantasy stories to dare depart from the source material with the aim of improving the representations of marginalised groups.

Objectives, Significance, and Implications of the Study

This research provides theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to the fields of YA Studies, Publishing, and Book Studies. Insights from this research can be used to uncover new areas of investigation within YA Studies. These insights can also inform practical decisions within the publishing industry, particularly at the writing, acquisition, commissioning, and editing stages of the book journey within and beyond YA fantasy. As mentioned in my introduction, this thesis had two main objectives: dismantling some problematic tropes and trends in YA fantasy and building a better understanding of ‘diversity’ and the representations of marginalised groups in this genre. The first objective was met through an analysis of some popular tropes and trends in YA fantasy and the parameters within which they operate from various perspectives (publishing professionals, social media influencers, readers, and media adaptation). The second objective was met by unlocking some alternative ways of thinking about these popular YA fantasy tropes and trends, thus contributing to reorienting the genre towards safer and more inclusive spaces that characters from marginalised groups can inhabit.

This research built on the groundbreaking works of YA scholars, including Thomas’s (2019) *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games*, Wilkins’s (2019) *Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Conventions, Originality, Reproducibility*, and Ramdarshan Bold’s (2019a) *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom*. The “*imagination gap*” (Thomas, 2019, p.5), that YA continues to suffer from shows the need for research that explores issues of ‘diversity’ and representations of marginalised groups. In this research, I demonstrated YA fantasy’s move from individualistic Chosen One heroes that were popular in the early 2010s toward collective and interdependent communities, such as the Crew Hero trope. I argue that this is closely linked to the genre’s move towards more ‘diverse’ ways of thinking because as we

move away from the traditional version of the Chosen One hero, we move away from the idea of the 'norm' which has often been White, able-bodied, heterosexual, and cisgender. Therefore, the premise of a Crew Hero challenges the expectations of whom the hero is supposed to be. As readers and fans of YA fantasy continue to engage with the genre across different platforms and in various formats, they may face problematic and damaging representations of characters from marginalised groups, perpetuating and reinforcing people's biases. Wilkins demonstrated that genres "can change over time under the shaping pressure of audiences and the industry that seeks to attract those audiences" (Wilkins, 2019, p.26). Thus, raising awareness about these issues and providing detailed analyses of how these damaging tropes are constructed can be helpful to readers in recognising the problematic spaces that marginalised characters sometimes occupy in YA fantasy. Through the efforts of these readers, along with the publishing industry, and authors, YA fantasy would then be able to reorient its narratives.

This thesis has embraced the interdisciplinary nature of YA Studies by exploring various avenues that lead to the construction of YA fantasy—such as Media Studies, Fandom and Audience Studies, and Publishing and Book Studies—to expand the existing knowledge of YA Studies. Although the study focuses specifically on YA fantasy, insights from its findings can be applied in the broader field of YA. Problematically, YA research "all too often does not take race into account, treating adolescence as a universal stage of human development independent of social contexts and cultural differences" (E. E. Thomas, 2020, p.3). For this reason, my analysis focused mainly on issues related to 'race'. However, while this thesis was focused, it was by no means exclusionary. Issues of dis/ability, religion, gender, and sexuality were also mentioned throughout the thesis and explored at various depths. This was determined by the direction that the data collected was pointing towards, as well as my own identity and the areas I felt comfortable commenting on and the ones I felt

needed to be examined by Own Voices researchers in those areas (please see the recommendations for further research section below p.265). Thomas highlights the importance of stories in determining how we interpret the world around us, noting that:

Stories matter. Who gets to tell stories, how many, when, and under what circumstances, and how the stories that we tell each other shape discourses, minds, the imagination, and entire worlds. Some stories, if told often enough, can become the *sine qua non* of a person, a group, a nation, or an entire race of more than one billion human beings, numbering more than one-seventh of our species, *Homo sapiens*. (2020, p.2)

My methodological approach overlaps traditional and creative methods. As I have explained in the Methodology Chapter of this thesis, I used a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative interviews using hypothetical vignettes, a case study of Netflix's adaptation of the *Shadow and Bone* series, and a quantitative online survey with YA fantasy readers. This offers a holistic understanding of the YA fantasy world and how it operates, particularly in terms of 'diversity' and representations of marginalised groups. Introducing hypothetical vignettes—which have typically been used in the fields of social and health sciences with vulnerable groups or sensitive topics—to YA Studies, Publishing, and Book Studies opens the door for more research. Using vignettes makes it possible to have a tangible example to discuss while still avoiding ethical implications such as making participants reluctant to share an honest opinion for fear of potential repercussions. Therefore, this tool impacts the ways in which research that investigates issues of 'diversity' and representation within the publishing industry can be conducted.

