



YA AUTHORS SHARE
PERSONAL MOMENTS
OF INSPIRATION

ATIA ABAWI
RENÉE AHDIEH
LIBBA BRAY
HOWARD BRYANT
ALLY CARTER
ALLY CONDIE
JAMES DASHNER
CHRISTINA DIAZ GONZALEZ
GAYLE FORMAN
ROMINA GARBER
I. W. GREGORIO
KATE HART
BRENDAN KIELY
DAVID LEVITHAN
ALEX LONDON
MARIE LU
JULIE MURPHY
JASON REYNOLDS
AISHA SAEED
NIC STONE
ANGIE THOMAS
JENNY TORRES SANCHEZ
NICOLA YOON
JEFF ZENTNER

Edited by **ROSE BROCK**

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YA AUTHORS SHARE
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OAKMONT REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

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ANGIE THOMAS

Now More Than Ever

FACT: FOR MANY OF US, our current political climate is scary.

Fact: It's okay to be afraid, overwhelmed, and stressed.

Fact: I've got more hope now than I had before November 8, 2016.

As a young black woman living in Mississippi, I've unfortunately felt the frustration, pain, anger, and stress that many people in this country are just starting to feel because of our current political climate. My home state is known more for its bigotry than for anything else. Now, let me set the record straight: I've never been told to sit at the back of the bus. I've never had to drink from a "blacks only" water fountain. I've never even seen a KKK member in my life. Mississippi is still problematic in many ways, but it is not *that* problematic. The bigotry comes in a different form now.

For one, there's our state flag, straight from the Confederacy. Many of the state's white citizens cannot seem to understand how a flag associated with a racist past offends the state's black citizens. (Fact: Way too many Mississippians have trouble letting go of the past and embracing a more inclusive future.) Then there are the elected officials who make comments on social media about "lynching" flag opponents. On top of that, there are the laws that are

clearly rooted in bigotry, like the so-called “religious freedom” law, which is really just a way to allow people to legally discriminate against the LGBTQIA+ community. (As a Christian, I wish more Mississippians would remember that Jesus said to love our neighbors. There’s no “except if they . . .” at the end of that.) I can’t forget the attempts to make sagging pants illegal. A law like that would clearly target young black men above all. (I seriously doubt plumbers would get into trouble.)

Yep, Mississippi is problematic. Yep, our country currently is too. Yep, I still have hope.

Like so many, I had a moment of despair on Election Night. Everything that I hoped wasn’t true about our country and the people in it suddenly seemed to be. Months before the election, I was trolled big-time by hate groups on Twitter simply because I asked people to stand up for diversity. On Election Night, it felt as if those individuals had won, and I almost wondered why we should even try to change things.

Then my book came out.

The Hate U Give may be one of the scariest things I will ever publish. I put a lot of my own emotions into that book, and sharing those feelings with the world is scary. Even more than that, I was terrified of what the reception to the book would be. It’s inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, and if you say “Black Lives Matter” to three different people, you’re likely to get thirty different responses. For some people like me, those words are a rallying cry, asking for a system that places value on black lives. For some, it dismisses the value of all other lives, and they say things like “All Lives Matter” or “Blue Lives Matter.” For others, the movement and the

organization are hateful or antiwhite. I hoped that my book would help people truly understand why we say “Black Lives Matter,” and why we feel as if we have to constantly remind this country of the value of our lives. Yes, all lives should indeed matter, but we have a systemic problem in this country in which black lives don’t matter enough. So black lives matter too.

But after being trolled and seeing just how hateful people can be, I was hesitant for my book to even come out. I remember cautiously checking my email in the days and weeks after it was released, just waiting for the moment some bigot decided to send me hate mail. I wondered if I would have hecklers at events, like some authors of color have dealt with when they dare write about anything that confronts the racism of this country. And my launch event in Mississippi? Mississippi, where racism still rears its ugly head? I had no idea what might happen, especially when the event was advertised on the local news as a launch party for the “Black Lives Matter–inspired novel.”

Yet over the past few months, the love I’ve received from *The Hate U Give* has stunned me. There are three encounters in particular that will most likely stay with me.

As I said, my launch party was held in Mississippi. It was in my hometown of Jackson, to be exact. As the capital city, Jackson has a tainted history. If you know anything about the civil rights movement, you will know that many sit-ins and marches took place there. A civil rights leader by the name of Medgar Evers was murdered in 1963 in his driveway while his young children were inside the home—my family’s house is only minutes away from his. In fact, my mom was a kid at the time and heard the gunshots that killed him.

