

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

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## Introduction

While the world of young adult literature and the culture of modern slavery are two entirely different industries, I cannot help but think of the power money has with both. Young adult literature is continually expanding its role in United States culture, and modern-day slavery's discreet presence is growing exponentially. Slavery is still a massive problem, but the multi-billion dollar industry fails to catch as much attention as young adult book adaptations like *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games*. The *Harry Potter* series alone exemplifies young adult literature's prowess, with more than 450 million books sold. Most estimates of slaves in the modern day tally between 12 and 29 million. By using the middle of that range – 20.5 million – then we can see that 22 *Harry Potter* books were sold for every slave in the world today. According to [freetheslaves.net](http://freetheslaves.net), a slave costs \$90 today. At list price, those 22 *Harry Potter* books add up to more than \$220. For all the money people have spent on a young adult series, the world could have purchased the freedom of every modern slave – twice. That's without the range of films, games, and merchandise that sprouted from the series' success.

This is not a call to end young adult literature to end slavery; this is a call to take this massive resource to engender support for anti-slavery movements. If a genre can generate that much income through its most successful series, it can generate enough talk through several less popular books 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.

To demonstrate this need, I will explain the current conversation on slavery portrayals in young adult literature, as well as analyze those portrayals in *Sold* (2006), *Trafficked* (2012), and *The Winner's Curse* (2014). These three texts were the easiest to find when searching for young adult literature books involving slavery. This means they are some of the most accessible options, making them ideal to analyze. Each of these books explores a different facet of slavery, with very different situations. *Sold* and *Trafficked*, both set in a modern time period, involve girls in unfamiliar countries. In *Sold*, the protagonist's parents sell her, moving her from freedom in Nepal to slavery in India. *Trafficked* sees its protagonist move from Moldova to the United States in hopes of opportunity, but she ends up working for a Ukrainian family that abuses and restricts her. *The Winner's Curse*, a fantasy novel loosely based in the Greco-Roman time period, has

people enslaved through war. Although *The Winner's Curse* does not clearly exemplify a known modern conflict, it still brings the problem of slavery to light just as these other texts.

### **Current Conversation**

A prominent issue within young adult literature 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 current commonality of adapting adult books into children’s books to enhance sales. Through these adaptations, the books lose much of the complication and controversy. For example, Jon Meacham released a children’s version of his biography of Thomas Jefferson. When writing the text, aimed toward people 10 and older, Meacham struggled with the portrayal of Jefferson’s relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings. In an article by *The New York Times* titled “To Lure Young Readers, Nonfiction Writers Sanitize and Simplify,” Meacham discusses the transition from adult to child version. Meacham said, “For a fifth or sixth grader, how do you explain an illicit relationship between master and slave, and be honest, but not send them screaming? . . . It’s hard enough to do it for grown-ups.” Yet it is this sanitation of situations like this that lessen the impact of a text. If slavery is sanitized in a text, it is sanitized to the reader; therefore, the text is less likely to teach them of the problems surrounding the institution. In reality, people should be “screaming” about slavery. It is not a topic to take lightly, and these texts must reflect that.

Though similar adaptations are still being made and are still selling, Chris Shoemaker, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, said the adult version is often better for readers. In the same *New York Times* article, he said, “If they’re cutting out controversy and assuming that teens aren’t able to absorb some of these bigger ideas, we go back to the adult version.” And while Laura Hillenbrand, author of *Unbroken*, a World War II story about an Olympic track star who becomes a prisoner of war, adapted her text into a children’s version, she said she knows of children as young as 10 who read the adult version and enjoyed it.

So if many children can still handle the controversial topics presented in texts, then why are books being simplified and sanitized? It is because texts are still being challenged by people who want to ban them. One of the most popular young adult literature texts lately, *The Hunger Games*, is fifth on the American Library Association’s list of most challenged books of 2013. The top ten books on this list – one that is not even restricted solely to young adult literature –

contains many other books in the YA genre, including *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Looking for Alaska*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, among others. These books are challenged by numerous groups, from parents to teachers. 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

But even when young adult literature does not delve into controversial issues as problematic as slavery, it still receives heavy criticism. Pamela Burrell Cole discusses issues of censorship in her text “Trends and Issues in Young Adult Literature.” In her article, she denotes the somewhat obvious but extremely essential point that the novels are written for and marketed to young adults. Focusing in on an audience and acknowledging the financial marketability influences the content in a way that could diminish the in-depth treatment of more traumatic subject areas.

