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### A Young Adult Scrutinizes the Michael L. Printz Award

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“A Young Adult Scrutinizes the Michael L. Printz Award”**

written by

**Claire Elaine Seale**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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27 April 2020

**Dedication**

To all the other young women who made John Green's Alaska your role model.

### **Acknowledgements**

Special gratitude to the young adult authors who ventured out into the intimidating publishing industry.

Special gratitude to the Young Adult Library Services Association for running the annual Printz Award, allowing readers like me to discover their love for young adult literature.

Special gratitude to my thesis director Dr. Amy Sonheim for letting me plop down in her office to discuss books, life, and more. Our meetings will always have a special place in my undergraduate memories.

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## Introduction

In a century peppered in controversy, adolescents between the ages and twelve to eighteen are turning to young adult literature to find hope in their lives. These books with headlining titles like *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* are no longer just in print, but their narratives centered around teenage protagonists are being brought to life on screen. In fact, the source of much of our twenty first century culture derives from the ingenuity of young adult authors. Although the young adult empire continues to grow in modern times, many advocates for young adult literature, including the American Library Association [ALA], have had to fight to build such a vast industry. After a steep decline of young adult literature during much of the nineties, the American Library reinvigorated the genre by creating the Michael L. Printz award for excellence in young adult literature. The award committee's charge is to select the best young adult books based on their "literary merit." Many of the winners have become common classroom curricula and even made their way onto movie screens.

The Michael L. Printz Award catapulted the tiny twentieth century economy of young adult literature into a twenty first century empire that produced 4,644 young adult book titles in 2009 ("Number of Children's Books"). The young adult literature industry holds the most impressionable generations as their audience, and because the publishing sphere often revolves around awarded titles, it is important to analyze the literature that the Printz Award is delivering to the future of America. "Literary merit" can mean many different things, ranging from aesthetic value to timeless themes, but overall, "literary merit" is subjective to its beholder. Why do the Printz committees strive to leave their requirements so ambiguous? Perhaps they want the readers of the awarded novels to judge the merit for themselves, or maybe they want to capture a wider genre of young adult novels. Flexible criteria are necessary as the market changes, but

with such a wide range of ages reading these Printz texts, the content should be looked at with discernment. At the age of twelve, a reader is still in middle school, whereas, at the age of eighteen, a reader is becoming fully embedded into adult life. Regardless of the Printz's anonymity, there are some features that remain common among all the novels and some principles that differ drastically. In this context, I argue that, over time, the Printz award has sacrificed "literary merit" for popularity.

The Printz committee is composed of librarians across the nation, and yearly they award one contemporary young adult novel published in the last year and honor up to four novels. These books are not limited to genre—some are graphic novels and others are science fiction—but they only "recognize the best in the field of material for young adults" to "promote the growing number of books published for young adults" ("Policies and Procedures"). The Printz committee's overall mission statement is to increase the genre as a whole, but sometimes, they seem economically motivated, which is evident in a comparison between the first awarded novels to the most recently awarded novels. For example, the recently endowed novels are often realistic fiction revolving around political hot-button issues. The Printz Award claims that "MESSAGE" is not considered quality, but some of the award-winning novels lack originality in all but their meaning, like novels responding to headlining topics. The novels with "MESSAGE" are often the novels that are later turned into screen adaptations, which further proves that they might be listening to the economy rather than the needs of young adults. To me, the recent Printz

committees prioritize popularity resulting from “MESSAGE” instead of analyzing solely based on literary merit.



*fig. 1* The Printz Award Seals found on the YALSA website. Gold represents winning novels, and silver represents honored novels.

With a gold or silver seal of approval embossed on the front of these awarded titles shelved in every Barnes & Noble and flashed on each Amazon screen, many consumers, including parents, do not question the content and merit of these texts (see *fig. 1*). I have seventeen Printz

awarded young adult novels over the course of my two-year study. Some of my readings have left me questioning the Printz’s decisions, while others have confirmed the Printz’s inspired educational motivations. The twentieth year of Printz awards has now since been celebrated, but the question still resounds within the young adult community: what makes a young adult novel meritorious?

Former Printz committee member Kefira Philippe cites that the Printz organization “is tasked with looking for excellence in story, voice, style, setting, accuracy, characters, theme, illustrations, and design, but the books recognized also have that indefinable something, that *je ne sais quoi*, which sets them apart.” Do sex, scandal, suicide, alcohol, and other salacious and vulgar themes constitute for a silver plaque? The Printz award, like the young adult industry itself, follows the needs of the American community, but without completely censoring the content, I argue that the Printz Award should clarify standards before they stamp on the seal of approval to impressionable readers. Or, perhaps, the genre itself should be divided into two



audiences, younger readers (twelve through fifteen) and older readers (sixteen through eighteen). The Printz Committee withholds the tremendous power of being the most prestigious honor for young adult texts, and with power comes the great responsibility of honoring books that accurately mirror a young adult's life. Over the course of this paper, I will analyze many of the themes that appear throughout my readings and conclude with my recommendations to improve the Printz award altogether.

### **The Dawning and Evolution of Young Adult Literature**

Scholar Michael Cart wrote the proverbial book on young adult literature history in 1996 entitled *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, which I had the pleasure of reading his 2016 edition. He is a nationally recognized scholar in young adult literature and author or editor of twenty-three books including the following: *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity* (2009), *Cart's Top 200 Adult Books for Young Adults: Two Decades in Review* (2013), *Taking Aim: Power and Pain, Teens and Guns* (2015), and *Representing the Rainbow in Young Adult Literature: LGBTQ+ Content Since 1969* (2018). In his past, he has served as the director of the Beverly Hills Public Library and president of the Young Adult Library Services Association. Cart holds a large role in my paper as the outline of my knowledge in the history of young adult literature. Furthermore, he was one of the founders of the Printz award. With his vast knowledge in the field, I knew I needed to reach out to him asking the following questions: *Have you, since the publication of Young Adult Literature: 'From Romance to Realism in 2016,' noticed any changes within the Printz award in regards to the winning novels' popularity and controversial material? In other words, how do you think the committee defines "literary merit" in 2020?*

To my surprise, He responded addressing the Printz's attention to popularity:

The one thing we [the founding Printz committee] were scrupulously careful *not* to include in our deliberations was that old bugbear popularity. I'm not so sure that succeeding committees have always been so careful in their own evaluations. I've reviewed the winners and honor titles for the last six years and I'm suspicious that popularity might have been factor in the respective committees' choices of honor titles.

("RE: Your Message")

Because of Cart's extensive detailing of the history of the young adult industry and engagements with the Printz committee, his email confirms my fear about the Printz award— "literary merit" is slowly slipping away from their priorities.

To begin to understand the Printz award, one must comprehend the history of young adult literature as a whole. This section detailing the timeline of the industry is largely based on Cart's works. My dialogue with Cart's vision throughout this paper is critical in comprehending the Printz award. He remains a trail blazer in the field because of the genre's relatively modern beginnings. Young adult literature did not exist as a genre until the late 1950s because the idea of young adults did not exist. In fact, the term "adolescence" was not coined until after WWII; it was G. Stanley Hall, one of the first scholars of child study, who identified the concept of the phase between childhood and adulthood (Grinder 1-2). Many adolescents from ages twelve to eighteen prior to WWII did not experience the innocence of childhood because they were propelled into the workforce around the age of twelve. The Great Depression prompted the rise in high school education (*Romance to Realism* 5). In 1910, only 15% of American youth were in high school, but by 1930 the number had increased to 50% ("The State of Restless Art"). This high standard of high school enlistment birthed youth culture, and with culture comes literature. Although youth culture sparked in the thirties, it took many decades for authors and publishers alike to build the young adult empire as we know it today.

In the thirties, teenage readers began desiring to read about their high school experience. They craved texts that captured their senior high trials, but although the audience was there, the market divided books between children's literature and adult literature, leaving teenagers to read one or the other. High school readers consumed novels that were either too mature or too naive, but as the publishing economy began recognizing the desires of teenaged readers, they inspired

their authors to publish narratives that targeted youth culture. Given its late start to the cultural mecca of America, it is not a surprise that the field of young adult literature is a new economy and scholastic forum that is still drastically evolving.

Most scholars, including Cart, define the first young adult novel as *Seventeenth Summer* by Marueen Daly published in 1942 (*Romance to Realism* 11). It was the earliest novel explicitly advertised for teenagers. Classified in the romantic genre, the novel follows high school life of the protagonist Angie as she falls in love with Jack. High school readers finally found a narrative that captured their lives on the page. Although Daly touches on problems that teenagers encounter, including underage drinking, she writes the main character in an impersonal, third person narration. The text, at least from a modern perspective, was only relatable to the upper middle-class white teenager. Daly, however, blazed a trail for many authors to focus their narratives on the new young adult demographic, and these authors created a collection known Cart's term of "junior novels," which promoted a plethora of stories imitating the boy-meets-girl tale found in *Seventeenth Summer*.

In the 1940s and 1950s, "junior novels" reached an all-time peak, and young adult literature experienced a drastic divide between gender and failure to mention minorities. Teenage girls read romances, and teenage boys read action-packed sports novels, science-fiction, and adventure tales. The 1940s also witnessed the creation of *Seventeen* magazine, which published solutions for girls in their day-to-day lives. *Seventeen* magazine recognized the readership of young females and began writing about the issues they wanted to hear about, like makeup and boys, and the publication continued to define an audience of young readers for the rest of the author community. Most "junior novels" and magazine articles centered around a picture-perfect, unachievable fantasy: "the impression that every teenager was white and lived in a small middle

or upper middle-class hometown filled with white picket fences” (“The State of Restless Art”). The teenage characters described in these novels faced temporal problems like romantic love interests or, in the case of many boy’s preferred science-fiction texts, rockets. The 1940s, although I will not define it as the start of the field of young adult literature, created a niche for later writers to fill.

Following the rapid emergence of “junior novels,” the ALA formed the Young Adult Library Services Associations [YALSA] in 1956, officially coining the term “young adult literature.” YALSA created a community of librarians devoted towards studying young adult literature and its impacts on young readers, and the teenage literary population was officially defined from ages twelve and eighteen, finally were accredited with literature representing the years between childhood and adulthood. Because teenagers are trapped between abandoning childhood and adopting adult behavior, they need to be treated as a distinguished group of readers, and the formation of YALSA finally prompted the publishing industry to take the youth population seriously.

The “junior novels” of the forties and fifties centered around explicit fantasies, but many authors in the sixties abandoned a romantic portrayal of the world and adopted a bleak realism. America in the sixties suffered from the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, which both affected the Monday through Friday lives of America’s youth. Young consumers began to read more authentic texts that captured their momentous daily struggles, and young adult authors witnessed this shift in their audience’s taste, creating a realism renaissance. This renaissance inspired engaging novels like S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. Hinton captured the blossoming of youth realism in this 1967 *New York Times Book Review*:

Teenagers today want to read about teenagers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme with a horse and the girl who loved it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned. In short, where is the reality? (qtd in “How ‘Young Adult’ Fiction Blossomed”)

Hinton, along with the young adult readers, recognized that the boy-meets-girl novels were no longer relevant to an America that enlisted sixteen-year-old soldiers and watched brutal racist massacres in the southern streets. Likewise, *The Outsiders* followed two teenage rivaling gangs, the “socs” and the “greasers,” in Oklahoma battling violence, bullying, and addiction. The “greasers” captured the perspective of the sixties working class; whereas, the “Socs” represented the privileged, white youth. Hinton highlighted the socioeconomic divide and violence for her readers to create their own opinions on their surrounding American society. Although some authors continued to publish novels that comforted teenagers with narratives focused on young love and science fiction, Hinton and many other of her realistic contemporary young adult authors paved a way for subsequent writers to detail the teenage life with authentic themes discussing culture, sex, addiction, and more.

During the 1970s, the young adult publishing industry highly sought-after tweens and middle-school audiences. With the increasing rates of the baby-boomer era, the population of tweens drastically sky-rocketed. The young adult economy continued to starkly divide between realistic fiction and romantic narratives. In 1974, Robert Cormier published *The Chocolate War*, capturing mob-mentality in its account of a Catholic school’s secret student society and their battle against one lone protester, Jerry Renault. The protagonist battles grief from his mother’s recent passing while defying the status-quo at his high school. The novel ends in a bleak, non-

resolving conclusion, which mirrors modernist persuasions to replicate real life that rarely reaches heart-warming solutions.

As the realism revival continued to gain momentum, the seventies spurred writers like Judy Blume and Lois Lowry. Their novels, although still realistic, follow single problem narratives, glossing over the layered issues that young adults face and create narratives that only discuss one theme. 1970s readers would leave their texts with inspiration for their life, rather than conviction and true understanding for the world around them. These 70s writers adhered to the conservative backlash against minorities fighting for equality; they wrote with political correctness. For instance, in Judy Blume's bestselling novel, *Are You There God? It's me Margaret.* (1970), the main character, Margaret Simon, only eleven, adapts to her new move to New York City. Blume depicts Margaret's intimate relationship with God. Margaret's biggest issue is fitting in, but teenagers during the seventies witnessed first-hand the cruelties that African Americans, the LGBT community, women, and more marginalized communities suffered, but the 1970s publishing world created many pieces that provided problem-solution formulas to stifle youth activism. Typically, texts only tackled one problem at a time instead of showing the authentic teenager with layers of issues from their domestic life to their school life. The 1970s followed closely the archetypal story-arc: one problem and one happy resolution.