The field of YA is evolving at a rapid rate; therefore, it is important that authors, industry professionals, and readers remain aware of 'diversity' issues to be able to make informed decisions. The findings outlined in this thesis can provide guidance for these people

who are involved in the process and encourage the production of authentic YA stories that do not perpetuate damaging and problematic representations of characters from marginalised groups. This will ultimately have an impact beyond YA and the awareness will spill onto people's lives and the ways in which they perceive themselves and the people around them.

Limitations of the Study

While this thesis achieved both of its objectives, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The lack of representation and the problematic representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy are daunting issues that cannot realistically be solved single-handedly or immediately. This research disrupts some significant problematic and damaging representations of marginalised groups in this genre. However, many other equally critical problematic representations were not discussed in great detail such as representations of gender and sexuality. While the scope of this research was broad, including different formats and a variety of people who are involved in the publishing journey, it did not include all of the elements of the YA fantasy 'genre world'. The authors, for instance, represent an essential part of the construction of YA fantasy. Still, because of the time constraints and the difficulty in recruiting authors for interviews, this research did not include a detailed discussion about the role of the authors in writing authentic and 'diverse' YA fantasy stories. Time constraints of this PhD also meant that only one case study of a Netflix adaptation was discussed and analysed in Chapter 5 which does not allow for generalisations. However, the case study offered useful insights into some of the implications that adapting YA fantasy stories can have when including more 'diversity' that was not present in the original text. Furthermore, because this research offered the option to remain anonymous, the identities of the interviewees were not part of the discussion in Chapter 3. While there is a need for such research, being able to draw meaningful conclusions about any correlation between a publishing professional's identity and the types of tropes and stories they are interested in

would require a much larger sample. The limitations of the research methods I used for this thesis can be found in the Methodology Chapter (please see p.130 for more details). The impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic is also explored in the Methodology Chapter (please see p.145).

Recommendations for Further Research

In this section, I highlight a few pathways for future research trajectories. This thesis lays the groundwork that further research can utilise. A few areas of investigation can be woven from the various threads of this thesis. For instance, the following areas have emerged from my research. The continuous growth of social media and online platforms represents a timely and relevant area of investigation within YA Studies. The emerging Booktok phenomenon, which is changing the way in which books climb to the bestseller lists, could be used as a medium to investigate its impact on marketing 'diverse' YA fantasy books. Digital Ethnography research could be well-suited for such an investigation. Furthermore, my research about 'diversity' and the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy builds on the existing literature and opens pathways for future research focused on 'diversity' issues. For example, more research that focuses on dis/ability, queer identities, mental health, social class and neurodiversity in YA fantasy and other genres within the field of YA is needed. I encourage a more comprehensive investigation of the topic of 'diversity' in YA fantasy. I look forward to more scholarship that addresses racism, Orientalism, and erasure in YA fantasy. As YA fantasy becomes increasingly more inclusive to Black and African diaspora authors such as Tomi Adeyemi, Jordan Ifueko, and Namina Forna, scholarly research by Black and African scholars must follow (E. E. Thomas, 2020). Another area for future investigation is the publishing industry. There are many roles in the publishing industry that have different levels of impact on the representations of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. While I explore some of these roles through analysing the interviewees for this

thesis, there is room to explore other positions within publishing, such as designers and translators, in more detail. Yet another area of investigation for future research for YA Studies can be about Netflix because as Netflix continues to adapt large numbers of YA stories, more research is needed to examine these adaptations and their impact on the field of YA.