Cole writes, “Young adult literature became an easy target for censors because it emanated from the problem novel, realistic literature that focuses on teen coming-of-age issues such as sexuality, divorce, drugs, abuse” (71). Judy Blume’s young adult texts dealt with issues like menstruation, masturbation, and teen sex – all of these topics resulting in her books being challenged. Even the small issues that teen readers deal with every day can result in censors. Therefore it is no surprise that authors hesitate when covering bigger topics, such as slavery.

*Trafficked* author Kim Purcell found herself hesitating when dealing with some of the darker parts of her book. She wrote on her blog that she “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” (Purcell, “How I Research *Trafficked*”). This concern over banning can cause authors to reconsider their writing, and this hesitation can stunt the impact of some texts; however, writers need to overcome these concerns to retain the integrity and accuracy of their work.

Perhaps it is these concerns that have caused some of the problems Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale discovered in YA literature. In their text “What’s Happening in YA Literature? Trends in Books for Adolescents,” the pair researched the lack of diversity in the genre. After

studying a range of texts, the authors note that the majority of texts involve European-American characters. No other race was widely represented. While most books included no religion, in those that did, Christianity was overwhelmingly more present. As far as subject matter, the closest area to representing slavery, abuse, was only in 20 percent of books reviewed. Most were coming of age texts, involving more traditional social issues. Koss and Teale argue that the genre needs to explore cultural and diversity issues more prominently. They also argue that the genre needs to push the boundary more and enhance young adults' ability to analyze the media and information that they are consuming. This points to the genre's need to expand and cover more controversial issues, and this current lack of coverage is important when looking at portrayals of less common topics like slavery.

When explaining the implications of their research, Koss and Teale write, "This knowledge can be useful to teachers and school librarians in deciding on books they choose to include in their classroom, school, and public libraries, and can help them be more aware of what is and what is not being represented in the literature" (570). This idea is very important for slavery in YA lit. If it is written about more, educational institutions are more likely to find the texts. Whether or not some of these texts receive challenges, educators are seeking out books that deal with controversial texts to enhance classroom learning. If those involved in the young adult literature industry realize that this search for textual diversity is alive and well, then the range of diverse texts will expand.

In an article titled "What's the Big Idea? Integrating Young Adult Literature in the Middle School" on the *All About Adolescent Literacy* website, 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:

As they read, her students were moved by the horrors of slavery faced by the protagonist, a young slave girl, Sarny. I observed a class discussion one afternoon when Tomeka, whom Maria described as 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.

Likewise, Maria was finding that the unusually detailed written responses to the book in the students' journals often focused on their outrage at the injustices of slavery.

Because of this positive learning experience, Maria began to include other more controversial texts to enhance the discussion quality of texts and takeaways for students.

Despite the threat of censorship, the young adult literature industry must take risks by exploring controversial topics. Authors can find financial success with these controversial texts because of their educational value and ability to provoke conversation. And if authors realize this, young readers will only become closer to these issues, which can eventually inspire action. Although each text has its own flaws, the three texts I will analyze, *Sold*, *Trafficked*, and *The Winner's Curse*, all represent this potential.

### ***Sold* (2006)**

The combination of style, subject, and execution makes *Sold* a powerful example of how to successfully portray slavery in a YA novel. Rather than writing it in a traditional style, author Patricia McCormick writes in vignettes with a poetic structure. This enhances the novel's pace, as well as the depth of the protagonist's experiences.

In *Sold*, McCormick explores slavery from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old from Nepal. Lakshmi 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.

This novel in many ways depicts the gruesome nature of slavery. It 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 extra income. It also explores the difficulties of sex slavery, as well as the never-ending debts many slaves nonetheless try to repay.