Much like the seventies, the eighties saw an increase in young adult literature, but many books still left out many current issues. This was the dawning of multiple-part series like *Sweet Valley High* and *Goosebumps*. These series were marketed to teenagers exclusively; their covers were often cartoon illustrations capturing the attention of teenage purchasers. Shopping malls littered the nation promoting the teenage shopper phenomenon: "By the early 1980s American teens were spending a staggering \$45 billion per year on nonessential consumables" (*Romance to*

*Realism* 44). It was no longer the librarians and mothers behind the purchasing of novels. Young adults had the economic freedom to choose what to read. However, 80's young adult literature predominately followed white main characters and split titles between gender. These narratives can now be seen on the bedside tables of modern elementary school students, not the high school senior entering adulthood.

Michael Cart cites that in the early 1990s, the young adult genre reached a "near-death experience" with a low number of authors publishing in the field; however, in the late 1990s the young adult genre faced a "revival and renaissance" (*Romance to Realism* 55-63). Authors began to focus on other audiences, and a major factor in this young adult literature depression was the expansion of the middle-school education system. From 1966 to 1981, middle schools increased from 499 to 6,003 (*Romance to Realism* 57-8). The publishing community mirrored this middle-school birth by lowering the age of their protagonists, and, likewise, young adult literature threatened group readers from eleven to fourteen. The 90s witnessed a gap between middle school readers and adult readers, and once again, high schoolers were in drastic need of their own genre to confront life's problems.

However, a drastic rise in youth culture in the late 1990s inspired many book awards, including the Printz. This youth culture revival was in part due to America's teen population "growing 16.6 percent from 1990 to 2000 when it totaled 32 million" (*Romance to Realism* 63). This youth culture not only contributed to the increase in young adult titles, but it also created a new television media marketed to teenagers, which endured the rise of MTV. Even television altered to center around more vulgar themes to interest teenage viewers. *A New York Times* Critic, Jon Pareles, notes that the film industry evolved into "a long line of films in which teens are amoral, irrational, hormone-crazed and oblivious to consequences" (qtd in *Romance to*



*Realism* 71). This bawdy television production went hand in hand with early 2000's young adult literature. Nevertheless, not all youth-driven art, television, and literature were vulgar, but the increase of "MTV Content" aided in authors realizing that young adults could comprehend more than a Judy Blume, single-problem narrative.

Also, in response to the near-death of young adult literature and coinciding with the boom of youth culture, the YALSA created the Michael L. Printz Award in 1999 that startled the world of literature prizes. YALSA wanted to encourage the growth of young adult literature as a separate genre from children and adult books. The YALSA created a nine-member task force to propose the restraints of the new award labeled the Printz. They held the standard that winning novels should celebrate "literary merit" that refuse to avoid controversy and honor ("Policies and Procedures"). In January of 2000, the first Printz committee voted on their first winner and three honor books. Walter Dean Meyer's *Monster* (1999), a novel written as a screenplay following an African American teenager on trial for his life, was the first to win the Printz award. It has been clear from the start that the Printz award refused to avoid controversial issues.

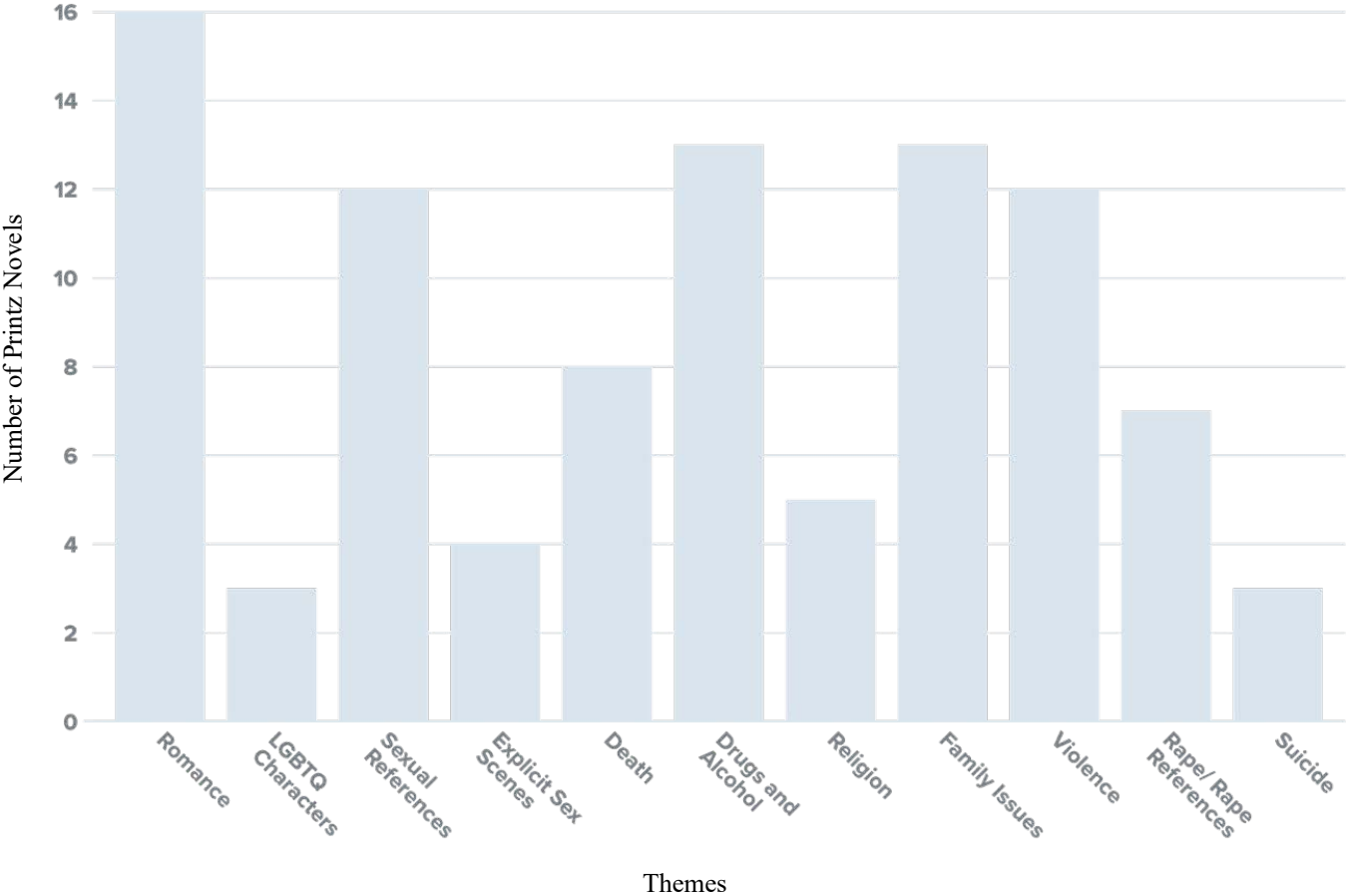
The early 2000's was defined by paranormal and dystopian narratives. Readers began flipping the pages of the *Harry Potter* series and *Twilight*. This decade, according to Cart, is known as the "Second Golden Age" of young-adult literature. When a typical American considers young adult literature, they probably recollect some of the "Second Golden Age" spear headers like the *Hunger Games* and *The Fault in our Stars*. In the early years of the Printz award, popularity was not a major factor in rewarding novels. Cart states that "when one is talking about selecting best books, popularity alone is no measure of merit. If it were, the Printz would automatically be awarded to Suzanne Collins (*Hunger Games* series) each year and there would be no need for discussion" (*Romance to Realism* 87). However, in recent years, the books that

have been selected are often popular before and after publication. Printz award-winners within the past three years have become national bestsellers, like, like *The Sun is Also a Star* (2016) and *The Hate U Give* (2017). For the Printz award to maintain its prestigious reputation, it will be vital for the committees to abandon the consideration of popularity before awarding their precious plaques.

### Trends

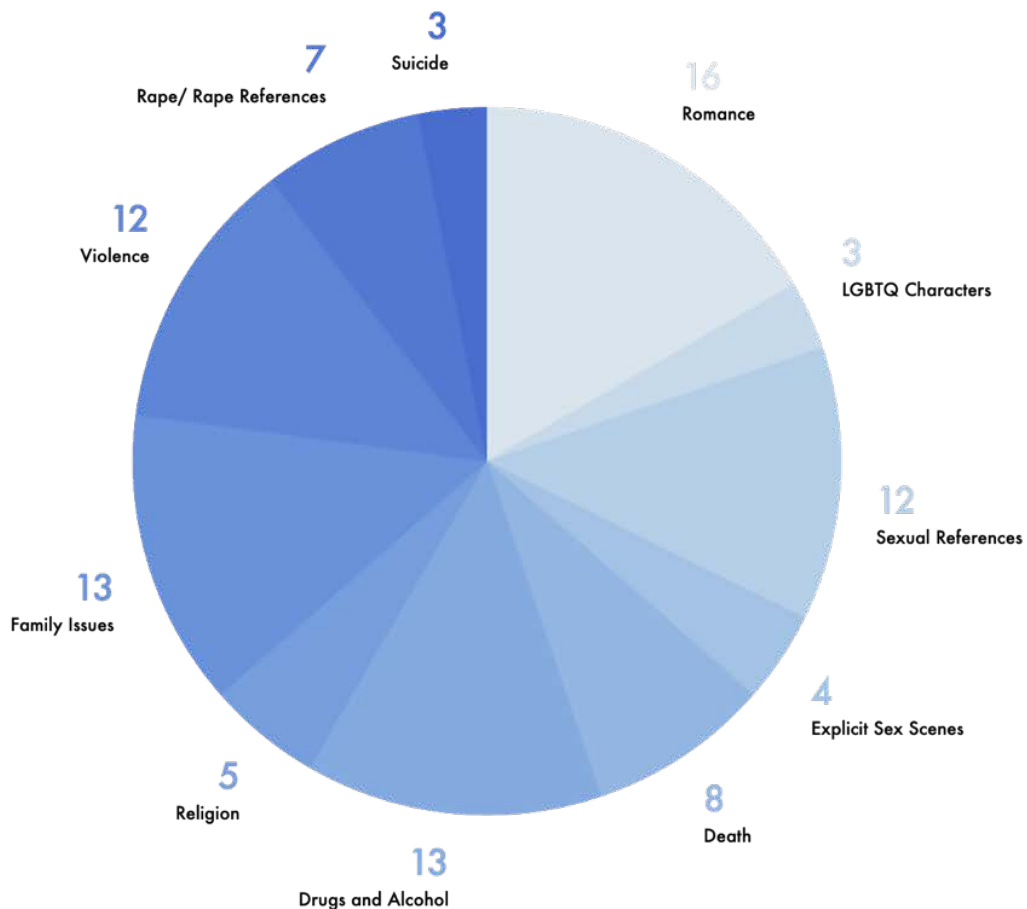
In order to understand the trends in the Printz award, I found it vital to record statistics regarding theme, content, gender, and point of view. Below you will find five infographics that I prepared after concluding my reading of seventeen Printz novels.

## Themes and Content in 17 Printz Novels



(Table 1)

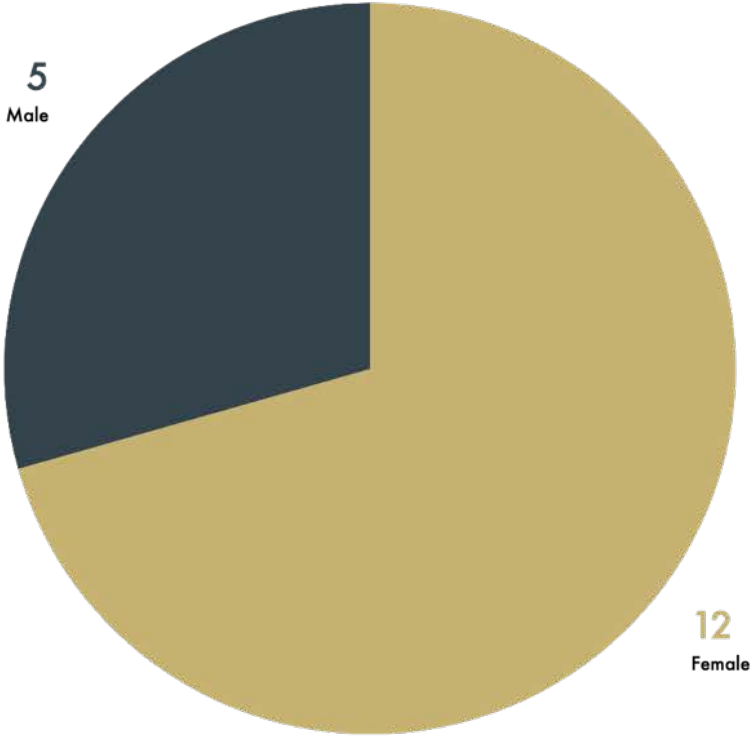
## Themes and Content in 17 Printz Novels



(Table 2)

*Throughout the course of reading these seventeen novels, I kept a record of major and minor topics in each text. The above eleven themes and concepts appeared in more than one of the Printz books. Not every topic was the most predominate in a novel to be included. For instance, in *I, Claudia* by Mary McCoy, the main character encountered a romantic interest, but the novel would not be classified as part of the romance genre. A Printz worthy young adult text is multi-faceted narrative with more than one concept.*

