

Writing for a Generation:

Exploring a Sense of Responsibility as a Young Adult
Writing Young Adult Fiction.

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Introduction

After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.

— Philip Pullman (as cited in Scholastic Book Clubs, n.d.)

Generation Omega is a dystopian Young Adult (YA) fiction novel, set in a world where most of the youth population have a life expectancy of just 25 years. With no cure in sight, this volatile ‘Omega Generation’ is isolated from society in an attempt to prevent anarchy. Those who remain home on the Mainland face a life under heavy surveillance, but for those who choose to leave everything behind, a life of freedom awaits on the outposts – repurposed cities originally abandoned during a worldwide disease outbreak.

Left to find their own way of life, the Omega on one of the outposts have formed two clans, managing to co-exist in relative harmony. The story follows Kai, a City clan member, and a mysterious new arrival to the outpost, Zoe, who is on a quest to find her brother. Unbeknownst to Kai and the other Omega, Zoe has actually been cured by a prototype treatment back on the Mainland. However, fearing that her brother will not live to see the cure distributed to the outposts, Zoe runs away from home in the hope of saving him before his twenty-fifth birthday. As tensions mount between the clans, stirred by the charismatic new leader Aiden, Zoe and Kai must face struggles both external and internal as they come to terms with their very different futures.

My motivation for writing *Generation Omega* was fuelled in part by my love of YA fiction, as well as a passion for defending the integrity of the genre. As a writer who falls into the wider YA demographic, I felt a responsibility to create a work that would not only be entertaining and fulfilling for a YA audience, but that would also prompt the reader to reflect

on themes such as violence, love, and the brevity of life. However, throughout the writing process I found this goal had to be balanced with the practicalities of creating an engaging narrative that could stand on its own, regardless of my more philosophical aspirations. In this exegesis, I will look at some of the historical factors that have shaped modern YA literature, which, as a result influenced my understanding of the genre. I will also reflect on my experience as a young adult author, and the challenges I faced throughout the writing process.

PART I: Understanding Young Adult Fiction

A young and shifting genre

Genre played a considerable role in the shaping of my creative work. At the heart of this was audience awareness – as a YA reader and part of the wider target audience, I had a certain insight into what I would want from a piece of YA fiction, and felt compelled to incorporate particular elements. However, it was only by exploring the history of this relatively new genre that I began to understand some of the foundations that have paved the way for more recent works of YA fiction.

As explained by Cart (2014), the concept of creating literature specifically tailored to the needs of adolescents only emerged in the early 20th century. This was due to the fact that teenagers were still perceived to be children until the 1930s, and as such did not require their own targeted reading material (Cart, 2014). Accounts of the earliest pioneers of the genre which would later become YA refer to works from the 1930s–1940s, including the *Little House* series by Laura Ingalls Wilder (1932–1943) as well as Helen Boylston’s *Sue Barton Student Nurse*. The latter attracted considerable attention due to the way in which it defied the conventions of other genres at the time. This was perhaps because the story didn’t quite fit

into pre-existing categories, a view expressed by librarian Margaret Alexander Edwards in the *Saturday Review* (1954):

It was too mature for children and too uncomplicated for adults. In the end Little, Brown took a chance and published the story under the title ‘Sue Barton Student Nurse’ and the dawn of the modern teen-age story came up like thunder. (as cited in Cart, 2014, p. 9)

A recurring theme appearing in this new category of fiction is the perception of the world through the eyes of an adolescent protagonist, highlighting a quest for identity as well as an external journey. This was supplemented by the fresh perspective of young adult writers, as seen in Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), which the author claimed to have partially written as a teenager herself, and S.E. Hinton’s widely acclaimed *The Outsiders* (1967), a work written for teenagers, by a teenage author.