During the beginning of Lakshmi's time at the brothel, Mumtaz beats and starves her to force her to submit, to force her to be with the men that pay for her. One vignette describing her beatings uses poetic language and a minimal length to enhance meaning:

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. (110)

By having short, impactful sections like this, the pain layers on even faster for the reader. There is a sense of time just being a blur for Lakshmi because she moves from scene to scene, sometimes spending very little time at all describing, and she highlights her pain. The short sections also result in a lot of white space on most pages. As McCormick says in her an FAQ on the book, the “‘white space’ between the vignette calls on the reader to engage his or her imagination in the story-telling process to fill in the blanks” (McCormick, “*Sold* FAQ”). Deeper engagement enhances the capability for empathy these texts require.

In addition the showing the physical pain, the book touches on Lakshmi’s personal trauma through the first-person point of view. Along with her emotional trauma, Lakshmi also struggles with Mumtaz’s manipulations. When an American man pays for a session with her, he asks if she wants to escape, but she has a negative perception of him because of how the other people at the brothel talk about Americans and police. “I know about these Americans. Anita has told me all about them. I will not be fooled into leaving her only to be stripped naked and have people throw stones at me and call me a dirty woman” (McCormick 204). By portraying the physical pain, emotional trauma, and deep manipulation Lakshmi experiences, McCormick covers the different facets of sex slavery.

As a National Book Award finalist, *Sold* has garnered attention and earned lot of praise. The novel not only addresses the traumatic notions of slavery that writers sometimes feel a need to simplify, but it was also well received, recently being adapted into a film. Looking at *Sold* proves that texts can go far enough to portray slavery accurately while also succeeding from a marketability standpoint.

To create the well-regarded text, McCormick researched the topic heavily. Hazel Rochman’s *Booklist* article “Daughters for Sale” describes McCormick’s time researching in Nepal and India. She interviewed victims of the sex trade, their families, some rescuers, and also some people who played a part in the trade. One man she interviewed sold his fiancée into slavery. McCormick told Rochman,

I snuck into a prison to interview a young man who sold his fiancée because, he told me without a trace of embarrassment, he wanted a motorcycle. What surprised me most about him was how normal he looked—young, attractive, wearing a Nike tracksuit, how utterly unconcerned he was about his fate; he knew he would eventually get off in court.

This kind of research allowed McCormick to understand the different sides of the system, which helped develop her protagonists and antagonists. This young man's decision to sell his fiancée is reflected in how Lakshmi's father is comfortable selling his daughter into slavery and lying to her about it, saying she will be able to work as a maid to help the family. By using examples like this to develop the realism of her novel, McCormick created something believable and impactful. She also thought deeply about the best way to portray the story, which resulted in the vignette style; she said, "the vignette form was right for what is inherently a fractured, fragmented experience" (Rochman). Her time to research and attempt to understand the trauma are what made the text succeed.

Though on most counts *Sold* is successful, one possible problem with the novel's depiction of slavery is having an American author and making the man who saves Lakshmi a white American. While this is sometimes the case in reality, the profoundly pro-American nature of the text can take away from the otherwise valuable representation of slavery. However, the potential negatives of an American author and savior are outweighed by the overwhelmingly accurate portrayal of slavery. If anything, making the man who saves Lakshmi American places more responsibility on the American readers. This may be a positive factor in the book's ability to cause action. McCormick acknowledges the potential issue of the book's American savior in her FAQ: "I was writing for a primarily American audience and I wanted readers to see a version of themselves involved in fighting the problem. But if I had to do it over again, I think I would rewrite it to show the brave and effective work that local people are also doing to fight trafficking" (McCormick, "*Sold* FAQ"). Even with such a successful narrative, audience still had a significant impact in the text.

Exploring the text as a whole, it is clear that *Sold* is one of the most successful young adult slavery novels. It is a model for authors to follow, and clearly demonstrates that these texts cannot succeed without abundant research and careful crafting.