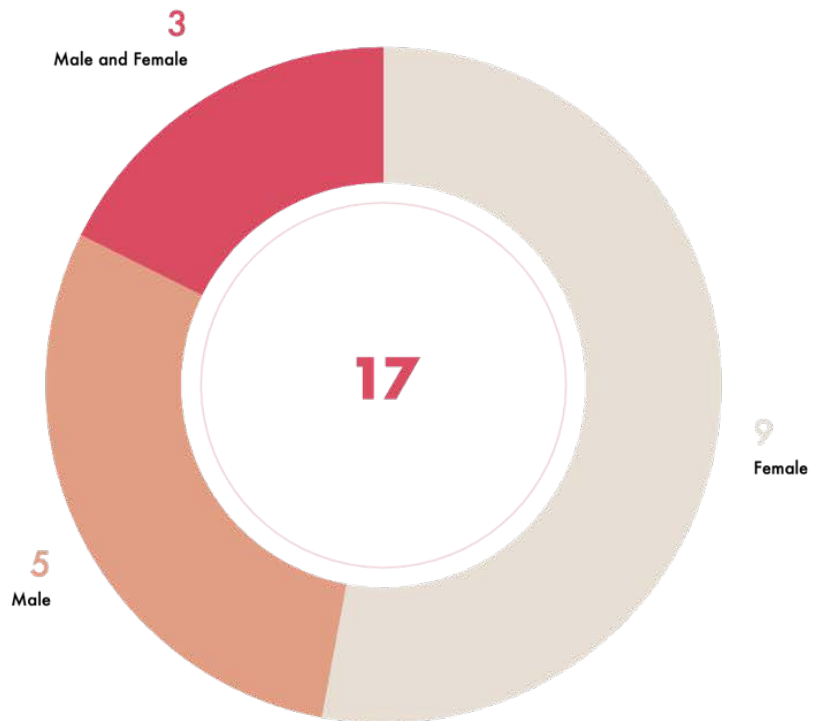
# Sex of Authors of 17 Printz Texts



(Table 3)

*Note: John Green was 2/5 of the male authors I read.*

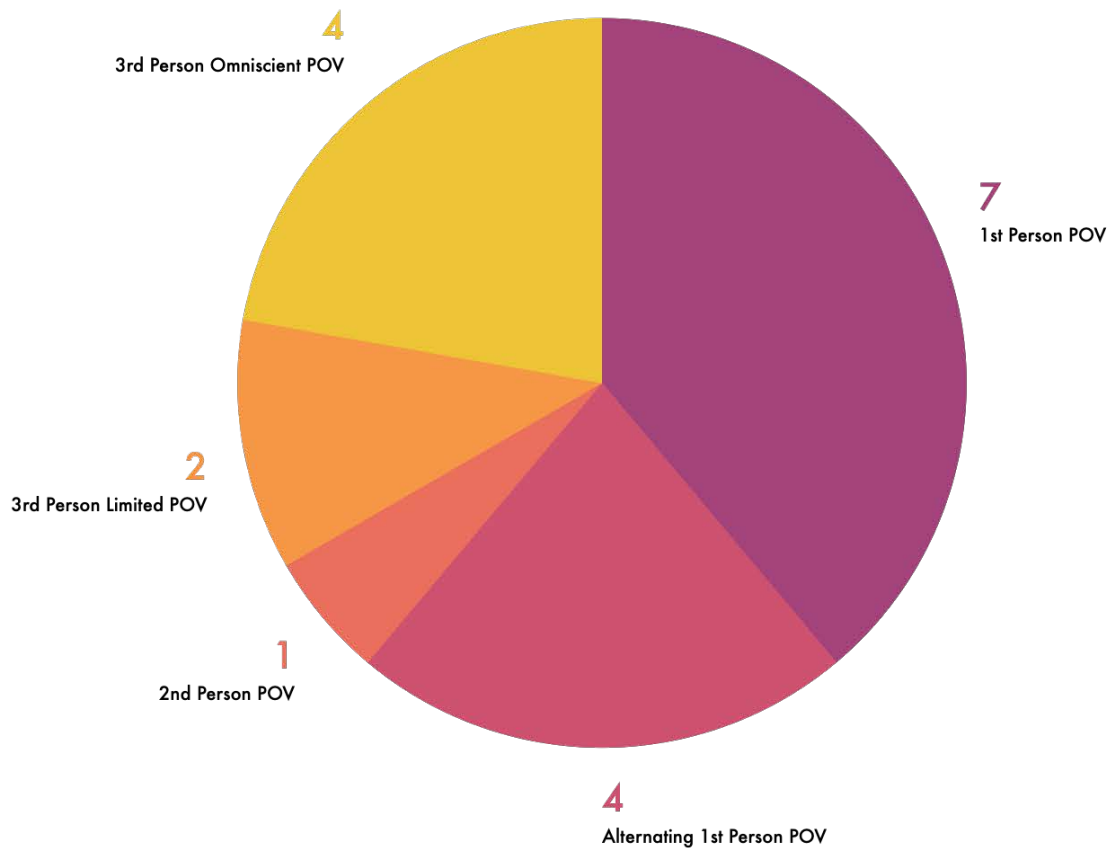
## Sex of Main Character(s) in 17 Printz Texts



(Table 4)

*Note: the texts that followed Male and Female characters employed methods of switching from each perspective in alternating chapters (i.e. *The Sun is Also A Star*).*

## Point of View [POV] in 17 Printz Texts



(Table 5)

*Note: Table 5 includes eighteen point of views. The Sun is Also a Star by Nicola Yoon shifts between an alternating 1st person point of view between her two protagonists and a 3rd person omniscient point of view.*

## Marketing

### *Teenagers' Interaction with the Printz Award*

The publishing market recognizes that adolescents are reading Printz texts in one form or another, and even some high school and middle school teachers are choosing Printz novels for their curriculum. On the YALSA blog entitled “The Hub: Your Connection to Teen Collections,” Amanda Margis argues in response to students in 2012 reading at a 5<sup>th</sup> grade level that young adult literature can help fix the problem:

More young adult literature in high school classes [might] increase interest and reading levels. . . Teens, like most readers, appreciate characters and situations that are familiar to them and their lives. . . When incorporated into literature curricula, YA titles can offer a wide spectrum of views on popular themes like identity, conflict, society and survival.

YA literature can be easily incorporated into classroom. . .

Margis includes a compiled list of her classroom young adult literature recommendations, and five of those texts are Printz-honored books. She pairs *Fat Kid Rules the World* (2003), a 2004 Printz honor book, with S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. Margis is not the only scholar pushing teachers to embrace young adult texts into the classroom, but in the introduction to the book *The Critical Merits of Young Adult Literature: Coming of Age* (2014), Crag Hill claims that “YA literature is ensconced in our culture . . . for example, many YA novels can be found in the exemplar texts posted on the website for the Common Core Standards, which have been adopted by 46 states” (3). Naturally, teachers turn to the Printz canon to pick out texts, knowing that a committee of well-educated librarians rewarded the novels. Moreover, students are picking up the Printz texts in their free time or are reading them for academic assignments, leaving the Printz having a big teenage draw.



When these adolescents are not soaking in the Printz literature from the page, they are often absorbing it from the screen. Out of the seventeen Printz texts I read, four have already been adapted by Hollywood films: *The Hate U Give*, *Looking for Alaska*, *The Sun is Also a Star*, and *Monster*. Likewise, four Printz authors are rumored to have sold their television rights to the following texts: *Asking for It*, *Eleanor and Park*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, and *I'll Give You the Sun*. Movie and television studios are drawn to young adult novels for their authentic emotions and universal coming of age themes. The screen adaptations drive more audiences to the books, but the question worth raising: how did the Printz award know these novels would do well in print and in the box office? The Printz award must consider the popularity of their texts during their deliberations.

Not only are these texts modified for the screen, but the authors are also jumping onto social media. Authors can now communicate past the epilogue and author's note, and social media has allowed readers to get more information about their beloved novels past the page. John Green's YouTube entitled "vlogbrothers" discusses his texts, other novels, science, history, and more; the channel currently has 3.3 million subscribers. If a subscriber to "vlogbrothers" becomes a fan of Green, they might pick up one of his six books. The platform that young adult literature creates is too hard to pin down with statistics, but one thing remains true—the audience continues to grow. Teenagers will encounter Printz texts either through the words themselves, in screen adaptations, or even on YouTube.

### ***Not So Young Anymore***

Who else reads young adult texts? The ages twelve to eighteen are filled with a purgatorial stage between the innocence of childhood and the realities of adulthood. There is not a single emotion or problem that can define this coming-of-age period, but some in this age

range are much more mature, due to their raising or traumas. It is difficult to fully capture the needs of such a large scale of ages and maturity into one genre.

Young adult authors and their publishers have responded to such a wide audience by aging their characters and content. Consequently, the young adult industry has created a canon of crossover novels or new *adult* novels. In 2009, the publisher St. Martin's Press created the term New Adult to describe the age range of readers from nineteen to twenty-five year olds, creating an outlet for “fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of older YA or New Adult” (qtd in *Romance to Realism* 143). The problem the market is currently facing is dividing the texts between the New Adult category and young adult literature. Rainbow Rowell won the Printz award in 2014 for her 2012 novel *Eleanor and Park* (2012). In 2013, Rowell came out with *Fangirl*, but it was classified as New Adult, shelving her novel across the store in Barnes & Noble. However, the interior of her 2013 copy of *Eleanor and Park* displays: “also by rainbow rowell . . . fangirl.” Although *Fangirl* was not recognized by the Printz committee, Rowell herself was honored for *Eleanor and Park* a year after *Fangirl* was debuted. This is not to say that a Printz writer cannot step over genres, but I do argue that Rowell's case proves that the market has made the boundaries between young adult and new adult hazy.

Practically speaking, for young adult literature, the audience is not necessarily the twelve to eighteen age range. In fact, adults are responsible for the purchasing and reading of 65-70 percent of young adult books (*Romance to Realism* X). Because the publishers and authors recognize these statistics, I would argue that young adult books purposely employ adult themes and concepts within their texts to entice their adult readers. Adult readers are apt to read young adult texts because of the universality of their coming-of-age journeys. Each young adult text I have read for the course of my study, regardless of the genre, involves a classic bildungsroman

structure. Adults are, like young adults, frequently in a state between phases of life—whether that be between marriage or parenthood or work life or retirement. Thus, adults, too, find comfort and solace within the characters in young adult fiction.

The evolution from a strictly young adult text to a text designed for crossover readers is no better portrayed than the difference between *Dig* (2019)<sup>ii</sup> and *Monster*. The first novel that was awarded the Printz award was Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, which follows sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon, an African American teenager, who is on trial for murder. Through his ingenious script style, Myers conveys Steve's journey from accounting the murder itself to living through the trial. Although a heavy, adult theme, Myers employs a first-person perspective exclusively, leaving the reader to question if Steve were guilty or innocent. The most recently awarded text in 2020 is *Dig* by A.S. King, which was published in 2019. King writes about racism, violence, and toxic masculinity. The characters in King's novel have traded in their generation-old potato farm for a modern subdivision. They did not only inherit the potato farm, but they also inherited a storm of familial dysfunction. The text follows seven points of view, and each character tackles a different battle that all interweaves with their family. King masters the Printz's "originality" in "voice" that the committees recognize according to their "Policies and Procedures," but, although some perspectives are from teenage characters, King follows multiple adult characters, highlighting the importance of leaving good for the next generation to come. So, "originality" comes at the cost eliminating the adolescent voice.

Not only are multiple characters aged, but because there are seven perspectives, the text reads almost like a puzzle. On Goodreads, there is a question and answer section where user Susan asks, "Is this a book adults should read too? Will it appeal to adults or is it strictly YA?" and user Nathan Byrnes replies, "Absolutely! Many of the characters are teens, but many are also

adults. It's a difficult read, but is well worth the lifting (or, digging)" ("Is this a book"). On the other hand, Myers' first-person point of view delivers clear content, leaving the readers to question only Steve's innocence. As a matter of fact, 41% of the books I read employed first-person point of view, because it allows for intimate clarity of the narrator's emotions (see *Table 5*). Neither novel patronizes readers while discussing weighty themes, but *Dig* overall is marketed to an older audience, teaching them about adult themes like parenthood, tradition, and money.

### ***Audience Accountability***

While the young adult audience has burgeoned from twelve to sixty-year-olds, Goodreads, a platform where any user may review a book, has given adolescents a chance to autonomously control the publishing industry. Goodreads' statement of purpose is as follows: "Goodreads is the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations. Our mission is to help people find and share books they love" (Chandler). Readers and reviewers alike gather via this platform to either bash or praise texts. Although Goodreads' ultimate motivation is found in creating a platform for bibliophiles, some of these reviews are even sponsored by publishing companies themselves. Many users begin or end their posts with disclaimers explicitly stating that they are writing this review in return for a free book, and as a result, the publishing industry looks towards Goodreads to create marketing tactics. For instance, after user Samantha (WLABB) reviewed *Dig* with 4.24 stars she cites "\*ARC [Advanced Reader Copy] provided in exchange for an honest review" ("Samantha Reviews"). Despite many of the posts being sponsored by publishers, these sponsored critics do not shy from rating free texts with low ratings. Though these elite book reviewers provide information to the masses, there are voices

missing, namely, that of the average teenager. The reviewers on Goodreads are more often than not teachers or driven students.

Peer-reviewed book analyses and Goodreads posts differ drastically. Reviews found in academic journals, predominantly read by scholars and teachers alike, are overwrought in jargon. Academic journals can only be accessed through school databases or a personal subscription. Thus, the audience for such journals is much smaller than Goodreads' free platform. Deborah Stevenson, a children's literature professor at the University of Chicago, published her review of A.S. King's *Dig* in *the Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* in 2019. Stevenson first summarizes *Dig*; then she concludes her brief review with her own opinion:

Watching the puzzle pieces [in *Dig*'s narrative] come together, however, is purely mesmerizing, and their assembly results in the most haunting exploration in youth literature to date of the advantage and poison that is white privilege, and the resentment of young people at the toxicity of what they inherit. King fans know to expect the unexpected, and they'll be richly rewarded with this intricate, heartfelt, readable concoction.

Stevenson's review is fairly straight-forward to a scholarly reader, but words like "toxicity" and "readable concoction" are not words typically found on the Goodreads platform. True purchasers of novels who take the time to look up a review are more likely to access Goodreads before they come across Stevenson's article. On the other hand, Goodreads provides for a quick and easy read that often even include moving images or graphic interchange formats [GIF]. In June 2019, Goodreads' user Lou reviewed *Dig* with many personal references:

*Dig* follows SEVEN povs, all of which are connected. Even though each voice sounds a little bit the same...except for Loretta's pov!!!!!! *I love that cutie pie with my entire heart...*I was still invested in everyone's story

....

