Event Outline: The Craft of Writing Intersectional Identities in Young Adult Literature

The moderator will make some brief remarks about the topic and the why of the panel. The moderator will ask the panelists to introduce themselves. The moderator will then ask prepared questions of the panelists, digging into our topic, and she will also keep the discussion on target. The last 15 minutes will be reserved for Q&A.

Participant Biographies

Jen Ferguson (moderator) (she/her) is Métis and white, an activist, a feminist, an auntie, and an accomplice with a PhD. She believes writing, teaching and beading are political acts. Her debut YA novel, The Summer of Bitter and Sweet, is out now. She is an Assistant Professor in English at Coe College.

Adib Khorram (he/him) is the award-winning author of books for readers of all ages, including Darius the Great Is Not Okay, Darius the Great Deserves Better, Kiss & Tell, The Breakup Lists, Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story, and Bijan Always Wins.
Adrianne White (she/her) is an interdisciplinary writer and editor. Her work has appeared in Smithsonian Magazine, Fusion, PBS Parent, Temporary Art Review, and the young adult anthologies All Signs Point to Yes and The (Other) F Word: A Celebration of the Fat and Fierce.

Anna Meriano (she/her) is the author of the Love Sugar Magic series, This Is How We Fly, and It Sounds Like This. She works as a writing teacher in Houston, Texas.

Hayley Dennings (she/her) is a queer, Black woman from the Bay Area, and a French and English graduate from Loyola Marymount University. Her debut novel, BITTERSWEET POISON, a sapphic historical fantasy set during the Harlem Renaissance, releases from Sourcebooks Fire in the fall of 2024.

Moderator’s Opening Statements

Welcome to The Craft of Writing Intersectional Identities in Young Adult Literature.

A few reminders before we begin:
- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

KidLit has embraced expanding representation so that characters in stories now better reflect the demographics of our cities and schools. But how do you successfully craft characters whose identities are intersectional and oftentimes multiply so while still telling a story with a great plot and excellent pacing? This panel will consider the craft of writing characters in YA, in both short stories and novels, whose identities are shaped by more than one marginalization.
A little background on me. I’m the author of *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*, *Those Pink Mountain Nights*, and the forthcoming A Constellation of Minor Bears, all published by Heartdrum / HarperCollins.

One thing I constantly hear about my books from reviewers and readers is that “there’s a lot going on here.” That’s maybe the less nice way to say that my books are about a lot of real things that today’s teenager experience.

When I was young I didn’t have the language to express who I was in so many ways, especially queer words, but also words to describe my white skin and my Indigenous and white settler ancestry.

One of the words I was missing was “intersectionality.” Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, it was a legal concept that didn’t travel very far at first and now is a concept that gets used a lot.

**Moderators Questions**

Q1: Let’s start with building characters whose identities are shaped by more than one marginalization. How do you go about building a character? What are your main concerns? Does your approach change when a character is doubly or triply marginalized? Does it change if you
are writing a short story vs. a novel? Does your approach change if you have multiple main characters whose identities are formed by more than one marginalization? What about side characters? How do you do their identities justice when they don’t get as much space on the page?

Adib: Years ago, I was privileged to listen to a talk by the amazing Sharon Draper, and I walked out of that talk with a line scrawled in big letters at the top of my notes: *We’re not writing characters, we’re writing people.* So the humanity of the people I write about is always my primary concern, and I let that guide me in whatever research I need to do, whatever empathy gaps I need to fill, and whatever narrative choices I need to make. From a craft standpoint, I tend to operate organically, which is a facetious way of saying I write by the seat of my pants, learning about the characters as they face the challenges of the story. All that said, I do keep a copy of Kathryn Pauly Morgan’s *Intersecting Axes of Privilege, Domination, and Oppression* close at hand.

