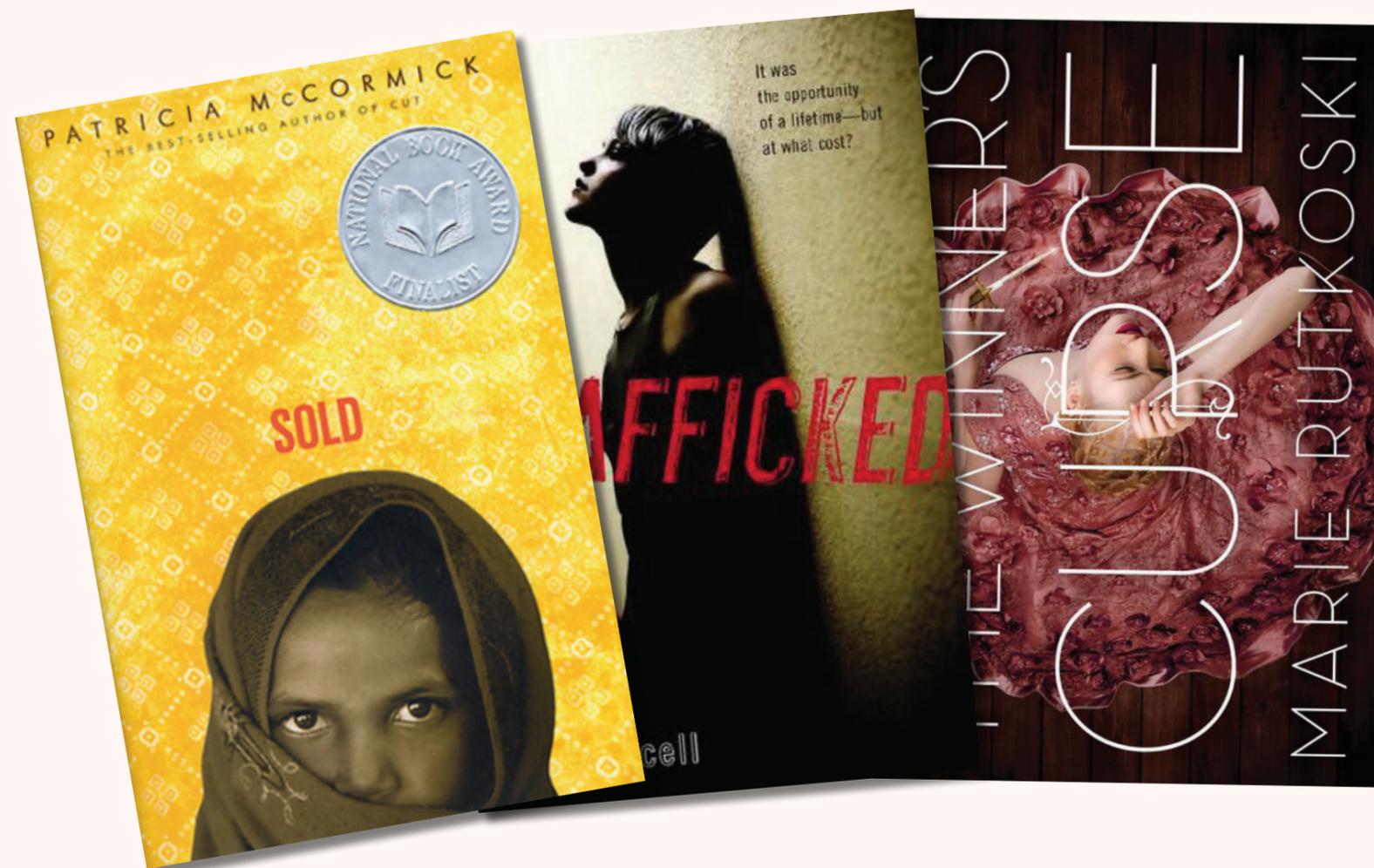


Issues of Trauma, Audience, and Marketability within Portrayals of Slavery in Young Adult Literature



This is a call to take this massive resource of young adult literature to engender support for anti-slavery movements.