Overall, I loved the sparse writing-style of this book and the gorgeous domestic imagery. Realistic AND aesthetic dialogue + representation of a whole range of social issues. Not many people know about this book and I am BAFFLED!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ("Lou's Reviews").

Lou employs many first-person pronouns, emojis, modern abbreviations, and capitalization variation. She does use literary terms like "imagery" and "dialogue," but her overall review reads like a text message. It is much easier for parents of readers and readers to relate more with Lou's review because of the many modern adaptations. Lou makes it apparent with first-person pronouns that the review is biased. Lou does not create an argument from academic jargon whereas Stevenson never uses a first-person pronoun. Young adult texts are meant to be personal narratives that readers can relate to, and the Goodreads' platform creates personal reviews. Platforms like Goodreads keep the Printz award accountable for their search of "literary merit." Goodreads also provides an accessible platform where Printz committee members can see what annual novels are popular prior to their deliberations. For example, 2017 *The Hate U Give* holds a 4.5 average rating out of five stars with 414,135 reviews. Whereas, the 1999 *Monster* has a 3.72 average rating out of five stars with 58,132 reviews. Hence, I would go as far as to argue that the Printz award pays fervent attention to such reviews, learning about readers' positive and negative feedback for novels and leading them to discover what novels would be popular among the reader community.

### Sex and Young Love

Because the Printz committee has access to reviews from young adults, they realize that sex and love result in the most popular novels. I begin with the theme of sex and young love because romance is involved in 94% of the novels I read, and 70% of the novels include sexual references (see *Table 1* and *Table 2*). It is not a surprise that the majority of Printz novels deal with sex and love because young adults are experiencing puberty, inciting them to look at their bodies and others' bodies differently. Although romance and love are both universal themes for adolescents, 24% of the Printz texts I read provide graphic depictions of sex. Even the narratives that address sexual assault often lack ambiguity, providing a vivid picture for readers' minds. When sexual scenes are explicit, young readers can often create a skewed vision of sex. Ambiguity is not necessarily always good in literature; some of the classics, like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, depict sexual scenes to develop the complexity of the characters and plots. Nevertheless, with the age range that the Printz award claims as their audience, increasing anonymity will appropriately allow for even the younger readers to understand the layers in texts.

With understanding that the Printz award should reward vagueness in sexual scenes, I found graphic sexual content the most alarming throughout my readings. This is not to argue that sex should be avoided completely; in fact I agree with Cart's claim that books that address the "intersection of love and sex. . . . do readers a service by acknowledging the fact that teenagers are sexual beings who deserve to see their stories in the pages of good, nonjudgmental young adult books" (*Romance to Realism* 185). I think romance and sex are a pertinent aspect of teenagers' lives. Yet, consider a twelve-year-old who does not have a proper sex education or a mentor to talk to; their conception of sex is highly impressionable. According to the Center for Disease Control [CDC], from 2006-2008, only 62% of males and 53% of females received a formal sex education by the eighth grade (Martinez et. al). How does a reader comprehend

healthy sex if they are unaware of birth control measures? With this startling statistic in mind, I argue that unless the age range is changed to fourteen to eighteen, ambiguity is desirable for texts with “literary merit.” In fact, the meritorious William Shakespeare and John Milton included sex in their works, but they did not compose the kind of pornographic scenes that are often common among modern young adult texts. I agree that sex should be included in young adult novels, but it is important for these Printz committees to note if the description of sex acts necessary to the development of their characters. The reality is that teenagers reach for texts that discuss inappropriate content that they might not be able to watch on the television; thus, I maintain that the Printz committee has on a few occasions rewarded topics that would be well read instead of focusing on originality. I would further claim that the Printz should consider only recognizing young adult texts that include one reference of healthy love or sex to juxtapose with heartbreak or assault. I know that there are no lines and rules for sex and love scenes in young adult novels, but the Printz award must contemplate how a twelve-year-old might interpret sex and young love in their novels.

### ***Rape Culture***

The most impressionable Printz novel about rape was *Damsel* (2018) by Elana K Arnold, which was awarded a Printz honor in 2019. Arnold introduces a young, female protagonist named Ama, who is raped by the aristocrat Prince Emory, whom had just saved her from the infamous dragon in their kingdom. Not only rape by one’s rescuer, Arnold’s text also portrays suicide, self-harm, and other traumatic content. Yet, the summary on the fold of the book reads as follows:



The rite has existed for as long as anyone can remember: When the king dies, his son the prince must venture out into the gray lands, slay a fierce dragon, and rescue a damsel to be his bride. This is the way things have always been. When Ama wakes in the arms of Prince Emory, she knows none of this. She has no memory of what came before she was captured by the dragon or what horrors she faced in its lair. She knows only this handsome young man, the story he tells of her rescue, and her destiny of sitting on a throne beside him. It's all like a dream, like something from a fairy tale. As Ama follows Emory to the kingdom of Harding, however, she discovers that not all is as it seems. There is more to the legends of the dragons and the damsels than anyone knows, and the greatest threats may not be behind her, but around her, now, and closing in.

Although Ama's major identity struggle is finding independence while facing trauma, the book jacket focuses predominantly on the medieval fantasy world, rather than accurately reflecting the

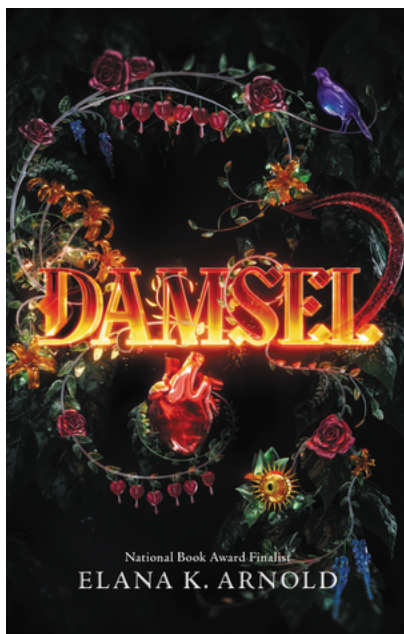


Fig. 2 The 2018 jacket cover of *Damsel*; Jacket art by Valut49 and Jacket design by Michelle Taormina.

rape culture. A reader will dive into *Damsel* and discover that dragons, castles, and other medieval details are merely a side-battle for Ama.

Not only is the summary deceiving, but the cover itself reflects a fantastical fairy tale. The book cover shows the title surrounded by floral graphics and the picture of a heart (see fig. 2). Each illustration on the cover is highlighted in a golden magical outline. Because of these misconceptions, *Damsel* to me is the epitome of the Printz award's ambitions to celebrate authors who tackle issues that might trigger a heated, political response, rather than staying true to literary merit. Because

many young adults are avid readers of fantasy novels, hence *Harry Potter*, this novel focused solely on marketing tactics and resulting popularity with their cover and description, which the Printz award subsequently condones.

Arnold uses graphic language to describe sexual scenes, creating a pornographic photo for young readers to envision. Fabiana, one of the servants in the castle, describes the “king’s yard” or penis as follows: “Well, for the first, it feels all different ways. It can be a soft lump of warm dough, a handful of wrinkles and weight. And then it becomes a great thick horn, like the well-cooked leg of a turkey” (Arnold 166). Fabiana encourages Ama to act like she is enjoying pleasing the Prince sexually. Although Arnold never explicitly uses medical terms for the male genitalia, it is easy for readers, even young readers, to read in between the lines. There is not one instance of healthy sex or romance throughout the text.

The conclusion of *Damsel* remains the most alarming. The novel begins with Prince Emory “saving” the damsel from the dragon, and once Emory rescues Ama, she is required by legend to become his wife. Emory saves Ama from the dragon with three powers: his strength, his intellect, and the last power was left unknown. Towards their wedding day at the end of the novel, Ama sneaks off to glass blow her own dragon sculpture against the wishes of Emory, but Emory discovers Ama’s secret hobby and destroys her art. Readers then discover that Ama is the dragon, and they uncover that Prince Emory’s third power is his “yard.” Ama begins recounting flashbacks realizing that she was the dragon, and she recollects that Prince Emory penetrated his penis into her armpit, turning her into a princess. At the end of the novel, Ama kills Emory and flies back to her cave. Although one could say Arnold masks explicit imagery in coded language, a reader becomes fearful of Emory’s “yard.” Ama eventually returns home, but she suffers from immense scars from Emory’s abuse.

Arnold's novel elicits an intriguing twist on the typically male-centered fairy tale, but it leaves young readers with misrepresentations of sex. Arnold has the right intentions for exploiting toxic masculinity in the form of a fairy tale, and I appreciated it from a level of maturity for someone who has a sex education. She highlights society's roles in demeaning women into domestic values such as childbirth, robbing them from their greater dragon-like abilities. However, her sexual scenes are brutal, taking away from Arnold's merit. A young reader might leave the text of *Damsel* with questions about sex and society, but not many young readers will push past the page to discuss these weighty topics with an adult. Also, an adolescent reader might be intrigued by sexual content, leaving them to read its entirety. Furthermore, if an adult purchased *Damsel* for a teenage reader, perhaps she would not think to open a discussion about sex after they merely reviewed the cover and dust jacket. Overall, other than Arnold's feminist twist on the medieval world, her originality stems from her message, and "MESSAGE" is not the same thing as "literary merit."

Although, in my opinion, Arnold's message about toxic masculinity is too explicit for a middle school reader, in another novel *The Poet X* (2018), Elizabeth Acevedo provides a preferable universal survey of sexual assault and body acceptance. Acevedo's protagonist is the sixteen-year-old Dominican American—Xiomara Batista. Serving as a diary for Xiomara, *The Poet X* is written in poignant, personal verse. Xiomara blossomed physically faster than her classmates, and many men and women began to objectify Xiomara:

I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips  
 so that the boys who called me whale in middle school  
 now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.

The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast. (Acevedo 5)

Even at the age of sixteen, Xiomara is painfully aware of rape culture and misogyny. She is continuously harassed with catcalls and comments, but Xiomara prevails in joining her poetry club at school, falling in love with a classmate, and learning to accept her body. Although Xiomara is frustrated with the verbal assaults she encounters, she learns to express her anger on the page writing poetry to the audience that a female can prevail in finding love to become comfortable in her own skin. Much like *Damsel*, *The Poet X* creates a narrative centered around a female protagonist who defies all odds and overcomes her adversity, but Acevedo forms a coming-of-age story that describes the sometimes bleak reality of gender roles. Even when describing masturbation, Acevedo prescribes to ambiguity:

In bed at night  
 my fingers search  
 a heat I have no name for.  
 Sliding into a center,  
 finding a hidden core,  
 or stem, or maybe      the root. (130)

Within the context of the novel, a reader can fill in the blanks, but Acevedo does not anatomically describe the masturbation. Acevedo portrays a sexual awakening and body acceptance after traumatic situations in an edifying manner.

Like Acevedo, Deb Caletti in her novel *A Heart in a Body in a World* (2018) depicts heavy themes with anonymity deals. Caletti tackles toxic masculinity through her protagonist Annabelle Agnelli who was victimized by sexual assault and gun violence. Within the beginnings of the novel, Annabelle is at a locally owned burger restaurant when she is accosted by a man who aggressively hits on her, and when she signals her disinterest, he touches her

without permission: “He [the boy at the restaurant] steps toward her. He reaches for her arm. She feels his fingers through her sleeve. . . Annabelle wrenches her arm free” (Caletti 9). Although this is not the main assault described in the novel, Caletti avoids purposely dramatizing the scene in the restaurant; instead, she provides details about Annabelle’s emotional response: “All of it—the hand, the arm, the vulnerability. . . All of the wrongness thunders and falls and threatens to bury her alive” (9). Caletti ingeniously utilizes ambiguity throughout the text about the main sexual assault and gun violence, but she elaborates in detail about the traumatic aftermath of such events. It is the indirectness of the physical, but the truthfulness of the emotion, that offers literary merit.

After the assault in the restaurant, Annabelle is suddenly paralyzed by a related memory of a boy from high school who sexually assaulted her in the past. When she rebuffed him and sought recourse through her school, the boy became violent and brought a gun to school where he shot several of her classmates. Annabelle’s sexual trauma tangled with gun violence at the hands of “the taker” is slowly revealed through flashbacks throughout her run from Seattle to Washington D.C.. Caletti does a good job of balancing a realistic recovery from the sexual assault with exploitation of rape culture. While Caletti shows her readers the tragic outcomes of sexual assault and toxic masculinity, she focuses more on Annabelle’s recovery than Annabelle’s trauma. Annabelle refuses to allow “the taker” to steal any more from her life that he already has, but she still experiences the harsh triggers of PTSD. If the Printz committee continues to recognize novels that deal with rape culture, I believe that they should only reward novels that like Caletti and Acevedo’s works that focus predominately on the consequences of trauma instead of dramatizing the violent act itself.