Other notable additions to the burgeoning genre include Judy Blume’s *Are you there, God? It’s me, Margaret* (1970), which explored the everyday challenges faced by its 11-year-old protagonist, and Robert Cormier’s provocative picture of an all-boy’s prep school in *The Chocolate War* (1974). However, the lines between Middle Grade fantasy and YA fiction arguably started to blur with the emergence of JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. The first novel, *The Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), followed the adventures of 11-year-old Harry Potter as he tried to fit in at school while experiencing scrapes both exhilarating and sinister in the magical world. However, as Harry matured into a 17-year-old boy over the course of the series, the following books took on decidedly darker themes, focusing on death and grief as well as rebellion against authority.

Other works that fuse fantasy elements together with YA sensibilities include Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005–2008), centring on the relationship between awkward high

schooler, Bella Swan, and her love interest, vampire Edward Cullen. A huge commercial success, the Twilight series spent over 235 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list (Grossman, 2009), and inspired countless other vampire romance titles. One of the next major series to leave its mark on the YA genre was Suzanne Collins' popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, the first title published in 2008. Set in a dystopian America run by a totalitarian regime, the story follows teenager Katniss Everdeen in her attempt to protect those she loves, while being unafraid to question the status quo in a vein similar to Harry Potter.

The rebellious spirit of Katniss and her comrades was also harnessed in the *Divergent* trilogy by Veronica Roth (2011–2013), which drew on a similarly dystopian setting and an oppressive governing regime to challenge the characters. Both *Divergent* and the *Hunger Games* marked a bold new movement in the YA genre that didn't shy away from violence and sexual themes, championing strong female characters that spearheaded the action. The rise of the YA heroine was additionally bolstered by Kristen Cashore's *Graceling* (2008) and Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007–2014). Described as a work of urban fantasy, Clare's novels comprised more sexual overtones in the later books, an increasingly common occurrence in older age-range YA novels.

A recent trend to emerge in YA works is the rise of character-driven novels such as John Green's *Paper Towns* (2008) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). The latter centres on the relationship between two teenagers with cancer who meet as part of a support group, and explores themes surrounding love, suffering and mortality, as well as how to live one's life. The book was met with considerable critical and commercial acclaim, and represented the enduring ability for works of YA fiction to delve into more sensitive, serious topics. This movement also undoubtedly inspired the emotional and philosophical underpinnings of *Generation Omega*, which I endeavoured to integrate into a fast-paced, exciting narrative.

A genre by any other name

The sheer range of works classified under this genre poses the question of a central definition for what constitutes such a work. The use of YA fiction to describe junior, teen or adolescent fiction is, as noted by Crowe, a label “as misguided and troublesome as any other the field has had” (2001, p. 146). One early definition from Carlsen (1980) attempts to define the parameters of YA literature through a series of common characteristics:

Young adult literature is literature wherein the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective ... Typically they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels – like all fine literature – address the entire spectrum of life. (as cited in VanderStaay, 1992, p. 48)

While this is a fairly succinct summary of what might constitute a YA novel, other texts declare the genre to be more ambiguous in nature. Cart (2008) argues for the inherently amorphous nature of ‘young adult literature’, due to both the terms ‘young adult’ and ‘literature’ changing along with the culture and society that provide their context:

Though once dismissed as a genre consisting of little more than problem novels and romances, young adult literature has, since the mid-1990’s, come of age as literature – literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking. (Cart, 2008)

Another way that YA fiction is often contextualised is by suggested reading age, fitting into a perceived gap between child and adult readers. The National Library of New Zealand notes that the definition of the genre differs from one organisation to the next, citing reading ages from 11–13 up to 18–21 years old (n.d.). However, while YA books may be intended for a demographic of preteens, teenagers and even those just past their teenaged years, this is not necessarily the audience who is reading such works. This is evidenced in a Bowker Market

Research study that found over half of those buying YA books (defined in the study as books for ages 12–17) were in fact 18 years and older (2012). The study also found that adults aged 30–44 years accounted for 28% of sales. Vice-President of Bowker Market Research, Kelly Gallagher expressed her surprise at the “extent and age breakout of adult consumers” of YA fiction. While she attributed the survey results to the popularity of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* series, Gallagher also noted the trend was indicative of a greater phenomenon (Bowker Market Research, 2012).

