

# Ploughing the Field: Controversy and Censorship in US and UK YA Literature

Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips

The United States and the United Kingdom have faced a record number of book challenges in recent years. In the US, the American Library Association documented 1,269 demands to censor library books and materials in 2022, nearly double the number of challenges reported in 2021 (ALA n.p.). In the UK, a third of librarians have been asked to censor or remove books from their libraries (CILIP, qtd. in Shaffi n.p.). In both countries, YA texts are among the most banned and challenged books. The assaults on young people's freedom to read represented by this form of censorship particularly target marginalised identities and experiences: "the majority of banned titles are authored by or about members of the LGBTQ and Black communities" (Diaz n.p.). The ideologies underpinning many book challenges can also be seen in the divisive attacks against transgender people and their right to exist, vitriolic responses to critical race theory, and the elimination of reproductive rights, to name but a few. In short, the personal has become political, as "book challenges represent the movement of a private act (determining what one's own children should read) into the public sphere" and the attempt to transform personal convictions into "community values and

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beliefs” (Knox 132). In this iteration of “Ploughing the Field”, we brought together YA experts (see Table 1) who have lived and/or worked in the US and the UK to better understand: some of the recent trends in YA and why they have garnered such strong reactions in the Western milieu; the role that YA can play in the lives of young people; and our responsibilities as teachers and scholars of YA to young readers and each other.<sup>1</sup>

## QUESTION ONE

What are some of the recent trends and themes in the YA literature market in the US and UK, and why do you think some of these generate such strong reactions from readers and critics?

**Autumn Allen:** I see a focus on identity, social justice, and activism, alongside the more timeless themes that continue to be present, like love, friendship, family, and finding your way in the world. As to why these generate such strong reactions from some critics, I think that the combination in these books of diversity and social justice on the one hand, and love and relationships on the other hand, can be explosive due to the cultural shifts and generational differences at play. It is the disconnect between people’s ideas, beliefs, and values that causes disdain for certain texts, and this can also cause real fractures in families and communities. We are seeing youth create ‘found families’ – communities based around mutual respect. I think it’s a challenge to the older generation, whether it’s parents or teachers or publishing professionals. We’re really forced into a position of choosing our reaction to cultural shifts: are we going to choose the wellbeing of people or are we going to choose a commitment to our own ideas? I think that’s one of the reasons YA is so contentious.

**Sita Brahmachari:** I couldn’t agree more with Autumn. We are in a huge, huge time of transformation in relationships across different generations, which I think has been fuelled by the technological revolution we have been witnessing. Young people have more access to their own online spaces and online communities than ever before, but with that they also feel a compounding sense of pressure to meet some of the expectations that are amplified by the media and social media. I see the YA literature market as a place where authors can speak about and against some of these pressures. Some of my earlier work has centred on the wellbeing and mental health of young people in relation to how they are experiencing a

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1 Eight contributors were invited to attend one of two roundtable discussions hosted by Corbett and Phillips on Microsoft Teams in July 2023. We collected more than 180 minutes (nearly 30,000 words) of dialogue and therefore offer an edited précis of responses in a combined account of these separate conversations that does not reflect the order in which contributors put forward their ideas.

linear education system that pushes them towards a productive model of success. Take *Kite Spirit* (2013) for example, in which a young person who is about to do their first stage GCSE exams (those for 14-16-year-olds) takes her own life. She believes that she cannot be perfect, cannot fulfil the expectations that have been placed on her and other young people who are making their way to being adults. She decides that rather than fail, she will end her existence. The rest of the book is about her friend trying to understand how they can live in a society where they feel so much pressure on so many levels.

**Gabriel Duckels:** As I've listened to Sita, I've been thinking about the role of the internet. Traditional borders of literature are being redefined by the internet – by Tumblr, TikTok, Twitter, and all sorts of other digital platforms. That's the way people often connect – the way we're connecting right now – and it's influencing how young readers are experiencing the YA market. Before I became an academic, I worked in the wildly underfunded public library system in the UK. About five years ago, I remember this teenager coming in with a list of books that they wanted from the library. They were all queer, American YA novels recommended through Tumblr which weren't published in the UK, and we didn't have any of them. The boom we're seeing in more representative YA, coupled with their increased visibility via the internet, is making space for historically marginalised people, historically less visible groups of people, to gather and forge allegiances and found families, which is the term that Autumn used. It seems to me that an increase in legislation which seeks to censor YA literature is an attempt to suppress these newly globalised reading communities.