If a genre can obtain such a wide audience and generate so much income, it can generate enough talk to impact slavery today. The literature industry should take advantage of this resource by producing more young adult books on slavery with more powerful and accurate portrayals.

by Daniel Brout

Introduction

SANITIZING LITERATURE

A prominent issue within YA lit is audience. Authors and editors sometimes “sanitize” texts because of assumptions that young readers can only handle a certain level of controversy. This issue parallels the trend of adapting adult books into children’s books to enhance sales. Through these adaptations, the books lose much of the complication, controversy, and pain. But these books should be challenging. Slavery is not a topic to take lightly, and these texts must reflect that.

SLAVERY TEXTS IN SCHOOLS

In an article titled “What’s the Big Idea? Integrating Young Adult Literature in the Middle School,” Marshall A. George explores numerous instances where educators are seeking out these more diverse, controversial texts for classroom use. One specific instance includes Maria, who uses the novel *Nightjohn* to enhance discussion of slavery in her students’ Civil War studies. She found that the novel opened up a lot of debate within the class, creating a more topical and passionate discussion than she had before.

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Her students were moved by the horrors of slavery faced by the protagonist ... Tomeka, usually quiet and uninvolved, spoke aggressively about the injustices associated with slavery. Her comments sparked an atypically heated and passionate class discussion, involving a number of students who rarely participate.

