

(Socio)Economics, Power, and Class:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this collaborative written conversation, we are honored to feature the words of Sarah Carroll, Pablo Cartaya, and Kara Thomas, three YA authors whose work explores the complex intersections of (socio)economics, power, and class. We appreciate their willingness to engage so thoughtfully and candidly in a discussion about these difficult topics.

As to process, we generated and sent the authors a series of questions and then compiled their initial responses into a single document. The authors revised the conversation in a shared document to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope readers enjoy the thoughtful insights offered by these authors.

What role do (socio)economics and class play in your novels?

Sarah: Misplaced values in a materialistic society and the role that socioeconomics play in the lives of individuals are reoccurring themes in my work. In general, my characters' search for themselves occurs within the limitations presented by their socioeconomic backgrounds. My primary aim is to draw the reader into the story of the individual, and once immersed, to hold a mirror to society. My first novel, *The Girl in Between* (2017), is told from the point of view of a young homeless girl who lives with her Ma in an abandoned mill that is about to be torn down. It deals with homelessness, grief, addiction, and forgiveness. The text opens and closes

with the words "I'm invisible" to highlight the fact that those who struggle in plain sight in our society often go unseen.

I chose the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum in my follow-up novel, *The Words that Fly Between Us* (in press, 2019). The story follows the 12-year-old daughter of the developer who bought the mill featured in *The Girl in Between*, and it deals with bullying, the power of words, and the easy arrogance of those who caused the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

Pablo: I have a culture-specific-micro-obsession (is that a term?) with socioeconomics in my work. Allow me to explain.

In my novel *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora* (Viking, 2017), a very wealthy Latino land developer named Wilfrido Pipo comes into town to convince the community that his über-stylish, wealth-centric building is going to be good for the community. Arturo, the novel's 14-year-old Latino protagonist, takes charge in protecting his working-class, independently owned neighborhood from the greedy developer. An epic battle for the soul of the community ensues, pitting the über-wealthy Wilfrido against the working class Zamora clan led by the tenacious Arturo. The battle is about money, and money, above most things, has the power to be a separator of people—to divide them into factions based on status, wealth, and power.

I didn't set out to write a novel about class or socioeconomic disparity within cultures. It just

came out of the bedrock that I was creating. I realized after writing *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora* that I actually have a keen interest in the challenges that socioeconomics present within a culture.

I'm Cuban American, and within my own community, there exists a clear delineation of socioeconomic status. There are socioeconomic divisions that linger from our inherited colonial past. Throughout history, there are established hierarchical norms of mobility. I want my characters to inhabit the spaces that challenge these gaps and, I hope, to make headway in changing the dynamic.

Kara: *The Darkest Corners* (2016) is set in a Pennsylvania town that has been hit hard by the decline of the steel industry. Tessa, the main character, grew up in a low-income family; shortly after losing his job, Tessa's father is sent to prison for armed robbery, leaving her mother to care for two children on her own. Tessa often thinks of herself as "low class" or "white trash," and these feelings are exacerbated when she reconnects with her childhood friend, Callie, who comes from a middle-class family.

In *Little Monsters* (2017), Kacey, the main character, has lived her whole life moving from apartment to apartment with her working-class, single mother. When Kacey moves in with her birth father and his new family, she is struck by their upper middle-class lifestyle. For Kacey, her new family's socioeconomic status is emblematic of the stability she's been craving for most of her life.

Did you address (socio)economics and class with intention as you considered and crafted your novels?

Sarah: Absolutely. With *The Girl in Between*, my aim was to help the reader step over the begging cup and learn the story behind one family's path to homelessness. By linking my following novel to my first novel, through the developer, I aimed to directly contrast the socioeconomic settings to further highlight the responsibility that we as individuals play in addressing socioeconomic equity.

Pablo: I think of character first. Then I focus on what that character is trying to tell me about his or her

world. From there, a story plays out, and I go from being an observer of this character's world to an active participant in discovering the events that shape that character's worldview. The family in *Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish* (Viking, in press, 2018), for example, is not wealthy. Marcus engages in some sketchy money-making schemes to help his mom make ends meet. I counter-play this with him physically walking through his neighborhood and seeing the enormous houses that make up part of his community. As he searches for his father in Puerto Rico, he finds family members who aren't defined by what they have but rather who they are. This helps him define his own worldview. Ultimately, my characters aren't motivated by money or a rise in social status but rather they come to see a focus on the strength of family and community as the true measure of success.

Kara: For me, it is impossible to write mystery-thrillers without considering the socioeconomics of crime. In *The Darkest Corners*, a killer in Fayette, Pennsylvania, targets runaways, sex workers, and women struggling with addiction. The media do not pay attention to the murders until an attractive, young, white college student from a middle-class family goes missing. When crimes occur, class factors into the ways in which the media portray the victims. I wanted to examine this phenomenon in my novels. In *Little Monsters*, Kacey observes of her friend Bailey's disappearance, "At least if she is missing, she's the type of girl people will actually look for"—meaning that Bailey is attractive, white, middle class, and from the suburbs.