**Jamie Bienhoff:** The way YA grapples with the concept of power, in general, has been one of the biggest shifts for me. A lot of our recent YA novels seem to be less about power in the way Roberta Seelinger Trites described in 1999 – how “adolescents must learn their place in the power structure” (x) as constituted by the institutions shaping their lives – and more about internal power struggles: Who am I? What is my identity? How do I fit into my community? I think this is part of the reason as to why YA is being banned and challenged so much, and where my own interest in censorship intersects with YA studies, as the books that are banned and challenged are often the ones opening space for people who are disenfranchised. I see a lot of problematic reactions from some white, straight, cisgender folk based on them not relating to the content of these books, or not wanting their children to be influenced by them, without recognising the need to grow and expand their understandings of the world beyond them.

**Susanne Abou Ghaida:** I also see this sort of aversion to discussions of social justice, to the idea that people, depending on where they're from, are going to have a different point of view about reality. I'm often taken aback by the resentment some people feel to even one extra person of colour and/or LGBTQ+ person represented in literature or media. My fear is

that this right-wing shift isn't just happening in the West. You get some interesting reactions in, for example, Arab countries, where there can be a sense that certain Western ideas are being imposed. I understand those fears because there is definitely a lack of equality about how culture is produced and consumed and disseminated, but also there's actually a lot of affinity between reactionaries in both parts of the world, in the West and the non-West. I want to see more attention paid to how censorship differs in various cultural contexts and as books move across the world. Why was one book translated while another wasn't? Why has something been censored in one translation but not in another?

**Leah Phillips:** We spoke about this briefly in "Ploughing the Field: YA Literature in Translation" (2021), specifically about what can and, perhaps more tellingly, can't appear in the US book market that can appear in Spain. I agree we need to be asking more of these questions.

**Elen Caldecott:** Even if a book is being published in the UK, it might be being printed outside of the European Union, so the sorts of cross-cultural censorship that you're both talking about also impact books written and published in the UK. Working in one country doesn't mean that the social mores of another country aren't going to affect the finished product.

**Cris Rhodes:** As someone who studies US-based YA literature, in particular, I find one of the difficulties in charting trends in a time of book banning and censorship is deciphering whether the trends we see are based on the reality of the market or whether they are just the books, themes, characters, or tropes making the news. We can certainly see that there has been an increase in the representation of different identities in YA, especially since 2014 with the We Need Diverse Books movement. But I think we need to tackle the extent to which our perceptions are skewed by what we see in the news, or in the media, or being promoted by lawmakers.

**Gabriel Duckels:** I think of YA literature as being part of popular culture, so I find it hard to think about trends and themes in terms of YA without seeing them in the context of a larger culture war where we're seeing an increase, or a perceived increase, in the visibility of queer people and people of colour at the same time as backlash against that. A research interest of mine at the moment is the Hays Code, which was a set of industry guidelines introduced in the 1930s to govern the US film industry and prohibit the depiction of people of colour, queerness, and anything else deemed 'inappropriate'. I find the parallels between those early decades of cinema and the early decades of the internet fascinating, and it's something I'd like to write about in much greater depth. What this example demonstrates for the purpose of our conversation, though, is that recent book challenges against YA novels are one move

in the much bigger game of chess that is continually playing out in society. In addition, a focus only on recent trends can also lead us to underestimate the politically-charged history of the YA field from the 1960s onwards. US YA is inseparable from the US Civil Rights Movement. Taking a presentist approach to YA can mean we forget to think about the work of early pioneers, such as S. E. Hinton or Virginia Hamilton, who laid the groundwork for our current conversations decades ago.

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** Teens are always implicated in the conversation about the future of the nation. Who's going to lead? How are they going to grow and develop? What sort of adults will they be? What difference might they make to the world? I think that as long as YA capitalises on that becoming stage – that liminal space – we're going to have fights over YA, because we're fighting over our collective future in and outside the page, to a certain degree.