Adrianne: I mostly stay mindful that characters are supposed to feel like people. There’s no stock set of “marginalized” characteristics that you can apply, nor should you try. I’ll start with bullet lists of character info, things that I use to inform the writing as I go. Most of those details may never become part of the story, but they are definitely present in my mind as I write.
Anna: I draw character inspiration from the people around me, so when I’m building a character I don’t necessarily approach the process differently based on their intersecting marginalizations, but there definitely was a process where I had to become more aware of my expectations and biases to realize the full spectrum of characters available to me. I have heard many writers discuss their early writing and how most of their characters were white because they were used to reading about white characters, and I relate to that on some level, but even more so I find that same thread in my writing where characters I wrote who were clearly displaying neurodivergent and queer traits but who were straight and neurotypical on the page because I hadn’t considered the possibility of them being anything else. (There is a super embarrassing example of this that I might share if time permits). Looking back at the books I loved as a kid, I often see those same quiet hints of marginalization peeking through the normalized text. So I am excited that I have the opportunity to be more aware of why my characters act the way they do, what experiences shaped their behaviors, speech patterns, and beliefs, because it makes me better at writing them.

Hayley: My main concern when creating characters is just making sure they feel as real as possible. I like to plan their backstories and their ghosts (the things that haunt them, traumas, etc.) because I find that
helps me understand the way they behave and therefore shape the story according to their choices. My process is the same whether writing a short story or a novel and if my characters have multiple marginalizations. It's definitely more difficult with side characters who don’t have as much page time because I like to give their identities as much nuance as possible. But it does help having them interact with the main characters and relate over various aspects of their identities.

Jen: I cheated when I wrote a short story. Since the short story features characters from Those Pink Mountain Nights, I let their depth and breadth exist in the novel form and not be explored as heavily in the short story. The short story has a more focused conflict (Indigenous language learning and being kinda crap at it) and doesn’t actually need all the nuance the novel does. But readers who have read the novel will bring added context on identity and conflict to the short story. But again, I cheated.

Q2: Okay, once you’ve built a complex, three-dimensional character how do you handle their conflicts? How do you make sure that your book is addressing all of the things that your character’s identity invokes? Or is doing this not so very important? Does your approach to a character’s identity in the conflict/plot of a story change based on the
genre you’re writing? Does it change based on the length of your story? Does it change for other reasons?

**Adib:** I don’t think the text owes any reader that it addresses every aspect of a character’s identity; what it *does* owe is a coherent approach. In that sense, genre does have an impact. If a story is set in our world, have I been accurate in representing how power works? Have I been deliberate and consistent when I’ve chosen to deviate and depict a more inclusive world? If the story is set in another world, have I been honest and thoughtful in my construction of where power lies and what it does? But just as with all people, we’re not always grappling with every part of ourselves, all the time, all at once; each event in our lives strikes some parts of us more strongly than others.

**Adrianne:** When drafting, I let identity take up as much room as it needs to. Like in real life, all aspects of our identities aren’t always present, and even when they are present, they may not be outwardly perceived. My goal is to write characters with complexity and compelling layers, who move through the contemporary world, sometimes confidently, mostly clumsily, grappling with double consciousness and the perpetual perniciousness of being othered.
**Anna:** In spite of what publishers sometimes expect from marginalized voices, I have not tended to write books where the character’s marginalization is the central conflict. I consider those to be the “Identity 101”-type books, and I have been very lucky to be able to follow classic “101” books rather than having to trailblaze myself. My main goal is to make sure conflicts arise in ways that make sense for who the character is. Sometimes you know that you need a character to react a certain way or feel a certain emotion for Plot Reasons, but it’s always going to hit better if their emotions connect to their experience of the world. (if this isn’t too long already, I would add that I’m thinking about certain scenes that I could not get right until I stopped putting lines that I thought sounded good or showed what I wanted to show and focused on lines that the character would actually say. Sometimes that also means speaking to a friend or family member to understand their mental landscape better.)