Like the rest of the state, Jackson cannot seem to get away from its past and is still divided in many ways. There's the mostly black side of Jackson and the mostly white side of Jackson. These racial lines seem to be economic lines as well. The mostly black parts of Jackson are the run-down parts where you don't go unless you absolutely have to and the schools perform poorly. In other words, they are mostly the hood. It's the total opposite with the mostly white areas. And racism? It's a hot topic that people either don't want to discuss or will passionately discuss, but it's obviously still a factor in many ways.

So, my launch party. I remember sitting at my signing table and looking out at the line of people, stretched out the door, who were there to meet me. I will be honest—one of the first things I noticed was how many white individuals were in line. Yes, right there in Jackson, Mississippi, half of the hundreds of people waiting to see me and get me to sign my Black Lives Matter book were white. It was a moment that caused me to check my own biases. I remember one gentleman in particular. He was older, white, and not exactly who I had in mind as I wrote my book, but he thanked me for it. He hadn't read a word of it yet, but he said he already knew it was an important story, even for an "old guy like me who's still trying to get it right."

I never thought someone would say that to me, and especially not in Mississippi.

Only days after my launch party, I did an East Coast tour to promote my book. There were so many great memories made along the way as I was blessed to connect with readers and soon-to-be readers. One of the highlights was my event in Maplewood, New

Jersey. Just across the river from NYC, it's a very picturesque small township that looks like it came straight off a postcard. However, even with Maplewood as diverse as it is, the town had recently experienced racist incidents at the local high school. It was a story that was being repeated in many schools around the country after the election as hate crimes seemed to increase—racist graffiti had been tagged on bathroom walls, and racial slurs were being thrown around by students. By the time I arrived to the town for my event, the incidents had made the national news. I didn't know what to expect.

My event was almost like a town hall meeting. The mayor introduced me along with the moderator, a professor from Harvard. The venue was packed. Hundreds of people of all races and ethnicities showed up just to hear me discuss my book. They actually cared about what I, the black girl from the hood in Mississippi, had to say about Black Lives Matter.

Toward the end, we held a question-and-answer session. One of the first people to get up was a black woman who had lived in the town most of her life. She talked about how the recent incidents at the school hurt her and asked not just me but everyone there at the event two important questions: Can we begin to listen to one another, and can we change things?

The questions got a lot of applause. Some people answered and told her that's exactly why they were at my event—they wanted to help change things. Instead of ignoring race issues brought up by people of color, more and more of them were determined to listen. That's honestly one of the most important steps to change, especially in our current political climate. It's easy to write people off when

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it comes to racism, bigotry, and hatred. Instead, we need to pay attention to the concerns people raise. If I say that something is racist, it doesn't help for you to tell me I'm just making it up or exaggerating. Listen. Learn. Grow.

The folks in Maplewood are trying to do just that. Imagine if more cities and towns did the same thing.

It gives me hope.

By the time my tour was over, I'd heard many stories and witnessed many things that gave me some light in the darkness. However, it was an email that seemed to top even all of those incidents.

Like I said earlier, I used to dread checking my email. I just knew that at some point, a bigot would get ahold of my address and send me hate mail or threats because of my book. One day, I received an email with the subject line "Thank you." Simple, yet I was cautious. Subject lines can be deceptive on purpose. I opened the email. The writer started it by telling me she had been raised by a white supremacist. Honestly, I tensed up, waiting for the vitriol.

Instead, she poured her heart out to me.

She told me about her father and some of the things he had said and done over the years, and how it shaped her view of the world and black people in particular. The n-word was a regular part of his vocabulary, among other things. As she got older, she started to second-guess the things he'd told her and began to realize they were rooted in hatred—and she wanted to change. Books allowed her to do that. Professor Rudine Sims Bishop once described books as being mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. For this woman who wrote me, books gave her a window that helped her humanize people she was once taught were beneath her. How powerful is that?

Recently, someone had told her to read my book. According to her, it opened her eyes even more. She now understood a little more why we say Black Lives Matter. Even more than that, she had a better understanding that black lives do indeed matter. By stepping into Starr's shoes for four-hundred-plus pages, she gained insight. More importantly, she developed empathy. It made her look at the Starrs and the Khalils of the world in a whole different light.

I'm honored to know that my words did that.

Since November 8, 2016, we have witnessed a horrendous side of our country. More of us have come to realize that in many ways, the past is still present—racism and bigotry didn't die, they just hid themselves well. Now it seems they no longer have reasons to hide.

However, for me, the days after November 8 have shown me that there is more love in this country than I thought, there are more reasons to keep going, and there are more people who are trying to change things than I realized. Now more than ever, people are speaking out and getting involved. My book has allowed me to see this through one-on-one conversations with people, and I hope you see it through the rallying cries echoing around this country. We are not being silent, we are not sitting down, we are not allowing hatred to win.

We are fighting for you, and we will continue to fight.

You give me hope. I hope I give you hope too.