**Susanne Abou Ghaida:** Since the development of children's literature and YA studies, we've been having conversations about the concepts of childhood and, later, adolescence, and we will continue to have these conversations. They are especially relevant in the context of book banning and censorship, where the impetus is often to try to protect young people, whether or not we are going about it in the right way. The 'right way' can look very different to different people and in different points of time. For example, in "We Are All Censors" (1992) Perry Nodelman stated that he was firmly against the censorship of children's books, that "[t]here is *nothing* that anybody should not be allowed to say or write—nothing, no matter how offensive, how narrowminded, how boneheaded, or how dangerous [he] might personally find it" (122). Nearly 30 years later, in "We Are Still All Censors—and that Includes Perry Nodelman" (2020), Nodelman reflected on how his position had been shaped by his identity as a white man and acknowledged the work of scholars including Sarah Park Dahlen, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, and Debbie Reese, who have drawn attention to the significant harm that racist depictions might cause to young readers and how that can be avoided. Nodelman concluded that "censorship is wrong, except sometimes when it is right. And access to as much information and knowledge as possible is a good thing, except sometimes when it is a bad one" ("We Are All Still Censors" n.p.).<sup>2</sup> Book banning and censorship are harmful, but they can also be well-intentioned.

**Elen Caldecott:** When we're creating stories for young people, there is always going to be a level of censorship involved. We often perceive it as being imposed from the outside. Certainly, this sort of censorship exists in education or the state, for example. However,

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2 Notably, "We Are Still All Censors—and that includes Perry Nodelman" came about after *Emilia*, a Brazilian children's literature journal reached out to Nodelman asking to reprint the original (Nodelman 2020). We've included *Somos mesmo todos censores?*, the Brazilian publication, in the references.

there's also the author's self-censorship that happens at every stage of the process. There's a level of care that comes with writing for children and you're not going to write in the same way you would for an adult, otherwise we would just be giving children adult books. I've had conversations with editors in the UK about swearing. You can have a 'bloody' and a 'bollocks' in the UK with no problem. Once you start writing the 'F word', it becomes more controversial. If you're blaspheming, it becomes more controversial, especially if you're selling to an American audience. I've known writers to put in twice as many swear words as they want in the finalised book, because they know they're going to lose some to editing along the way. Cleaning, cleansing, and shaping are part of the book's production line.

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** We need to be aware of the influence of money, of how financial decisions drive the market. Once a book gets banned, there's a flurry of attention that follows and it often makes the bestseller list. Conversations become about the authors, the books, and the fictional children in the books. How much do we really pay attention to how young people are consuming YA literature? How do they make decisions of what to read? Perhaps they're interested in certain storylines that we aren't even talking about; perhaps they're not interested in some of these pro-revolutionary stories at all.

**Jamie Bienhoff:** My students and I talk a lot in my classes about the hegemony of adulthood in relation to literature for young people; we talk about who markets the books, who writes the books, who sells the books, who buys the books. YA is interesting because, while there is adult hegemony, teenagers also often have the agency to buy or borrow books for themselves. They become consumers who can influence the market.

**Elen Caldecott:** Books are economic products, but we ignore that, I think, at our peril. I'm in agreement with Marilisa's point about the need to think carefully about what the market implications are of a book being banned, and it makes me want to know to what extent the possibility of controversy or book-banning factors into commissioning of a book. It's not just a question of what themes and tropes are present in the YA market, it's more specifically a question of what is being purposefully and knowingly selected to be put in front of a group of young people by people for whom their financial success depends on it. It's an awful aphorism but it's true to a large extent: there's no such thing as bad publicity. Banned books can sell well, especially if ownership of the book becomes a shibboleth for one side or the other of a culture war. That has to be having an influence on decision making in the publishing chain.

**Susanne Abou Ghaida:** We also need to be mindful of the harmful effects that book banning can have on authors, though, as I'm sure the authors in the room know all too well. I see on Twitter that authors are receiving a lot of unwanted attention, that their hearts are breaking

because even though their book is popular, it is no longer as likely to make its way to the hands of the teenage reader who may want or need it. The identity of an author is also so often also used to sell books – Melanie Ramdarshan Bold has drawn attention to the harm in the ways that authors of colour frequently feel either invisible or highly racialised.

**Elen Caldecott:** While there are some independent houses, in particular, doing phenomenal work, publishing houses traditionally neglect to prepare an author for what the reception of their book can be like. Recently, I looked at the Amazon reviews of a picture book called *Granddad's Pride* (2023) by Harry Woodgate. Before it was even published, it had 50% five-star reviews and 50% one-star reviews – nothing in between. As a writer, I'm thinking about how that must feel to know that it's likely that not that many people have read your book yet, but instead they've made a decision to rate it based on their ideological position and this therefore renders the reviews meaningless in relation to the quality of your art. Authors just become fodder for a fight that's bigger than them. How you prepare yourself for that, I don't know.

**Autumn Allen:** We need to get a wider range of voices and perspectives involved as publishers, academics, authors, and educators. Once the decision-makers are more reflective of society, that will help to change the conversation.