Final Remarks

As I put the final touches on this thesis, I am also currently starting to put together the outline to write my own YA fantasy story. The last few years working on this thesis made me realise that I had my own story to tell, a story that reflects my experience as a North African Amazigh woman that could further diversify the YA fantasy genre. This story seems like the natural next step after finishing this thesis. It is inspired by authentic and empowering ‘diverse’ YA fantasy stories such as the works of Tomi Adeyemi, Namina Forna, Roshani Chokshi, Hafsa Faizal, Vanessa Len, Zoraida Córdova, and Natasha Ngan, among many others. I first had the idea for this story when I was brainstorming ideas for the hypothetical vignettes. A modified version of it ended up being Vignette D. The positive feedback I received from publishing professionals, social media influencers, and readers about this vignette while conducting my interviews and survey gives me the confidence that this is a story worth telling. While this thesis makes an original contribution to the scholarship around the representation of marginalised characters in YA fantasy, writing a story that considers all the aspects discussed within this thesis would make a different albeit equally significant contribution to the genre. This story is also born out of frustrations from other people telling the story of my people and misrepresenting Muslim North African Amazigh identities. An example of this is the problematic upcoming fantasy novel titled *Black Shield Maiden* by Willow Smith and Jess Hendel, which describes Amazigh people as “thieves and slavers” and “dangerous on their best day” (Penguin Random House, 2022). Conducting this research has

equipped me with the necessary tools to write an authentic counter-narrative that showcases the beauty and complexity of North African and Amazigh cultures. It is my hope that this will have a positive impact on the representations of my people in the YA fantasy genre and encourage more stories in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet for Publishers and Social Media

Influencers of YA fantasy

Title of Study:

‘Diversity’ in YA Fantasy

Department:

Information Studies

Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):

Ikram Belaid

ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:

Dr. Samantha Rayner

s.rayner@ucl.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in a PhD research project about ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy. Before you decide if you want to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask if you have any questions or require further information. Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the project’s purpose?

The purpose of this study is to reach a better understanding of genre expectations and the influence of publishers, social media influencers, readers, and transmedia storytelling in the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. Thus, this research seeks to expand

the growing research interest in YA fantasy by focussing on ‘diversity’. These interviews will last 30 to 45 minutes each.

2. Why have I been chosen?

The target participants for this study are adult publishers and online influencers working on YA fantasy novels. I would like to hear your views and concerns about the trends in YA fantasy. Other YA fantasy publishers and influencers will be approached. In total, 20 participants will be interviewed for this study.

3. Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary so you do not have to accept this invitation. If you do accept it, you still may withdraw from the research at any stage. You may withdraw your data up to four weeks after the interview has been conducted. A copy of the interview transcript will be sent to you and you will have a chance to amend it. If you decide to take part, you will be given a participant information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form.

4. Will I be recorded and how will the recorded media be used?

If you give consent. The interview will be audio recorded. This audio will be used to create a transcript of the interview. No one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. After the transcripts are made, the audio file will be deleted. The data collected during the course of this study will be used only for analysis in my PhD thesis and potentially, for illustration in conference presentations or lectures. No other use will be made of them without your written permission.

5. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be sitting for a 30-45 minute semi-structured interview (in person or via Skype) regarding the main research aim. You will be asked to share your opinion on the current state and trends in YA fantasy. The interviews will be semi-structured so there is opportunity for you to expand on any theme you find particularly interesting. You will be given the choice on whether you wish to share your name or remain anonymous.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No disadvantages or risks to taking part are being anticipated, although it will of course take up some of your time.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will lead to a better understanding of heroes in YA fantasy and contribute towards establishing YA as a field of research in its own right.

8. What if something goes wrong?

Should you wish to raise a complaint in the case of a serious issue regarding your participation in this project, you may get in touch with my supervisor Dr. Samantha Rayner – s.rayner@ucl.ac.uk. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you may contact the chair of the UCL Research Committee – ethics@ucl.ac.uk

9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

You will be given the choice as to whether you wish to be named, or anonymised and identified by a letter or a number, e.g. participant A. If you wish to be anonymised, all the

information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The data collected from this study will only be used for analysis in this research and potentially for illustration in conferences, presentations, and publications.

Along with any personal information you wish to reveal during the interview (e.g. your background, your career in the publishing industry), we will also keep a record of your contact details. These will be held for the purpose of contacting you during the research period. Your personal information will not be shared outside the research team; however, it is possible that those with knowledge of the field may be able to identify you.

