

YA Authors who Give Back, From John Green to Ellen Hopkins

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Left to right: Ventana Sierra chief executive Kelley Foutz with resident Alyssa Rowley, author Ellen Hopkins, who is Foutz's mother, and resident Pamela Rhine.

Photo by David Calvert for SLJ.

Judy Blume is not a woman with a lot of free time on her hands, yet she serves on the board of directors for the National Coalition Against Censorship. Linzi Glass, author of *Ruby Red* (Penguin, 2008), has won awards for her philanthropic work and is a cofounder of the Forgotten Dog Foundation, dedicated to rescuing and rehabilitating dogs in need. Cammie McGovern, whose YA debut novel *Say What You Will* (HarperCollins) publishes this month, is also the founder of Whole Children, an organization offering programs for young people with special needs and disabilities.

These are only a few examples of the philanthropic endeavors that young adult authors have embraced. They support charities, start nonprofits, and donate their talent as well as their time to numerous causes. Other writers who give include Deborah Ellis, a peace activist and author of the bestselling "Breadwinner" series (Groundwood), about a girl in Afghanistan who disguises herself as a boy under Taliban rule. Ellis donates most of her royalties to charities, including Street Kids International and UNICEF.

Author A. S. King, known for *Everybody Sees the Ants* (Little, Brown, 2011) and editor of *Dear Bully: 70 Authors Tell Their Stories* (HarperCollins, 2011), has traveled the country to engage with teens and adults about issues such as bullying, drinking and driving, and drug use. Lady Gaga got behind King's message last year, when she made an appearance at the St. Paul Public Library during "Read Brave," the library's community-wide event that embraced *Everybody Sees the Ants* to raise awareness about bullying.

Melissa Walker, who wrote *Ashes to Ashes* (HarperCollins, 2014), encourages readers to celebrate their wonderful, awkward years by submitting photos to her "Before You Were Hot" project. On a larger scale, YA superstar John Green, author of *Looking for Alaska* (2005) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012, both Dutton) and a prolific vlogger, codirects, with his brother, Hank Green, the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, which raises and contributes money to charitable causes.

The altruism generated in this community goes far beyond the writers: activism extends to their fans, as well. Much of the YA world, from publishers to tweens on Twitter, inspires, encourages, and supports altruism. Here is just a sampling of some of the good things these authors do.

“IT HURTS TO SEE KIDS IN NEED”

Ellen Hopkins is best known for her novels in verse, including *Crank* (2004), *Glass* (2007), and *Fallout* (2010, all S. & S.), that take on gritty, dark, and difficult topics, such as prostitution, drugs, and sexual abuse. As a *New York Times* bestselling author, Hopkins does many school visits, during which her readers share their often-heartrending stories with her. “It hurts to see kids in need....a lot of their stories are ‘I don’t know where to go. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to find help,’” said Hopkins.

Inspired by such encounters, in 2012, Hopkins and her daughter Kelly Foutz launched Ventana Sierra, a nonprofit organization that gives young people who have aged out of the foster care system a place to live. Their first home opened in Carson City, NV, in June 2013. Since then, they have experienced successes as well as failures. Residents struggled with rules about drugs and drinking. Toxic romantic relationships lured some girls away. Not all residents have been willing to work or go to school. “You start with a big idea,” said Hopkins. “And then you have to fine-tune it as you go.”

Nineteen-year-old Alyssa Rowley is one of the beneficiaries of this “fine-tuning” and of Ventana Sierra’s swift growth from one house to two homes and an apartment. Despite graduating with honors, Rowley found herself homeless after high school. Her parents were doing drugs again, and her dad had sabotaged her chance to go to college. About four months ago, the Reno native moved into a Ventana Sierra apartment. Now, she is looking forward to studying business or child psychology this summer. “[Ventana Sierra] gave me a really good opportunity,” said Rowley. “They opened the doors for me to go to college and to provide a better life for me and my sisters.”



Authors T Cooper and Allison Glock-Cooper (right) post “unselfies” on their site, in which people to express their emotions through pictures of things they see around them rather than focusing on themselves.

Photos courtesy of T Cooper and Allison Glock-Cooper. “You Are Beautiful” unselfie by Vicky Beal.

PROMOTING EMPATHY AND ANTI-BULLYING

Like Ventana Sierra, the We Are Changers campaign is still in its early days. Authors T Cooper and Allison Glock-Cooper launched this “empathy project” in late 2013, shortly before the husband-and-wife team published the debut novel that inspired it, *Changers: Book One: Drew* (Akashic), in February 2014.

