

BOOKS NOVEMBER 15, 2016 2:01 PM

Forget vampire boyfriends — this young adult fiction gets serious



< 1 of 4 >



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Vampire boyfriends, post-apocalyptic worlds and cliché love triangles were, for awhile, the staples of young adult fiction. But at this year's Miami Book Fair, young adult fiction gets serious.

Through twisted fairytales and dark fantasies with complex villains, the young adult books that will be discussed at the fair are filled with strong female characters, queer relationships and biracial characters. They explore topics such as race, feminism, mental health, sex trafficking and coping with disabilities.

Nicole Swift, programming director for the fair's youth events, said bringing in a diverse group of authors is important.

"You have to bring as many voices as you can to an audience that can relate to them," she said. "It's just about expanding the literary world in Miami."

Don't be surprised to see adults during the sessions Friday through Sunday. More than half of young adult books are bought by adults, which isn't surprising; many new Y/A books deal with realistic problems and mature topics.

Race and privilege is a theme in Alexandra Bracken's new book series "Passenger," in which violin prodigy Etta Spencer discovers a family legacy that allows her to time travel, and she becomes a passenger on Nicholas Carter's ship. Together they travel across centuries in search of an heirloom. Nicholas, a biracial man, has to be aware of his surroundings in a way Etta doesn't.

"I don't think that teens and readers in general are aware of their own privilege," Bracken said. "I think it's very different to witness it first hand and how it follows through that person's life."

Bracken, who studied history at the College of William & Mary, said she read primary documents and essays on Black Lives Matter as research. Including diverse characters in her stories is important, she said, because readers are diverse.

"I think there's probably nothing quite as devastating as not being able to find yourself in media and works of fiction."

Bracken could have been talking about Renee Ahdieh, author of “The Rose & Dagger,” a retelling of a Middle Eastern story of “One Thousand and One Nights.” As a mixed-raced child — her father is Scottish and her mother is South Korean — Ahdieh didn’t see many diverse character in the books she read.

“I didn’t see myself in books much,” she said.

She got the idea for her book when she saw a tapestry in her mother-in-law’s house that told a Persian version of “One Thousand and One Nights.” In the story, a king executes one of his brides each night, but one young woman escapes by distracting him with stories until he eventually falls in love with her.

In “The Rose & Dagger,” the protagonist, Shahrzad, volunteers herself to be a bride after her best friend is killed by the boy-king, Khalid. She’s a strong, reckless character who sees the world as black-and-white until her perspective changes, and she gains a new understanding of Khalid.

“You’re raised to believe there’s good and evil, light,” Ahdieh said. “Most choices in life are not that clear cut.”

Ahdieh worried that no one would like a retelling of a Persian story because usually twists on Western fairy tales like “Cinderella,” “Snow White” and “Beauty and the Beast” are what’s popular. But “I really wanted to bring different worlds to life,” she said.

In her Red Queen series, which includes the books “Red Queen” and “Glass Sword,” Victoria Aveyard tackles class issues by introducing a strong female character, Mare Barrow, who lives in a world divided by blood (those with red blood are commoners who serve the elites, who have silver blood and are gifted with superhuman abilities). Mare sets out to find others like her while avoiding capture from her enemy, King Maven.

Aveyard said Maven and Mare are some of her most complex characters to write.

“Those two are fun to write because they are very similar,” she said. “Seeing yourself in a villain is very interesting.”

In Leigh Bardugo’s “Crooked Kingdom,” six outcasts complete an almost impossible heist, then one of them is kidnapped. Bardugo’s characters deal with disabilities, human trafficking and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Inej, the spy and talented acrobat of the gang, was kidnapped as a child and forced into prostitution (she also suffers from PTSD). She draws strength from her faith and memories of her family. For research on human trafficking, Bardugo conducted her own independent research. She was so moved by her research that she decided to donate a percentage of her book sales to an organization that works with young women and girls who have been trafficked called Girls Educational and Mentoring Services.

Also suffering real problems in the novel is Kaz, who uses a cane, which mirrors Bardugo’s osteonecrosis. He handles his trauma and disability differently from Inej and a dyslexic character.

“Kaz is a single character coping with a particular type of disability, and it isn’t a coincidence that he and I share similar mobility issues and problems with chronic pain,” she said. “I just don’t think stories about adventure and magic and romance should belong to only one type of person.”

But not everything has to be serious. Despite the struggles they face, there is room for romance — with two of Bardugo’s queer characters.

“I’d love to see more LGBT representation in young adult [fiction],” she said. But like everybody else, she likes a good love story: “I just want readers to see two people falling in love and being ridiculous dorks about it.”

IF YOU GO

What: Miami Book Fair young adult program

When: Nov. 18-20

Where: Miami Dade College, 300 NE Second Ave., Miami

Schedule: www.miamibookfair.com



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