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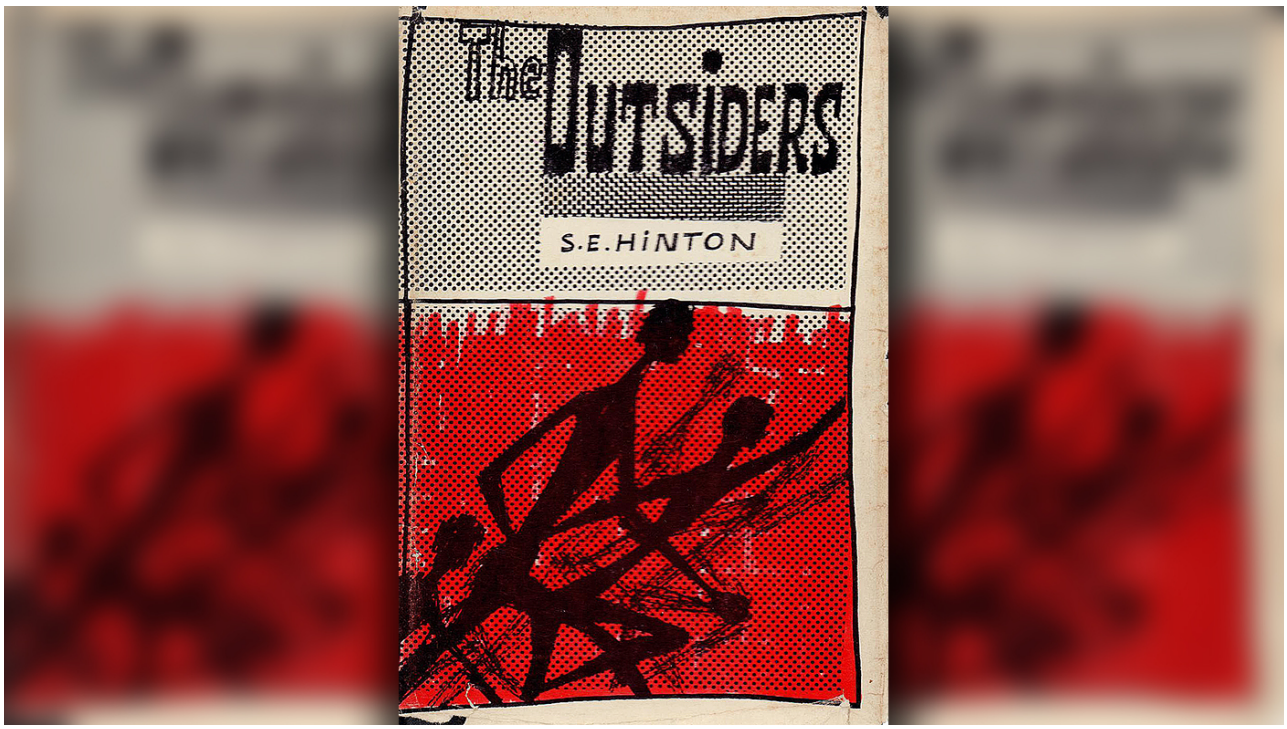
Margaret Eby

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Why 'The Outsiders' Still Matters

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S.E. Hinton's young adult novel about greasers in Oklahoma still resonates with readers over 50 years later



When S.E. Hinton published *The Outsiders* in 1967, a novel she began writing at age 15 and sold at 17, the idea of a teenager writing fiction for her peers was a novelty. Most of the literature handed down for high school students to read had, in Hinton's estimation, nothing to do with the lived experiences of teenagers in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. "The authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times," she wrote in an op-ed for *The New York Times*. "In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme, with a horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second."

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Hinton's novel, which describes in gritty detail the ongoing gang warfare between the lower-class Greasers and the well-to-do Socials, didn't have much to do with romance or horses, unless you count her protagonist, the 14-year-old Greaser Ponyboy Curtis. But it was a hit with teenagers across the country. Fifty years later, the book has sold upwards of 15 million copies, become a steady feature on middle school reading lists, inspired a Francis Ford Coppola film of the same name and helped shape an entire literary genre marketed to young adults.