With such a diverse audience, one can also observe a subtle shift taking place within the genre itself. This has resulted in the gradual separation of ‘younger’ YA from ‘older’ YA works, as well as the creation of the New Adult (NA) subcategory. Jackson explains that younger YA addresses the self, as well as “burgeoning sexuality”, while suggesting that older YA should have a more worldly focus with more socio-political considerations (as cited in Pfitsch, 1997). The emergence of the NA genre has also raised questions about the classification of various titles and their appropriate content. Loosely classified as having protagonists aged 18–30, New Adult works can overlap with ‘older YA’, as explained by Brookover:

In YA fiction, the characters’ lives are circumscribed by school, family, and sometimes work. In NA novels, the characters have more freedom ... And that’s one reason that YA fantasy and historical fiction crosses up easily to NAs. In those genres, the age of maturity is measured differently than in our contemporary society, and teens may be far more independent at a much younger age. (as cited in Engberg, Seaman, & Vnuk, 2014)

Critiques of YA

As both a reader and writer of YA fiction, it would be amiss to ignore some of the blanket critiques that have been aimed at the genre. As noted by Crowe, “because of a few bad YA

apples, the entire field has come under fire” (2001, p. 146). This denotes the wide variation in the perceived ‘quality’ of YA novels, ranging from the highly criticised *Twilight* series to the more acclaimed works of S.E. Hinton and John Greene. Crowe identifies “poorly conceived” books with “weak writing” and “sloppy cover art” as factors that have led to criticism of YA literature, in spite of other strong works in the genre (2001, p. 146).

As evidenced by the Bowker Survey, YA audiences are not restricted to the target demographic of teenagers, with many adults also reading works within the genre. This trend has also drawn the ire of a number of literary commentators. Ruth Graham, writing for The Slate Book Review, states that adults “should feel embarrassed” reading YA fiction:

Let’s set aside the transparently trashy stuff like *Divergent* and *Twilight*, which no one defends as serious literature ... These are the books, like *The Fault in Our Stars*, that are about real teens doing real things, and that rise and fall not only on the strength of their stories but, theoretically, on the quality of their writing. These are the books that could plausibly be said to be replacing literary fiction in the lives of their adult readers. And that’s a shame. (2014)

I wrote *Generation Omega* mindful of these critiques, aiming to defend a genre that I believe pushes boundaries with socio-politically thought-provoking, yet readable and entertaining stories. In other words, I was determined not to add to Crowe’s metaphorical bad apples, a self-imposed responsibility that shadowed me throughout the writing process.

PART II – YA writing for a YA audience

Walking in the footsteps of Hinton

*I was a ‘young adult’ when I wrote *The Outsiders*, although it was not a genre at the time. It’s an interesting time of life to write about, when your ideals get slammed up against reality and you must compromise.*

— S.E. Hinton (as cited in Sozio, 2007)

As YA fiction has evolved to become the multifaceted, amorphous genre it is today, a number of young writers writing for their wider demographic have left their mark in an industry largely dominated by more mature adult writers. One of the most prolific examples is S.E. Hinton, who began work on *The Outsiders* at age 15. Rather than a cautionary children's tale with a clear lesson for the young reader to take away, *The Outsiders* is told through the eyes of 14-year-old Ponyboy Curtis, with all of the stakes and dilemmas relevant to his world of 'Greasers' and 'Socs'. As Hinton wasn't an adult at the time of writing, one could argue that she wasn't burdened with the implied onus of trying to infuse her work with various educational morals. Instead, she didn't hesitate in boldly approaching otherwise taboo subjects such as smoking, suicide and teen pregnancy, including them as part of the characters' world.