## QUESTION TWO

What is the role of YA literature in helping young readers to reflect on their lives and the world around them? Is there a responsibility for YA literature to 'do something' beyond simply entertaining readers, and if so, what should that something be?

**Cris Rhodes:** As someone who studies primarily Latinx YA literature, this question stood out for me as one of the more pressing ones. Latinx YA is still a relatively new field; we didn't have Latinx books that were specifically YA published until around the 1990s and most of what we think of as Latinx YA, such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1983), has subsequently been labelled YA because of its adolescent protagonists. As Latinx YA is new – in relative terms – there is this problematic idea attached that the books have to 'do something': they can't only be entertaining, they have to make some kind of impact. So many *well-known* Latinx YA texts problematise identity, where being Latinx or being an immigrant or the child of immigrants becomes the 'problem' to be solved, rather than it being part of life for people like us. Our lives are so much fuller than our experiences of racism and xenophobia. So, while it's important for young readers who need them to have access to

books that can help them deal with our alarming current sociopolitical and geopolitical landscape, I also want Latinx YA to be a place for readers to have fun.

**Gabriel Duckels:** Cris, one thought I had while listening to you talk about Latinx YA is that, while queer YA has been around in the West for decades, it didn't always look like what we know of as queer YA today, and this has a lot to do with representation and focalization. On the one hand, in the 1970s and 1980s, you often had mostly well-intentioned straight people writing problem novels about the 'problem' of homosexuality. On the other hand, there's a secret history of queer authors writing while in the closet professionally in the 1960s and 1970s: authors like M.E. Kerr and John Donovan. Some of their books have been categorised as homophobic or heteronormative in comparison to queer YA novels of recent decades, just because there's less knowledge of the queer context of their authors. But there's such a significant lineage of queer authorship here, which gets lost sometimes in YA scholarship. So, it's about: who gets to tell the story at a certain point in history, and which story do they get to tell?

**Sita Brahmachari:** When I'm writing, I don't set out to address specific issues. Who wants their life to be an issue? Sometimes people have said: "Oh, you managed to cover so many issues in your book". I haven't covered a single 'issue', in that sense, in any of my books. I am exploring characters in their landscapes and their lives and their journeys and their diaspora roots and their branches. I'm exploring where they come from, who they want to be, and the identities they're developing as they progress through life. They're young people, so the privilege of writing these characters is that constant evolution in being. There's also an intensity because often you're experiencing things for the first time at that age. In *When Shadows Fall* (2021), my most recent novel, young Kai and Omid (a refugee survivor from Syria) are seeking a place to express themselves in any way they can, whether it be through art, dance, or drawing as they navigate complex experiences such as racism and grief. I think in YA literature, we authors are trying to offer an opening place for people to explore imaginatively and creatively – a place to express, and a place to be. And yet in society, understandably, and within education, there's a kind of tentativeness around what will happen if we tell these stories. This tension is potentially one of the reasons why it makes the current YA market such a controversial place to write into.

**Susanne Abou Ghaida:** Given our responsibility to the young adult audience from which YA gets its name, I think it's hard to escape the expectation that YA needs to "do something" for its readers. It could be that YA allows teens to see themselves or shapes them in some other way, such as the socialising role that Jamie mentioned and that Trites discusses in *Disturbing the Universe* (1999). Should we move away from that? I don't have the answer. I am interested, though, in this dichotomy so many people seem to subscribe to between aesthetic pleasure

and ideological content. I think there's a bit of a danger in pitting one against the other. A book can certainly be entertaining and convey a world view. Everything is ideological.

**Jamie Bienhoff:** Through the "hidden adult" that Perry Nodelman has drawn attention to in his work, we can see how the views and ideological position of an author spill into their books. We can also see how different perceptions and misconceptions of different people are perpetuated by the ways they are represented, whether it is intentional or not. Take family structures, for example, which we've unpicked in my children's literature classes. If all of the wonderful, kind, generous characters have two parents, but the school bully has the only single parent in the book, we can suggest that is (wrongly) conveying something about single parents. That book doesn't have to be didactic in a traditional sense, but it's still teaching young readers something about the world, and we need to think carefully about what messages are being communicated.