In 2019, the Printz committee awarded another novel tackling sexual trauma—*Asking for It* (2016) by Louise O’Neill. O’Neill portrays rape culture with a modern lens, including social media and cell phones. This was unlike the other novels I read about sexual assault, which were often placed in the past or without current focus on modern technology. Interestingly, the novel was first published in Ireland and the text itself is based in Ireland; thus, there are many parts of the novel that are not applicable to American readers. The novel begins with a typical day in Emma O’ Donovan’s privileged life. She attends a private school, hangs out with her friends

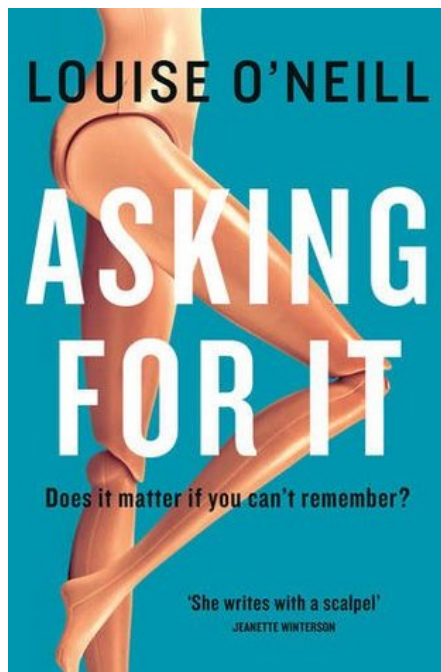


Fig. 3 The book jacket cover of Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It* (2016). Jacket design by Kate Gaughran.

after class, and ends her evening with a party. However, she wakes up on her front porch abused. Over the course of the novel, the horrific events of the evening unfold. O’Neill does an excellent job at not sugar-coating rape. Her novel proves that even privileged, rich white young women can be assaulted, but her recounts of the rape are graphic. Unlike *Damsel*, the novel’s cover is not misleading: it depicts a nude Barbie doll, representing Emma’s objectification; thus, a reader should know the weight of the content before they open the text (see fig. 3). Emma initially did not remember the trauma from the night before, but she realizes she was assaulted after seeing photos published on social media:

I [Annabelle] click on the photo.

Pale limbs, long hair, head lolling back on the pillow. The photos start at the head, works down the body, lingers on the naked flesh spread across the rose-covered sheets. . .

Dylan on top of that girl (*me, me, that can't be me, that's not me*) his hands over the (*my—no, her*) face, as if to cover her up. . . In the next photos his fingers are inside the body, the girl (*me, me, oh God I'm going to be sick*), but she doesn't move. Her head and shoulders have fallen off the edge of the bed. He spreads her legs, gesturing for the camera to come closer, the next photos of pink flesh. . . (O'Neill 135)

Defining graphic scenes in a novel is inevitably biased, and this detailed description is even necessary to understand O'Neill's plot. Such graphic scenes are employed by O'Neill to impact readers' emotions and persuade them of her "MESSAGE." So, why did Printz award honor *Asking For It*? The Printz claims that "MESSAGE" is not a criterion of the reward, but there is not anything significant about the voice, style, characters, and other criteria that the Printz organization observes ("Printz Policies and Procedures"). In fact, Emma herself is not developed; she is a mere placeholder for a privileged white female. The most significant feature of *Asking for It* is that O'Neill engenders her readers with a "MESSAGE" that sexual assault has no stereotype and victim-blaming is never acceptable. This is not to say that meaning and message in texts should altogether be avoided by authors, and I believe that *Asking For It* would impact some readers lives for the better. Yet, I have a hard time seeing a twelve-year-old capable of processing such weighty, bleak issues, especially with the emotion-provoking scenes. In fact, Emma herself is eighteen, which is the top tier of the defined age for young adults, but the lack of ambiguity remains that the Printz award recognized a novel specifically targeted for ages over eighteen. Although the committees recognized a novel that might incite thought-provoking realizations for readers, the Printz must consider that not every reader will talk out in the open about heavy topics past the page, especially a twelve-year-old.

Sexual assault will continue to be included within the Printz canon as the times progress with the encouragement of organizations like the #MeToo movement. Likewise, the CDC cites that “1 in 3 rape victims experienced it [rape] for the first time between 11-17 years old” (“Preventing Sexual Assault”). It is clear that sexual assault affects young adults in America, and it is essential for both young men and young women to understand the traumatic aftermath of a sexual assault on a victim. In fact, many high school teachers have brought these young adult texts into their classrooms. In the 2018 version of the *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, three English teachers argue for including young adult texts tackling sexual assault in high school literature classes:

We are living during an important cultural moment where victims of sexual violence are speaking out. The #MeToo movement highlights how sexual violence has entered the public discourse at-large. Yet, the lack of classroom discussion on this topic can leave many students with incomplete understandings of sexual violence. Fortunately, teaching literature that educates students on sexual violence can fight against this trend.

(Colantonio-Yurko et al. 10)

The Printz award holds the tremendous responsibility to help create the modern canon of young adult texts that tackle sexual assault, and it is essential that they critique every aspect of these awarded novels ensuring that they portray an accurate representation of sexual assault. Because the Printz committee is tasked in rewarding merit and not “MESSAGE,” they must distinguish didactic and literary concerns in texts dealing with rape.

### ***Insta-Love***

Another common theme found in young adult novels is the insta-love phenomenon. Insta-love is synonymous with love at first sight; it is the act of believing someone is your soulmate



when you first meet them. The texts that portray insta-love frequently conclude in some sort of sexual encounter, often the teenagers losing their virginity. In fact, the CDC cites that “in 2017, a total of 194,377 babies were born to women aged 15–19 years” (“Reproductive Health”).

Teenagers are having sex, but without proper sex education and with the intense emotions correlated with insta-love, it might be hard for them to develop boundaries. Insta-love is an ancient archetype found in many fairy tale plots, and the trope continues to appear in young adult literature, even Printz winning titles. As adolescents’ brains are continuing to evolve, lust and infatuation form a hodgepodge of irrational actions, including quick romantic relationships. Dr. Bianka M. Reese, a researcher and program evaluator specializing in adolescent health, cites that young women have often not reached maturity when entering romantic relationships:

‘Puberty is a key life transition that can have implications for well-being into adulthood . . . Early pubertal maturation, especially for girls, can elevate risk because youth may enter romantic relationships before they have the psychological maturity and interpersonal skills needed to successfully navigate relationships. The potential risks may be further elevated for girls who identify as a sexual minority, because they may lack appropriate role models and strong interpersonal support networks. As far as we know, no one has explored this important question before.’ (qtd in “Study Explores”)

It is hard for teenagers, especially the ones who encounter puberty early, to define edifying love, and insta-love shrinks the realistic love timeline into possibly only one paragraph. Young adults might experience such intense, immediate feelings, but young adult literature, in my opinion, should not encourage such quick love affairs. Plots including insta-love encourage infatuation over developing authentic relationships with realistic boundaries. The Printz award honors some titles that depict mature love timelines, but some novels ascribe to the insta-love cliché.

Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park*, awarded the Printz honor in 2014, portrays a healthy sexual progression, but an unrealistic emotional timeline. Sexually, Rowell does an excellent job in portraying a healthy advancement in physical actions before intercourse. For instance, Eleanor and Park hold hands in the bus for a long time before they eventually kiss, and they never impulsively touch one another. The characters engage in healthy dialogue when deciding to progress in a new sexual signpost. It is obvious that young adults will face lustful decisions, and like Rowell's couple, young adults find themselves asking whether or not they should do said physical act. Rowell's *Eleanor and Park* serves as an example of a novel exhibiting healthy touching. After Eleanor and Park passionately make out a few times, they stop before they have sex. The lengthy timeline of physical progression allows for the characters to develop an emotional connection before a physical connection. Unlike Arnold in *Damsel*, Rowell highlights that teenagers can have physical interaction with love.

Although Rowell does create a love story with healthy sexual representations, Rowell complicates her emotional timeline between the two sweethearts. The novel portrays a healthy sexual progression but an unrealistic emotional timeline. Both Park and Eleanor, before they fell in love, have negative perspectives of one another. Eleanor initially refers to Park as the "weird Asian kid" (Rowell 53). Likewise, after Eleanor could not find a place to sit in the bus Park yells at her, "Jesus-fuck. . . *Just sit down*" (Rowell 9). However, Park evolves from utter annoyance to appreciation for the little things about Eleanor; he desires to get batteries to listen to listen to music with Eleanor on his Walkman:

That morning, in English, Park noticed that Eleanor's hair came to a soft red point on the back of her neck. . . He emptied all his handheld video games and Josh's remote control

cars, and called his grandma to tell her that all he wanted for his birthday in November was AA batteries. (Rowell 60).

It is hard for readers to comprehend how classmates who initially despise each other may fall in love so fast. Park transformed from anger to sacrifice in the matter of a month.

Another addition to the Printz committee's insta-love narratives was Nicola Yoon's *The Sun is also a Star* (2016), which perpetuates the "love at first sight" archetype through her characters of Natasha and Daniel. The characters are each going through personal issues when their lives fall together. Natasha, a Jamaican-American, is facing the risk of deportation. Daniel, a Korean American, is rebelling against his parent's desire for him to become pre-med major, for Daniel aspires to become a poet. In classic young adult obsession with identity crisis, Yoon's text begins on the day that Natasha faces deportation and Daniel runs away from his family. Daniel finds Natasha attractive and the "one" from the beginning: "But something about Natasha makes me think my life could be extraordinary" (Yoon 72). However, Natasha approaches their collision with more cynicism and caution. Eventually, the two fall in love in one lengthy day, but the two individuals do not know each other well enough, in my opinion, for complete emotional attachment. *The Sun is Also a Star* includes many nuances and multi-faceted characteristics that display Yoon's talent, and the text is delightfully entertaining. The novel achieves in "literary merit" for its concept of time, clever writing style, and Yoon's extensive knowledge of the city. Yet, the overall relationship between Daniel and Natasha is romanticized and unrealistic. "Insta-love" is by no means an "original" feature, but it does make good movies, allowing Yoon's novel to become adapted to the screen in 2019.

Another Printz text including insta-love is *Why We Broke Up* (2011) written by Daniel Handler and illustrated by Maira Kalman. The picturesque graphic novel is a coming-of-age

story about a girl infatuated by old movies and known as “arty.” The text is formed in second person point of view, representing Min writing to Ed, a typical high-school all-star. Min describes their relationship and their breakup. It takes twenty six days until Min loses her virginity to Ed. They even say the infamous words “I love you.” However, the book concludes with Ed cheating on her with a classmate and Min jumping back into another boys’ arms. From page 297 to 303, Min discusses the sexual experience, and then there is an illustrated condom. The reader feels a slowing of the novel’s pace. It ends with, “The laughing was the best part” (303). The way the novel portrays sex is a nostalgic memory of the teenage life with positive connotations. I found myself smiling as she lost her virginity, instead of remembering they broke up and Min gives something to Ed that she is never able to take back. After the two finish having sex, Min and Ed decide they are hungry:

Let’s not push our luck, we’re paying cash,” you said, and found a phone book. “Pizza.”

“Pizza.” I was fierce with the thought of it.

My first grown-up meal, I couldn’t help thinking, and what I want is kid stuff. (Handler 305)

It took fourteen pages to depict a decision that Min made that will forever alter her life, but rather than discussing the emotional aftermath of losing her virginity, Handler continues on with the story and pizza. It takes twenty pages until Min finds out he is cheating on her. The amount of emotional trauma that the break up causes was never displayed throughout the text, but Min ends up in the arms of her best friend. The book ties up with a happy ending. Thus, Handler provides to his readers that having sex prompts maturity and happiness. Because Min opens her heart so fast to Ed, she gives away her virginity, and such an insta-love in real life ends in pain.

I am not saying that sexual content and love should be omitted from young adult narratives; rather, I am saying that young adult authors need to increase their ambiguity with sexual themes. The Printz award committee should remain true to their claim their award is for ages twelve through eighteen. It is difficult to comprehend how novels that explicitly detail sex and its counterparts may be put in the hands of a twelve-year-old, merely passing the sixth grade. Continuing, the adolescent mind is not thoroughly matured enough to quite grasp the idea of true love. I agree that these topics should be discussed, but many young adult readers leave novels without talking to an adult figure. The Printz committee must remember that a young reader might hold romantic relationships in novels as truth and follow sexual timelines in narratives as direction.

### Forbidden Religion

Only 30% of the Printz novels I read include references to religion. Albeit there are not many instances of religion, young adults are exposed to the tragedies the world endures, leaving them to adopt a higher power. Professor Donna Freitas in her article, “Is Any Topic Off Limits When You Write for Teenagers? Maybe Just One,” she notes that “religion [is] the last taboo” in young adult literature:

Religion in the mainstream Y.A. publishing world makes people nervous. . . One study from 2013 found that nearly 90 percent of protagonists in award-winning and best-selling Y.A. titles claim no religious or spiritual identity whatsoever. That does not align with the real lives of American teenagers.

I concur with Freitas that teenagers are questioning religion; thus, why does the Printz award avoid theological topics? Not only do I recommend that the upcoming Printz committees recognize texts with the inclusion of religion, but I also feel that the awarded novels that do mention religion should offer more complexity. The Printz Policies and Procedures states that they will “foc[us] on individuals, in all their diversity, and that focus is a fundamental value,” and I think the award has done an excellent job in recognizing books with characters of racial diversity. Yet, they are lacking in a range of religions represented in the texts. Most of the novels that touch on religion only employ Christian characters. Furthermore, when characters are religious, their religion is more of an obstacle, developing a new Printz trend of recognizing negative representations of religion.

In John Green’s *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), one of the main character’s best friends, Hassan, is a practicing Muslim. When considering dating a girl named Lindsey, Hassan states ““Dating Lindsey would be *haram*,”” which Green footnotes “*Haram* is an Arabic word

that means ‘forbidden by Islam’” (*An Abundance of Katherines* 86). This is one of the many Islamic references that Green makes throughout his descriptions of Hassan. When Colin, the protagonist, claims that Hassan “do[es] all kinds of shit that is *haram*,” Hassan replies:

‘Yeah, but the *haram* shit I do is, like, having a dog. It’s not like smoking crack or talking behind people’s backs or stealing or lying to my mom or fugging girls. . . . I don’t think God gives a shit if we have a dog or if a woman wears shorts. I think He gives a shit about whether you’re a good person.’ (*An Abundance of Katherines* 87)

Green does not shy away from discussing religion through the mouths of teenage boys. Hassan always points out to people he meets that he is Muslim, but he admits that he breaks the rules sometimes. Although Hassam is not the main character in *An Abundance of Katherines*, he was the only Printz novel I read that included Islamic religion. Green provides a good “MESSAGE” because Colin, the main character, is not a believer in any religion, proving that friendships can exist without commonality among spiritual beliefs. Nonetheless, Hassam follows Islamic tradition because his parents pushed it onto him growing up; he does not have a personal relationship with his God. Hassam checks off the diversity box, but he describes the religion as suffocating, causing Hassam to only follow the rules he wants.

