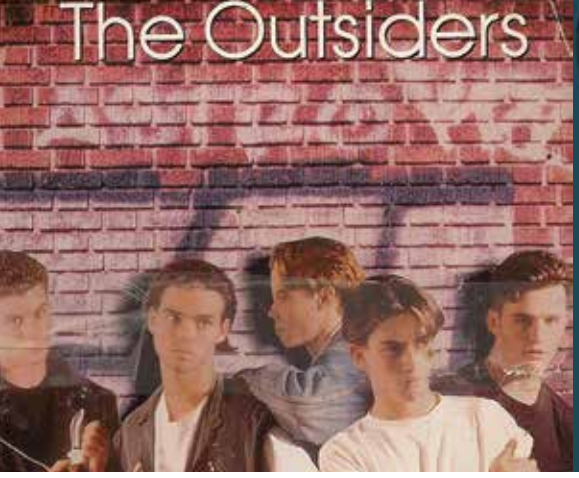






ANOTHER LOOK AT:

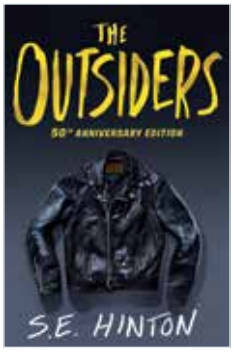
S. E. HINTON'S THE OUTSIDERS

YA lit's all-time classic looks even deeper—and darker—with 50 years of hindsight.

BY DANIEL KRAUS

What more can be said about the book that launched the modern YA novel? Books as recent as David Arnold's *Kids of Appetite* (2016) pay direct homage; phrases like "Stay gold, Ponyboy" are as entrenched into our vernacular as "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"; and Hinton's vision of a scuffed, leather-jacketed teen gang has influenced, along with earlier movies like *The Wild One* and *Rebel without a Cause*, our view of beautiful, tortured delinquency.

Let's get the plot out the way, and with spoilers, since you've already read it: a group of boys known as "greasers" feud with rich kids known as "Socs," and to save our 14-year-old narrator, Ponyboy Curtis, the gentle Johnny Cade kills a Soc named Bob. Ponyboy and Johnny go into hiding and end up rescuing children from a burning church, during which Johnny is injured. There is a final rumble; Johnny dies in the hospital; and the last pages of millions of library copies become wrinkled with tears.



It still shocks how modern the book feels; one can't set out to write prose this timeless. That doesn't mean it's perfect. Much of the opening 10 pages are given to long, repetitive physical descriptions of each boy. Darry has "eyes that are like two pieces of pale-green ice." Soda has "lively, dancing, recklessly laughing eyes." Dally's "eyes were blue, blazing ice, cold with a hatred of the world." Tired of eyes? Too bad: Johnny has "big black eyes in a dark tanned face." (See how the audio version makes this work in our "YA Audio Classics" review on p.110.)

The book's magic trick is how, in its self-contained world, even the imperfections feel perfect. Take this random sentence wherein Ponyboy surveys a crowd: "We knew about everyone there." Great sentence? Hardly. Then again, not a word is misplaced. It's not "We knew everyone." It's not "We knew just about everyone." The inconclusive *about* and the superfluous *there* are precisely in Ponyboy's voice; Hinton's instinct for this never falters. She was 15 when she wrote *The Outsiders*, and she managed to use her youth to her advantage. A rare feat, but it does happen: see such other teenage debuts as Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed* (1996) and Hannah Moskowitz's *Break* (2009).