**Hayley:** I don’t think my approach to writing my characters’ identity ever really changes regardless of story format, length, genre, etc. Their identity and conflicts are some of the most important parts of writing a story—I genuinely believe I won’t have a good book if my characters aren’t developed enough. How much their identities influence the actual plot is usually more dependent on the genre, though. Whenever I’m writing historical fiction, I’m aware of how the environment is a product
of the time period and how that would affect my characters’ ability to present themselves. When I’m writing fantasy, where I’m creating societal structures and norms, things will be a lot different. All that’s to say my approach is more or less the same for every book because representation of these identities is always incredibly important to me. however the way their identities end up interacting with the story might be different.

**Jen:** I agree with what Adib is saying. The only thing I might add is that I find it’s harder for me, someone who writes YA Contemporary, to get my word count down because I feel like I owe my characters their full humanity—and when one or more than one characters has a multiply marginalized identity, it means that their story often has more layers. Or at least, in order for me to give my characters what they need, it takes up more space. That’s where I’m at now in my craft.

Q3: Can we talk about pacing? It seems to be the thing that so many writers struggle with. But is it a bigger issue with characters who are multiply marginalized? If so, how do you deal with character depth and breadth vs. pacing?

**Adib:** Bold of you to assume I know what I’m doing with regards to pacing. That sounds more like my editor’s problem. In all seriousness,
though, I think this is when I as a writer am served by the time I spent studying the craft of screenwriting. In film, every scene needs to be doing multiple things at once: moving along the plot, revealing character, introducing or complicating information. I do my best to adopt this ethos: let every scene do more than one thing at a time.

**Adrianne:** I edit as I write so I spend a good chunk of time identifying places where I can use action, dialogue, or scene cuts to move things along. Having characters with multiple identity intersections doesn’t make pacing any more or less important, but you can be of greater service to story if you pay close attention to pacing tools and utilize more than one at a time. nn

**Anna:** Haha, I am also an overwrite with an iffy sense of pacing! I agree with the general writing hack of having scenes serve several purposes at once, and I usually do sentence-level condensing as well. I guess I also think that characters (especially side characters) can sometimes be deepened even more with quick comments and unfinished glimpses than with full exposition. I’m thinking of a line in *To All The Boys I Loved Before* by Jenny Han where a character says “My mom’s okay with [my identity]. My dad’s……. Mostly okay with it.” A wealth of character depth in just that hesitation.
**Hayley:** Pacing is always a tough battle for me because I’m a big fan of dense internal monologues to really portray a character’s thoughts and how they interact with the world around them. It’s definitely a part of my characters having multiple, complex identities. So the challenge comes in because those extra details might slow down a story, but I think I manage it well with micro tensions on a more scene by scene or sentence level.

**Jen:** Once my story structure is set and I’ve made sure it’s as tight as it can be, I like to think about micro-pacing or what I can do at the sentence level to tighten things. Usually, this means that I set myself a goal of x number of words I need to cut. While it might be cutting 3-5 words a page only, I’m convinced that the overall effect of 900-1500 words less is contributing to tighter pacing. I do this before I send my book to my editor and during developmental edits. I also trust my editor when we come to line edits and she’s still suggesting I can cut more. I am an overwriter as well as someone whose characters have complex, layered identities. So, this is a major challenge for me.

Q4: What other craft elements (for example, dialogue, setting, subtext, internal dialogue, narration, symbols, etc.) do you find help you do the work of writing intersectional identities in YA? And how do you use that element to strengthen your characters?
Adib: I’m always writing toward the moment in the story where the subtext becomes the text, and what I’ve found is that when writing a marginalized character, what readers familiar with that identity consider “text” and “subtext” can vary wildly from how unfamiliar readers react. This to me is where a lot of tension lies: which reader do I want to favor? Which experience do I most want to honor?

Adrianne: Writers should use whatever best serves their stories. I’m a fan of setting, dialogue, and subtext. But I started writing before I even knew what craft was, so while learning about these elements gave me more storytelling tools, I’m also mindful that the “rules” were not created by people like me, and the originators didn’t intend for me to use them, so I remix them liberally.

