DIVERGENT THINKING

YA AUTHORS ON VERONICA ROTH’S DIVERGENT TRILOGY

EDITED BY LEAH WILSON
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A lot of people have called the Divergent trilogy “the next Hunger Games.” It’s a fair comparison in some ways: they’re both science-fiction dystopias with prickly, complex heroines. They’ve both left millions of readers thinking about them long after reading their final pages (even if—or maybe in part because—their endings were a little controversial). And, like many other dystopias, they both wrestle with the idea of control and how we resist it.

But where the Hunger Games engages with control on a societal level, the Divergent trilogy is more focused on the personal. Where the Hunger Games tells a story about rebellion and social change as much as it does about its protagonist’s efforts to subvert others’ use of her, Divergent is interested in a different kind of freedom—from exploitation, yes, but also from the labels society puts on us and the subtle pressures of others’ expectations. From our individual fears and from our personal histories. These things may shape us, the Divergent trilogy says, but they do not control us.

*Allegiant* introduces us to two different, though interrelated, agents of control. First, there’s the Bureau of Genetic Welfare, the organization that designed Tris’ city hundreds of years ago as an experiment, constantly monitors its
goings-on, and steps in (either directly, by wiping memories, or American imperialist–style, by supplying weapons to the side they like best) whenever that experiment’s integrity is threatened. Second, there’s genetic damage, which—the Bureau claims—controls one’s nature so thoroughly that the kindest thing to do for a GD is take away her identity and sequester her in a community where she can be more effectively controlled. (After all, look at the way they live outside those communities, in the fringe!)

At first, *Allegiant*’s focus on the Bureau and genetics makes the book feel like a strange departure from the earlier parts of Tris’ story. But it eventually becomes clear that this new world, the one outside the city, is just another version of the one we came to know in *Divergent* and *Insurgent*, that microcosm writ large—a more familiar mirror, a world one step closer to our own, in which the trilogy’s earlier themes are reflected. We’ve seen the unfeeling, arrogant scientists before, in Jeanine and the Erudite, who use their serums and superior knowledge to manipulate and control (in the case of the Dauntless, quite literally). We’ve seen, in the factions, the idea that there is something innate that determines the course of your life—an inborn quality you can test for, that tells you who you should associate with and what jobs you can do.

In both worlds, Tris proves herself to be a hero. And in both worlds, she does so in a way that shows that heroism is a choice you make, not something you’re born with.

In the context of the trilogy’s first two books, Tris is our hero because she is Divergent—because she is aware during simulations, but even more important, because she cannot be contained by any one of her city’s labels . . . even if she must pretend to be. Her Divergence puts her in danger, but
it also means she has a choice: both at the Choosing Ceremony and in every moment after.

The thing is, though, everyone in her city has a choice—at least in theory. That’s why it’s called a Choosing Ceremony. Caught between the desire to choose Dauntless and the expectation she will choose Abnegation, Tris defies her upbringing and chooses to be brave. But every one of her fellow sixteen-year-olds has the option to choose as well, not according to social pressure and not according to their test results, but according to their own values—according to who they want to be rather than who their family and history has made them. We know Tris’ father made his choice this way when he left Erudite for Abnegation. It could be argued Tobias does, too, despite his claim to have chosen Dauntless out of cowardice. Neither of them is Divergent. (Nor are the other transfers in Tris’ Dauntless initiate class, for that matter.) And both are successful as transfers. Tobias finishes first in his initiate class; Tris’ father is a well-regarded councilman. Their successes are just two of many, many examples in the Divergent trilogy that, even if they are “genetically damaged,” human beings have the ability to learn and to grow. Ultimately, we are the ones in control of what and who we become.

Other people, whether our parents, our factions, our government, or the tests they design and administer, can try to influence us. They can tell us what they think we should believe, and who they think we should be. They can try to teach and guide us. But what we learn from them—that we do with the information we receive from them about the world and its truths—is up to us. Bureau director David gives Tris her mother’s journal, no doubt thinking it will lead Tris to believe in the Bureau’s cause. She brings the Bureau
down instead. Edith Prior’s video was supposed to encourage the city to protect the Divergent and treat them as special, but it only ends up leading Jeanine and her predecessor Norton to kill them. I’d suggest that, by the end of Allegiant, Divergence comes to mean more than just awareness within simulations or having an aptitude for more than one faction. It also suggests awareness, in the real world, of our ability to choose, no matter what our genes say. Of our ability to become, as Tobias says in Divergent, “brave, and selfless, and smart, and kind, and honest.” Of our ability to think and act independent of influence, whether that influence comes in a serum or from the ones we love.

What does all this contemplation of control and awareness have to do with the book you’re holding?

The Divergent trilogy, like any book, is an invitation. It’s an invitation to think, and to feel, and to experience. But while a book offers us a story to respond to, it can’t control what that response is any more than a video or a “damaged”gene can. Because the way you read a book—the way you react to events and characters, the conclusions you draw—depends on you: your history, your interests, your values.

The Divergent trilogy provides a wealth of ideas for readers to respond to. Divergent Thinking collects the responses of more than a dozen of those readers, all of whom also happen to be YA writers themselves. Each came to Tris’ story with his or her own influences and experiences, and each came away with—and shares here—something different.

The same faction system led Rosemary Clement-Moore to think about why we enjoy stories that sort us into
categories, Jennifer Lynn Barnes to think of a particular way psychologists classify personality, and Julia Karr to think about the inherent dangers a system like the one in the Divergent trilogy presents.

Blythe Woolston came away from the books thinking about fear, while Elizabeth Norris thought about bravery.

Maria V. Snyder and her sixteen-year-old daughter Jenna couldn’t read about the Choosing Ceremony without thinking of Jenna’s own upcoming choice: of colleges.

The trilogy’s setting led Chicago-resident V. Arrow to wonder how the series’ landmarks would map onto her city’s real ones.

There are plenty more ways to look at the Divergent trilogy than the ones you’ll read here—as many as there are people who’ve read it, I suspect. Still, reading what this particular set of readers saw in the trilogy made my experience of the books significantly richer. It made me a little more aware of what the Divergent trilogy had to offer, and led me to engage both with the story and my own world in new ways.

In fact, you could say that reading these essays made my reading of the trilogy a little more, well, *divergent*.

Leah Wilson
December 2013
You can’t talk about the Divergent trilogy without talking about the faction system (and don’t worry, we’ll be talking about the faction system plenty). The tension between factions—in particular, Erudite and Abnegation—is the chief source of conflict in Divergent, and that tension is only compounded by the introduction, in Insurgent, of the factionless as a united, antifaction force. In Allegiant’s biggest reveal, we discover that the philosophies on which the factions were built are integral to the reason Tris’ city even exists.

So that’s where we start this collection: with Abnegation, Amity, Candor, Dauntless, and Erudite, and with Rosemary Clement-Moore’s consideration of our human obsession with sorting ourselves and others, both in history and in literature.
Thanks for checking out this preview of

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