CENSORSHIP AND BANNING

According to the American Library Association, from 2000 to 2009, the top four reasons for challenges all could apply to texts about slavery:

- Sexually explicit
- Offensive language
- Unsuitable to age group
- Violence

Many authors try to avoid these issues by sanitizing their texts. They leave out crucial details that they feel readers cannot handle, eliminating true understanding and accuracy for the sake of marketability.

Sold (2006)

PLOT

Lakshmi, a thirteen-year-old from Nepal, is sold into slavery by her stepfather – she thinks she is just going to work as a maid in the city— and she ends up as a sex slave in a brothel in India. Although Mumtaz, the owner of the brothel, tells Lakshmi that she can leave once she repays her debt, Mumtaz tampers with Lakshmi's payment and prevents her from escaping.

PORTRAYAL OF SLAVERY

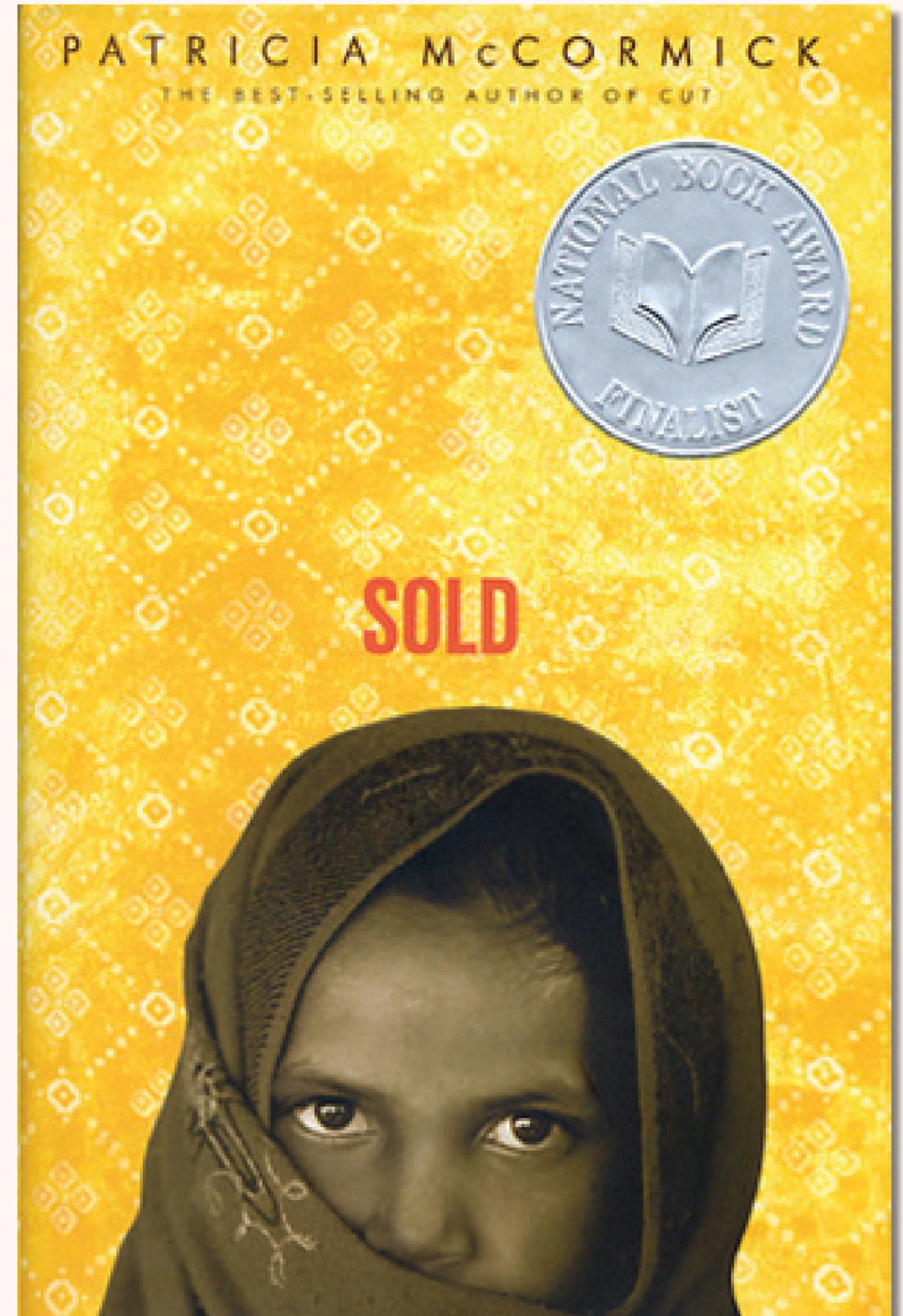
This novel demonstrates how slavers often force people out of their environment so that they cannot escape, and it shows that families often sell their children (whether knowingly or not) into slavery for income. It explores the difficulties of sex slavery, as well as the never-ending debts many slaves nonetheless try to repay. The book is written in short, vignette chapters that quickly layer the pain on the reader while also showing how time is a blur for Lakshmi as she continually suffers. This is one of the strongest portrayals of slavery in YA lit.