How do you perceive the relationship between economics and power?

Kara: I think, unfortunately, that those with the most economic resources have the most power, which contributes to inequity in our society. The most powerful and influential people often are the wealthiest, while those with less economic capital feel like they don't have as much of a voice in decisions that are being made about issues that affect them, such as health care and fair wages. The middle class is shrinking, and the wealthy continue to get wealthier.

Economics and power directly impact young adults and the decisions they make about their futures. Most middle-class and low-income students cannot afford the astronomical costs of attending college, especially prestigious universities. There is a mentality in society that everyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but what do you do if you don't have boots? I think a lot of young adult literature as of late is bravely taking a look at this question.

Sarah: Personally, I firmly believe that freedom of choice only comes with financial freedom. It is all about luck. For example, I'm a woman. If I had been born in any century other than the 20th or 21st, I would not have received the education I needed to become financially independent and would not then be able to support myself during the first six years I spent learning the craft of writing. Also, I'm Irish and from a middle-class background. If, instead, I had been born into a subsistence farming family in a war-torn country, I might enjoy neither a stable upbringing nor a quality education.

My incredible good fortune to be born healthy and happy and in the right place at the right time are the reasons I have been afforded these opportunities. That, and one other major choice: I decided I would never, ever, be in debt to a bank. Instead, I would take the bus until I could afford a car. I would live on a boat until I could afford a house. I would quietly elope rather than take out a loan to pay for an extravagant wedding. So I believe financial freedom is a huge factor when it comes to success. However, success is difficult to define. Financial freedom, even harder.

This is well-illustrated by the American Dream—the idea that if you play by the rules and work hard, there is ample opportunity to better yourself and your own socioeconomic environment. But what if the rules mean that you become so indebted to the bank (college fees, purchasing property) that you are shackled to working long hours or to an unloved career path in order to earn as much money as possible to reduce your debt? This is a form of wage-slavery that is promoted by the banking industry.

What then if you get sick? What if you can't pay your bills?

True financial independence is the privilege of the very few. Those few are the ones in a position to amass more money rather than debt. And it is there that the power lies, while the most vulnerable are allowed to slip through the cracks, their struggles invisible. This is something Kara discussed above—how can you pull yourself up by your bootstraps when you have no boots?

Pablo: Kara and Sarah are bringing back dark, debt-ridden memories from my college years! I *wish* I would have had the foresight to ignore credit card debt early in my life. Unfortunately, the moment I walked onto a college campus at the age of 18, I was given a credit card and told to spend, spend, spend and just pay minimums! *Ugh*. I've only now, after many years in debt, been able to climb out of that hole. The system is built for most of us to always be looking up. Unless you are proactive about it (looking at you, Sarah), you won't climb out of the debt hole.

The ability to regulate fiscal policy is directly reliant on power or, to be more specific, on those *in* power. Power needs to control economics in order to survive. Those who manage the purse strings, so to speak, dictate who gets what and where it goes. This isn't a new phenomenon. It dates back to antiquity. The word "class" is derived from the Latin word, *classis*, which was a term Roman census takers used to categorize citizens by wealth. It was the empire's way of organizing society into hierarchical divisions. Think, too, about sumptuary laws. These laws have been around for thousands of years! According to *Black's Law Dictionary*, sumptuary laws were made for the purpose of restraining luxury or extravagance. Throughout most of civilization, however, sumptuary laws were in place as a way to control social rank and station. These laws were enacted the world over—in Ancient China, Feudal Japan, Europe (throughout the Middle Ages all the way to the Victorian Age), even in the early years of the American colonies—and were enforced to remind people of where they belonged on the socioeconomic ladder.

Sociologist Max Weber divided class into three components: class, status, and power. Class

was a person's economic position. Status was a person's prestige or popularity in society. And power was a person's ability to get one's way despite the resistance of others. When all three are serving a particular person or group, it's easy to see how economics and power create an Olympic-sized gap between the haves and have-nots.

So why go into all of this? And more important, what can be done? Literature for young people is a good place to start. If stories are written about characters who challenge historical socioeconomic norms, then we can start creating a new normal. If fiction is a mirror of the world at a given moment, then it can also be a reflection of what we want it to look like.

What narrative of class do you think is perpetuated in our society? How might literature help readers rethink this narrative in more complex ways?