One of the most religiously centered novels is Elizabeth Acevedo’s *The Poet X*. Xiomara, the protagonist, is a Dominican Catholic forced into the religion by her zealous mother. As young adults question their own world, they begin to question the metaphysical world. Acevedo does not shy from bashing strict Catholicism. In fact, Xiomara’s main abuse and obstacle is her parents’ coercive approach to religion. Her parents force her to attend Catholic confirmation, but Father Sean, her confirmation teacher, surprises her by becoming one of her main role models.

Often in discussions with Father Sean, Xiomara throughout the text continuously questions God and the accuracy of the Bible; she specifically questions Father Sean about the book of Genesis:

‘I Think the Story of Genesis is Mad Stupid’

‘God made the Earth in seven days?’

Including humans, right?

But in biology we learned

Dinosaurs existed on Earth

for millions of years

before other species. . . (Acevedo 120)

It is likely that many Christian teenagers question Genesis’ accuracy in tandem with science, but Acevedo leaves the theological question without much of an answer other than Xiomara’s abandonment of her faith. Even though the subject of faith is emotionally charged for many readers, Acevedo highlights a binary approach, relating to some but not many

Other than the *Poet X*, *The Passion of Dolssa* (2016) by Julie Berry is one of the only Printz awarded texts that includes the main characters dealing with religion. It is a historical fiction novel placed in 1241 about a young woman named Dolssa with phenomenal healing powers. The story is predominately narrated by Dolssa’s sister, Botille, who explains how the two flee from the friar who wants to track Dolssa down and burn her as a heretic. Berry examines medieval religion through her historical fiction inspired by the crusades in southern France. Not only do Berry’s readers grasp knowledge of medieval culture, but they also learn about the history of Christianity. Berry describes Dolssa as “single-minded and more single focused on [her] devotion and ardor of their love for God” (Ackerman). Even though Berry is writing about history where women had little to no rights, Berry crafts Dolssa and her sister as



strong and independent females, defying often anti-feminist medieval religious traits. The church in 1241 was arguably a patriarchy. Nevertheless, the two sisters remain strong and continue to serve God through hardships. Throughout the text, Dolssa calls Jesus “beloved,” creating an intimate relationship that is empowering, and Dolssa engenders many Christian traits like loving one another: “To love as my beloved does, I must love all those whom he loves. In heaven, there are neither nobles nor peasants. Only children of God” (Berry 206). The church is tracking Dolssa down to be killed, but she prevails in staying true to her faith. Through her character of Dolssa, Berry proclaims to her readers that one can be a Christian outside of the corruption of the institution or the church’s misogynistic traditions.

The Printz award claims to welcome controversy and diversity, but religion, one of the most controversial and diverse topics, is not represented in many novels. I agree with Frietas and her claim that, “To ignore religion in Y.A. cedes the entire conversation about religion and spirituality, and all that it stands for, to exactly the kind of intolerant voices that Y.A. publishing has fought so hard against.” I recognize that there is a lack of newly published young adult novels that discuss religion, but I hope the Printz award pays special attention to the novels that discuss such topics in the upcoming committees. To truly see themselves reflected in narratives, many young adults would need to see more texts inclusive of religion

### Substance Ab-USE

Amidst searching for identity, teenagers often turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their feelings. Drinking, drugs, and smoking are all substances that young adults will either struggle with or encounter at some point in their adolescence; likewise, it is essential that young adult authors walk the tight line between romanticizing these substances and ignoring them altogether. Teenagers need narratives that detail tragedies at the hands of addiction and over-consumption to humanize the situations that readers' parents and teachers have so often drilled into their memories. The Printz committee should continue to reward novels that employ realistic, authentic characters who are facing real-life risks in the face of substance abuse, but it is important that the Printz committee refuses to condone narratives that romanticize.

*Asking For It* by Louise O'Neill unabashedly includes frequent, detailed uses of drugs and alcohol. The protagonist, Emma consumes a copious amount of alcohol and drugs at the age of eighteen. It is important to note that one reason perhaps O'Neill includes intricate details about alcohol is that she wrote for Irish young adults. In Ireland, the legal age to imbibe alcohol is eighteen, but the Printz award is an American award where the legal drinking age is twenty-one. Regardless of frequency, O'Neill does not glamorize drugs and alcohol at all. In fact, the novel includes the lack of sobriety as one of the factors leading up to a sexual assault and its aftermath on the Emma's life and family. The substance abuse plays a major role in the novel; O'Neill asks the question: if Emma were drunk, was she enabling the sexual assault? However, once again, the alcohol and drugs serve as an accessory to the "MESSAGE," not the merit.

Yet, not every Printz awarded novel refrains from sharing the consequences of substance abuse. *Looking for Alaska* (2006) by John Green tells the story of Miles Halter and his year at a boarding school encountering love, friendship, heartbreak, and the fun of underage drinking. The story romanticizes both alcohol and drugs. Although Miles' love interest, Alaska, eventually dies

from a probable drunk driving accident, drinking and smoking become a daily part of the characters' lives. Miles does not personally experience any consequences other than losing Alaska, but in the end, by rebelling against the law in a parentless world, Miles gains love, friends, and autonomy. The drinking does not serve to advance the plot; rather, I argue that it was Green's way of keeping his young curious readers interested in turning the page. I think the Printz award did well in rewarding Green's novel for its overall portrayal of teenage awkwardness and coming-of-age, but it is hard to believe that a twelve-year-old would adopt a healthy insight about substance abuse after reading *Looking for Alaska*. In my opinion, alcohol and drugs should not serve as an accessory to plot and characterization in young adult texts, like many of the Printz awarded novels thus far.

### Familiar Family

An individual might not be able to choose their family, but during the ages represented by the Printz award, teenagers gradually gain autonomy from their domestic situations. Since a teenager does not become an independent by law in America until they turn eighteen, young adult readers more often than not interact with their parents and/or siblings. Young adult fiction is an excellent platform for discussing the theme of family, because domestic environments can often be difficult for teenagers, riddled with divorce, abuse, and arguments. When a narrative highlights growth or destruction in familial relationships, a young reader will feel like they are not alone. I argue that the Printz award does an excellent job in rewarding texts that ponder the relationship between kin and identity.

In *I'll Give You the Sun* (2014), Jandy Nelson writes about twin siblings: Jude and Noah. The twins were inseparable when they were younger, but their lives diverged following their mother's death. Both protagonists were in a heated fight with their mother when she passed away. Their mother was often hurtful, even her last words to Jude left a scar: "Mom had asked me over the summer and fall as my skirts got shorter, my heels higher, my lipstick darker. . . Do you really want to be *that girl*? She asked me the night before she died—the last words she ever said to me" (Nelson 315). Jude must deal with the pain of feeling like her mother did not approve of her. On the other hand, Noah caught his mother cheating just prior to her death. The relationship between Noah and Jude is filled with immense jealousy of one another. Nelson highlights to her young readers that sibling relationships break and mend over time. She also reminds her readers that families are never perfect; in fact, they are often a web of lies, secrets, and suffering. This reminder is much like Tolstoy's first lines in *Anna Karenina* (1878): "All

happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Because the two characters go through tragedy together, the twins learn that they must heal together as well.

Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster* not only discusses the American justice system, but he depicts the tragedy that Steve’s family goes through while he is on trial. Each family member must grapple with Steve’s incarceration. Steve’s younger brother loses his best friend, and Steve’s parents must help battle for Steve’s innocence while also questioning his innocence. His parents even question if their son had become the titular “monster.” Whereas, Steve battles with the shame of his imprisonment and his family’s pain. During one of Steve’s visits with his father he writes in his “Notes” section that “I’ve never seen my father cry before. He wasn’t crying like I thought a man would cry. Everything was just pouring out of him and I hated to see his face. What did I do? What did I do” (Myers 115)? Because *Monster* was the first novel to receive the Printz award, many other Printz awarded texts have focused on family relationships as literary conflict, richly multi-faceted and complicated.

## Nontraditional Young Adult Literature

The Printz award also honors ingenuity in young adult literature. Cart asserts that “ever since 1989... the field [of YA] had become increasingly open to experiments in style, structure, and narrative form” (*Romance to Realism* 81). The Printz award recognizes authors who step outside the realm of the normal young adult chapter books. Many Printz awarded texts include artful and original writing styles. For instance, in John Green’s *An Abundance of Katherines*, Green employs a use of copious amount of footnotes to reflect the main character’s quirkiness. On the other hand, some Printz texts are graphic novels, like *American Born Chinese* (2006). I commend the Printz award for searching for original styles, but in some instances, the Printz award, in my opinion, honors originality more than “literary merit.”

### *Starring and Re-VERSEing*

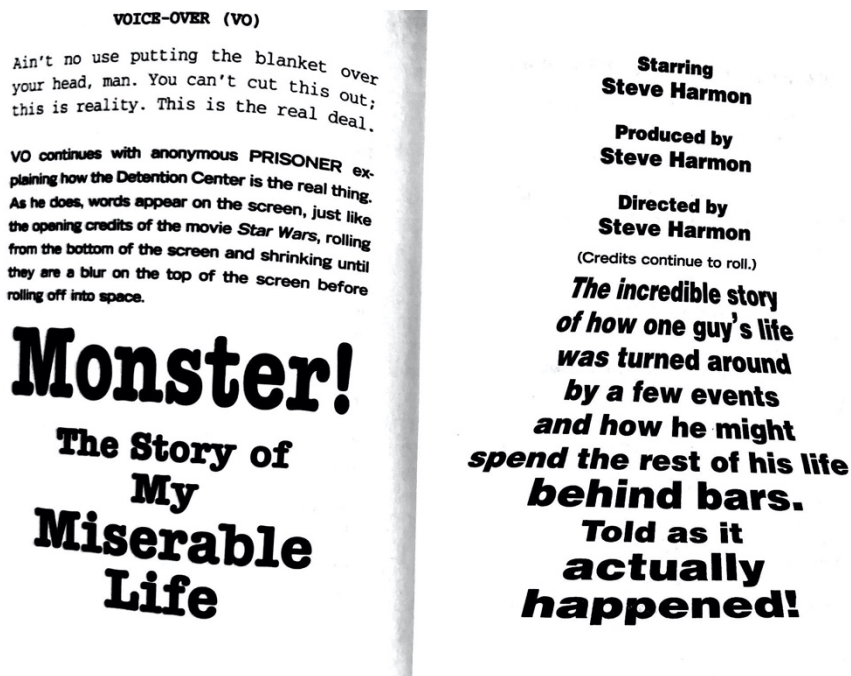


Fig. 4 *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (8-9).

Since the beginning of the Printz, committees have acclaimed young adult authors who experiment with writing approaches. In fact, the first awarded novel, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers is written as a screenplay and interspersed with

journal entries. The novel follows Steve Harmon, an African American teenager in a grown

man's jail. Steve states, "I feel like I walked into the middle of a movie" (Myers 3). Steve plays as the starring role of the screenplay, reflecting Steve's external world (see *fig. 4*). Through an action-packed screenplay, Myers ingeniously mirrors Steve's shock of being in jail and the audience's shock for such a young man being on trial. The journal portions are displayed in a handwriting font, and in these entries, Steve provides his emotions behind the actions happening in the trial. Myer's creative writing style elicits a personal narrative, humanizing the justice system from the perspective of a teenager.

Poetry is another unique writing style in which Printz authors exalt. In *The Poet X*, Acevedo tells the story of Xiomara Batista finding her voice through

poetry. The novel is written in verse, representing Xiomara's slam-poetry journal entries.