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WHAT'S LEFT

Tonight when Mumtaz comes to my room, she sees that her strap has left raw sores on my back and neck, my arms and legs. So she hits me on the soles of my feet.

(McCormick 110)



Trafficked (2012)

PLOT

In Moldova, Hannah is struggling to make ends meet. So when she receives an offer to work as a nanny in Los Angeles, she takes the opportunity. There, she has no money, a lack of understanding for the society, no documentation, and no way to escape her circumstances. She starts working for a few weeks for exceptionally long hours, and realizes she is not getting paid. She must deal with traumatic abuse and absurd working hours.

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Trafficked. She's been trafficked? After everything she'd gone through, she'd never thought of herself as the girl in that poster in Moldova, struggling in the palm of a giant man's hand.

(Purcell 373)

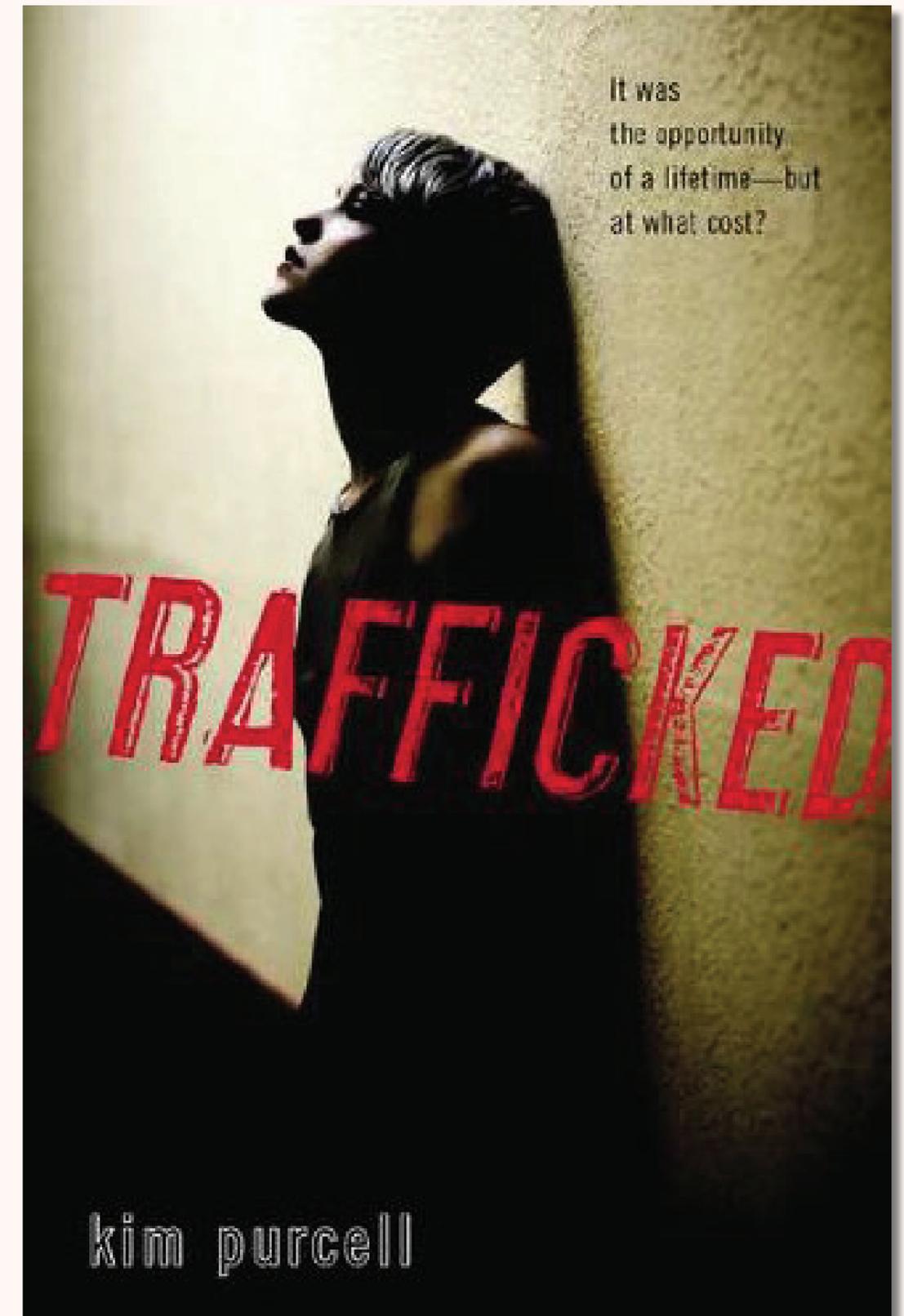
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I actually made it a little milder than what is probably the truth for many of these girls because I'd been warned that it could get banned in some areas due to the issue of slavery and the harsh nature of what she goes through.