More recent examples of young adults writing YA fiction include Nancy Yi Fan, Amelia Atwater-Rhodes and Christopher Paolini. One particular work that stood out to me was *The Bone Season* (2013), published when author Samantha Shannon was 21-years old. With a dystopian, paranormal setting and a strong female lead, *The Bone Season* drew on decades of YA fiction influences to create the world of Scion London. With episodes of violence, physical intimacy and explicit language, Shannon's younger perspective was echoed in the daring, unique prose – fusing the academic and supernatural while also appealing to YA fiction's wider adult audience:

[A]lthough many of the paths walked by *The Bone Season* will already have been well travelled by fantasy readers, Shannon shows real skill in combining them so easily into an original and enjoyably escapist fictional world. Like so much recent young adult fiction, I suspect this series will appeal to the fearless teenager dwelling within many adults. (Brown, 2013)

Themes and dystopia

One of the distinct challenges in writing an inherently genre-based work is to surprise the audience while adhering to certain characteristics of the genre they have come to expect from previous reading. For YA fiction, these expectations often include a personal transformation or inner journey for the main characters reminiscent of a Bildungsroman. This is seen in a number of the examples discussed in the earlier part of this exegesis, from *The Outsiders* to *Harry Potter*. The personal discovery of self is also a recurring theme throughout younger YA stories, as it reflects the often tumultuous formative years prior to adulthood when many readers are building their own personalities and perspectives.

However Young Adult literature evolves, it is an important, useful, and enjoyable resource for young adults as they struggle to understand themselves and the world around them during a period of intense life changes. (Andersen, 2014, p. 14)

YA fiction is also known for romance, as seen in *Twilight* and *The Fault in our Stars*, and adventure, such as in *The Mortal Instruments* and *Hunger Games* – elements that I incorporated instinctively into *Generation Omega*. These core themes were then understandably heightened due to the dystopian setting of the outpost. Commonly seen in Science Fiction, dystopian themes have become a hallmark of modern YA, with many novels such as the *Hunger Games*, Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Last Survivors* and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* series incorporating this style of setting. Dystopia has the unique ability to touch on concerns from the environment, technology and personal identity, to politics and war as depicted in John Marsden's *Tomorrow Series* (1993–1999). The use of dystopian settings in YA fiction could also be seen as a renaissance of the children's cautionary tale, with depictions of the future used to warn readers of the consequences of current actions (Trupe, 2006).

As a young adult in 2016, I felt I couldn't ignore the reality of events taking place today that could potentially affect our future. During my work on *Generation Omega*, the Zika virus was occupying the attention of the media, with the disease found to affect the development of children in the womb in a way similar to that of how I imagined the Omega's condition would occur (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2016b). Furthermore, in *Generation Omega* the decrease in global population and mass evacuation to the Mainland is attributed to a superbug – a real-world concern that prompted a UN General Assembly meeting to discuss the growing threat of antibiotic resistant infections (WHO, 2016a).

I chose the setting of an abandoned Auckland city primarily as an auxiliary force to isolate the protagonists from the adult world. This allowed characters greater freedom to make independent decisions on their journey, and enabled them to form their own society, reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies* (1954). The dystopian setting also narrowed the Omega's worldview to a more immediate one of the outpost. By doing this, the reader is able to observe as the characters begin to lose perspective of what is important – that they are all facing the same fate – and begin to turn against each other.

However, as noted by Basu, Broad, & Hintz, dystopia can serve as more than just a vehicle for the cautionary tale (2013). Often infused into adventure stories with exciting plots, dystopian themes can also convey messages and potentially even motivate young readers trying to comprehend the world around them.

The dystopian worlds are bleak not because they are meant to stand as mere cautionary tales, but because they are designed to display – in sharp relief – the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances. (Basu, Broad, & Hintz, 2013, p. 3)

This sentiment is echoed by Day, Green-Barteet, & Montz (2016), who differentiate children's dystopian fiction from adult examples by the inherent hope that the challenge will be overcome, preparing readers for "whatever flawed world they inherit outside the book" (p. 187). It was in this spirit that I created the circumstances of *Generation Omega* to mirror concerns we are facing now, while providing hope for the characters in the form of the cure and the eventual rescue of the outpost Omega who believed that society had abandoned them. Even a character like Kai, who was resigned to his fate, was able to hope again, as much as it pained him to do so:

"I thought I knew how my last years would go out here. I was feeling good, stable."

