

# How a school library responds to a #BookTok world

*By Lauren Kyte*

## Snapshot

Lauren Kyte, a valued SLAV member and Head of Library at Salesian College, reflects on the library role in selection and curation. The influence of booktok, the role of policy, and the needs of students are discussed as are the professional sensibilities and care that library staff bring to their role.

It's been a few years now since I've referred to myself as an English teacher, even longer since I last oversaw the text selection process. But no matter how much time has passed, I'm still critical of the choices that were made. Were the texts progressive enough? Were they interesting? Whose voices did we privilege in the selections? Did the texts promote, or kill, our students' love of reading?

At its best, text selection is a deliberate and democratic process. At its worst, text selection is a panicked reversion to tired favourites the day before the book list is due. Regardless of one's approach to text selection, there remains some sense of guidance and purpose to the process. At a minimum, the chosen text must relate to its summative assessment. Teachers then consider literary merit, exposure to themes, representations, voice, as well as the potential for reader engagement.

**At its best, text selection is a deliberate and democratic process. At its worst, text selection is a panicked reversion to tired favourites...**

All this to say that there is a framework to text selection which both protects and provides for the English teacher. Audio visual texts are determined by formal classification guidelines; written texts can be vetted by asking if any school community stakeholder might find the material offensive, controversial, or obscene. All these parameters could be grouped under the handy umbrella of HMMPR – How Might My Principal React?

It's this sense of certainty that I've missed in my role as a newly minted Head of Library. While the English text selection process was onerous when choosing a dozen books, at least I had a sense of clarity about my position. Now, overseeing the curation of approximately 17,000 texts, the moral questions of selection versus censorship have tested my sense of duty as an educator.

I place a lot of the blame on Colleen Hoover.

## The new age of 'New Adult'

Please don't mistake me; I am *thrilled* to be working as a teacher librarian after over a decade in English teaching and leadership. This change has driven me to explore new ways of supporting student literacy, allowing me to tackle 'readicide' from a position adjacent to the English faculty. I am especially fortunate that my school library is well-resourced, and that we can respond to student requests, and trends, as they emerge in the literary space. My exceptional colleagues have their finger on the pulse, ordering any Netflix tie-in as its announced (*Stranger Things*, *Outer Banks*, and *Heartstopper* proving unsurprisingly popular). We regularly create displays boldly declaring that **#BookTok Made Me Borrow It!** to capitalise on student interest and recreational reading habits.

And yet it was #BookTok that acted as catalyst for my existential lending crisis. With her prequel *It Starts with Us* due for release in October 2022, Colleen Hoover (or 'CoHo' to her legions of online fans) was engaging in an online promotion onslaught.

**But where does this leave library staff who have a moral obligation to provide access to texts as well as a duty of care towards their students?**

Student requests for the origin text *It Ends with Us* were coming thick and fast, and even more students were bringing copies from home for independent reading. A text with graphic examples of domestic violence and explicit sexual content was being read extensively by Year 7 and 8 students; and this was outside of our control and influence. They weren't getting the book from our library – but they were asking to.

Realistically, this concern did not 'start' or 'end with' Hoover's texts but can be applied to an emerging genre referred to as 'New Adult'. Different to 'Young Adult' – whose readership of twelve- to eighteen-year-olds covers the gamut of secondary school students – the 'New Adult' genre targets emerging adult readers of eighteen to twenty-five. These texts feature older protagonists and address issues of leaving home, career decisions, negotiating sexuality and identity. Shaun Stephen (n.d.) from the University of Queensland distinguishes between the two genres using a nature analogy, 'YA is the depiction of identity as a newly emerged butterfly, emerging from a chrysalis. NA, on the other hand, follows that same butterfly as it explores life: taking the very first few flights, mating and finding a new home.' Less graceful critics might refer to NA as 'YA sexed-up'.

The issue for us, as librarians and educators, is an official lack of distinction between these genres – particularly from an advertising standpoint. Most booksellers (both online and in store) are not actively marketing the 'New Adult' genre. Many haven't even recognised its existence. Consequently, authors such as Hoover, Anna Todd, and Sarah J. Maas are being carelessly promoted as age and stage appropriate for YA readers – especially via social media platforms such as TikTok. Parents are buying their 12-year-old *It Ends with Us* because of the non-descript

floral cover, the promotional work of Big W, and their child's insistence. But where does this leave library staff who have a moral obligation to provide access to texts as well as a duty of care towards their students?

## Not censorship, but selection

In 1953, American librarian and scholar Lester Asheim wrote the seminal piece titled *Not Censorship But Selection*. His work contrasted the intentions and actions of an autocratic 'censor' with the democratic 'selector'. Through his writing, one recognises the tension experienced by librarians – when do the choices made during catalogue curation cross the line from selection into censorship? It is perhaps unsurprising that a piece written at the height of McCarthyism should continue to be quoted verbatim by the American Library Association.

