

# ***A Multitude of Identities: Intersectionality in Young Adult Fantasy***

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Poster of *The Dragon Prince*. Retrieved from <https://thedragonprince.com/>

*“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” -Audre Lorde (Gill, 2018)*

*A*s children grow, their understanding of themselves and world around them changes and becomes more complex. Instead of identifying one way, their identity becomes layered and overlaps with others. These identities bring new perspectives to the world, but are often underrepresented in literature and other forms of media. This lack of intersectional diversity not only prevents teens from these

marginalized groups from seeing themselves, but also creates a lack of awareness about these perspectives.

## **What is Intersectionality?**

Diversity is an important area to analyze and study in children and young adult literature, but there is not much research being done on intersectionality. This may be due to changes in terminology. Until recently, the term multicultural was used to describe diversity, as it is meant to be inclusive of all cultures (Thomas, 2016). As our education and awareness continued to grow, this term changed to diversity and grew to include “differences in gender, sexual orientation, religion, immigration status, cultural and linguistic differences, and disabilities” (Thomas, 2016, 114-115). As our language and awareness continues to evolve, so do the terms we use to describe diversity.

Intersectionality is the idea that an individual can “belong to multiple social

categories such as gender, ethnicity, social class, or disability” (Meier, et. al., 2015, 57).

Jessica Tran, a character from *Not Your Sidekick* by C.B. Lee, is an example of an intersectional character, as she identifies as bisexual and Vietnamese-Chinese.

Intersectionality is usually used within critical theories when analyzing literature, and is often used with a combination of other critical theories such as queer theory, critical race theory or feminist theory. Using intersectionality alongside one of these theories can show how complex identities and lived experiences are within marginalized groups (Meier, et. al., 2015).

Stories with intersectional representation are important to add to young adult media, especially to genres like fantasy that have a lot of potential for intersectional representation. Many fantasy stories do not have a lot of positive representation, leaving young readers without marginalized perspectives. Without diversity, it limits

young readers to a single perspective in stories, and affects their imaginations and understanding of the world (Thomas, 2016).

### **Issues with Representation in Current YA Material**

There is not much academic research done in YA literature and diversity, but there is a clear need for more representation. The Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s reports that over 85% of all children’s and young adult books that are published every year feature white characters (Thomas, 2016). This statistic has not moved since the 1960’s (Thomas, 2016), which is worrying when one considers how influential trade books and textbooks can be to a young mind (Schieble, 2012). If the only books available to a teen have characters with white, heterosexual, and able-bodied characters, it may prevent readers from seeing other perspectives and thinking critically about society.

Another issue in YA literature is that the CCBC has reported that a trend in books that feature diverse characters are not written by authors from those backgrounds, which leads to questions whether these characters are portrayed accurately or not (Thomas, 2016). While non-marginalized authors who write marginalized characters have good intentions, they lack the experiences marginalized authors are able to share, giving a more authentic perspective. There are also issues of stereotyping, marginalization and other problematic issues with characterization of diverse characters that continue to persist in not just YA literature but video games, movies, and television as well (Thomas, 2016). Without qualified voices to share their experiences, young adults risk only having stereotypes or unauthentic experiences to shape their world view and understanding of marginalized groups.

### **Online Creators**

Publishers may still lack diverse characters in their trade books, but they are not hard to find online. As digital media becomes easier and more affordable to access, marginalized creators are able to share their stories. Online platforms such as Hiveworks, Tapas, FictionPress and Wattpad allow teens and other young creators from marginalized backgrounds to “write themselves into stories” that have previously excluded them (Coleman & Hall, 2019). This is a form of ‘restorying’, a process of reshaping narratives to reflect diverse experiences and perspectives and expand representation (Coleman & Hall, 2019). Restorying is a great method to create more intersectional characters, especially those within the LGBTQ+ community (Coleman & Hall, 2019). Restorying is also prevalent in fanfiction, where teens often change the story to a popular series or add their own characters and their perspectives.

Creative online platforms are also great for sharing experiences with others through commenting on self-published works. These comments can create dialogue between users from different backgrounds, creating a community of shared personal experiences with others (Coleman & Hall, 2019). Self-published digital works present more intersectionally diverse characters than current trade books, which allow online readers to learn more about diversity and create more empathy than most trade books do.

### **Work Being Done in the Publishing World**

Thankfully, on top of the online creators, there are also many authors, educators and creators who recognize how important intersectional representation is. Authors Ellen Oh, Malinda Lo, Aisha Saeed, publisher Lee and Low Books, and many others have pushed for conversations to be started around diversifying children and

young adult literature (Thomas, 2016). Other groups like #WeNeedDiverseBooks are also pushing for diversity in young adult media. These groups help raise awareness within the publication world, allowing for the conversation to begin.

Even though much of YA media underrepresents marginalized groups, there are some that have intersectional characters. Fantasy books such as *The Summer Prince* by A.D. Johnson, *Dread Nation* by Justina Ireland and *The Magnus Chase* by Rick Riordan all have intersectional diverse characters. Television shows such as *The Dragon Prince* and *The Mortal Instruments* from Netflix also feature intersectional diverse characters. These shows and novels help promote intersectional diversity, showing that there are easily accessible places for those voices to be heard.

## Conclusion

While print authors and publishers are slowly beginning to include more intersectional diverse characters, greater attention should be given to online creators. With the rise of online platforms, young creators are able to share their experiences through stories that young adults will enjoy and relate to. These platforms give intersectional identities a stronger voice than they have ever had before, showing the true depths and complexities of human beings that ought to be celebrated in this incredibly diverse world that we share.

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