The interview will be transcribed and you will be given a copy that you may request to amend. At that point, we will be able to discuss any concerns you might have and add in any clarifications you think necessary.

10. Limits to confidentiality

Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to; however it might not be possible to absolutely guarantee confidentiality as participants may be identified by people of knowledge in the field.

11. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The data collected during this research will be analysed and presented within my PhD thesis, and could also be published.

12. Local Data Protection Privacy Notice

Notice:

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click [here](#)

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices.

The categories of personal data used will be as follows:

Name

Email address

Role or position in a company

Job title

The lawful basis that would be used to process your *personal data* will be [performance of a task in the public interest.]

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

13. Who is organising and funding the research?

The first three years of this research are being funded by the Algerian Government.

14. Contact for further information

For further information about this study, feel free to contact me at ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk.

Each participant will be given a copy of this Information Sheet to keep. Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.

Appendix Two: Consent form for YA fantasy readers, publishers and social media influencers

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Title of Study: ‘Diversity’ in YA Fantasy

Department: Information Studies

Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):

Ikram Belaid

ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:

Dr. Samantha Rayner

s.rayner@ucl.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of the UCL Data Protection Officer:

Alex Potts

data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee: Project ID number: 16001/001

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

		Tick Box
1.	<p>I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction and would like to take part in:</p> <p>- an individual interview</p>	
2.	<p>I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to four weeks after the interview has been conducted.</p>	
3.	<p>I consent to participate in the study. I understand that my personal information will be used for the purposes explained to me. The personal data that will be collected may include my name, email address, role in company/job title. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation.</p>	
4.	<p>I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified (<i>unless you state otherwise</i>). Please be aware that even if you wish to anonymised, there is still a chance that you might be identified by people in the field.</p> <p>Anonymity is optional for this research. Please select from the following 3 options:</p>	

	<p>(a) I agree for my real name and role/affiliation to be used in connection with any words I have said or information I have passed on.</p> <p>(b) I request that my comments are presented anonymously but give permission to connect my role/affiliation with my comments (but not the title of my position).</p> <p>(c) I request that my comments are presented anonymously with no mention of my role/affiliation.</p>	
5.	I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the University (to include sponsors and funders) for monitoring and audit purposes.	
6.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
7.	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher(s) undertaking this study.	
8.	I understand that I will not benefit financially from this study or from any possible outcome it may result in in the future.	
9.	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published in a PhD thesis and I wish to receive a copy of it. Yes/No	
10.	<p>I consent to my interview being audio recorded and understand that the recordings will be deleted once these have been transcribed.</p> <p>1. To note: If you do not want your participation recorded you can still take part in the study.</p>	
11.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix Three: Information Sheet for the Online Survey with YA fantasy readers**YOU WILL MAY SAVE THIS INFORMATION SHEET****Title of Study:**

‘Diversity’ in YA Fantasy

Department:

Information Studies

Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):

Ikram Belaid

ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:

Dr. Samantha Rayner

s.rayner@ucl.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in a PhD research project about ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy. Before you decide if you want to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to ask if you have any questions or require further information. Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the project’s purpose?

The purpose of this study is to reach a better understanding of genre expectations and the influence of publishers, social media influencers, readers, and transmedia storytelling in the representation of marginalised groups in YA fantasy. Thus, this research seeks to expand the growing research interest in YA fantasy by focussing on ‘diversity’. This questionnaire will take less than 10 minutes to complete.

2. Why have I been chosen?

The target participants for this study are adults (18 and older) who read YA fantasy novels. I would like to hear your views and concerns about the trends and tropes in YA fantasy. Everyone who completes this questionnaire will be included in the study.

3. Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary so you do not have to accept this invitation. If you do accept it, you still may withdraw from the research at any stage. If you decide to withdraw, you may simply close the questionnaire. You may also withdraw your data up to four weeks after participation. Data from incomplete questionnaires will be deleted. If you would like your information to be deleted after completing the questionnaire, you can contact me by email (ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk) and I will delete your data.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be given a consent form to agree to. You will then get access to the questionnaire. It should take you less than 10 minutes to complete it. You won't be asked for any personal details. Your data will be completely anonymous.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No disadvantages or risks to taking part are being anticipated, although it will of course take up some of your time.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will lead to a better understanding of heroes, tropes and 'diversity' in YA fantasy and contribute towards establishing YA as a field of research in its own right.