"That's because you stopped thinking about the outside world," Rose said, her voice tinged with sadness. "You didn't have anything to lose before Zoe came along."

... "Hope is meant to be a good thing," he said. "But hope hurts, Rose." (*Generation Omega*, p. 188)

A matter of character

In *Generation Omega*, the core characters (with the exception of Zoe) need to come to terms with the fact that their lives are due to end in a short matter of time. This impending mortality can mould a person's perspective for better or worse, as seen in the contrast between Kai, Rose, and Aiden's actions. By including characters with different outlooks on life, I aimed to present the reader with the opportunity to perhaps identify elements of these perspectives in themselves, or in their family and friends.

Of the Omega, Rose sees her fate as the world turning its back on her, and her interactions with other characters can be abrasive. Her saving grace is Kai and Aiden, who she feels share her sense of injustice. When she sees Zoe infringing on her relationship with Kai, Rose reacts with suspicion. However, as Zoe suggests, Rose's actions are motivated more by her feelings

for Kai than pure curiosity (*Generation Omega*, p. 125). This outward struggle for Rose to hold on to the little she has left culminates in arguments with Kai and Aiden, as well as a physical fight with Zoe.

Aiden, who is presented with the chance to save his own life by betraying his fellow Omega, represents another way of coping with mortality. Given the opportunity to live, however small, Aiden will forsake his friends and even his morality when he kills Cara to ensure the success of his mission. Aiden never fully contemplates the possibility of his own death, even though he knows he is running out of time before his twenty-fifth birthday. While Aiden struggles under the burden that his family has placed on him, the promise of life beyond the outpost is too strong, and he cannot be redeemed even by Kai:

“You were like a brother to me,” Kai wheezed, the breath knocked out of him. “When did you turn into a murderer?” ...

“If I don’t finish this,” said Aiden, “then everything I did, all of that will mean nothing.”
(*Generation Omega*, p. 235)

Kai’s outlook on life is yet another alternate perspective. He sees his fate as something that is futile to resist in the way Rose does, and as something that he must accept. His childhood struggles with schoolyard fights and the fear of turning into his father are constant shadows over his life, and he approaches his time on the outpost as a fresh start to try and be the best person he can. He has become so comfortable with the idea of his approaching death, that when he discovers that Zoe will live on, it creates immense inner conflict. As Kai discovers, love will cause him great pain, but it will also ultimately be his redemption, a theme that I did not anticipate emerging in my work until later drafts. Kai’s fight is not so much an external one, but a personal one, as he gave up on fighting for his future a long time ago (*Generation Omega*, p. 216).

Told all her life that she is a troublesome child, Zoe is used to thinking outside of the box when it comes to achieving her goals. Her brother was one of her strongest supporters, encouraging her when she didn't fit in with other children her age, and providing her with reassurance when her parents were not there to do so. The fact that Zoe was cured by a prototype treatment that had proven fatal to other Omega singled her out once again, leading to an immense feeling of guilt that she carries throughout the novel.

“It should have been you,” she said, one teardrop rolling down after the other, falling off her chin. “I came all this way and I failed. I don't deserve an ordinary life.”

“Don't,” said Jake ... “You never failed me.” (*Generation Omega*, p. 205)

In a similar way to Kai, Zoe doesn't like to imagine her future, purely because she believes she hasn't done anything to deserve a long, happy life. While she knows the quest to cure her brother could be futile, it is the only thing giving her some sort of grounding and purpose. Zoe subconsciously believes that if she can save Jake, she will have done something to merit being cured. However, with Jake's passing and the resolution of her initial quest, Zoe finds herself morally obligated to stay and stand with the Omega on the outpost, even forsaking safe passage home (*Generation Omega*, p. 212).

