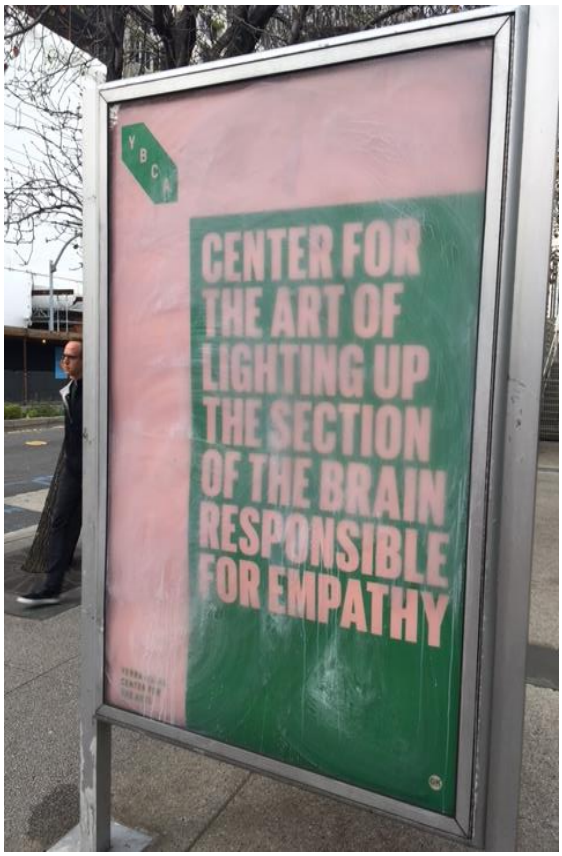
The Transformative Power of Storytelling: Reading Fiction to Engage with Social Justice Issues

By Bianca Martin

Literature has long played a significant role in shaping our understanding of politics and social justice. Historically, autobiographical writing has been key in highlighting the lived experiences of marginalised people and drawing attention to the various ways that inequalities are enacted and perpetuated. Books like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969) reveal the lifelong impacts of racism and sexual violence upon the oppressed and underrepresented. Since its publication, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been taught widely across schools to demonstrate the extensive social and personal impacts of racial prejudice. The book, while set in the 1930s, exemplified many of the issues that arose during the contemporaneous Civil Rights Movement.

Closer to home, *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* by Nugi Garimara (also known as Doris Pilkington) (1996) makes visible the injustices faced by Indigenous Australians with the forcible removal of children from their families and communities. A year after its publication, the *Bringing Them Home* report was released, documenting this forced removal and other violences enacted under these government policies and practices. *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* provides a voice to this long-suppressed history and continues to be read as key and influential testimony that exposes the cruel treatment of Indigenous Australians as a result of colonisation.



There is certainly no shortage of contemporary writing that addresses prominent social issues such as climate change, sexual violence, LGBTQIA+ rights, and racial discrimination. The sharing of personal stories

continues to be a valuable means of gaining personal insight into the firsthand experiences of others. However, fictional texts are now also being recognised as a legitimate site in which storytelling works in the service of raising awareness, educating readers and highlighting the necessity of social change in these areas. Texts such as *Juice* by Tim Winton (2024) and *Prima Facie* by Suzie Miller (2019) have sparked conversation among the general public about issues pertaining to climate change and sexual assault respectively. Both authors have deployed their creative works as a mode of activism to call attention to these issues. Reading and engaging with literature can be a crucial means of constructing and developing activist consciousness. As creative writing scholar Shady Cosgrove explains, "[a]fter all, literacy is critical for engagement and engagement is one of the cornerstones of political activism" (233).

Juice is a dystopian novel, set against the backdrop of a harsh landscape that has been devastated by oppressive heat. Winton has used the promotion of the book as an opportunity to further his personal environmental and climate activism. In one interview with *The Guardian*, Winton asserts that "[t]he consequences of our decisions now will be the biggest in our species' history. Can you imagine a generation of people who could, by the way that they act over less than a decade, have such a profound consequence for those who come after?" (Cain). In *Juice*, Winton is offering readers a warning into what the future landscape may look like if the climate crisis is not addressed in a meaningful way.