Pablo: The narrative is much as I mentioned in the last question referring to economics and power. A class system works to keep those at the top in positions of power by creating the economic policies and laws that shape the rest of the population into acceptance of their power. The disaffected members of society are often so because they feel there are limited economic opportunities. The United States has been stagnant on mobility for quite some time now, while the cost of living continues to rise. There is a gradual frustration occurring in the middle and lower classes. Why is this? Why have the wealthiest Americans enjoyed the benefits of economic growth, while the rest have stayed stagnant or gotten worse? To answer this, I think literature, especially children's and young adult literature, plays an integral role in shaping the outlook for the future. Writing characters who are empathetic to class and community will give readers the opportunity to see themselves in stories. I can list a number of brilliant authors doing this in their work, but I'm afraid I'm running out of space!

Kara: I think that our society places significant emphasis on class and often perpetuates the narrative that if you work hard enough, you can move up on the class ladder. For a while, it seemed that "wealth as aspiration" was also the dominant

narrative in fiction for teens. However, there has been a decline in interest in the aspirational wealth narratives, such as those found in *Gossip Girl* (Von Ziegesar, 2002), where characters name-drop designer products to display their status. I believe young people especially are looking for stories that mirror their own lives, and they have been able to do so with the arrival of complex stories such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007), *Eleanor & Park* (Rowell, 2013), and *We Were Liars* (Lockhart, 2014).

Sarah: As Kara said, our society places significant emphasis on class and often perpetuates the narrative that if you work hard enough, you can move up the class ladder. The American Dream, however, fails to take into account the crippling effect that lack of access to money, a job, a home, good mental or physical health, or even love, can have on the individual.

Equally, I think modern media must take responsibility for perpetuating the idea that those from under-developed nations are childlike and helpless (think of the countless advertisements that use images of wide-eyed children from African or Asian countries who are begging for your help).

Literature can help to address these narratives. As Harper Lee (1960/2010) wrote, "You never really understand a person [. . .] until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it" (p. 30). I believe this is where the power of literature to change that narrative lies, by allowing the reader to walk in the shoes of a three-dimensional, rounded (if flawed) character that is dealing with a reality very different from that of the reader—to allow the reader to feel and understand another's struggle. With this understanding, individuals can begin to question their place and role in society and society's responsibility to the more vulnerable.

Conversations about the connections between economics and power are difficult, complicated, and sometimes controversial. What do you hope your readers gain from considering these ideas?

Kara: I would hope that readers are able to view literature, and also the world, through the lens of socioeconomic status and class in order to exam-

ine who really has power and why and how these dynamics can be called into question in order to promote equity.

Sarah: I was once given the task by my high school English teacher to write an essay on the idea that life is not about answering questions but questioning answers. In these post-truth days, this idea is more pertinent than ever. I would hope my readers question the narrative that society and the individual are in no way to blame for allowing the struggles of the most vulnerable to go unseen. I would like readers to question their role in creating a socially equitable and just world.

Pablo: To not see this as an “us versus them” scenario but rather a “How do we move forward together?” narrative. It’s not about making the wealthy poor or throwing the entire economic ladder down. Mobility is good. Striving for success is important. Having income to buy a house, living a healthy fruitful life, enjoying economic freedom—these are all worthwhile goals. I think where it gets muddled is when we lose sight of our communities. It all comes down to that, doesn’t it? Communities that look out for each other on the local level become stronger. Economically. Socially. Educationally. Also, please pay attention to the facts! According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (Jiang, Granja, & Koball, 2017), children represent 24 percent of the population, but they comprise 34 percent of all people in poverty. That’s insane! We need to be aware of these truths and tell these stories, as well. We have to write stories where *everyone* from every background, up and down the ladder, has a seat at the table.

Sarah Carroll is the author of The Girl in Between (2017), published by Kathy Dawson Books/Penguin Random House. Her next novel, The Words that Fly Between Us, is due out in early 2019. Before turning to writing, Sarah lived and worked in Tanzania, where she established a hostel and worked alongside local community projects. She currently lives on a houseboat in Ireland with her family.

Pablo Cartaya is the award-winning author of the The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora (Viking, 2017); Marcus Vega

Doesn’t Speak Spanish (Viking, in press, 2018); and two forthcoming titles in 2019 and 2020, to be published by Kokila, a new imprint of Penguin/Random House whose mission is to “add depth and nuance to the way children and young adults see the world and their place in it.” He holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and a BA in English from Loyola Marymount University. Pablo is lead faculty at Sierra Nevada College MFA in Writing for Children & Young Adults and frequently speaks around the country on identity, culture, and community. Visit him at www.pablocartaya.com.

Kara Thomas is the author of The Darkest Corners (2016) and Little Monsters (2017), both published by Delacorte Press. Her next novel, The Cheerleaders, will be released this summer 2018. She graduated from Stony Brook University in 2011 with a degree in English and Secondary Education and is currently pursuing a Master’s of Library and Information Science at Long Island University. She lives in Eastern Long Island with her husband and rescue cat. You can find out more about her books at www.kara-thomas.com.

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