Incorporating a strong female lead was yet another passion I had when embarking upon this project. Inspired by authors such as Kristen Cashore, Suzanne Collins and Cassandra Clare, as well as by the earlier works of Tamora Pierce, I wanted to create a focussed and capable, yet not totally invulnerable protagonist who would accompany the reader in discovering the world of the outpost. At the same time, I was cautious of unintentionally enforcing any negative female stereotypes as outlined by Day, Green-Barteet, & Montz (2016). As such, I

didn't want any romantic interest in Kai to prevent Zoe from finding Jake or standing with her friends at the final conflict on the bridge.

In a literary world inundated by Manic Pixie Dream Girls and damsels in distress, it is important that books by women about women are taken seriously, especially if they provide a more realistic view of the world as it is, with full and flawed female characters. (Anderson, 2014, p. 13)

In addition, I was committed to my work being able to pass the infamous Bechdel test, born from the 1986 comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Allison Bechdel. Originally intended to assess films, a work is said to pass the test if it meets three criteria: firstly, it must have at least two named female characters. Secondly, these characters must have a conversation. Thirdly, their conversation must be about something other than a man (Bechdel, 2013). Also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test, Bechdel (2013) explained that she was inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), wherein the narrator reflects on the nature of relationships between women in literature:

All these relationships between women, I thought, rapidly recalling the splendid gallery of fictitious women, are too simple. So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. (Woolf, p. 162)

In *Generation Omega*, Zoe discusses happenings on the Mainland with Margaret, and also has interactions with Rose and Sita later in the book. The consideration of the Bechdel Test especially extended to Rose, who is able to overcome her initial dislike and jealousy of Zoe by the end of the novel, enabling them to work together.

I also felt strongly about trying to create an ethnically diverse cast in *Generation Omega*. This motivation became especially apparent to me after discussing the idea with my peers who

expressed a wish to see more diverse characters in fiction. While I was cautious in trying to portray characters from ethnic backgrounds to which I do not belong, I equally felt a responsibility to write a book without a ‘whitewashed’, or all-Caucasian/European cast. I was also inspired by the work of Cassandra Clare, a YA author and advocate for greater diversity in fiction:

One of the things I get most often in terms of letters from kids is: “Could you write a kid like me?” Which incorporates the spectrum of diversity – a character of color, a disabled character, a neuro-diverse character, a gay character, a lesbian character, a trans character... I know we can all do a better job and work harder at it. (Clare, as cited in Charaipotra, 2014)

By including an Asian male lead, and other strong female characters such as Rose, Sita and Margaret, I attempted to reflect the very multicultural environment in which I live as an Aucklander. This is evidenced in the latest census where Auckland was found to have New Zealand’s youngest and most ethnically diverse population, with just 59.3 per cent of the city identifying as European (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). While *Generation Omega* is by no means an exemplar of more ethnically inclusive fiction, the writing process has been a culturally informative one that will undeniably influence my future work in the YA genre.

Part III – Considering the audience

Anchoring the readers on familiar ground

“Everywhere she looked there was a reminder of abandonment, from the shuttered up businesses to the empty houses, their windows watching the street like sombre eyes.”

— (*Generation Omega*, p. 37)

In addition to allowing my familiarity with the YA genre to guide the underlying elements of the book, I also found a number of my decisions being influenced by potential audience

considerations. As the setting for *Generation Omega* is dystopian in nature, I wanted to create an environment with a certain gravity and intrigue, but that was also distinctly realist. I had never incorporated New Zealand as a setting for any of my prior creative work, so the ability to draw inspiration from local landscapes was a considerable aid in creating the concrete world of the Omega.

While Central Auckland and the North Shore – places where I grew up – served as both the blueprint and the backdrop for the narrative, I chose not to name the outpost explicitly as Auckland. My intention was to enable readers in interpreting and imagining the setting without the need for an intimate knowledge of the city, or even New Zealand. Simply put, by engaging with the physical framework of the outpost in the novel, I wanted readers to be able to substitute their own hometown for Auckland. This being said, New Zealand readers will naturally be able to draw different meaning from the text, whether it is from familiarity with Auckland landmarks such as the Harbour Bridge, Sky Tower or Rangitoto, or cultural references such as the *taniwha*.

