

Library chooses YA novel for One Book Charleston County

Converging on *Divergent*

by Amanda Merritt



Nelson Fitch

Veronica Roth wrote *Divergent* while she was an undergrad at Northwestern

Thought-provoking reading doesn't have to come from classic authors like Dickens and Steinbeck. Young adult literature, which continues to grow in popularity, has been producing intriguing works about society that appeal to a wide audience — a fact that the Charleston County Public Library hasn't missed. "Literature doesn't have to be dry and dull in order to 'matter,'" says Andria Amaral, the YA services manager for the library. "There is also value in fast-paced page-turners that help create a habit of reading for pleasure."

To help reach a young adult audience, the Charleston County Library has announced Veronica Roth's *Divergent* as the next novel in its One Book initiative, which encourages people throughout Charleston County to read and discuss a single book. "Young people are an important part of our community, but they hadn't really connected with our previous One Book selections, so this year we specifically looked for a title that would be interesting and relevant to all ages," says Amaral. "Young readers enjoy the fast-paced thrills and adventure, and those with more life experience appreciate the underlying struggles — individuality versus conformity, separation versus attachment — that are universal to the coming-of-age experience."

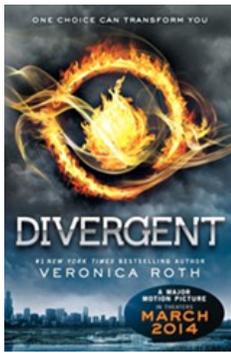
The many One Book events that take place this month, from lectures to scavenger hunts to book discussions, will be focused around Roth's novel, which chronicles a teenager who must hide her identity in a dystopian America. In the world of *Divergent* each person's life is characterized by a particular virtue, whether it be bravery, honesty, peacefulness, selflessness, or intelligence. The novel's protagonist, Tris, tests positive for multiple virtues, making her a threat to the government. When one faction decides to use its abilities against the others, Tris has to confront her fears about family, love, and identity to save the day.

The first two novels of the *Divergent* trilogy have sold more than 3 million copies since their release two years ago, and a movie version starring Shailene Woodley and Kate Winslet is in the works with a release date in early 2014.

Though young adult literature is nothing new, in the last 15 years the genre has transcended a strictly teenage audience, becoming more appealing to adults. The *Harry Potter* books, for example, have sold over 450 million copies and created a \$15 billion franchise, while the *Twilight* books have spawned fan clubs of middle-aged women and, most notably the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which started as *Twilight* fan fiction.

But what's so special about these books?

Margaret Stohl, co-author of the witchcraft-centric *Beautiful Creatures* and co-founder and panelist for Blue Bicycle Books' upcoming YALLFest, says the answer is simple. "I think teen readers look for truth anywhere they can find it. Emotional truths, world truths,



relationship truths. Truth in fiction. Adult readers are [looking for truth] too."

The truth that has been represented lately in YA fiction has been increasingly dystopian. A decade ago, *Harry Potter* was criticized for the dark subject matter in the later books. Nowadays, bestseller *The Hunger Games* describes a post-apocalyptic world where teens battle each other to the death. And *Divergent* details the undercutting of community uprising against the government by creating fierce competition between factions. These societies currently being depicted are admittedly much darker than a fantastical world threatened by an evil presence.

Though adult fiction is no stranger to dystopias, Stohl has heard some criticism from fellow authors about YA literature's tweaking of the theme. "As grim as any dystopia is, I don't believe a YA author will leave a reader without a glimmer, a tiny spark of hope," says Stohl. "The more complicated a place the world becomes, the more valuable that one spark can be for a reader. Adult authors can sometimes be more dismissive of hope. One adult sci-fi fantasy author said to me on a recent panel, 'That's how you talk to children.' I found it

interesting."

Amaral believes sharing these kinds of books in the One Book format will be beneficial for more than just young adults. "I hope that adults who read *Divergent* will use it to start conversations with the young people in their lives, not only about the themes and issues in the book, but about how those themes and issues relate to their own adolescence and path to adulthood."

The culmination of the One Book initiative will be YALLFest, a celebration of young adult literature on Nov. 9. Presented by Blue Bicycle Books, the yearly event will have panels, presentations, and book signings with 50 YA authors. Roth is scheduled to be the keynote speaker. See the full listing of One Book Charleston County events on the library's website at ccpl.org.

Tags: Divergent, Veronica Roth, One Book Charleston County, Charleston County Public Library

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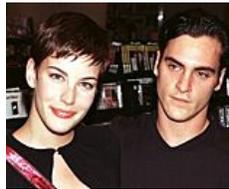
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