Although written in verse, Acevedo's language is easy to grasp. Katherine McCabe, a member of the Printz committee that awarded *The Poet X* comments that "the language was simple. It was very accessible to readers of all kinds. For struggling readers, there were no big, fancy words to stumble on. But the story was so lyrical anyway." Because the Printz committee desires to "Inspire wider readership in the genre," they considered challenged readers with rewarding *The Poet X*, a text that is readable by many in the young adult age range ("Printz Policies and Procedures"). Acevedo even crafts the physical form of her poetry to invoke emotions, pace, and

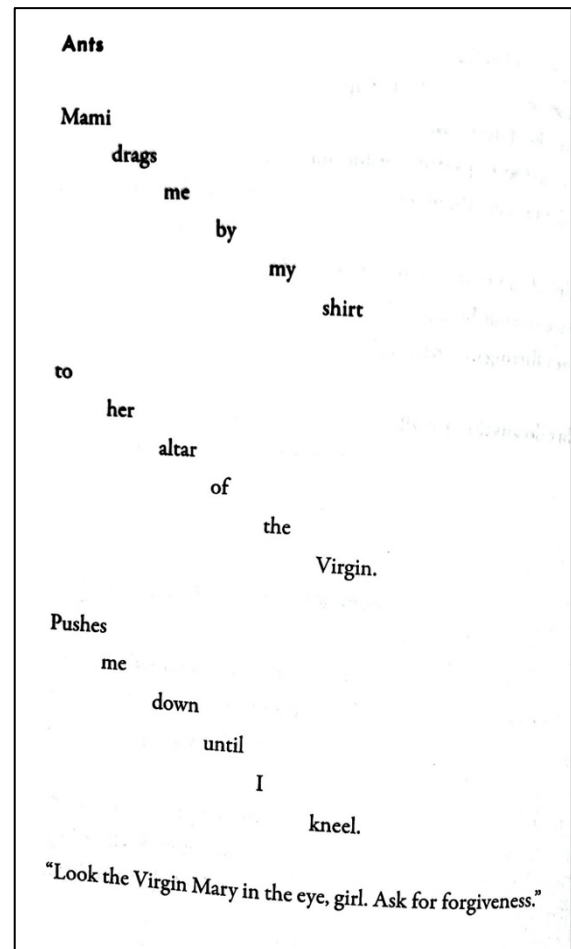
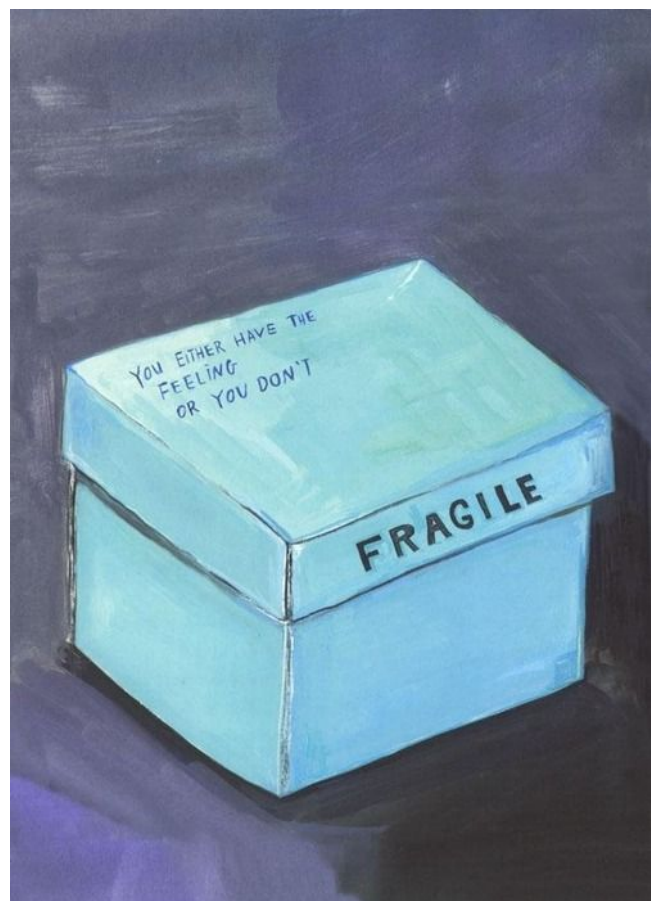


Figure 5 This Poem/ journal entry entitled "Ants" is on page 198 of Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*.

movement. In *fig. 5*, Xiomara is describing her mom's reaction to finding out she had been hanging out with a boy instead of attending her confirmation class. With the indented diagonal lines, Acevedo mirrors Xiomara's sinking feeling of being dragged into the living room by the altar. This is one instance of many eloquent ways that Acevedo utilizes verse-form.

### *Never Breaking Up with Illustrations*

The 2012 Printz-honored, *Why We Broke Up* written by Daniel Handler and illustrated by Maira Kalman, is a quasi-graphic novel about the main character Min Green, a free spirit who falls in love with a jock, Ed. Each chapter begins with an illustrated item in the breakup box that symbolizes an event in their relationship or a reason the couple split. The break up box is depicted in *fig. 6*, which Min describes in her first letter "The think is the box, Ed. This is what I am leaving you. I found it in the basement, just grabbed the box when all our things were too much for my bed stand drawer" (Handler 3). Handler's stream-of-consciousness harmonizes with Kalman's illustrations: "Kalman's



*Fig. 6* Maria Kalman's illustration on page 2 of *Why We Broke Up*, written by Daniel Handler

illustrations poignantly encapsulate the detritus of the romance, providing an emotional vernacular all their own. Like film stills in Min's mind, they achieve a powerful impact as the book draws to a close" (Edinger). The illustrations provide an expressive, rose-tinted tone that



juxtaposes with the titular breakup. Although the pictures depict heartbreak, they aid in leading up to the happy conclusion—Min ends up with her best friend. In reference to my insta-love section, I would argue that *Why We Broke Up* won the Printz for Kalman’s illustrations. Even Todd Krueger, one of the committee members that rewarded *Why We Broke Up*, recounts that “I’m always taken by books with an unusual structure, which is another reason I was drawn to it.” Krueger is right that the book employs an “unusual structure” that might even attract new kinds of readers. The Printz award claims that format and illustrations are part of the rewarding process, but in this instance, I think they were the only two qualifications.

One of the two nonfiction books I read was *March: Book Three* (2016) by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. It is the concluding graphic novel in the trilogy about



Fig. 7 Page 6 of *March: Book Three* written by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin. Illustrations by Nate Powell.

congressman John Lewis, a key figure in the American Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. The authors and illustrator come together to create a stunning pictorial novel that humanizes the fight for equal rights so that young readers may correlate a relatable narrative with the history. Adolescent readers are able to see monumental Civil Rights events in a light that veers away from the unemotional manner of an academic textbook to a first-person perspective completely imbedded in the tragedies. Nate Powell designs the book into a comic format in black and white. Powell employs sharp lines to display movement and tense emotions.

Powell prints the illustrations in black and white, reflecting the Civil Rights Movement, which is often seen as a fight between African Americans and white Americans. The book opens with the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church by the Ku Klux Klan, and without having to include vicious features like blood, Powell shows a typical Baptist Sunday school room discussing a bible verse when the attack occurs (See *fig. 7*). Even though a young reader might know about the church bombing through a historical lens, the illustration evokes emotions from the readers to truly understand such a horrific act. Overall, in *March: Book Three* Lewis' unique perspective of the Civil Rights Movement combined with Powell's poignant illustrations create a timeless text that the 2017 Printz committee rightly rewarded.

I predict that the Printz award will continue to recognize graphic novels. Graphic novels open up a new sphere of Printz readers—struggling readers. By implementing Printz graphic novels into the classroom, uninterested readers will be drawn to enticing images. In her master's dissertation on the "Pedagogy of Graphic Novels," Valarie L. Phelps found that graphic novels' "presentation of material interest a group of students that are accustomed to visual stimulation and make them a valuable asset in an academic setting. Graphic novels are just one of the strategies that can be used by academia to improve . . . literacy" (61). Because the Printz award's most vital goal is to promote young adult readership, I would not be surprised to see them continue to discover and distinguish young adult graphic novels.

### Printz Preaching

I think one of the most important features of a Printz-worthy novel is one that provides educational content to their readers. Not only do these praiseworthy texts teach their readers about how to navigate life, but the narratives provide people and subjects often unknown to readers. Educational content in Printz texts can range from science to culture, but historical novels are the most overt among award winners, including Mary McCoy's *I, Claudia* (2018) and Deborah Heiligman's *Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers* (2017).

The Printz committee in 2019 recognized McCoy for her modern retelling of *I, Claudius* (1934), a historical novel written as an autobiography for the Roman Emperor Claudius. Told through the law of a modern disabled fourteen-year-old girl, McCoy's novel, *I, Claudia*, is the story about Claudia, who navigates the halls of her high school with a stutter and a limp. Her high school is an elite private school called Imperial Day Academy. Claudia defines herself as a historian and sees her life through a historical lens. Her depiction of high school parties, for example, is both imaginative and fact-based: "The ancient Romans went to the Colosseum to watch gladiator battles and see elephants fight rhinos to the death. Imperial day students went to Soren's parties" (McCoy 38). McCoy crafted a modern twist of historical fiction. The novel is relatable for high school students, because it deals with high school drama including love, an honor council, and popularity. Overall, McCoy teaches her young readers about the Roman Empire while simultaneously helping her readers discern the power plays in American high schools.

*Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers* by Deborah Heiligman offers loads of educational information in the form of a nonfiction narrative about the Van Gogh brothers. Heiligman describes the unbreakable bond of Vincent and Theo Van Gogh by intimately

following their turbulent lives filled with lovers, venereal diseases, heartbreak, mental illness, poverty, and mortality. The novel starts from the beginnings of their life and ends with their deaths. However, Heiligman continues to portray how the legacy of Vincent began—with Theo’s wife. Within the first opening pages, the reader will notice the depths that Heiligman went through to study Van Gogh’s life from beginning to end. She meticulously studied Vincent’s 658 letters. She depicts a tragic artist who experienced the terrible agony of mental illness, who reaches his potential solely through his supporters. Growing up in art class, a student is well aware of who Van Gogh is, but they probably see him just as his stereotype: a crazy artist who cut his ear, ate paint, and painted *Starry Night*. Heiligman, through her biography, flips this stereotype around, even offering possible other theories to the so-called suicide and missing ear. Heiligman provides a historical summary, more intimate than a Sparks Note, but respecting historical accuracy and the values of educating young adults.

I only touch on *Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers* and *I, Claudia* because they stood out the most for their pedagogical motivations. Nevertheless, almost every Printz novel teaches young readers about being human, our planet, and culture unknown to them. For instance, in *The Sun is Also A Star*, Yoon defines the Jamaican word “irie” and its etymological history, and later Yoon, provides historical context for why Korean Americans often own African American hair supply stores (24). The Printz reward must continue to find texts that uphold educational value without being sanctimonious or patronizing.

### Donald Trump's Young Adult Fiction

One of the most important educational values is encouraging critical thinking that does not conflate patriotism with thoughtless politics. Donald Trump's presidential candidacy sparked an American culture that revolves around the stigmatized world of politics, and as a result, modern young adult authors have created a large canon of female protagonists tackling these hot-button issues. Although these writers might not be publishing in response to Trump, they are writing to encourage their female adolescent readers to become advocates for themselves and their communities. Immigration, Black Lives Matter, and gun violence are all political debates that modern young adult authors realistically portray through the eyes of teenage protagonists. Erika L. Sánchez tells the story of Julia, a fifteen-year-old first-generation Latin American in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017).<sup>iii</sup> On the other hand, Angie Thomas depicts the role of a young African-American woman, Starr, participating in the Black Lives Matter movement in *The Hate U Give*. Lastly, Deb Caletti describes a young, white female protagonist, who runs from Seattle to Washington D.C. to lobby against gun violence in *A Heart in a Body in the World*. These authors humanize political topics through the voices of three assertive female protagonists who discover their identities to combat Trump's America with heart-wrenching stories.

Since his campaign in 2015, Trump has gained the infamous reputation of impulsive tweeting. Trump tweeted in 2015, "The Mexican legal system is corrupt, as is much of Mexico. Pay me the money that is owed me now - and stop sending criminals over our border." Even if young adults might not follow American news closely, adolescents witness the outcomes of political topics through Instagram posts or the murmurs of their parents. By engaging his political campaign in unruly manners on platforms that teenagers dominate, Trump invited young adults to engage in the political sphere.

Although Trump probably felt that he was reaching out to the adult population in hopes for more votes, he did not consider the next generation of youth. Young adult authors, like Sánchez, Thomas, and Caletti, identified the need to combat the many minority stereotypes Trump perpetuates. They took these 280-character blunt Twitter statements and created exposés, not telling readers what to think, but, rather, encouraging them to develop their own opinions on political issues with the encouragement of a nuanced narrative. Sánchez, Thomas, and Caletti create raw, realistic novels that follow the lives of female protagonists experiencing the effects of Donald Trump's MAGA propaganda. Likewise, they encourage young female Americans to realize they, too, can shape America.

The Mexican immigrant stereotype was perpetuated by Trump's continuous public definition of Mexico as the main source of criminals in the United States. Sánchez published her book in 2017 coinciding with the heated topic of Trump's wall and the future of the American immigrant. This Mexican American stereotype defines these immigrants as lazy criminals who take advantage of American freedoms while refusing to assimilate with American culture. Julia, as the daughter of two undocumented parents, in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* pushes against the Mexican American immigrant stereotype through aspiring after a collegiate education. Although she fights between her Mexican culture and her American culture, Julia concludes that she can embrace both. Sánchez's strong-willed feminist protagonist revolts against her parents' traditional views and, likewise, American immigrant stereotypes by aspiring to leave her family after high school to attend a four-year college. She pushes against her parents by stating, "I'd rather live in the streets than be a submissive Mexican wife who spends all day cooking and cleaning" (Sánchez 13). Many Trump supporters view immigrants as parasites, who suck the benefits of American society without contributing to the growth of the American

economy, but Julia aspires to earn a collegiate education. Julia yearns to assimilate, working hard to resist the self-loathing being foisted on her. Sánchez edifies her readers with a new image of the Mexican American immigrant—the intelligent high school senior fighting for education and independence.

Julia further combats Mexican American immigrant status quos through reading the American classics, including *The Great Gatsby* and “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street.” These American classics are key contributions to the American literary canon, which contradict the belief that Mexican American immigrants refuse to mesh with traditional American culture. Like many problems that a typical American teenager faces, Julia encounters angst, mental illness, family issues, and college applications. According to Jeffery Kaplan, a professor at the University of Central Florida, “Adolescent protagonists have come into their own in recent years and in turn, the examination of their actions and reactions to twists and turns in their daily lives as revealed on the printed page.” Readers of all ages will sympathize with people going through the immigrant experience. Sánchez unabashedly flips the tropes of naïve immigrants leeching onto American society to enable her readers to learn about the real United States immigrant. While American politics continue to revolve around the topic of immigration, young adult literature will continue publishing books with strong female protagonists battling for their identity to place a narrative correlation with a headlining topic.