Miller's novel, an adaptation of a one-woman stage production, highlights the "catastrophically low conviction rate for sexual assault" (Merritt). The narrative follows a sexual assault defence barrister who experiences the other side of the legal process as she seeks legal justice for her own rape. *Prima Facie* makes visible the lengthy and hostile process of reporting and convicting a sexual assault, particularly highlighting the inadequacies of the legal system to support victim-survivors. The story, in both its stage production and novelisation, clearly touched on some key issues for readers, which translated to real-world impact. In an interview, Miller notes that that a judge rang her to let her know that, after seeing *Prima Facie*, the judge had altered the directions read to jurors in rape trials in her court. These directions now stipulate that "just because someone doesn't remember something perfectly, it doesn't mean they're lying" (Peirson-Hagger).

So how does reading a fictional story translate into meaningful engagement with social justice issues?

Different Ways of Engaging with Social Justice Issues

There are varying modes of engaging in social justice issues, and these can be broadly understood in three different categories. The first category is direct action, which can include

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attending strikes, sit-ins, protests, boycotts, marches, demonstrations, picketing, or vigils. Secondly, people may engage in social justice through advocacy. This includes writing letters, contacting politicians or community leaders, volunteering for social justice organisations, or participating in social media movements. And lastly, this engagement can occur through education and awareness, like taking a class, watching a movie, or reading a book.

At times, these acts of education and awareness have been criticised as not being meaningful forms of activism that directly instigate real world change (Christiano and Neimand). However, the work of researchers such as Keith Oatley and Suzanne Keen into the affective responses of reading have sought to provide a direct correlation between reading and real-world action. "We tend to think of movie watching or book reading as passive activities," Oatley explains. "That may be true physically, but it's not true emotionally."

Much of this research hinges on the argument that reading facilitates empathy. Empathy, of course, is a difficult thing to measure and qualify, and so too is the direct connection between empathy and what Keen refers to as "altruistic behavior" (x). Both Oatley and Keen cite neuroscientific studies that attempt to locate empathic responses in brain activity using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology. What these researchers found in the course of their tests is that the brain signalled similar levels of activation when the subjects received an electric shock themselves as when the subjects knew another subject—who was known to them—was receiving an electric shock. Oatley concludes that "the empathic response that we feel for someone we know and like is the same as the emotional aspect we feel ourselves."

This is, of course, not a particularly surprising or controversial claim. Our basic understanding of empathy is that we are sharing in the feelings of others. However, this theory becomes particularly interesting when the subject is further removed from the person, thing, or situation they are empathising with—and even more so when what they are empathising with is not real.

Previous research suggests that provoking an empathic response in readers relies on reader identification. While identification certainly has the capacity to increase levels of empathy, Oatley and Keen suggest that there is more nuance in this relationship. Keen goes so far as to propose that "empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization" (69).

It is in this exploration of the role of empathy that fiction becomes notable in investigating this connection between reading and social change. Keen suggests that "readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion" (Keen xiii). It's this very feeling of reading a *story* that can ultimately lead readers to engage in a more meaningful way. Similarly, Oatley argues that this remove from reality means that "we can start to extend ourselves into situations we have never experienced, feel for people very different from ourselves, and begin to understand such people in ways we may have never thought possible."

Of course, readers don't blindly enter a text unconvinced or uninformed and expect a drastic change in their belief system. Not all books seek to inform or educate about social justice issues and not every reader interprets a text in the same way, let alone the way the author intended. There are a lot of moving parts in how and when a piece of literature may influence a reader to engage in social issues and for this engagement to translate into real world action. Cosgrove suggests there must be some sort of ethics already at play, either in the author's construction of the text or in the way a reader approaches the book. And Oatley is also careful to note that not every book sets out to achieve this, but rather it is only "certain kinds of fiction." Keen also notes "[t]he timing and the context of the reading experience matters: the capacity of novels to invoke readers' empathy changes over time" (xii). We may read a book differently now than we first did ten years ago because of our accumulation of knowledge and experience.