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** All literature has the potential to be didactic, to have an argument, or to convey a world view. In places like Puerto Rico, where children's literature has historical ties to Catholic moral teachings, there's perhaps stronger emphasis on using stories to teach young people to be, and do, good. I do think, however, both liberal and conservative adults really seem invested in the power of YA literature to change young people. And authors do as well. At the same time, we have people learning all their 'history' from fiction and that is complicated. How can we still tie to primary sources? Because historical events and people are not just characters in a book that we can resolve. At the same time, you have students studying more critical theory, perhaps on racial justice etc. Yet, they have little experience with students of colour or working with colleagues of colour. This idea of idea of 'good' needs to be lived out outside the pages if it is indeed transformative.

**Leah Phillips:** I work on YA fantasy, and one thing I've noticed in the last few years is that YA fantasy is marketing itself in the way that the problem novel used to be marketed: issues-driven. YA fantasy has always been a space to imagine worlds of possibility (fantasy does that more widely). It's never been free from the constraints of our world; after all, the imagining happens from here, but in being about imagining, there's a strong activism thread in YA fantasy. Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn, for example, argue that fantasy "is the realization of the impossible" (3), and even though they're arguing about the differences between science fiction and fantasy, the point works here: YA fantasy at its origins did imagine the impossible when it created female-heroes. However, YA fantasy used to wear that activism much more lightly. It's why Judy Blume's books are always banned and challenged, but Tamora Pierce, whose books, like Blume's, include birth control and sex (among many other things), haven't been. Now, many YA fantasy novels are being actively marketed and framed around diversity, representation, and social-justice issues. I'm thrilled to see more diversity and

representation in YA fantasy, and this move does foreground perspectives and voices that need to be centred in imaginative YA worlds. However, it runs the risk of reducing diverse identities to ‘issues’. Rather than organically incorporating diversity, some YA fantasy now takes more of an ‘issues-first’ approach at the expense of imagination and escapism. The activism becomes heavy-handed. If I’m being cynical, the shift likely reflects larger trends and the commercial realisation that diversity/activist themes sell in YA, but forced integration of issues can undermine the spirit of fantasy as an imaginative realm.

**Sita Brahmachari:** For me, as a writer, you really have to put forward your best tools in YA storytelling because, fundamentally, your young readers are often trying to find a voice in a world that they may not feel is not ready to accept them or to hear them. Among the things that I think about a lot are: How does it feel to be the central character in a novel when you're little represented? What is the impact of the representation on the person who has some deep resonance to the character that's being represented? How does that feel? What is the wider impact of my book on the mirrors available to these young people? How can I represent them with agency? These questions come into my consciousness when I'm writing because you can't dismiss the responsibility you have to these underrepresented young people, no matter what else is going on. Maybe if there were more books about all sorts of different people, there wouldn't be so much angst about creating and critiquing these books. We would all love for all young people to be widely represented, but they're not, or at least not yet. We can hope to continue to see positive change in that direction.

**Elen Caldecott:** The “simply entertaining” in this question gave me pause, as an author. Entertaining the reader is exactly what a book has to do. If a teenager is giving your five, six, seven hours of their life, then first and foremost, you have to keep their attention. Only then can we think about what else we might be able to slip into the story, especially when we're writing for a younger audience. So, what else can you do once you've entertained? For me, the important thing for a writer is to engage critically with themselves as someone who is writing from, and representing, a world view as others have suggested. You can absolutely deliver an engaging plot without this reflection, but there is a responsibility (which, of course, comes with an inherent risk) for an author to think about their point of view and the sorts of narrative and discourses they want their book to reinforce or subvert. Not all writers want to be writing little acts of rebellion, but I think that if you're writing in the YA field, then why not? You've got the chance to change the future, so you may as well try.

**Susanne Abou Ghaida:** I think this is why it is really interesting to get the perspectives of authors as they're writing and balancing the different needs and expectations of their readers. Elen, your and Lucy Cuthew's new *Leaf Journal* has been such an important addition

to YA studies for this very reason, with its focus on practice-based and practice-led research and the desire to think reflectively about the craft of writing for young people.

**Autumn Allen:** I love this idea of taking a closer look at the implications of “simply entertaining” readers. I learn the most when I’m talking to teens about the books they’re reading. In my literature circle this past year, I had the kids choose a book to read and talk about with the group. Even though they chose books I would not have chosen for them – because I’m focused on education and learning and discussion points – the ways in which they talked about the books they read were so smart. They were using different muscles, different parts of their brain than they used when we were talking about the books that had the ‘important’ themes and the issues. For example, they talked passionately about the books that made them want to slam them shut and throw them across the room. When it comes to entertainment, that word can take on all sorts of meanings.