The couple’s initiative to promote empathy is a reaction to studies about the cultural decline of this trait. It’s also a response to the plugged-in world, with all its cruelties and narcissism, which their two teen daughters are navigating. “You do feel a lot what they go through on a daily basis,” Cooper said, “and that changes your emphasis and your worldview, naturally.”

The We Are Changers website is a forum where visitors can take polls and watch videos of celebrities whom the couple has identified as “changers among us.” The site also includes a gallery of “unselfies,” pictures with short captions that convey emotions. The April unselfie winner was a picture of a sign reading “You are Beautiful” with the words “feeling beautiful starts from inside.” Another snapshot showed a terminally ill pet in a happy moment. Cooper and Glock-Cooper say that unselfies are a response to the proliferation of selfies, self-portraits taken with cell phones. “It’s literally the physical idea of turning the camera around and considering what life is like for other people,” said Glock-Cooper.

Bullying and self-esteem are important issues to many teen lit writers. Jay Asher, the author of *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Penguin, 2007), a novel about a depressed teen who commits suicide, is touring the country as part of Penguin Young Readers's "50 States Against Bullying" campaign. Heather Brewer, author of "The Chronicles of Vladimir Tod" series (Dutton), also speaks nationally about bullying. And last June, writer e.E. Charlton-Trujillo undertook a self-funded, cross-country book tour to talk with at-risk youth about themes from her novel *Fat Angie* (Candlewick, 2013). Several writers joined Charlton-Trujillo at some of her stops or appeared in *At-Risk Summer*, a documentary about her trip. They included King, along with Cecil Castellucci, author of *Tin Star* (Roaring Brook, 2013); Andrew Smith, whose most recent book is *Grasshopper Jungle* (Dutton, 2014); and Meg Medina, who wrote *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (Candlewick, 2013).

Writers concerned about teen mental health—including Nancy Garden, author of *Annie on My Mind* (Farrar, 1982); Brian Katcher, known for *Almost Perfect* (Delacorte, 2009); Robin Reardon, author of *A Question of Manhood* (Kensington, 2010); and Jordan Taylor, who wrote *Wonder Dogs* (Reel Dogs, 2009)—contributed stories to *Awake* (Cheyenne, 2011), an anthology compiled by editor Tracey Pennington. Book profits benefit the Trevor Project, an organization dedicated to ending suicide among LGBTQ youth.

WRITING THAT PROMPTS GOOD WORKS

Sometimes books alone will galvanize good deeds. A significant case in point is the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA). Founded in 2005 by Andrew Slack, an ardent fan of J. K. Rowling's fantasy novels, the HPA is a bighearted force to be reckoned with. HPA members organize to battle "real-world horcruxes" (in Rowling's titles, "horcruxes" are nefarious objects that contain parts of the evil Lord Voldemort's soul) that threaten the global population, from illiteracy to homophobia and genocide. Their undertakings are ambitious. In January 2010, the HPA joined the organization Partners in Health (PIH) to send five cargo planes of supplies to earthquake-ravaged Haiti.

Rowling is also known for her generosity. In 2012, she was scratched from *Forbes* magazine's billionaires list because her charitable giving and taxes knocked her down to the millionaires club. While members of the HPA draw motivation from the novels, not the woman who created them, Rowling herself has spoken about imagination and social transformation. "We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already," she said during a 2008 Harvard commencement speech. "We have the power to imagine better."

Like HPA members, John and Hank Green's Nerdfighters operate independently from their source of inspiration. Via forums and blog posts, Nerdfighters (Nerdfighters.ning.com) encourage one another to volunteer, champion causes (including the Greens' Foundation to Decrease World Suck), and provide support to fellow "nerds." The Green brothers' fans take on global warming, poverty, and human rights violations, but they also tackle bad days and loneliness. One post in the "Decreasing World Suck" forum asks members to share favorite jokes, and another requests that Nerdfighters send cheering notes to a member's friend who is fighting cancer.

Among organizations that authors have created to support literacy, a standout is 826 National, a network of eight nonprofit tutoring centers established by Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (S. & S., 2000). YA literati who serve on 826 boards include Lois Lowry, author of the "Giver Quartet" (Houghton Harcourt); M. T. Anderson, known for *Feed* (Candlewick, 2002); and Susan Shreve, who wrote *The Lovely Shoes* (Scholastic, 2011). ReaderGirlz is another organization founded by wordsmiths. This literacy and social media organization, which won the National Book Foundation's Innovations in Reading Prize, was launched by authors Dia Calhoun, who wrote *Aria of the Sea* (Macmillan, 2003); Janet Lee Carey, author of *The Beast of Noor* (S. & S., 2011); Justina Chen, author of *North of Beautiful* (Little, Brown, 2009); and Lorie Ann Grover, who wrote *Hold Me Tight* (S. & S., 2007).



Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) members and students at the New Beginnings Charter School in Brooklyn, NY. The school library benefited from an HPA book drive.

Courtesy of HPA.

THE COMPASSION FACTOR

All of this good work raises a question: Are writers and readers just more empathetic? An October 2013 study published in *Science* found that “reading literary fiction may hone adults’ ToM [Theory of Mind], a complex and critical social capacity.” In non-geek speak, this means that psychologists determined that reading literary fiction increases empathy among adults.

Though studies have not yet been conducted on the effects that reading YA literature may have on empathy, the community’s authors resolutely believe in fiction’s ability to promote and strengthen understanding. In a speech Green recently delivered at his alma mater, Kenyon College, he spoke about “Thoughts on How to Make Things and Why” and his conviction that reading and writing make better people of us all. “Through story, I can imagine others more generously and complexly,” he told a full auditorium. “I can glimpse the richness of their inner lives.”

Slack from the HPA has also spoken to the power of imagined narrative to inspire good. “What if we gave our teenagers the opportunity to imagine themselves as the heroes that they have grown up watching, rather than treating their precious minds as nothing more than a way to line the pockets of some CEO?” he asked in “Cultural Acupuncture and a Future for Social Change,” a 2010 *Huffington Post* piece about the HPA.

Slack is on to something, according to a publication released by the Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth, *Best Practices in Youth Philanthropy*. “Youth philanthropy programs provide authentic opportunities for young people to develop skills and knowledge that will make them better students and citizens in the present,” wrote the study’s authors, Pam Garza and Pam Stevens. Such involvement, Garza and Stevens maintain, will “increase the chances that they will continue to play active roles in the community in the future.”

In addition, “having friends that volunteer regularly is the primary factor influencing a young person’s volunteering habits,” according to a 2012 survey from DoSomething.org, which encourages young people to embrace social change. If a teen’s friends are justice-loving Nerdfighters or wizard-worshipping activists, she’ll likely want to “imagine” herself as a hero, too.

DOING GOOD DESPITE THE CHALLENGES

Though the number of U.S. nonprofits increased 25 percent between 2001 and 2011, to number around 2.3 million in 2010, “the amount of money coming into the sector has pretty much stayed the same,” said Sandra Miniutti, vice president of marketing and CFO for Charity Navigator, America’s largest charity rating service. “So more and more charities are fighting over the same level of contributions.” One percent of charities draw 86 percent of funding—which makes it tough for new and smaller nonprofits to get off the ground.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT DO GOOD

826 Valencia A nonprofit organization supporting students ages six to 18 with literacy and writing skills and to helping teachers inspire student writing.

Before You Were Hot Devoted to the belief that “every swan was once an ugly duckling.”

While working for a cause can be extremely time-consuming, authors feel that the reward is worth it. Hopkins falls into bed each night exhausted and daydreams about finding time for her work in progress. “Man, it’s like ‘Whoah! I need to go on a writing retreat,’” she said.

However, Hopkins knows that she can rely on her author friends and her publisher to donate resources and time for Ventana Sierra fund-raising endeavors. “It’s crazy the support I’ve gotten. I feel like [members of] the YA community are so supportive of each other....I’m blown away,” she said.

Among those who’ve reached a certain level of achievement, there’s also a desire to pay their good fortune forward. “At this age and stage in my life, you start to reflect on what you’ve done,” said 45-year-old Glock-Cooper. “I’ve built a nice career, and I’ve had so many blessings and great things happen. I wanted to give back concretely.”

Chelsey Philpot teaches writing at Boston University. Her novel, Even in Paradise (HarperCollins), publishes in October.

The Forgotten Dog Foundation

Committed to rescuing, rehabilitating, and finding homes for stray, abused, and abandoned dogs.

Foundation to Decrease World Suck

This all-volunteer organization has the sole purpose of raising funds to be donated to other nonprofit organizations.

Harry Potter Alliance

A coalition of fandom leaders and members who are passionate about the power of story to inspire and bring about social change.

National Coalition Against Censorship

Promotes freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression, and opposes censorship in all its forms.

Nerdfighters Increases social awareness, while cross-supporting the Foundation to Decrease World Suck.

The Pirate Tree A collective of children’s and young adult writers interested in children’s literature and social justice issues.

ReaderGirlz Promotes teen literacy and corresponding social service.

A.S. King	Authors & Illustrators	Byline	cover feature	Ellen Hopkins	Harry Potter Alliance	John Green	Nerdfighters
philanthropy	Public Services	SLJ_2014_Jun					