***Trafficked (2012)***

Focusing on a modern instance of slavery, Kim Purcell writes about a teenager who is brought into slavery due to her vulnerability. While growing up in Moldova, Hannah's parents die. As a result, she is low on money and needs resources to survive. So when she receives an offer to work as a nanny in Los Angeles, she takes the opportunity. This leads to her experience as a modern-day slave. Her experience follows the patterns of many modern slave stories. She is pulled into slavery because she is vulnerable. She is a slave in a foreign country, where she has no money, a lack of understanding for the society, no documentation, and no allies to help her escape her circumstances. She starts working for a few weeks for exceptionally long hours, and realizes she is not getting paid. Before she leaves Russia, she hears of girls being sold as sex slaves, and she believes she won't end up like them. Yet in the U.S., she finds herself in a similar situation. As a house slave, she goes through the traumatic abuse and absurd working hours many modern slaves go through. She experiences sexual abuse before even arriving in the U.S., but also in the house she works in. Not only is this novel a strong depiction of the modern issue of slavery, but it also succeeds in describing how slavery happens throughout the world, including the U.S.

While overall this text succeeds in its demonstration of how slavery happens even in the U.S., its success is bogged down by Purcell's restraint in describing the trauma and explicitly defining Hannah's experience as slavery. *Trafficked* is the perfect example of how a text can near the level of success *Sold* had, but falter because the author held back. Though in her blog, Purcell mentioned that she researched the topic heavily, she was afraid the book would be banned. This prevented her from pushing the envelope in the way she needed to.

At the end of the book, Hannah finally understands that she was trafficked like the girls she had heard of and refused to be like. "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). The text would have been that much more powerful if Hannah had realized that she had been enslaved. "Trafficked" isn't a word to be taken lightly, but it doesn't push as hard as it needs to. Despite Purcell's hesitance to use the word "slave" in the text, she uses it throughout her author's note. She says people like Hannah are "America's modern-day slaves" and that her "greatest hope is that we can end slavery in all its forms, including sex slavery and domestic slavery" (Purcell 386). The intention is there, and

the book succeeds overall, but without the hesitance, the novel could have been that much stronger.

One area in which the text is thoroughly powerful is the back and forth between cruel and kind treatment from the masters. Lillian and Sergey, the married couple that essentially own her, create a very disruptive and confusing environment for Hannah. Lillian is mostly cruel to Hannah, yet Sergey gives her money and gifts and defends her. The two pull Hannah in different directions, making it difficult for her to understand how to act around them. Further complicating this, Lillian is worse to Hannah because she is angry that Sergey is kind to her. Then Sergey makes it worse by trying to kiss and sexually abuse Hannah. The two also lie to her and withhold information, leaving Hannah more dependent on them and more confused. Eventually, Hannah realizes that Lillian hasn't been sending her letters back home. Because of a combination of this deception and Lillian's refusal to pay Hannah, she lacks the time and money to help her Babulya get the surgery he needs, resulting in her Babulya's death. This adds to the trauma and pain Hannah has as a result of her situation.

Focusing in on trauma, the best example in this novel is Hannah's constant reliving of the rape she experienced on her way to the U.S. The sound of a zipper is enough to force the memory back into Hannah's mind. By having examples of reoccurring trauma like this, the novel establishes that trauma is much deeper than a one-time experience. While restraint lessened the book's impact in some ways, Purcell still proves it is possible to create a marketable novel that both engages readers on the issue and has a call to action.

### ***The Winner's Curse (2014)***

Marie Rutkoski deals with the challenge of portraying slavery in her young adult fantasy novel *The Winner's Curse*. Because it is a fantasy novel, much of the description is spent world building, and she succeeds in creating a believable system of slavery within that world. There are some flaws in the portrayal of slavery, but the fictional world's slave system is successful enough to draw readers' attention to the controversial issue.

In the text, Rutkoski writes in third person but specifically delves into the minds of Kestrel, a general's daughter, and the slave she buys at an auction. Though she purchases the slave, Arin, she is not particularly supportive of the institution 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 most recently enslaved by the Valorians. From Kestrel's end, her perspective includes her considerations about the validity of slavery – she often expresses her guilt for purchasing Arin, and she points out how some people feel uncomfortable purchasing people even when the slaves already aid them with every task of their day. From Arin's end, he discusses how he feels animalized, and his disdain toward his place in Valorian society leads him to work toward a slave rebellion.

Rather than exclusively exploring one perspective of slavery, Rutkoski takes the time to include two. This enhances the value and validity of this fictitious portrayal of slavery, but it also emphasizes how challenging it is to get it right.