**Gabriel Duckels:** A lot of the angst in children's and YA literature studies about the function of stories – whether they’re educational versus entertainment – is disciplinary. It depends on whether you're in an education faculty or you're in an English faculty and how that context might shape the approach you take, and it's not actually necessarily as relevant to the books themselves. It's more about the way that you justify your own investment in them.

**Emily Corbett:** I continue to be interested in this notion of whether YA “do[es] something” being based on who’s looking at YA at any given time. Since our previous “Ploughing the Field” (2022) article, which explored these (inter)disciplinary boundaries and practices in YA studies, I’ve transitioned from working in literature departments to an education department and the conversations that are had about YA are so different, in much the same way as they vary when you’re talking to creative writers, librarians, parents, publishers, and all sorts of other people with stakes in YA. There are so many different voices and perspectives involved in creating and critiquing the texts, meaning there is always a collective expectation for YA not only to “do something”, but to do *everything*, because each person brings a different wish list and wants their needs to be met.

**Gabriel Duckels:** I agree, and we certainly shouldn’t view entertainment as ‘simple’ or ‘easy’ either, language which is so often weaponised to diminish our field. Nor should we give an elevated status to every novel that is “do[ing] something”. We have a long legacy of canonical white, straight texts that have done very real harm whilst ostensibly motivated by a sense of greater good. bell hooks says that popular culture is where the learning happens, it’s where the pedagogy is. Melodrama, for example, is my preferred way to think about how YA novels work, and it is often dismissed as trivial. YA literature gets disregarded as merely melodramatic whenever we feel uncomfortable about the transparency of its attempts to make us *feel* something. But feeling is important. The cultivation of emotion is central to any

understanding of YA literature as a politically-committed form of popular culture and expression.

**Elen Caldecott:** In *Leaf Journal's* inaugural issue, Carley Lee's "More than Just a Thing with Feathers: The Importance of Hope in Middle Grade Fiction" (2023) frames hope as the new morality, and I think the same might be said for YA. She makes the case that, while books that overtly push a didactic or moral message may be looked upon as 'preachy', hope is a shared value that we now expect in our stories for young readers. Whatever its other messages or ideologies, you can't write a YA book without it including hope in our current market.

**Autumn Allen:** I've resisted the idea that children's or YA literature has to have hope, because I've felt that young people see the real world alongside us and that it is false to inject hope where there may not actually be any. When I got to the final stages of revisions for my YA novel, *All You Have to Do* (2023), I was frustrated by my ending because it felt hopeful; you didn't walk away feeling like the world is just awful and you don't want to be here. You see, my novel is based on the story of my brother, and, for him, things didn't end well. I wanted the reader to carry the grief that I carry, which is a lifelong struggle that never goes away. However, my agent convinced me that to write for young people is a trust. The story and its messages don't only exist on the page. If I eliminated all hope, it wouldn't really be fair to young people who haven't seen enough of the world to decide whether or not there is hope. So, I kept the ending. It is our responsibility to remember that it is hard to live in the world we live in, especially with all of the things that human beings do to each other, and that we should not contribute to that hopelessness and despair.

**Gabriel Duckels:** Autumn, what you've just said was really beautiful and it is such a poignant example of bibliotherapy in your process as a writer. I find it interesting when people talk about the overrepresentation of hope in young people's literature, because we always take that to mean that there is too much hope in the books, rather than too little hope in the world.

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** I wonder whether there is an inherent problem with adults having such a dominant voice in YA. There is no doubt that YA can be wonderful and transformative for readers of all ages, and I think that is why we as scholars and creators of literature for young people are so invested in our careers, because we know the power of these books. For example, I read a picture book at 28-years-old that gave me the language to articulate what I was feeling very deeply about my identity at the time. However, there is something to be said for the way different communities of readers experience hope and what that looks like to them, and the need to prioritise young people's versions of hope and change.

**Sita Brahmachari:** The rights of children and young adult are being eroded all the time, and I think they're very aware of it. YA must be there to empower and give agency to young people facing injustices, to give them the language to advocate for themselves. YA is an activist process in that sense and anyone who writes and teaches YA should be speaking up for the human rights of young people.

**Gabriel Duckels:** I find it almost tedious is to think about novels as a form of activism in this current climate because we need *more*. Reading a novel, and even writing a novel, are very different to other forms of direct action. I've had to grapple with this, as someone who works on HIV and AIDS, in order to understand who I am and what I am doing. I don't want to conflate my own identity as a reader or researcher with activists or with the history of activism, even if I'm writing about the way that activism is represented. I'm always wary of the conflation of activism and literature, and activism and scholarship, but, also, listening to you, Sita, I wonder if my opinion could be changed on that. I do think it's important to recognise different types of activism, perhaps.

