

Slide deck and text version available on my website if that makes this presentation more accessible.

***The Handbook for Mortals* and the Muddy Waters of YA Best Seller Status CHLA 2018 Presentation**

SLIDE 1:

Hello! My name is Rebekah Fitzsimmons and I am a Brittain Fellow at Georgia Tech. My goal for today is to tell you the story of an attempted theft and the efforts of a small group of intrepid digital investigators who thwarted that crime. My presentation will chronicle some of the dramatic twists and turns then attempt to explain exactly why this particular incident is worthy of our examination.

SLIDE 2: Shenanigans

So without further ado: the first part of my talk will be the most fun – recounting the shenanigans that occurred on Twitter over the course of August 24, 2017 in response to the new and unexpected presence of a novel, *The Handbook for Mortals*, at the top of the YA bestseller list. I am not going to have time to recount all of the shenanigans for you but if you are interested, I'd like to plug this article Kaylee Donaldson that has EVERYTHING.

SLIDE 3: List

So, on the morning of August 24, 2017, the *New York Times* posted the advanced copy of the YA Best Seller list for September 3. At [7:55am on August 24](#), YA author and publisher Phil Stamper noted that *Handbook for Mortals*, had unseated *The Hate U Give* (henceforth *THUG*) by Angie Thomas in the number 1 slot.

SLIDE 4: It Begins

He tweeted a thread that began "I find it strange that a mediocre website can decide it wants to be a publisher, and one month later hit #1 on the NYT Bestsellers list." He continued "You shouldn't be able to buy your way onto the *NYTimes* list. But here we are."

SLIDE 5: YA Twitter Investigates

In response to this initial Twitter thread, (CLICK) individuals from publishing, bookselling, publicity, children's/YA librarianship and academia, a group loosely and collectively known as "YA Twitter" began to investigate the publication and sales history of *Handbook* and its author Lani Sarem. These investigations were collaborative, wide reaching, and took a number of unexpected turns – more on that in a minute.

SLIDE 6: Red Flags

There were a number of indications that *Handbook for Mortals* had manipulated the list, rather than coming by its #1 slot honestly. (CLICK 1) The first red flag was the relative newcomer status of both the publishing house, Geek Nation, and the author, Lani Sarem. (CLICK 2) While it is not impossible for first time authors to debut at #1, that kind of debut is generally the result of massive publicity campaigns conducted months in advance of publication; (CLICK 3) *Handbook for Mortals* had no such campaign, only two relatively obscure blog posts announcing its publication.

The relative lack of word of mouth endorsements, reflected in a lack of Goodreads and Amazon reviews, also appeared suspicious.(CLICK 4) For contrast, *Trail of Lightning* by Rebecca Roanhorse, which released on Tuesday (July 26,) had 90 Goodreads ratings and reviews its release day, compared to *Handbook's* 9 weeks after its release.

(CLICK 6) Additionally, the lack of advance reader copies or ARCs also indicated to many "investigators" that the bestseller list mechanisms had been manipulated ([Deahl](#)). Calls on Twitter and in Deahl's article for individuals who had actually purchased a copy (or had been sent an ARC for the purpose of review and promotion) were met with silence.

(CLICK 7) Even more suspicious, Twitter "investigators" who tried to purchase a copy of the book quickly discovered that the book was out of stock on Amazon and local chain stores, indicating that the book's sales did not reflect the book's availability. Generally, if a publisher believes a title has best-seller potential they will stock bookstores to the rafters with piles of books to be purchased. Sarem's book had no prominent bookstore displays, or even copies available for purchases.

(CLICK 8) Finally, the book sales numbers were abnormal. Most YA hardcover releases sell approximately 5,000 copies to top the list; the NDP BookScan reported that *Handbook* had sold 18,597 copies, which was well outside of the norm for the YA market.