A question of appropriateness

If writers aren't writing about uncomfortable, awkward, sometimes scary things, then how will kids ever learn to process them in a safe way ...? I would argue that it is our responsibility to do just that, to offer a million different worlds and experiences and push barriers and to allow the readers ... to pick the ones that they want to immerse themselves in.

— Sherry D. Ficklin (2015)

As I mentioned earlier, I felt a certain responsibility to create a work that didn't shy away from big topics. This led to a constant questioning of what was appropriate material for a YA novel as well as issues of self-censorship. At its core, *Generation Omega* has an inherently morbid overtone due to the Omega's short lifespan. However, we also encounter death in

other forms throughout the story, from the murder of Cara in the prologue, to the intimation of suicide on the outpost and even manslaughter in the case of the brawl at the ‘tourney’ resulting in the death of Matt.

There is a long history of death in various forms of children’s literature, with the fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson serving as prominent examples prior to the 20th century. Child death also features prominently in works of Victorian fiction, often as part of the moral imperative or educational nature of such works. As noted by Clement and Jamali (2015), the decline in death themes in “sanitized fairy tales” and turn of the century children’s literature was partially due to the “surfeit of dead children in Romantic and Victorian art and literature” (p. 7). However, it is recent works of YA fiction that have triggered concerns about the place of violence and death in books for teenagers. For some, the apparently increasing presence of violence in YA books is a “troubling trend even in the best of the literature”, with the same “graphic explicitness that has been decried in films and games” (Isaacs, 2003).

Rather than decrying the inclusion of darker themes in the genre, Alsup (2003) notes that YA literature can provide a means for younger readers to interact with relevant and even traumatic issues they may encounter in their lives. Furthermore, Alsup suggests that the process of reading can be not only an intellectual, but also an ethical one, which could “assist adolescents in coping with their tumultuous lives” (p. 159).

I believe we can no longer pretend that after classes end students go home to stable families and hot dinners. We can no longer waste the ethical opportunities literature provides in the face of increasing teenage apathy, anger and violence. The stakes are too high. (Alsup, 2003, p. 162)

Another advocate for the place of controversial issues in YA literature is author Sherman Alexie. Alexie's book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), chronicled the author's youth growing up on an American reservation, and touched on issues such as domestic violence, drug abuse, racism and death. The author later defended his choices, stating that critics bemoaning the state of YA fiction were more concerned with protecting "their privileged notions of what literature is and should be" (2011).

[Teens] read because they live in an often-terrible world. They read because they believe, despite the callow protestations of certain adults, that books – especially the dark and dangerous ones – will save them ... I read books about monsters and monstrous things, often written with monstrous language, because they taught me how to battle the real monsters in my life. (Alexie, 2011)

In addition to the recurring motif of mortality throughout *Generation Omega*, there are also examples of aggression and violence, as well as sexual connotations regarding Kai and Zoe's relationship. While the book depicts a level of physical intimacy between characters, it doesn't include an explicit sex scene, similar to a number of YA novels such as Cassandra Clare's *City of Heavenly Fire* and Kristen Cashore's *Graceling*. I was even wary about including the implication that Kai and Zoe had slept together, knowing that readers as young as 11–13 years old could potentially pick up the book, according to the National Library of New Zealand's definition of the YA fiction demographic. Reflecting upon my experience, I'm still uncertain whether it was a desire to protect the supposed innocence of younger readers, or a sense of appropriateness guided by my wider reading of the genre that influenced my narrative choices.

While references to sex between Kai and Zoe, Rose and Aiden, or Aiden and Cara are only included implicitly in *Generation Omega*, I do believe that YA authors should aim to disempower the taboo surrounding sexual content. Ted Dawe's *Into the River* (2012) is just

one example of boundary-pushing YA fiction, containing explicit sex scenes that earned the book an R14 age classification and an interim restriction on sales in New Zealand by the Film and Literature Board of Review (Office of Film and Literature Classification, 2015). The decision was met with strong opposition, including from the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA), and the restriction was lifted in 2015.