Asheim noted that a librarian will always apply subjective standards when purchasing texts. He suggests that librarians select their collections by interrogating the intent of the author, their sincerity of purpose, the literary excellence of the text, and the presumed effect upon the reader. In short, a librarian has the same sufficiently subjective, vague, and imprecise reasoning to reject books that censors also wield. But they shouldn't attempt to do so.

Instead, Asheim encourages the librarian to act as a selector saying, 'if there is anything good in this book let us try to keep it' (1953, para. 22). The primary good of texts like *It Ends with Us* is its role as a gateway book. In our experience, many of the young students requesting the title were reluctant female readers who had stopped reading recreationally when they entered secondary school. They had become 'too cool' for reading, but the ubiquitous popularity of Hoover on social media meant that this book was socially acceptable for them. We then needed to find a way to encourage their renewed interest in reading, while still meeting our duty of care as educators. This demanded a compromise in our library's borrowing practices: thus, our **Senior Fiction collection** was developed.

**Framing our approach in the most positive of terms, we have required parents to engage with their child's reading habits.**

## The impact of senior fiction

Previously, our Senior Fiction collection almost exclusively housed James Patterson, Karin Slaughter, and Liane Moriarty – it was a comparatively small selection of popular texts for staff to borrow from. In the wake of Hoover-mania and the New Age era, we have necessarily expanded the Senior Fiction collection to contain any book with thematic concerns or events that we don't want junior students to stumble across in their browsing. Borrowing from the Senior Fiction collection must be a considered and approved choice. Our stipulations are as follows:

- Students in Years 11 and 12 may borrow freely from the Senior Fiction collection. Students outside of these year levels must obtain written approval from a parent or guardian to borrow from this collection.
- Parents can provide approval via an online form, where they can offer either blanket borrowing permission or nominate a specific title from the Senior Fiction collection.
- The online permission form highlights some of the generic reasons why a text might be catalogued within Senior Fiction (including mature themes, explicit language, graphic scenes of a sexual or violent nature). The form also encourages parents to investigate the suitability of the chosen text for their child.

In introducing these loan requirements, we have endeavoured to strike the balance between censorship and selection. We have responded to student interest, recognised cultural shifts

**... we will continue  
to strengthen our  
selection processes  
with student wellbeing  
front-of-mind.**

in reading materials, while still meeting professional expectations for protecting student welfare. Framing our approach in the most positive of terms, we have required parents to engage with their child's reading habits. A critical view might suggest that we have deferred the role of 'censor' to the parent. I will gladly cop this criticism if it provokes a conversation about books around the family dinner table.

While the borrowing procedure has been easy to implement, what remains challenging is the process for determining which texts should enter the Senior Fiction collection. Currently, our cataloguing reflects Asheim's subjective standards. It's *'the vibe'*. For example, after reading (and loving) Craig Silvey's *Honeybee* I re-catalogued the novel to Senior Fiction. My thought process relied on the *presumed effect upon the reader*. I considered how the frequent and explicit discussion of suicide might impact on a vulnerable twelve-year-old – and I felt justified in the decision to implement some access restrictions. Be it labelled censorship, selection, or otherwise.

And my colleagues have all had similar experiences. Our library technicians' interest in Manga and Graphic Novels has resulted in the recent creation of a Senior Fiction collection particular to these genres. Texts such as *Tokyo Ghoul*, *Attack on Titan*, and *Jujutsu Kaisen* are most popular with our Year 7 and 8 cohorts, however they carry their own recommended reader ratings of 'Older Teen' and '16+'. As an adapted television series, *Attack on Titan* is rated MA15+. Consequently, we have used the Australian Classification Guidelines to support our cataloguing of these visual texts – particularly when assessing depictions of sex, violence, or drug use. As I write this piece, our collection development policies around Senior Fiction are fledgling but vital. And we will continue to strengthen our selection processes with student wellbeing front-of-mind.

Asheim concludes his work by stating that, 'the selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own' (1953, para. 30). While this may apply without question to

a public library and an adult readership, I would contend that a school library must place some protective caveats on the texts available to their readers. Our Senior Fiction collections represent our desire to have students borrow books which interest them – but at a time when they are emotionally and psychologically ready to experience them.

## References

Asheim, L. (1953). Not Censorship But Selection. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/NotCensorshipButSelection>.

Australian Classification. (n.d.). What do the ratings mean? <https://www.classification.gov.au/classification-ratings/what-do-ratings-mean>

Stephen, S. (n.d.). What is New Adult? University of Queensland: Alumni and Community. <https://alumni.uq.edu.au/what-new-adult#:~:text=In%20contrast%20with%20Young%20Adult,eighteen%20to%20twenty%2Dfive>.

**Editor's note:** This article is derived from a piece originally published as “*Young Adult, New Adult, Confused Adult: How a School Library Responds to a #BookTok World*” in VATE's journal *Idiom* Volume 59, No. 2, 2023.

**Lauren Kyte** is the Head of Library (Ciantar Learning Commons) at Salesian College Sunbury. A former Literacy Learning Specialist and Head of Curriculum, Lauren draws on her experience as an educator to actively promote and advocate for the library within the school community.