

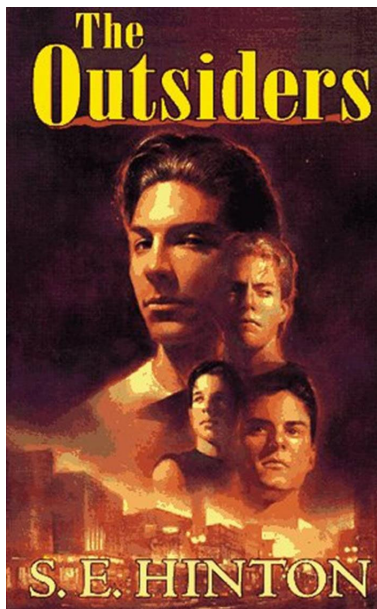
CULTURAL COMMENT

# S. E. HINTON AND THE Y.A. DEBATE

By Jon Michaud

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S. E. Hinton recalls that when she published her debut novel, “The Outsiders,” in 1967, “there was no young-adult market.” Her book, written by a teen-ager about teenagers in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was issued in hardcover by the Viking Press and then in softcover by Dell—both adult trade imprints. “ ‘The Outsiders’ died on the vine being sold as a drugstore paperback,” Hinton told me, but her publisher “noticed that in one

area it was selling very well. Teachers were using it in classes. All of a sudden, they realized that there was a separate market for young adults."

Since then, "The Outsiders" has gone on to sell more than ten million copies. Along with Hinton's other books for teen-agers—"That Was Then, This Is Now," "Rumble Fish," "Tex," and "Taming the Star Runner"—"The Outsiders" remains a mainstay on middle-school and high-school reading lists, and it continues to sell well in digital formats. This week, "Rumble Fish" will be a Starbucks pick, available for free download through the coffee chain's app or via [iTunes](#). For Hinton, who almost single-handedly brought the Y.A. genre into being, this marks a kind of transgenerational full-circle return. The author who changed the way that books for teens were written and published has seen her own work go from the spinning wire display rack near checkout to an online marketplace accessible while you wait for your morning latte.

Hinton's current publishers at Diversion Books hope that the promotion will "help a new generation of readers discover" her work and "inspire long-time Hinton fans to reconnect with the author." They are hoping, in short, to capitalize on the popularity of young-adult literature among both teen-age readers and adults—a trend that has been a heated topic of late. Over the summer, the critic Ruth Graham [published an article](#) in *Slate* arguing that "adults *should* feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children." There was a strong [backlash](#) from adults who [read](#) and [write](#) Y.A. books. Given the furor, it seemed like a propitious moment to talk to Hinton. She spoke to me over the telephone from her home in Oklahoma.

When I asked her whether she had read Graham's article, she answered, "Yes. Of course, I disagree. Under similar criteria, 'A Tree Grows in Brooklyn' could be considered a young-adult novel, and who would want to miss reading that?" Hinton had no time for the idea that adults shouldn't be reading books written for teen-agers or children. "If you enjoy reading something, read it."

The Y.A. debate has lately broadened into a discussion about the portrayal of adulthood in American culture. A. O. Scott's essay on the subject for the *Times* last month traced our national resistance to grownup responsibilities all the way back to the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain. Like Huck Finn, many of the young men in Hinton's books are without proper parental supervision. The adults in her fiction are alcoholics, drug addicts, or simply absent. Scott quotes the critic Leslie Fiedler:

the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid “civilization,” which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility.

While evasion and violence are recurring motifs in Hinton's books, several of her novels end with the young men accepting and benefitting from adult responsibilities. When I asked Hinton about this, she said, “like every other teen-ager, I was sure the adults had no idea what was going on. I didn't know how adults thought. I didn't ‘get’ them, so it was easier for me to leave them out.”

Hinton was herself a high-school student when she began writing “The Outsiders.” The novel, she told me, grew out of her dissatisfaction with the way teen-age life was being portrayed in the books she read. “There was only a handful of books having teen-age protagonists: Mary Jane wants to go to the prom with the football hero and ends up with the boy next door and has a good time anyway. That didn't ring true to my life. I was surrounded by teens and I couldn't see anything going on in those books that had anything to do with real life.” She remembers drawing inspiration from an eclectic range of titles, including “Gone with the Wind,” Shirley Jackson's “The

Haunting of Hill House," "Great Expectations," Will James's cowboy books, and the science-fiction stories of Harlan Ellison and Ray Bradbury. (An essay Dale Peck wrote for the *Times* in 2007 does a great job of delineating all those influences.) Many of the books and stories that Hinton mentions were originally written for adults but have since become favorites among teen-age readers.

"The Outsiders" and its successors also owed a great deal to the movies Hinton was watching, including "Rebel Without a Cause" and "West Side Story." Four of Hinton's novels have been adapted into film, two of them ("The Outsiders" and "Rumble Fish") by Francis Ford Coppola, with whom she co-wrote the screenplays. Hinton told me that the making of those movies ranks "among the best experiences" of her life, and that she still likes Coppola's interpretations. "One of the things that makes the movies work is that the boys were very close to the same age as the characters," she noted. Nowadays, filmmakers "would be casting [adults] to play these little kids."

Hinton hasn't written a book with a teen-age protagonist since 1988's "Taming the Star Runner." "It's very difficult for me to get in the mind-set again," she told me. "I'm pretty much out of that now. I don't get suicidal over a bad haircut anymore." She still writes screenplays, though, and has just completed one based on her collection "Some of Tim's Stories." She is also a devoted fan of the television show "Supernatural." She visits the show's set twice a year, where she is welcomed as a muse and presiding eminence. "There's a ton of fans of my work that are fans of that show," she remarked. "There's some kind of connection going on there."

Hinton doesn't read the young-adult books being published today. "I don't know what the hot topic is. I don't care what's trending. I read mostly nonfiction, as a matter of fact." She expressed concern for the genre's focus on female readers. "I do feel that the boys are getting left out. Girls will read boys' books, but boys won't read girls' books. If you're writing for a girl, you've got most of the audience on your side anyway." Though

she doesn't read Y.A. books, she keeps an eye on the market that she helped create.

"There is so much variety in young adult now," she said. "Any writer who gives a reader a pleasurable experience is doing every other writer a favor, because it will make the reader want to read other books. I am all for it."

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*Jon Michaud is the author of "When Tito Loved Clara."*

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