7. What if something goes wrong?

Should you wish to raise a complaint in the case of a serious issue regarding your participation in this project, you may get in touch with my supervisor Dr. Samantha Rayner – s.rayner@ucl.ac.uk. If you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you may contact the chair of the UCL Research Committee – ethics@ucl.ac.uk

8. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

No personal information will be collected about you during the course of this questionnaire. All data will be completely anonymous. The data collected from this study will only be used for analysis in this research and potentially for illustration in conferences, presentations, and publications. You will not be able to be identified in any ensuing reports or publications.

9. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The data collected during this research will be analysed and presented within my PhD thesis, and could also be published or presented in scholarly outlets.

10. Local Data Protection Privacy Notice**Notice:**

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click [here](#)

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices.

The categories of personal data used will be as follows:

none

The lawful basis that would be used to process your *personal data* will be [performance of a task in the public interest.]

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

11. Who is organising and funding the research?

The first three years of this research are being funded by the Algerian Government.

12. Contact for further information

For further information about this study, feel free to contact me at

ikram.belaid.18@ucl.ac.uk.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.

Appendix Four: Interview Participants

Date	Participant	Role	Location
16/11/2019	Stephanie King	Commissioning Editor at Usborne Publishing	Usborne Publishing Offices
14/01/2020	Participant A	Publishing professional	Hachette offices
20/01/2020	Participant B	Social media influencer	UCL
09/03/2020	Anonymous participant C	Marketing Manager	Participant's work offices
09/03/2020	Anonymous participant D	Publishing professional	Participant's work offices

24/03/2020	Kristina Perez	Literary Agent at Zeno Agency and YA author	Online (Skype)
30/03/2020	Anonymous Participant E	Publishing professional	Online (Skype)
30/03/2020	Anonymous Participant F	Social media influencer	Online (Skype)
30/03/2020	Anonymous participant G	Book Blogger	Online (Skype)
31/03/2020	Anonymous Participant H	Publishing professional	Online (Skype)
19/03/2020	Anonymous Participant I	Publishing professional	Online (Skype)
07/04/2020	Anonymous participant J	Publishing professional	Online (Skype)

Table 7: Interview dates, participants, roles, and location

Appendix Five: Interview guide questions

- Can you name a few of your favourite and least favourite YA fantasy tropes?
- Are there any tropes you think are outdated now and do not have a place in the current market?
- How would you describe a typical YA fantasy hero?
- What kinds of stories would you say you are currently looking for in YA fantasy?
- How would you describe the state of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy at the moment and compared to what it was in the past?

- Do you think social media and online platforms can have an impact on what kinds of stories get published?
- How do you imagine the future of ‘diversity’ in YA fantasy?

Appendix Six: Online Survey Questions

How many YA fantasy novels have you read approximately in the last year?

- 0
- 1-5
- 5-10
- More than 10

Do you usually read:

- New releases
- Older publications
- A mix between the two

Are you part of a marginalised group?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements:

Statements	Strongly disagree	disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

YA fantasy novels are more inclusive today than they were in the past.					
We need more 'diverse' YA fantasy novels.					
I would pick up a YA fantasy novel without reading the blurb if it has a 'diverse' cover.					
It is important for me to read YA fantasy novels written by Own Voices authors					
I have read YA fantasy that misrepresented my identity					
I can relate to characters who have different identities/experiences to mine.					

How often do you see yourself represented in YA fantasy?

- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

How accurate is this representation usually?

- Accurate representation
- Somewhat accurate
- Misrepresentation

Which of the following categories would you like to see more 'diverse' representation for? (select multiple)

- Race/ethnicity
- Dis/ability
- Sexual orientation
- Gender
- Mental health
- Religion
- Body image/sizes
- All of the above
- None

The vignettes (introduced in the previous section) were also included in the survey and participants were asked to rate how interested they were in each blurb.

Rank the following YA fantasy blurbs from the one you are most likely to read to the least.

- Vignette A
- Vignette B
- Vignette C
- Vignette D

Appendix Seven: Online Survey social media posts

The screenshots below illustrate the posts I used to share my online survey on Twitter and Instagram.



Figure 28: Instagram screenshot



Figure 29: Twitter screenshot