SLIDE 7: By the numbers

19 thousand copies is John Green opening weekend numbers. 19 thousand would saturate the YA market. So where were those 19 thousand copies? On Twitter, speculation turned to bulk book purchasing. Since the 1980s, the *NYT* denotes bestsellers that achieved that status through large bulk or corporate sales with a typographical dagger symbol (†). However, as this chart shows, the nationwide distribution and bulk ordering for *Handbook* appears to have been widespread enough to have avoided triggering the *NYT's* reporting mechanisms for bulk orders.

SLIDE 8: The Plot Thickens

By 11:00am on the same day, and I want to emphasize that this is all happening live and within hours of the first tweet, booksellers began reaching out to Stamper and others, (CLICK) indicating bulk orders of *Handbook* had been ordered to their stores AFTER the customer confirmed the bookstore reported to the *New York Times*. Stamper was contacted by three separate booksellers that morning, all with similar stories

SLIDE 9: More Booksellers

As the day went on, *Publishers Weekly* and other more established journalists were able to confirm additional reports of this nature, (CLICK) confirming that there was a coordinated effort to order large quantities of *Handbook for Mortals* without triggering the bulk buying warning system.

SLIDE 10: NYTimes Takes Notice

The YA Twitter investigations brought enough attention to the irregular nature of *Handbook for Mortals'* place on the bestseller list that by 3:32pm **on the same day**, Phil Stamper [reported](#) "Okay, NYT is on it and is reaching out to the booksellers for more info. My work's done here.*dies in an avalanche of notifications*" An hour later, *NYT* issued a statement: "After investigating the inconsistencies in the most recent reporting cycle, we've decided that the sales for *Handbook for Mortals* do not meet our criteria for inclusion." (Deahl).

SLIDE 11: Revised List

By 6:00pm on August 24, less than 12 hours after Stamper's original tweet, the *NYTimes* issued a revised YA Best Seller list that removed *Handbook for Mortals* entirely, putting *THUG* back at #1.

SLIDE 12: But Wait, There's More!

Now, there are a whole lot of additional twists and turns to this story and if we have time, I'd be happy to go down the tangential juicy stories, (CLICK 1) including the commentary from the lead singer of Blues Traveler (CLICK 2 & 3), the plagiarized cover art that doesn't credit the original artist Gill de Mace (CLICK 4 & 5), or, for you fanfic scholars, (CLICK 6) the vehement denial from the author of *My Immortal* that they were the author of *Handbook*.

SLIDE 13: Full Disclosure

I should also disclose that, after posting on Facebook that I would be presenting this paper at CHLA back in February, Lani Sarem contacted me both publicly and privately, offering to tell me "her side of the story." I declined to respond.

SLIDE 14: High Stakes of Bestseller Status

Ok. While it is certainly fun to dwell on the drama, we should spend *some* time talking about why it matters. Ultimately, this incident tells us that what happens on YA Twitter affects everyone involved in the YA field, whether you Tweet or not. I also conclude that this incident was made possible largely due to the public perceptions of YA lit and the inherently flawed nature of bestseller lists.

SLIDE 15: YA Twitter

To my first point, Twitter has become increasingly important to the YA field. YA Twitter is well-known for being a highly vocal group of authors, critics, scholars, and publishing insiders invested in the YA field. They have used Twitter to voice concerns about mainstream opinions of YA, racial and class divisions within YA publishing, and inter-YA disputes. This group had grown increasingly vocal in critiquing new or soon to be published titles that depict and normalize racist, sexist, or homophobic values. We Need Diverse Books was founded through a twitter hashtag. Members of YA Twitter devote considerable time and effort to helping raise the profile of diverse YA literature, uplifting #ownvoices authors, and calling attention to problematic texts, authors, events like all-white lineups at major book conferences. The mechanisms of Twitter, while not always ideal for holding nuanced conversations, allow for individuals who are usually locked out of the traditional structures of the publishing world to push for a more inclusive vision of YA that more accurately reflects the 21st century YA readership.

SLIDE 16: Toxic Twitter

In an August 2017 article in *Bustle*, Kat Rosenfeld reduced this organized online activism to "toxic drama." She describes how YA Twitter "denounces books for being problematic," a term which she classifies as "an all-purpose umbrella term for describing texts that engage improperly with race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other marginalizations." Rosenfeld goes on to decry this digital "thought-policing moral authoritarianism" and lament the true victims of this drama; the well intentioned, often white female authors who just wanted to publish a book without being "attacked."