**Autumn Allen:** I think we can agree that there is slow activism, as well as more immediate activism, and we need both. I tell my students that youth literature can change the world because it's shaping young people's view of the world, of how it is, and how it should be. Young people are also telling their own stories – challenging the status quo and empowering themselves wherever they can. And so, I think that books are activism, but they create a slower change than the out-in-the-streets activism.

### QUESTION THREE

What roles do educators and scholars play in shaping the discourse around controversial topics, censorship, and appropriateness in YA literature?

**Autumn Allen:** Literature is art and art has always been a provocation. It's a way of reflecting on society, critiquing society. People create art because they have something to say. YA literature is within this category, and so it does what art does. The fact that it's controversial means it is doing its job. Students are coming to universities to think, to explore ideas, and to explore the role of ideas in society, and it's important that they are given the opportunity to do so.

**Sita Brahmachari:** With my Creative Writing students at Goldsmiths, University of London, I've been emphasising the important of viewing YA as a catalyst for young people feeling empowered to speak up and advocate for themselves, and for having a sense of belonging.

We imagine storytelling as a patchwork quilt, where every person brings different pieces and different ways of stitching them together, but where there is no single correct way to 'be' in the world. For those of us who are teaching YA, we need to find ways to express to our students the complexity and power of these stories. In a way, by guiding the next generation of YA writers and critics, we are helping to raise the status of young adults in the world. That feels important.

**Cris Rhodes:** When I talk to my students about adolescence, I ask: How do we define what it means to be a teenager? What does it look like to be a teenager? What are the words we associate with being a teenager? My students talk about crushes, hanging out with friends, maybe having a summer job. Then I ask: Who gets to be a teenager? What about teenagers who are the primary breadwinner for their family? This is something that I use to try to push back against the ideas of appropriateness. When we say that certain things are inappropriate in YA books, what we're really saying is that certain teenagers' lives are inappropriate.

**Jamie Bienhoff:** The concept of "appropriateness" is weaponised against those whose identities or experiences do not align with dominant Western ideas. When "appropriateness", or lack thereof, is used as a justification for book banning, what we are witnessing is personal perceptions of adolescence and childhood, and what those life stages entail, being treated as if they are universal. As educators, we can resist some of this by choosing reading lists that show a range of experiences and ways of being a young person. That being said, one thing that I believe needs to be at the forefront of our minds when creating syllabi that incorporate diverse identities and co-called 'controversial' topics is the possibility that we can be creating a trauma buffet of Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and disabled authors addressing difficult experiences in their work. When we are including such texts, we also need to be paying attention to trauma-informed pedagogy and equipping our students with the necessary frameworks and mechanisms of support to read and discuss these texts.

**Leah Phillips:** I'm coming to this conversation as someone in a relatively secure position and with quite a bit of security along lots of identity lines, so I think I do bear a responsibility for being that ally that Cris mentioned. I need to read, listen, and learn, but I also need to speak up where and when I can. What I include on my reading lists and the kinds of assignments I ask students to do about those books is important. The first book my new cohort will read this year, as last year's did, is Aiden Thomas' *Cemetery Boys* (2020). It's this Latinx queer, paranormal YA love story that is absolutely fabulous. One of the things I have to think about is how to approach this book. I'm white, straight, while I'm from the US I haven't lived there in nearly 20 years, and I'm pretty certain I've never fallen in love with a ghost whose murder I'm also solving. So, how do I teach this book? Early this summer, at the Children's Literature Association conference, I learned a new tool, a new way of approaching

this question through a fantastic session lead by Professor Michelle H. Martin. In the session, Martin talked about cultural competence and how by researching, reading, and learning about the cultures within these stories we can become more culturally competent.

**Emily Corbett:** There is something to be gained in thinking carefully about who we are orientating our teaching towards as well. If we – and I’m saying this in relation to my own positionality as a white, able-bodied, cisgender educator – are teaching inclusive, diverse, or ‘challenging’ YA texts in ways orientated towards the students for whom the book is a “window” as a tool to broaden their understanding of the world, we are ourselves reinforcing the marginalisation and disenfranchisement that we’re trying to disrupt. Most of us already appreciate that part of our role as educators is to introduce our students to an inclusive and expansive range of texts, but we also need to equip them the critical skills to interact with those texts. YA studies programmes should show students how to interrogate their positionalities and reflect on how their identities, backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs shape their engagement with what they read.