Anna: I am a one-trick pony and that trick is dialogue. HOWEVER, I probably don’t give enough credit to how much Texas as a setting breathes life into the experiences of my characters. All my books so far have been set in Texas, and since I’m drawing from the people around me, it just makes sense. I have definitely gotten comments about how my books showcase a “surprisingly diverse” version of Texas, but the truth is that that’s the world I see. (shoutout to Houston being the #1 most diverse city in the US!)
Hayley: I love using allegories and symbols that force readers to look at the text closely. Subtext is also super great for that same purpose. Not spelling things out, or over explaining I think can lead to a stronger story especially when writing intersectional identities. I also believe that everything in a story must matter and things as “small” as short dialogue scenes need to have a significant purpose in either pushing the plot forward, or adding character development.

Jen: The “I teach fiction writing to college students” answer is, yes, obviously, use all the other tools to do multiple things for you. That if your dialogue isn’t doing more than one thing for you as a storyteller, it’s probably not really strong dialogue. Or if your setting isn’t opening up your characters, you’ve picked the wrong setting.

Q5: Who are the writers who do multiply marginalized characters in compelling stories best? Can you recommend a recently published (last 5 years please) YA book or short story anthology that will help our audience read more stories that have a great handle on the craft of writing intersectional identities in young adult literature?
Adib: Julian Winters is one of the masters of this. His latest book, *As You Walk On By*, is quite possibly my favorite of his (that’s published, at least…keep an eye out for his upcoming releases and his backlist too). His characters are rich, complex, and deeply human. (And incidentally, he and I have talked about this very subject before, and we have WILDLY different approaches. There’s truly no One Way to write.)

Adrianne: Anthologies are unsung heroes when it comes to discovering new-to-you writers coalescing around central themes. Recommending my collection, *All Signs Point to Yes*, co-edited with Cam Montgomery and g. haron davis, *Transmogrify!:14 Fantastical Tales of Trans Magic*, edited by g. haron davis, and *Take the Mic: Fictional Stories of Everyday Resistance*, edited by Bethany Morrow.

Anna: Yes, definitely everyone on this panel! Amanda Joy is another author who comes to mind immediately, particularly her short stories in anthologies like *Game On, Firsts and Lasts*, and *cool. awkward. black*. And Jonny Garza Villa and Sonora Reyes both write amazing queer Chinanx characters. And Jasminne Mendez’s book *Aniana Del Mar Jumps In!*

Hayley: *We Deserve Monuments* by Jas Hammonds, *Ophelia After All* by Racquel Marie, and *All My Rage* by Sabaa Tahir are all incredible
books about resilience and self determination while growing up as a teenager with intersecting identities. I have not stopped thinking about these books since I read them.

**Jen:** I’m going to do the work of saying, if you’re not already familiar with the work of these wonderful panelists, it’s time to start reading them. Truly. I love how Anna does this in her MG and YA; I appreciate Adrianne’s short stories/editing projects; the world needs to get ready for Hayley’s debut, *This Ravenous Fate*; and Adib has a backlist of works that do this and a brand new YA, *The Breakup List*, that’s out this April. Get reading!

**Audience Q&A**

**Resources for BIPOC, Queer, Disabled and Otherly Marginalized Writers**

[De Canon Blog “Writers of Color Discussing Craft: an Invisible Archive”](#)

[The Critical Response Process](#)

[Writing the Other Resource Page](#)

[Writing With Colour Tumblr](#)

[We Need Diverse Books](#)
The Brown Bookshelf
LGBTQ Reads
Disability In Kid Lit
Las Musas Books
SCBWI Resources
MFA vs. YA: How MFA Programs Can Discourage YA Writers
Why Queer TV is Getting Worse
Melanin in YA Resource List
Kweli, The Colour of Children’s Literature Annual Conference
Pre-Published KidLit Writer Resources
DivCon Panels