(CLICK) In a direct response published in *Bustle*, **Sona Charaipotra and Zoraida Córdova** noted that the children's literature/YA publishing world, like the majority of the US publishing industry "is an overwhelmingly white industry that is often unfair to marginalized authors." The

Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), notes that of the 3400 children's books published in 2016, fewer than 500, or less than 14%, were written by people of color. Charaipotra and Córdova argued that fans and critics have always engaged in criticism of texts and that "[w]hen a book contains harmful representation, unchallenged racism, or damaging tropes, it is the responsibility of readers, authors, and critics to talk about it." While the (largely white) authors often characterize these critical conversations as "attacks" or "witch hunts," the article concludes that the demands to "keep YA kind" does a disservice to the desire to improve YA literature for all readers.

SLIDE 17:

In topping the September 3 YA Bestseller list, *Handbook* unseated *THUG*, the debut novel by Angie Thomas. *THUG* had been sustained by plenty of critical buzz, publisher support, and strong word-of-mouth advertising in the YA community. It also had a film deal based on the book (and if you haven't seen the trailer for it, you should honestly leave now and take care of that.). YA Twitter was instrumental in flagging *Handbook* as a suspicious bestseller, in part because it disrupted *THUG*'s streak; YA people noticed.

(CLICK) However, Sarem quickly began to insinuate that her book had been targeted by associates of Angie Thomas in order to ensure *THUG* remained at the top of the list. (CLICK) Angie Thomas responded in defense of her agent in a thread that pulled no punches.

According to an interview by Claire Fallon, Sarem acted the victim and claimed the YA Twitter community was mad because she even though she didn't conform to the rules and wasn't represented by a big publisher, her book still topped the list. She said:

"I didn't [...] send out galleys two years in advance, and I didn't go talk to the people that thought I should come talk to them. I did it a different way. Do you only get to be successful in the YA world if you only do it the way that they think it's supposed to be done?" (qtd. in Fallon).

Sarem went on to present YA writers and readers as a tightly integrated closed community committed to gatekeeping and presented herself as an outsider trying to revolutionize book promotion and YA literature.

In the face of YA Twitter's current activism to bring people of color, LGBTQIA+ authors, and other marginalized voices into YA publishing, Vivian Kane's published an article in *The Mary Sue* entitled "'Handbook for Mortals' Best Seller Spot Is Peak White Entitlement." She noted that Sarem's attempt to manipulate the list "at the expense of a book that actually represents the 'outsider' success story narrative she's trying to fit herself into is a terrible look."

The fact is that Thomas, as a debut author and a woman of color from a working class Mississippi background, Thomas lacked Sarem's systemic and personal advantages. The reality is that Sarem is much better represented within the publishing industry than Thomas, and has enjoyed additional entertainment industry connections (she's related to JC from *NSYNC*, previously managed the band *Blues Traveler* and is friends with various *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* actors). To this day, Sarem continues to maintain that her bestseller status was legitimate and she the victim of a YA Twitter witch hunt.

SLIDE 18: Conclusions

So, given the very little time that I have left, I want to move on and discuss some of the other conclusions we can draw from this incident.

SLIDE: Conclusion List

Ordinarily, motivation for manipulating the bestseller numbers would be bestseller status itself; prestige and sales power are wrapped up in the “#1 *New York Times* Bestseller” sticker on the front cover of a new book. However, in *Handbook*’s case, driving further sales cannot have been the primary goal, as there was no inventory stocked to sell. (CLICK) In this case, it appears the motivation was more Hollywood focused. According to additional Twitter reports, Sarem, “was ‘promised full funding [for a film] as long as it [the book] becomes a bestseller’” ([West](#)). Sources also reported Lani was slated to star in the film version.