More than that: despite its age, *The Outsiders* continues to be a touchstone for adults who were born long after Hinton's graduation from high school. For proof, just look at the long tail of the phrase "Stay gold, Ponyboy." In *The Outsiders*, those are the dying words of Greaser Johnny Cade, itself a half-remembered quote from the Robert Frost poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay." In 2017, "Stay Gold" is a phrase you can find emblazoned on everything from T-shirts to throw pillows. It's the title of an entire album by Swedish folk duo First Aid Kit and a song by Run the Jewels. Though the era of Socs and Greasers has long past, the adolescent dynamic Hinton picked up on remains, even though the name of the groups changes.

The Outsiders captured, as if in amber, the ongoing fight at the heart of the adolescent experience – knowing that the way things stand is wrong, but being unclear how to fix it, and frustrated with older adults for continuing on, obliviously. The differences between the Greasers and the Socs have to do with money, but behind them, Ponyboy realizes, they aren't so different, if only they could figure that out.

Editor's picks

"The teenage years are a bad time," Hinton wrote in her op-ed. "You're idealistic. You can see what it should be. Unfortunately, you can see what it is, too." It's the same dynamic that drives filmmakers like *Manchester by the Sea* director Kenneth Lonergan to unpack the world of high school students. "Teenagers have that kind of freshness to the world," Lonergan said in a recent *New Yorker* profile. "They just want to wipe out racism, for example. And you are just like 'You are never going to do that. Just go to a restaurant instead.' Who is right in that conversation?"

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Though the specific social mores of *The Outsiders* are dated, that freshness remains, and continues to inspire writers. “I read *The Outsiders* when I was around 11 years old,” says Sara Benincasa, writer, comedian and author of the young adult book *Great*. “What has stuck with me is the sadness…*The Outsiders* is one of those books that made people believe juvenile fiction, or what the publishing industry eventually rebranded as ‘young adult’ fiction, could go beyond dating and cutesy shit to address real issues with depth and nuance.” For Benincasa, Hinton’s work proved that teens are up for being challenged with writing about big issues, ones to do with gender, sexuality, and violence. “I’d like to go deeper next time,” Benincasa notes. “That’s a book that showed me it could be done.”

Nick Greene, editor-at-large for *Mental Floss* was similarly impressed by Hinton’s tell-it-like-it-is approach. “What I remember affecting me most was that it was entertaining without trying to be entertaining,” Greene says. “Most of the books I had read up until that point were either explicitly goofy books like *Sherlock Bones* or *Bunnicula* or assigned school reading that intimidated or bored me. *The Outsiders* confronted serious stuff – poverty, loneliness, violence, insecurity – but was so compelling that I didn’t even notice it. There was a vibrant internal life to the book, which is that elusive quality that all good fiction has.”

And it wasn’t just Hinton’s work that inspired writers, but her background. “*The Outsiders* is the book that made me want to be a writer,” Greene continues. “When I found out S.E. Hinton was only 15 when she started writing it, it totally changed my definition of what a writer was. It wasn’t a job you had to apply for after checking off a list of appropriate credentials – it was just something you did because you wanted to do it.”

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Maybe the most abiding lesson that Hinton taught authors about writing for teenagers is that they didn’t need to water down their prose to relate to a younger audience. A look at the most recent *New York Times* bestseller list proves it – for the last for weeks, the most popular young adult book is Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give*, a book about a 16-year-old girl grappling with the aftermath of her friend’s fatal shooting by a police officer. Nor has the work of popular YA authors like John Green or Woodson shied away from serious “adult” issues like violence and racism. This is no “a horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it” stuff. Many writers have heeded the advice Hinton gave as a teenage author. “Writers shouldn’t

be afraid that they will shock their teenage audience," Hinton wrote in the *Times*. "But give them something to hang on to. Show them that some people don't sell out and that everyone can't be bought. Do it realistically. Earn respect by giving it." In other words: stay gold.

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