In 2015 Trump tweeted, “Sadly, the overwhelming amount of violent crime in our major cities is committed by blacks and hispanics—a tough subject—must be discussed.” Regardless of the foundations behind police bias towards African Americans, Trump continued to feed into the belief that all African Americans are criminals, which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr witnesses the brutal murder of her two friends at the hands

of the police force. Never having committed a crime, Starr ends her narrative speaking up for her murdered friends in front of live television during a protest. Thomas ingeniously employs white characters, placing Starr in a privileged white school to display the ignorance of the movement from the perspective of white people. Starr battles between her identity in her private all white school and her black neighborhood; the contrasting environments provide for a narrative that young white readers can also relate to. Thus, Thomas proposes that no matter one's race, a youth can be involved within the political activism sphere. Thomas strives to afflict the comfortable readers from their seats to take their own action.

In her author's note, Thomas testifies that she wrote *The Hate U Give* in response to the many African Americans killed at the hands of police, and she further encourages her readers to stand up against police brutality: "As we witness injustice, prejudice, and racism rear their ugly heads again in this political climate . . . it's even more important to let young people know that they aren't alone" (443). Young adult literature's main motivation is to provide a relatable novel with their readers. Thomas found the need for narratives that followed the teens affected by police brutality. Furthermore, through putting a female adolescent behind the race perspective, Thomas humanizes the police brutality: "While Starr is able to give first-person voice to her experiences with the abuses of modern US policing. . . the novel uncritically reproduces narratives of black criminality and lends added credibility to the abuses themselves" (Haddad). While adults battle for the candidates that would provide the best policies to relieve these situations, young adults, unable to vote, live the brutality.

America has witnessed 3,064 deaths as the result of gun violence since 2013, and 56 of the deaths were teens from the age of 12-17, according to the Gun Violence Archive ("Charts and Maps"). Yet, Trump continues to argue for firearm rights:



“THE SECOND AMENDMENT WILL NEVER BE REPEALED! As much as Democrats would like to see this happen, and despite the words yesterday of former Supreme Court Justice Stevens, NO WAY. We need more Republicans in 2018 and must ALWAYS hold the Supreme Court!”

The second amendment provides for gun rights, and even with these startling statistics, Trump continues to impulsively Tweet such statements. Although the majority of state laws hold that one must be eighteen to purchase a firearm, gun violence still affects young adults, and Caletti in *A Heart in a Body in the World* portrays the emotional aftermath that the high schooler Annabelle experiences after watching her boyfriend and best friend die at the hands of a teenage shooter. Instead of internalizing her struggles, Annabelle journeys from Washington State to Washington D.C. to lobby against gun violence. Annabelle is a mature main character that witnesses gun violence, who refuses to allow her country to remain the way it is. Caletti emphasizes to her audience that even though gun violence could be fixed by the government, young adults continue to witness these traumas, forcing them to skip their teenage years. In her narrative, Caletti expresses this tragedy in describing Annabelle: “She survived something big, and when you survive something big, you are always, always aware that next time you might not” (72). A life-or-death situation will always push years of life experience onto a young person. Many Americans might only see gun violence on a television screen, but with a young adult book about gun violence, a reader is truly able to emotionally connect with the victims. Caletti encourages her young readers to stand up and fight for what they believe in.

Although these authors are writing for the young adult literature, which is defined by the American Library Association as ages ranging from twelve to eighteen, a study in a *Publishers Weekly* article states that more than 55% of YA books are purchased by adults. Adults read

young adult fiction because they relate with bildungsroman stories, and no matter one's age, readers are always in a stage of growth, adapting to a new phase of life. Thus, these political themes are not solely to humanize Trump's tweeting for teenagers but also for adults.

The industry of young adult literature continues to become saturated with many texts employing central female protagonist dealing with ideological issues, and the Printz award follows in its footsteps by awarding such novels. Young adult authors will continue to write about political issues that flood the media to provide a narrative with relatable characters, helping readers recognize that these issues involve teenagers like themselves, but the Printz award must continue to analyze for "literary merit" not "MESSAGE" ("Printz Policies and Procedures"). The award has trended towards addressing only controversial issues with profound messages to combat Trump's America.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout my readings, I have found that while twelve-to eighteen-year-olds are the Printz award's target audience, some of the recent winners have stretched this boundary by including adult content. This is not a critique of the author's themselves for including these features in their narratives, but the young adult literature industry as a whole has promoted readings geared more towards the "new adult." Likewise, the Printz has often rewarded novels that contain explicit content so that readers of any age in their specified range could comprehend. I am not arguing that no twelve-year-old would be able to deal with weighty issues, but I do think the Printz award should implement one of the few options I am proposing to encourage the field of young adult literature to publish texts geared towards young adults and not the "new adult." After all, the Printz Award bylaws say the award "recognize[s] the best in the field of materials for young adults," but oftentimes these pieces focus predominately on "MESSAGE" and even "controversy" without consideration of "literary merit" ("Printz Policies and Procedures").

My first recommendation is drastic but viable option if the Printz award desires to continue to recognize novels battling heavy topics: create trigger warnings. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines a *trigger warning* as "a statement cautioning that content (as in a text, video, or class) may be disturbing or upsetting" ("Trigger Warning"). I agree that the Printz award should never avoid controversy ("Printz Policies and Procedures"). However, if the Printz award is able to include plaques on their book covers, they should also be able to instill trigger warnings on their book jackets. This will help young readers and their parents alike to avoid texts that the reader might not be able to handle emotionally. I noticed with many of my readings that topics like suicide, sexual violence, self-harm, and more were included side plots of the novels; thus, they were not necessary to include in the book jacket summary. However, the topic was

still thrown in for the reader, as young as twelve, to tackle. In *Asking For It* by Louise O’Neill, the consumer knows that they will read a text about sexual assault by reading the summary, but they might not realize that Emma describes her subsequent suicidal thoughts in depth: “I stand at the top of the stairs, looking down. If I fell . . . (Broken neck? Brain trauma?) People fall down the stairs all the time” (O’Neill 171). O’Neill eloquently captures the almost random harmful thoughts that a victim can have after a sexual assault, but she also gives an idea to a possibly suicidal reader. A warning would allow a reader to discern whether they are mentally sound enough to handle such a dark narrative.

Trigger warnings will also enable readers who have been through traumatic situations to avoid texts that discuss such traumatic situations until they are ready to read such a topic. Likewise, these warnings will alert parents and perhaps encourage them to discuss weighty topics with their young readers. In an age where Netflix and video games surpass reading, it is likely that a parent would be thrilled that their teenager is reading, and such happy parents might not analyze the texts before they hand them over to their mentally moldable children.

A trigger warning is not censoring. Instead, a trigger warning holds both the Printz award and the authors accountable for books marketed to twelve-year-olds. Just like a parent can read the ratings “TV-MA” or “R” on television shows and movies, parents and teenagers alike should have such warnings on books. More often than not, Goodreads reviews of Printz-awarded novels include a “trigger warning” or “TW” at the outset, recognizing that readers should be warned for topics that appear in the text that are not explicitly mentioned in the summary. Like the Goodreads commentators, I think that if the Printz Award wants to maintain its focus on twelve to eighteen year-olds, it should include trigger warnings to hold writers accountable for adding

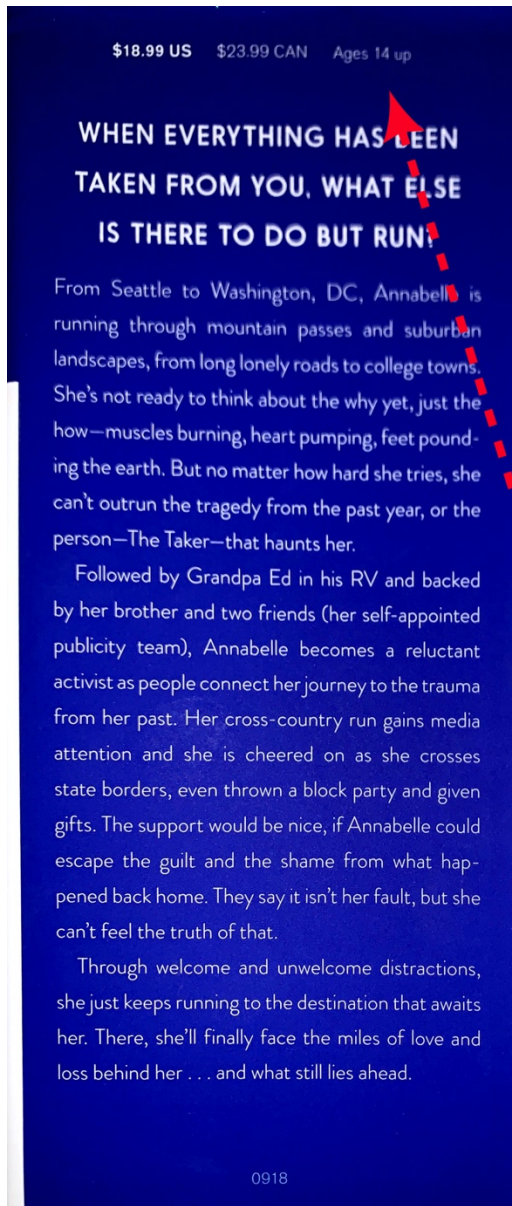


Fig. 8 Deb Caletti's Front Flap in *A Heart in a Body in the World* (2018); Arrow design inserted after photo was taken.

heavy topics that are not described in the publicists' synopsis, that is, if they want to keep their age range where it is.

Some of the Printz novels by the publishing house Simon and Schuster have included age recommendations. For example, the interior book-jacket in *A Heart in a Body in the World* includes an "Ages 14 up" advisory (see fig. 8). The words are labeled in tiny print, and only the most observant of consumers would notice the writing. However, when one is considering a parent in a book store, they might flip to the interior jacket and review the summary before purchasing a text for their teenager. With Simon and Schuster's recommendations, a parent of a twelve-year-old might consider doing more research into *A Heart in a Body in the World* before handing it to her child.

If adding a variation of a warning onto the novels is too drastic, the Printz award should create a canon of discussion questions that parents can have with their children after finishing a novel, or they can point parents to resources that do list startling content in their awarded texts. Presently, such resources are limited. Parents have access to websites such as Commonsensemedia.com that include an age-based rating, discussion questions, and thematic ratings. Common Sense Media is

one of the only sites that parents can access quickly to discover if a novel is appropriate and educational. In June of 2010, the National Coalition Against Censorship [NCAC] sent a letter to Common Sense Media's CEO, citing the following three problems with Common Sense Media reviews:

Our concerns fall into three general areas: 1) the implication that certain kinds of content are inherently problematic, 2) the negative attitude towards books, and 3) the potential that the ratings will be used to remove valuable literature from schools and libraries.

(“Parental Warning”)

NCAC backs up each of their claims with direct references and photos from Common Sense Media's website. For example, Common Sense Media ranks their novels on quality, educational value, messages and role models, violence, sex, language, consumerism, drinking, drugs, smoking, and user reviews (“How to Choose the Right Books”). These categories suggest that such topics should not be brought up in young adult texts, but each concept is a major aspect of a teenager's life. To me, it is concerning that the main resource that parents are using to review their book purchases is under influence of bias. In fact, Common Sense Media directly conflicts with librarian notions across the nation.

I argue that parents should have access to a quick and accessible platform that judges a text's content with regard to age, and the Printz committee comprises of the most educated librarians across the nation. Thus, I contend that the Printz committee has an obligation to provide information to consumers that go beyond the summaries inscribed on their awarded novels. If there is not a way for the Printz committee to add any additional information to awarded novels past their plaque, they should change the age range from fourteen to eighteen. In

fact, the Newbery Medal already rewards children's books for "ages up to and including fourteen" ("Newbery Terms").

The next few years will be monumental for the reputation of the Printz award. Throughout the course of this paper, it has been evident that the Printz award drastically varies in diversity among its genres, themes, styles, and more, but the Printz award is trending toward prioritizing popularity to keep their award alive. Indeed, I agree that the Printz award is under threat of extinction. Young consumers often find their book recommendations from media rather than scholars. Consider Reese Witherspoon's book club; not many of the novels on her list are recognized by scholars, but they soar to the top of the bestselling lists shortly after Witherspoon's endorsement. Perhaps, even teenage readers are turned off by such a prestigious mark of a plaque on the front of book jackets because it reminds them of books they are required to read in school. Yet, although I agree that the Printz award is under threat, I am reluctant to concede that committees should consider popularity in any of their deliberations.

The Printz award strives to promote the genre of young adult literature as a whole, and by choosing novels that include true "literary merit" and disregarding other factors, the Printz committee will reward novels that deserve recognition throughout the century. To me, the Printz organization is in charge of choosing books that will spark conversation in one hundred years about the novel's "story, voice, style, setting, accuracy, characters, theme, illustrations, design" ("Printz Policies and Procedures"). Popularity follows the literary fads of the current year; it does not often produce timeless literature.

I further maintain that the Printz award aided in sparking the young adult book empire that Americans enjoy today. Granted, the reward itself holds room for growth, but I have been astonished to realize the power that the Printz award has held within the past decade alone. The

majority of the novels in the preparation for this project, I had heard of before. Lastly, each annual committee truly digs through the trenches for original, thought-provoking, and timeless texts. However, the young adults whom the award is geared towards are not privy to the deliberations behind closed Printz doors. When reaching out to over twenty prior Printz committee members, they all reminded me of the anonymity required in the Printz bylaws. As of right now, we as readers of young adult novels divest all our trust as the marketed audience into the hands of the committee members, and for the Printz award to persevere, young adults themselves must scrutinize Printz winners.



### Notes

- i. I would like to note that I did not get the pleasure to read *Dig* by A.S. King, but I had read too many book reviews for me to not exclude it from my paper. I truly wanted to compare the most recently Printz awarded text with the first Printz awarded text. The majority of my opinion statements on *Dig* are compiled after reading the many book reviews.
- ii. This is not a Printz-winning text. However, it was a national book award finalist and *New York Times* bestseller. The section entitled “Donald Trump’s Young Adult Literature” focuses predominately on the genre as a whole.

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