I have been teaching English for too long to believe that there is any such thing as the “right” age to read a novel. Readers seek out novels that speak to them ... Along the way [they] will wander into worlds and scenarios they may never encounter in their lives, but if they do, perhaps they will be better equipped to deal with them. (Dawe, 2015)

Challenges throughout the writing process

I'm trying to write a book about what it means to be human, to grow up, to suffer and learn.

— Philip Pullman (as cited in Achuka, n.d.)

Attempting to create a YA novel that was entertaining while being infused with philosophical questions on life and death, love and loss, came with a number of challenges. Originally, my considerations for world building were restricted to the outpost, with a vague notion of ‘the Mainland’, where the rest of the world lived. I believed that by cutting off the Omega from society à la *Lord of the Flies*, it would make for a more interesting scenario and character behaviour. However, I found that placing every Omega on such a level playing field only dampened the intensity of stakes for the protagonist, Zoe. By closing off the world of the Omega without any of the socio-political implications of the Mainland, I would have also crippled Aiden as an antagonist, relegating his motivations to tropes of jealousy, inherent evil or insanity.

As I progressed, I realised that for all my earlier intentions surrounding the message of the book, the plot still needed to have a momentum and drive of its own. Preoccupied with my agenda, I was blinded to a severe lack of motivation for the antagonist until about a third of the way through the narrative. As an embedded villain, Aiden's crimes are only revealed toward the end of the story, meaning that I hadn't initially paid much thought to the reason why he'd become this way. I had envisioned Aiden gradually losing his sense of reality and descending into the role of a maniacal villain, but as a YA reader, I knew this wouldn't have been a sufficient reason to justify his actions.

Following this revelation, I needed to reconsider the circumstances that would push an otherwise ordinary young adult to murder his on-again-off-again lover. This led to a reimagining of the world outside the outpost, and the potential politics in play that could prove to be an additional antagonistic force. The idea of a conservative group aiming to coerce a central governing body into serving its best interests wasn't a long stretch for the imagination. Coincidentally, the 'Article 50' in *Generation Omega* was a nod to the article of the same name from the *Treaty on European Union*; a matter of contention following the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union in 2016.

Conclusion

Embarking upon my creative work I felt a sense of responsibility as both a YA reader and advocate, but also as someone ostensibly writing fiction for their broader age demographic. Using my knowledge of the YA genre, I had an opportunity to not only create a work that would be entertaining for a YA fiction audience, but that could perhaps provoke reader reflection or discussion on more philosophical matters. In *Generation Omega*, I endeavoured to create a varied cast of characters, each with their own way of coping with the world, as

well as a thought-provoking scenario in the form of the outpost. While I have no regrets about my ambitions, as lofty as they may appear, I have undoubtedly emerged from the writing experience with two key realisations.

Firstly, I found that a preoccupation with the intended message or philosophical meaning of a creative work can often distract from the craft of building a full, engaging narrative. Ironically, I realised that without a solid story to support it, the author's intended message may never effectively reach the reader. Secondly, even though I intended for *Generation Omega* to present the reader with queries on love, the futility of violence, and the brevity of life, I found that the YA sensibilities of the book still tied it to everyday struggles: whether it was complaining about kitchen duty, defending one's friends, the quest to fit in with peers, or unrequited love.

To conclude, any creative work is liable to change throughout the course of its development. Even though *Generation Omega* at the time of writing is certainly different to how I first conceptualised it, I am glad to have seen the narrative evolve and branch into new directions, as the experience has been both educational and enjoyable. With regards to my initial goal, I have come to the conclusion that I would like readers (whether they are 11–18, or 18 and older) to be primarily entertained by *Generation Omega*. Any engagement with the text on Alsop's supposed intellectual and ethical level would only exceed my aspirations.

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