Keen also proposes that "[r]eaders' empathy for situations depicted in fiction may be enhanced by chance relevance to particular historical, economic, cultural, or social circumstances" (81). If someone is reading a fictional book that reflects a social justice issue that is currently receiving significant attention, they may have a predisposition to identify with elements of the story and thus have an empathetic response.

Despite the many variables, these researchers still vehemently believe in the connection between reading and real-world social engagement.

So what does it look like when we attempt to apply this line of thinking to contemporary reading?

Case Study: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

The Hate U Give (2017) is the debut young adult novel of Angie Thomas. It follows 16-year-old Starr Carter, an African American teenager growing up in a low-income and criminalised area of a fictionalised city with a significant class and racial divide. One night, driving home after a party with her childhood friend Khalil, they are pulled over by a white police officer. While Khalil

is waiting outside the vehicle, he leans towards the passenger side to check on Starr; the officer perceives this action as reaching for a gun and responds by shooting Khalil three times, resulting in his death. Khalil was unarmed, and Starr is the only witness to this event. Khalil's murder sparks outrage in the community and becomes a national news story.

The Hate U Give reflects the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter Movement, particularly the excessive use of violence by police enforcement against African Americans. In fact, Thomas credits the movement as inspiring her to write this story, observing that "[i]t's usually young, unarmed black people who lose their lives" in these scenarios, making it a narrative that she believed was "imperative for the YA genre to grasp" (Hirsch).

Of course, the fact that *The Hate U Give* is written from the perspective of Starr in first-person present tense serves to facilitate an empathetic response. Keen concludes that the "the interior representation of characters' consciousness and emotional states" can do significant work in promoting empathy and we certainly see this in Starr's inner monologue (x). However, when it comes to representing that issue of police officers wrongly shooting people of colour—a very real issue that has sparked significant debate outside of fictional representations—there's more at play in creating empathy than simply a first-person point of view.

Afua Hirsch specifically notes in her *Guardian* interview with the author that Thomas deploys pop culture references to create empathy towards her characters. Starr embodies a typical teenaged fangirl, gushing about Tupac and hip-hop, *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Harry Potter*, and her Nike Jordan sneakers. The novel also includes repeated references to Tumblr, which certainly promoted a sense of joyful nostalgia for me as a reader. No, I'm not a 16-year-old African American teenager, but I definitely remember what it was like to spend hours reposting images and quotes in order to curate an online identity as a *cool girl*.

Another powerful technique deployed that facilitates empathy in *The Hate U Give* is the way Thomas makes visible the complexities and ambivalences of her characters. We don't have typical character archetypes and certainly none of her characters fully embody 'good' or 'bad'. And significantly, as one reviewer notes, *The Hate U Give* troubles the idea of the "antagonist" (Libretti). By requiring readers to meaningfully engage with characters by interrogating their motives and values, Thomas fosters a growing sense of reader identification, even in characters who may in no way resemble ourselves.

Khalil is a gang member and a drug dealer. Khalil was giving his childhood best friend a ride home to ensure her safety, after the party they were attending became violent, when he was shot and killed. Starr's father is an ex-gang member who served time in prison. However, he also acts as a model of cultural pride for his family through the values and ideals he exemplifies when he cites

activists from the Black Power Movement. Starr's uncle is a police officer who works at the same station as the officer who shot Khalil, and who is navigating what it means to be an African American man working in the police force during this moment. Even Starr herself is a complex character who has created two identities for herself: one when she is in her predominantly Black neighbourhood with her family, and another when she attends her predominantly white, upper-class school (as an aside, there's some really great research out there on how Starr embodies W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness!).