Initially, the text displays numerous descriptions of slavery as Rutkoski divulges the details of the society. During the first chapter from Arin's point of view, he is simply referred to as "the slave." Nothing else. This, along with the fact that he is renamed "Smith" to represent his blacksmithing skill, provides a powerful example of the loss of identity that slaves experience. Especially for someone like Arin, who was not born a slave, this conflict over his identity is very evident. After being referred to as an animal, he tries to process the words: "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" (33). Because he used to be a free man, he refuses to cope with his new identity as a slave.

His identity struggles expand, with his resistance blowing up into participation in a slave rebellion later. With this uprising, the text opens up questions about the morality of rebellion and what actions are acceptable for those seeking justice. To regain their position of freedom, the Herrani people cross many moral lines, such as poisoning innocent people and enslaving those who enslaved them. Instead of glossing over these complicated actions, Rutkoski highlights it from each side of the conflict, primarily focusing on the relationship between Kestrel and Arin.

Along with this rebellion, the focus on war in the text provides a context for understanding slavery that results from conquest and expansion. In the author's note, Rutkoski explains her attempt to connect the society she creates to that of the Greco-Roman period and how Rome enslaved Greece's population after engulfing the nation. Rather than the more common focus on the U.S. Civil War era and slave texts grounded primarily on issues of sexual

abuse, this book explores another type of slavery, helping to better expand the range and variety of books on slavery.

Rutkoski further enhances this range of slavery topics with the discussion of society's ostracism toward those it perceives as participating in master-slave sexual relations, slave auctions, and activities the culture has associated with slaves. For example, Kestrel is a musician, but music is considered below her because her society is so military-focused. Her people do not see the arts as important, and therefore they belong to the lowest class.

Rutkoski adds more depth to this depiction of the slavery system when one slave gains freedom. As a child, Kestrel asks her father to free her nurse Enai on her birthday, but when her nurse does not react positively to the news, Kestrel realizes that her nurse could never really gain her independence: "Kestrel saw, then, what Enai did: the difficulties of an old Herrani woman alone—however free—in her occupied country. Where would she sleep? How would she earn enough to eat, and who would employ her when Herrani couldn't employ anyone and Valorians had slaves?" (49-50). Because of the wide range of points the novel explores in the discussion of slavery, it can be called a success. But, it still fails where most slavery literature fails: the creation of substantial empathy and recognition of trauma.

Empathizing with Kestrel comes easily, but with Arin and the other slaves, the connection is minimal. On one level, this is because of the lack of an in-depth exploration of the lives of less well-kept slaves. Arin has it much better than other slaves, and Rutkoski fails to explore the harsher lives of slaves in her text. There are glimpses, but nothing deep enough to impact the reader.

In Stefan Raets and Liz Bourke's article "Bite And Sting: *The Winner's Curse* by Marie Rutkoski" on *Tor.com*, they explore some of the book's faults. They said the novel felt "a bit too comfortable at times" because "the horrors of slavery are mostly kept off-camera, but also because Kestrel seems to have (or at least develop) a moral compass that most people in her social circle lack, making it easy to identify with her." In this case, the readers identify more with someone in high societal standing than with the slaves. This skews the perception of the institution and makes it harder to understand its traumatic elements.

While Rutkoski could have developed the darker side of slavery more, she succeeds in creating a believable slavery system in a fictional world. Her biggest flaw was not taking more

risks. This is yet another book focusing on slavery that succeeded in being marketable, but the weaker empathy and trauma in the text fails to demonstrate the weight of the issue at hand.

Nonetheless, the text does expose readers to slavery. Those who don't know or don't care about slavery won't be looking at texts that are solely considered slave narratives. But they will explore fantasy novels and young adult literature. This glimpse into the fictional slave system of *The Winner's Curse* has potential to engender a new curiosity in understanding the traumas of modern slavery. Maybe the coming sequel to this book will explore the issue of slavery in a deeper and more successful manner.

### **YA Literature's Potential**

Although young adult literature has a wealth of potential to spread awareness of slavery, this potential has been stunted by concerns of marketability and what readers can handle. In Raets and Bourke's article discussing *The Winner's Curse*, they say, "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." 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.

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.

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