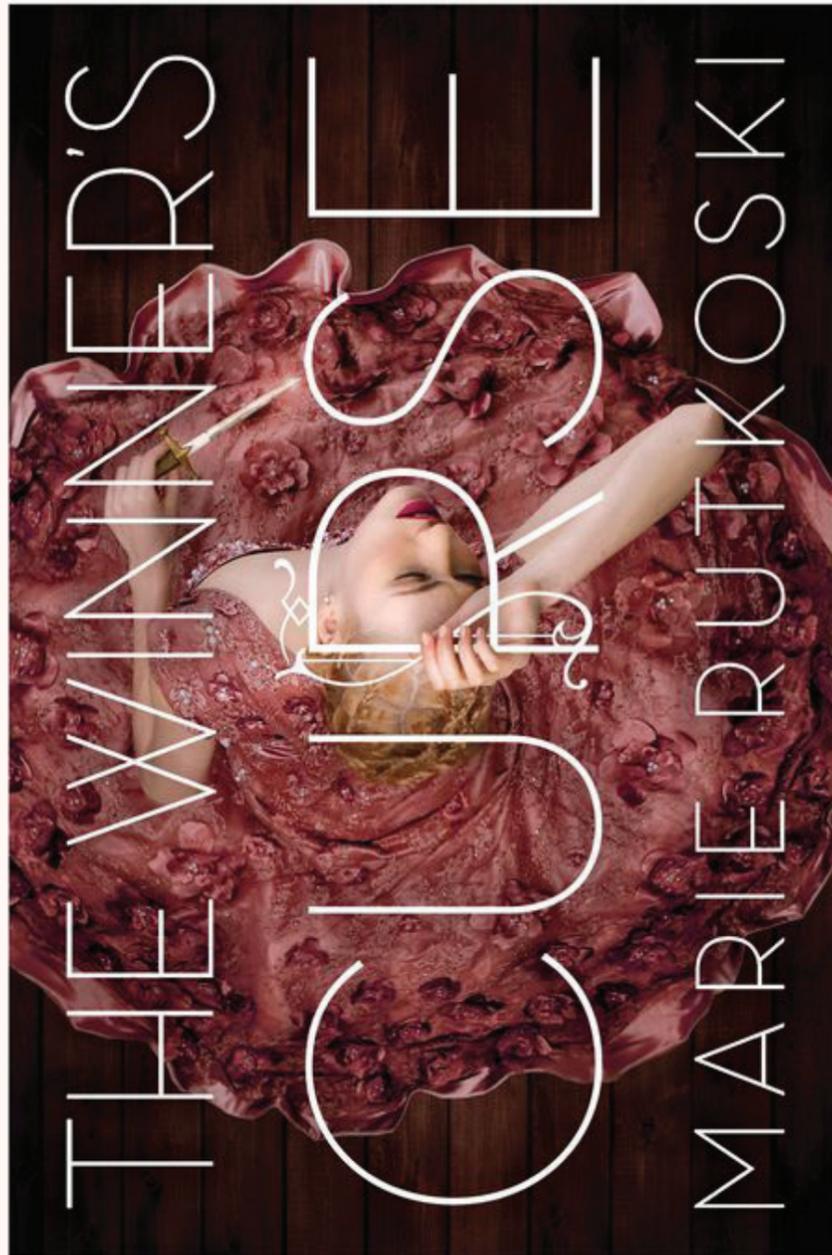
- Author Kim Purcell

PORTRAYAL OF SLAVERY

This text's success is bogged down by Purcell's restraint in describing the trauma and explicitly defining Hannah's experience as slavery. Hannah has triggers that return her from the trauma of being raped, so Purcell succeeds in portraying that trauma. But the rest of the story feels as if it is holding back. Hannah never admits that she was a slave.



The Winner's Curse (2014)



PLOT

Though Kestrel, a general's daughter, buys a slave, Arin, at an auction, she is not supportive of slavery. Her nation is an expanding one that enslaves the people of the places it invades. Arin is a Herrani, one of the races enslaved by the Valorians. Kestrel struggles with her guilt for purchasing Arin as their relationship develops. Arin feels animalized, and his disdain toward his place in Valorian society leads him to work toward a slave rebellion.

PORTRAYAL OF SLAVERY

This text avoids the darker side of slavery, but it succeeds in creating a believable slavery system in a fictional world. In addition, the free character is much easier to connect with than the slave character, making it difficult for readers to care about the trauma of slavery. The text's main flaw is lack of risk. The book succeeded in being marketable, but the weaker empathy and trauma in the text fails to demonstrate the weight of the issue at hand.

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Somehow, 'animal' had become possible. Somehow, the word named him. This was a discovery ten years old and yet remade every day. It should have been dulled by repetition. Instead, he was sore from its constant cut of surprise. He was sour with swallowed anger.
(Rutkoski 33)

Conclusion

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Of course it's unfair to expect something like Twelve Years A Slave in a novel aimed at a younger audience, but I still felt a bit let down by the simplistic approach to the idea of slavery.
(Raets and Bourke)

WHY IS THIS UNFAIR?

Texts like *Sold* and *Trafficked* prove that young adult literature can deal with these traumatic ideals, and educators often use these more challenging texts to teach their students. Claiming it is unfair to expect an accurate portrayal in a young adult novel is an attack on the success of the genre as a whole. Marketability is an issue for any author, but writers cannot sacrifice the integrity of their craft by succumbing to preconceived notions about the maturity of a reader or the market.

YA LIT'S POTENTIAL

On Kim Purcell's *Trafficked* website, she includes a "Help Trafficked Teens" button. On the website for the film adaptation of *Sold*, there is a page labeled "Take Action." Even *Harry Potter*, despite not being a text focused on slavery, has resulted in action against slavery. Fans fought to have all of the franchise's chocolate products sold through Warner Bros. completely Fair Trade or UTZ certified (Rosenberg).

Young adult literature is huge to modern U.S. literary and pop culture. With all of this potential, I can only imagine what kind of impact the literature industry can make if it takes risks and pushes for more accurate and powerful portrayals of slavery.