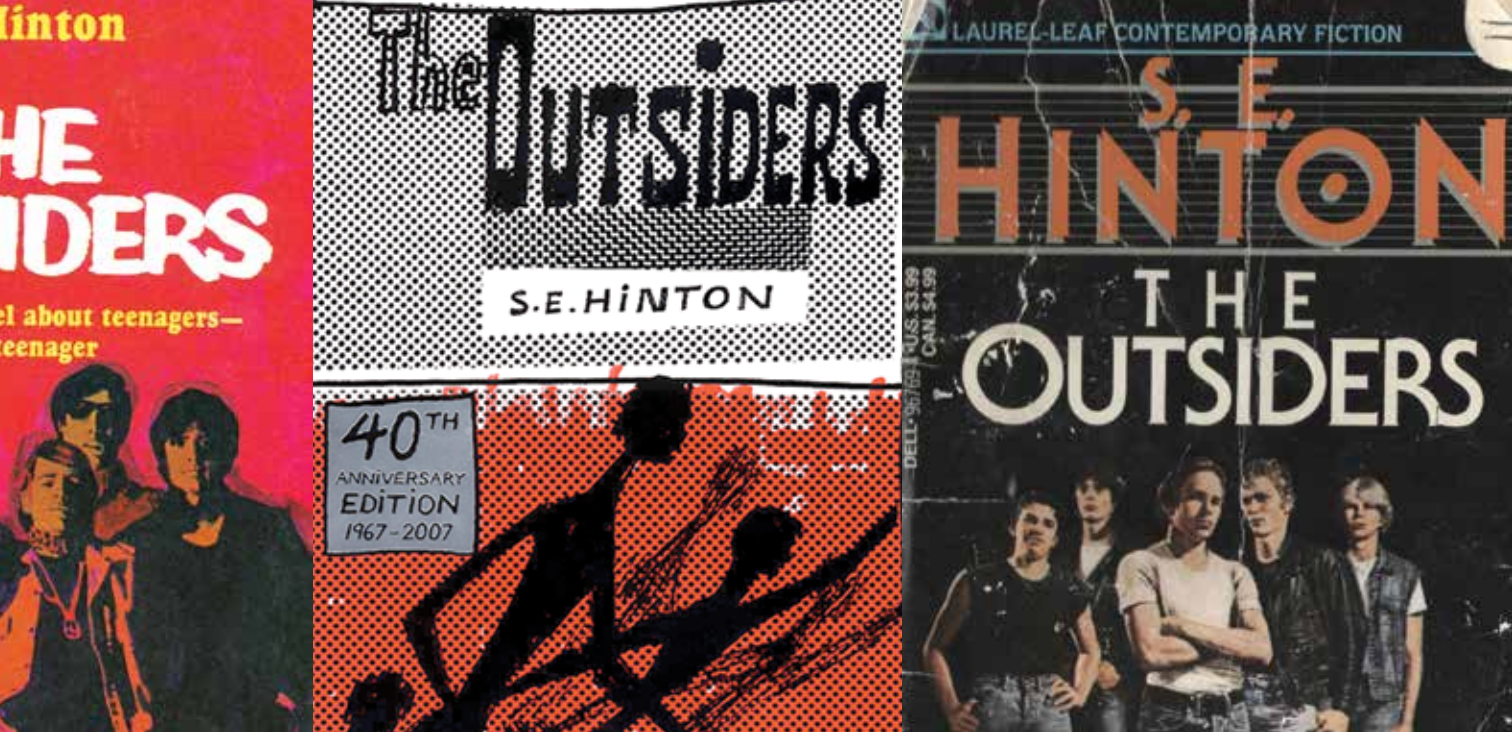
What likely captured teens' attention 50 years ago still does today (and what that says about our country is up for debate): Hinton's portrait of boys is shockingly sensitive. The boys embrace, give each other back rubs, hold one another in bed, break down in tears. Even today it's difficult to find such a portrait (though Van Camp and Moskowitz both did it, too). But Hinton lays it out with such matter-of-factness that readers accept the legend: there were these boys called the greasers, and they were *tender*.



Ponyboy lives under the care of his older brothers, Sodapop and Darry. You probably remember that. Here's what you probably don't remember and might even miss on a reread: *their parents have been dead for only eight months*. It's mentioned once near the start, and then, near the end, there's this clue: "It's going to be a long time before I can even think about my parents."

If you shine a light at this shadowed fact, the book becomes one about grief. Perhaps this explains why the boys are so frequently emotional, whether that emotion is anguish or anger. Hinton keeps her characters awash in cinematic lights throughout—the movie theater, the drive-in—reinforcing Ponyboy's self-mythologizing vision of them as long-haired, T-shirted Lost Boys cut off not only from parents but from all of adult society. In Ponyboy's eyes, no human alive is stronger than Darry, handsomer than Soda, funnier than Two-Bit, deadlier than Dally.