To achieve bestseller status, Sarem reportedly contracted with ResultSource, a 3rd party marketing company that specializes in “bestseller campaigns” on behalf of authors. They claim that they will create bestseller status for any client willing to pay by “taking bulk sales and breaking them up into more organic-looking individual purchases, defeating safeguards that are supposed to make it impossible to “buy” bestseller status” (Bercovici).

I should be clear on this point; Sarem is not the first to try to game the bestseller list. Politicians are often banned from the non-fiction list for bulk buying and bestseller scholarship holds some truly rich apocryphal anecdotes from publishing history about authors who have tried to sue, sleep, or buy their way onto the fiction list. Her story is not abnormal, its just a first for the YA list (that we know of).

(CLICK 2) So, if you’re going to buy a slot on the bestseller list, why the YA list and not one of the other lists? With a 20 year old protagonist and an urban fantasy/paranormal romance plot, *Handbook for Mortals* could just as easily have been promoted as a novel for adults and the adult bestseller list arguably carries more prestige.

First, I argue the YA list appeared more easily hackable to individuals outside of the YA community, both in terms of sales figures and literary quality. The general opinion of YA literature is that it is all silly, superfluous stories about sparkly vampires and teen girl sleepover parties. Culture critics like Ruth Graham love to point out that the things teen girls s unserious and unworthy of adult (white male) attention. Sarem’s book plays into this stereotype – by all reports from those who were able to acquire copies of the book, *Handbook for Mortals* includes the worst of the worn-out YA tropes, awkward writing, misrepresentations of learning disabilities, and problematic gender issues (Trout). The general conclusion is that had Sarem tried to market *Handbook* in a more traditional manner, she would not have had much success.

(CLICK 3) The third conclusion I draw from this particular incident is that the hive mind enabled by social media is strong and often mighty and not just in terms of the online activism. A large number of interested individuals moved swiftly to uncover many different aspects of this particular scam; various experts delved into publishing figures, library databases, bookseller contacts, and other areas from their own professional perspectives. No one individual could have uncovered as much as the collective group and definitely not as fast. Twitter is often a cesspool of trolls, bots, and confrontation, but in this instance, it enabled an national cooperative effort.

(CLICK 4) The fourth conclusion is that bestseller lists are not objective, nor are they infallible. While this controversy was quickly addressed, the incident itself publicly exposed the mechanisms and editorializing of the *NYTimes* bestseller list that allow for this kind of

manipulation. As I've written about elsewhere, the *NYT* uses a complicated formula to derive their rankings based on numbers from large booksellers, independent bookstores, and other venues. However, the *NYT* does not disclose the list of which outlets report, nor does it make the formula or statistical methods publicly available. Therefore, it is impossible to verify how accurate this formula really is (Miller 293). Their right to editorialize the list was even upheld by the Supreme Court in 1983 and as I have written about elsewhere, it was this editorializing that allowed for the controversial creation of the Children's Bestseller List in July 2000.

(CLICK 5) Regardless of the flawed nature of bestseller lists and the often invisible politics about what kinds of books make the list, it is important to note that the *NYTimes* list does largely affect the books that get read, purchased and made into films. While we can analyze the list and listmakers through an academic lens, the vast majority of the book buying public looks to the *NYTimes* as part book recommendation forum and part evaluation of quality (even though many of my students in the Fall were able to use data mining to demonstrate that length, reading level, and reader reviews have no correlation with bestseller status). While we can certainly take the position that bestseller lists are not valid measures of any kind of quality, we also, as scholars, should pay attention to the list, publicly celebrate when books we appreciate appear on the list, and pay close attention to how our own book purchases, recommendations and even citations help shape these lists.

SLIE 20:

In the longer version of this paper, my co-authors and I delve more into how public libraries in particular respond to these complicated politics; specifically, how to serve public demand while also curating a lasting collection on limited funds. I am certainly happy to try to address these concerns in the Q&A but I do give a shoutout to my fabulous co-authors Karen Viars and Liz Holdsworth at Georgia Tech, who added this valuable perspective to my own.

SLIDE 21:

So this where I will conclude. Thank you very much for sticking with me through all the shenanigans and I look forward to the discussion at the end of the panel.