Thomas shows how the choices people make often occur as a direct result of their immediate conditions, and when those immediate conditions are limited, so too are their choices. This prompts questions about how we might view the actions of people who experience structural and systemic injustices. Thomas "asks us to think about the ways hate and racism are features built into our overall social system" (Libretti).

Significantly, *The Hate U Give* goes beyond simply reflecting issues directly related to a social movement. Thomas also provides a model for an activist journey in her protagonist. Starr's narrative in locating her activist consciousness follows a relatively linear trajectory. Social media plays a key role in her early social justice education. She starts by engaging with hashtags on Twitter and reblogging posts on her Tumblr account. It is only after Khalil's murder that she questions how these passive interactions can translate into the real world:

> I've seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black, and all hell breaks loose. I've tweeted RIP hashtags, reblogged pictures on Tumblr, and signed every petition out there. I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person, and I'm too afraid to speak. (Thomas 38)

After this realisation, Starr starts a blog called 'The Khalil I Know' in order to directly write back against the mainstream media reporting that primarily frames Khalil as a drug dealer, rather than a victim of racial prejudice. The relative anonymity of this blog provides Starr with controlled space to test her personal activist voice.

After gaining confidence through these online interactions, Starr's activism begins to transition offline. She starts to call out the microaggressions and racist assumptions of one of her close friends, who is white. She attends rallies and protests in her neighbourhood, eventually being the one to speak into a megaphone to the crowd. And finally, Starr agrees to a television interview as the only witness to the crime.

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education and real-world change. Here, Starr's consumption of media related to social justice issues provide her with the confidence and language to become an advocate, which in turn leads to direct action. In providing this through line, Thomas reveals the power of reading (because reading Tumblr posts is still reading!) as a means of engaging in social change.

The Hate U Give and Social Change

A quick Google search for reviews *of The Hate U Give* shows dozens of personal blogs and Reddit threads praising the way this book changed readers' understanding of contemporary racial inequalities. One blogger writes that they "come from a small, conservative town; my world view is fairly narrow," and that reading *The Hate U Give* was an opportunity for them to learn about the hardships other people face (Zunic). In the blog post, this writer goes on to reference the additional research into the Black Lives Matter movement that they undertook as a direct result of reading this book. Another blogger explains that *The Hate U Give* helped them to create a connection between what they see on the news and what happens in real life, asking "[h]ow many times has someone looked at the news and placed a label on something just because those with power tells us to. Maybe you don't realize your [sic] even doing but most have done it at least once" (Wallen).

In an interview, Thomas recounts an encounter she had at a book signing:

> This past weekend in Mississippi actually the state celebrated the opening of our Civil Rights Museum, and President Trump came to visit. It led to a lot of controversy. I had three young black girls who came to my signing. They had on these t-shirts that said "Black Girl Magic" and "Black Lives Matter" and they had their signs with different things for Mr. Trump to see. And they said "we came to your signing, and we want you [sic] sign our book, but you have to be quick with it because we have to go protest."
>
> They said they were inspired by Starr to speak up and speak out to make themselves heard. And that did me all the good in the world because I see them being exactly what I wanted Starr to be in the book. They were

> going to go make themselves heard and make sure our president heard them. (Strainchamps)

Would Starr's activist journey be as impactful if we didn't feel empathy towards her? And to that point, would we have felt empathy if she started this novel with a fully formed activist identity? Would this narrative have been as well received if it had been published before the inception of the Black Lives Matter movement? *The Hate U Give* debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestsellers list, signalling the public interest in a text that was directly mirroring the current social climate. As Oatley and Keen have shown, there's no easy answer to drawing these conclusions, yet somehow we understand that some stories have the power to set into motion what other stories cannot. As readers, our engagement with certain texts manages to awaken something inside of ourselves that we then bring into our daily lives, and the very real impact of that shouldn't be overlooked.

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