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** YA programmes also need to teach outside of traditional YA literature and YA scholarship to broaden our students’ understanding. If our students have only been introduced to Rudine Sims Bishop’s (1990) “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” metaphor, and this is the only framework through which they can understand race, there’s going to be an issue. There’s so much more than a metaphor to think about: there are Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and so many more scholarly traditions to explore. We just need to read more. For example, if we are reading a Black YA novel in our classes, but not reading Black feminist scholarship, what are we doing? How are we centring different traditions of knowledge in our classrooms, and how can we do better? We also need to expand our research and our students’ reading lists to beyond what is specifically written about children’s and YA literature. We need to read Saidya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Vannesa K. Valdez, for example, as critics who maybe weren’t talking about children’s literature at all, but who were thinking about frameworks for understanding a lot of the complexities that we also encounter when we read YA literature. This matters a lot to me, and it’s why I’m such a proponent of Ethnic Studies. The book I’ve been working on with Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez, *Ethnic Studies and Youth Literature: A Critical Reader* (forthcoming), tries to tackle this problem. It’s something that I think will really help drive conversations forward.

**Cris Rhodes:** My perspective on how we talk about censorship with our students is deeply informed by the political landscape in which I live and work in the US, where I’m witnessing an anti-intellectual turn tied to a distrust of academics and certain forms of knowledge. I think that the roles we play as people who study, teach, and publish on YA texts is going to

become increasingly political. There has been a desire to remain intellectual about issues – to remain scholarly – but nothing is ever apolitical, nothing is ever without a need to engage in social consciousness. So, I think that as scholars, we’re going to need to adopt that activist-scholar model moving forward, or at least those of us who can do that, should. We certainly have colleagues for whom an activist-scholar model puts them in danger. Our Black and Brown scholars, our trans scholars, our scholars who inhabit multiple intersectional identities, they're going to be the ones who are going to be targeted first and most. It becomes the responsibility of those of us who have privilege to be able to try to push back against censorship and to talk about appropriateness.

**Elen Caldecott:** In the UK, it’s a very different situation to the US higher-education context, but it’s nevertheless quite chilling at the moment. We recently had “The Freedom of Speech (Higher Education) Act (2023)” pass through Parliament, whereby the difference between freedom of speech and academic speech has been blurred and now there is an impetus to teach ‘both sides’ of a topic. In practice, this could mean being expected to teach ‘both sides’ of the so-called gender-ideology debate, for example, with potential consequences for anybody who is unwilling to do so. It is important to keep asking how we include more diverse voices in our conversations, but more pressing questions for me are: How do we make our classrooms safe spaces for marginalised people? How do we put ourselves between an attack against our humanity and the people who are most at risk?

**Marilisa Jiménez García:** I can certainly think of a time when I was writing and talking about ethnic studies and Latinx representation, and very few people were interested. Then, when the We Need Diverse Books conversation started, I found myself in high demand. I participated in countless panels where I was asked to talk about my research and experiences as a woman of colour, until one day I thought to myself: What is the point of this? Is the goal to celebrate and engage with my work, to celebrate and engage with my colleagues’ work? Or is it just to hear our pain? Is it true inclusion? Or are we being treated like objects that bring colour to a conversation that still centres whiteness? And the same questions can be asked when we think about who is teaching on our programmes or working in our departments. We need to advocate for scholars of colour and scholars working in marginalised fields to have financial support, to have access to the resources they need to do their work. This is not something specific to YA studies, but to academia at large.

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**TABLE ONE**

Name	Role	Country
Sita Brahmachari	Author; Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London	UK
Autumn Allen	Author; Lecturer in Children's Literature at the Harvard Graduate School of Education	US
Gabriel Duckels	Early Career Research Fellow, Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge	UK
Cris Rhodes	Assistant Professor of English, Shippensburg University	US
Elen Caldecott	Author; Lecturer in Creative Writing, University of Lancaster	UK
Susanne Abou Ghaida	Postdoctoral Fellow, Aix-Marseille University; PhD in Education from the University of Glasgow; Specialising in Arabic Children's and Adolescent Literature	France/UK
Jamie Bienhoff	Doctoral Student in Children's and Adolescent Literature at Western Michigan University	US
Marilisa Jiménez García	Associate Professor of Children's Literature, specialising in Ethnic and Latinx Studies, and Youth Literature and Media, at Simmons University	US