Time, of course, doesn't apply to Lost Boys. When ages are mentioned, they rarely make sense (how can the frequently jailed Dally be only 17?), and if you thought eight months since Pony-



boy's parents' death was quick, it's downright disorienting when Hinton mentions the book's action lasts a single week. It feels like Ponyboy and Johnny were in hiding for *months*. No wonder Francis Ford Coppola, one of the biggest directors of the era, adapted the book for a 1983 film drenched in these larger-than-life, mythic qualities.

As readers, we get so caught up in the silver-screen glow that we lose sight of the fact that these are—brace yourself—sort of bad kids. You can almost hear Ponyboy's yawn in his offhand accounts of barbarity, how he and the gang "chased two junior-high kids across a field for a few minutes." "I beat up people," says Soda. "I rob gas stations. I am a menace to society. Man, do I have fun!" None of the greasers see their own faults, and so readers, too, miss them, as cleanly as they missed the detail about the parents.

Much more blatant—unless it's a coincidence—is Hinton's religious allegory. Like so many other pure-hearted fictional characters, Johnny Cade's initials doom him, and when he and Ponyboy use a church as their hideout, experienced readers see the sacrifice coming. Johnny does seem to die for the greasers' sins; it even feels, for a time, that Hinton is heading for a euthanasia scene brought on by Johnny's lack of interest in living paralyzed. Instead, the suicide is shifted to Dally, who, after Johnny dies, purposefully gets himself shot down by police.

If you haven't read the book in a while, it's likely your memory of it goes like this: murder, hideout, fire, Johnny's death. Here's a surprise: the fire is the book's midway point, nowhere near the end. The entire last half of the book is often overlooked, and there is a reason. The book's most iconic, quintessentially YA moments are front-loaded: the boys from the wrong side of the tracks negotiating friendship with upper-class girls, the fear of being outnumbered, Ponyboy reciting the "stay gold" poetry to Johnny.

The second half of the book is actually the strongest, though, due partly to its lack of these tidier, graspable moments. The centerpiece is Ponyboy's conversation with Randy. What, you don't remember Randy? He's a Soc, and although fellow Soc Cherry Valance gets the famous early line "Things are rough all over," it's Randy who gives the sentiment teeth. He explains why he's not joining the rumble and makes the unexpected case that Bob (the dead Soc) was among the book's most sympathetic characters.

This is driven home by a thorny truth I hate to break to you: Ponyboy does not, in fact, "stay gold." One of the last times we see him, he is breaking a bottle so he might slash an approaching Soc. "I wasn't scared," muses Ponyboy. "It was the oddest feeling in the world. I didn't feel anything—scared, mad, or anything. Just zero." Here's something to ponder. If Johnny is the story's Jesus, who is Ponyboy? How misled have we been by all the boys' pretty eyes and slick hair and appreciation of poetry?

Only the richest of books even invite such interpretations. One thing a reread of *The Outsiders* makes evident is that it's good for another 50 years, if not in total perpetuity. In the greasers' own parlance, the book is both *tough* and *tuff*, and, as Ponyboy says, "In our neighborhood, both are compliments."

YA FLASHBACK: CLASS OF 1967

All year we'll be pulling from the archives of our original reviews of books now considered YA classics. As this particular review proves, the hardest thing to predict is a book's staying power. —*Daniel Kraus*

The Outsiders.
By S. E. Hinton.
1967. 192p. Viking, $17.99 (9780670532575); paper, $15 (9780143039853).
Gr. 6–12.



This realistic but sometimes unconvincing and melodramatic teenage novel by a 17-year-old girl centers on the actions of a semitough gang in an Oklahoma city. Narrated by 14-year-old Ponyboy, the story describes the conflict between the "greasers" and the wealthy upper-class boys, during the course of which Ponyboy's best friend is provoked into killing another boy. Some of Ponyboy's philosophizing about himself, his friends, and his enemies does not ring true, but on the whole the book is a meaningful narrative with appeal for teenage readers. Junior high and high school.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.