

# 'An unapologetically black book'

*Angie Thomas was afraid YA readers wouldn't want a novel that explored police brutality and a black teenage experience. It turns out they did.*

BY LISA EDGE  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"The Hate U Give" is an award-winning young adult novel mesmerizing teens and adults alike who delve into its pages.

Author Angie Thomas introduces the reader to Starr Carter, a 16-year-old black girl whose life is permanently altered after a routine traffic stop turns deadly. Starr's friend Khalil is giving her a ride home from a party when they are pulled over by a police officer for a broken taillight. The officer shoots and kills Khalil in front of Starr, and he dies at the scene. It's a frightening scenario and a real fear for communities of color who are often seen as threats.

This pivotal moment in the novel takes place in the first two chapters.

Afterward, readers learn more about Starr and the toll Khalil's death has on her as the case moves through the judicial system.

Thomas captures the nuance of black life – its challenges, as well as lighthearted moments. For example, Starr refers to rapper J. Cole as her future husband. Starr's father prays to Black Jesus, she lives in a black neighborhood but attends a mostly white high school, and there's plenty of slang spoken by the characters. Thomas is a fan of rap and hip-hop, which shines through, even in the meaning of the title (I won't spoil it for you).

"The Hate U Give" is Thomas' first novel and has spent the past 18 weeks on The New York Times' YA hardcover best-sellers list. Now, it's No. 1. Thomas said she wrote "The Hate U Give" with young black women and men in mind. Because of her success, she's aware that she could easily be labeled as the "it" black YA novelist of the moment. She has no plans for taking on that title and wants to use her access to uplift the voices of other black authors.

Thomas lives in Mississippi and has a Southern drawl to match. She's working on a second novel and has so far managed to name every chapter in the book after an old hip-hop song.

In the book, there are so many things that ring true about the black community. From the names Devante and Dalvin to using the phrase "you smell like outside."

**Lisa Edge:** Was it important that you add in those little nuggets of authenticity?

**Angie Thomas:** Absolutely. I felt like I didn't see that a lot in young adult books. I've had teenagers tell me, "I haven't seen that kind of stuff in books." It's important. I wanted to even show – I'll go with the name thing with Dalvin and Devante. They made fun of it in a way, but there's a line where

Seven discusses what his dad says about names. What makes our names any different from anybody else's names? Just because they're unique doesn't mean that's a bad thing at times. I wanted to show that in a positive light. I wanted to have an unapologetically black book. I wanted it to be there, and I wanted it to sometimes make other people uncomfortable. I'm OK with that because I've been uncomfortable with books for decades. So they can be uncomfortable for a little bit. I wanted to celebrate us and who we are in the small ways.

**L.E.:** You said you wanted the book to be unapologetically black. Did you have any qualms about writing it that way?

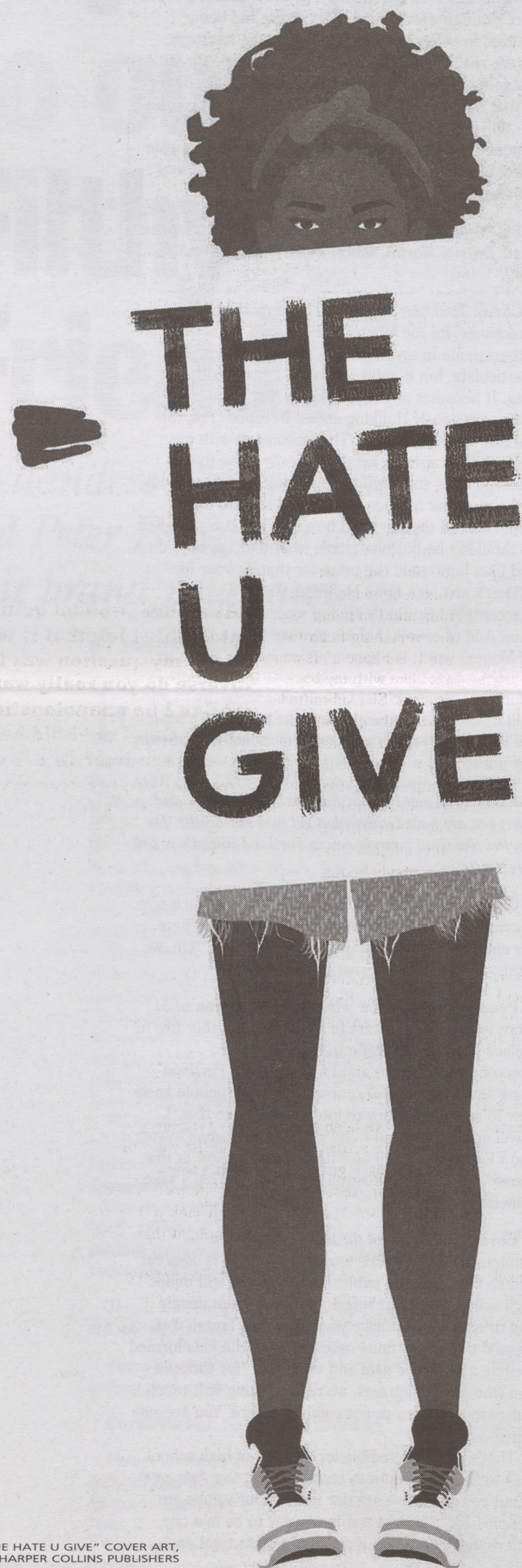
**A.T.:** I was definitely concerned. I did that before I had an official literary agent. The only way I allowed myself to even do that was I just made the decision, I'm writing this book for me, not for anybody else at the end of the day. That's probably the best thing I could've done. But when it was time to go out to literary agents, I was terrified. In the children's publishing industry, we have the call for diversity now. As a black woman going into publishing – that is mostly white – my question was how diverse do you really want it? Can I be unapologetically black? Can I not hold back on some things? Or are you guys calling for diversity because that's what looks right at the moment? I ended up asking a literary agent on Twitter if the subject matter was even appropriate for a young adult novel. He responded with "Yeah, I'd love to read it." I signed with him a few months later. We took it to publishers and 13 of them wanted the rights to the book.

Even after I signed with my publisher, I wasn't sure that this book would sell. I wasn't sure that the public would like this book – the young adult audience would like this book – because young adult has been so white. We put a black girl on the cover. That's rare in young adult books. My publisher was saying yes, we know this book is unapologetically black, and we love it as it is. That's been the attitude from the get-go. I'm very blessed to say that, because I know there are a lot of black authors out there who have had publishers and others tell them they need to tone it down or this has to be more mainstream or something like that, as if being black can't be mainstream. Audiences have proved them wrong that black books can't sell in young adult.

**E.L.:** In the novel, Starr's parents give her the "how to interact with cops" talk. In light of the release of the Philando Castile dash-cam video, which shows him complying, how do you think the talk black parents give their children now has changed?

**A.T.:** There's a line in "The Hate U Give" where Starr's mom says, "Sometimes you can

See THOMAS, page 11



"THE HATE U GIVE" COVER ART,  
HARPER COLLINS PUBLISHERS