

# The Portrayal of Enslaved Children in Laurie Halse Anderson's 'Seeds of America' Trilogy

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**SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU  
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA UČITELJSKE STUDIJE**

**Leonarda Pavić**

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**Zagreb, rujan, 2023.**

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**Zagreb, rujan 2023.**

## Summary

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## Summary

This thesis focuses on the characters of four enslaved Black children in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Seeds of America* (2008-16) trilogy. The series comprises three novels: *Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010) & *Ashes* (2016). The story takes place during the American Revolutionary War and follows four characters on their way to victory and freedom. The aim of the thesis is to examine the portrayal of Isabel, Curzon, Ruth, and Aberdeen to determine how complex each character is. This examination begins with determining the main and secondary characters of the series, as well as the narrators. Next, the relevant genres represented in the trilogy are explained. This includes historical fiction, the neo-slave narrative, coming-of-age story, and the problem novel. The largest part of the thesis considers how the themes Family and Home, Spirituality and Religion, Relationships, Disability and Illness, Violence, War, and Identity are presented in the novels. These themes not only show who these characters are, but also how they are perceived by the American society of the time. The final part inspects how the individual novel titles, the trilogy title, and the front cover illustrations are related to the four characters and their adventures, and how closely the characters are influenced by the American Revolutionary War. The results of the analysis show that Anderson created a diverse set of characters, who all strive towards the same goal – freedom. Despite portraying a unique and interesting perspective of enslaved Black children, who grow into young adults, in the American Revolutionary War, the trilogy has not earned much critical response thus far.

*Keywords:* young adult fiction, historical fiction, slavery, character portrayal, Laurie Halse Anderson, *Seeds of America* trilogy

## Sažetak

Ovaj rad bavi se likovima četvero porobljene crne djece u trilogiji *Seeds of America* (2008-16) autorice Laurie Halse Anderson. Serijal obuhvaća tri romana: *Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010), te *Ashes* (2016). Radnja traje tijekom Američkoga rata za neovisnost, te prati likove na putu prema kraju rata i slobodi. Cilj je rada proučiti prikaz likova Isabele, Curzona, Ruth, te Aberdeena kako bi se utvrdila kompleksnost svakoga od njih. Prvo se određuju glavni i sporedni likovi serijala te tipovi pripovjedača. Nakon toga, objašnjeni su žanrovi koji se mogu prepoznati u trilogiji: povijesni roman, neo-ropska pripovijest, roman o odrastanju (Bildungsroman) te problemski roman. Najveći dio rada razmatra kako su u romanu prikazane dominantne teme: obitelj i dom, duhovnost i religija, međusobni odnosi, invaliditet i bolest, nasilje, rat i identitet. Navedene teme prikazuju tko likovi jesu, ali i kakva je njihova pozicija u američkom društvu toga vremena. Posljednji dio rada tumači kako su naslovi svakoga romana, naslov trilogije te omotne ilustracije povezane sa četvero likova. Rezultati analize pokazuju da je autorica stvorila raznovrsnu skupinu likova, koji teže prema istom cilju – slobodi. Unatoč tomu što nudi jedinstven i zanimljiv prikaz porobljene djece koja postaju mladi ljudi u Američkom ratu za neovisnost, ova trilogija još nije privukla značajan kritički odaziv.

*Ključne riječi:* adolescentska književnost, povijesni roman, ropstvo, prikaz likova, Laurie Halse Anderson, trilogija *Seeds of America*

## 1. Introduction

This thesis examines how the characters of four enslaved Black children are portrayed in the *Seeds of America* trilogy by Laurie Halse Anderson, which has not been much explored in literary criticism. Bickford III & Rich (2014) claim that the topic of slavery has been significantly misrepresented in children's literature, with authors changing aspects of historical fact, which ultimately paints a different picture of the past and its people in recent works of fiction and non-fiction.

The *Seeds of America* series comprises three novels: *Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010), and *Ashes* (2016). The trilogy is primarily a work of historical fiction, which is described by Fisher (2004) as being based on fact, with either imaginative characters or real historical figures, set in a plot in such a way "that the historical background is clear, the place is evident, and any unfamiliar terms are self-explanatory" (p. 490). The characters' story begins in the beginning stages of the American Revolutionary War and ends a few weeks after the final major battle of the war (Neimeyer, 2007). As America is aiming to free itself from the oppressive British rule, the enslaved young Black characters – Isabel, Curzon, Ruth & Aberdeen – are trying to find their own place within the societal system designed against them through *Chains* (Anderson, 2008), *Forge* (Anderson, 2010), and *Ashes* (Anderson, 2016), respectively.

The events in *Chains* (2008) begin on May 27, 1776, and end on January 19, 1777. *Forge* (2010) begins on October 7, 1777, and ends on May 18, 1778. The final novel, *Ashes* (2016) picks up three years after, on June 25, 1781. The events of the trilogy are brought to a close on November 5, 1781. The events that take place between these timeframes, are retrospectively portrayed in the following novels. Therefore, the entire trilogy encompasses five years and five months in total, allowing the characters to develop from innocent children into sophisticated young people, who are changed as the result of their experiences of war and status as Black people in young America.

The thesis examines the four characters from several angles. Firstly, their importance within the narrative is determined. This includes defining the main and secondary characters (Nikolajeva, 2002), and the types of narrators (Gamble & Yates, 2002; Nikolajeva, 2005).

After this, the characters and the plot are examined based on the genres applicable to this trilogy. This includes historical fiction as the most prominent genre (Fisher, 2004; Glazer,

1997). There are three more genres present, one being the neo-slave narrative (Anim-Addo & Lima, 2017; Hinton, 2008; Kutenplon & Omlstead, 1996; Rushdy, 2004). The third genre present is the coming-of-age story (Chinn, 2020; Lafuente, 2016; Reynaud, 2004). The final genre is the problem novel (Eccleshare, 2004). This genre includes many elements that are more closely inspected in the following sections.

The central part of this thesis focuses on certain thematic elements of the trilogy, which offer a more insightful view of the characters and their portrayal in the trilogy. Each of the characters is inspected through thematic elements that can be applied to their situation. These include: Family and Home, Spirituality and Religion, Relationships (including friendships, romance, and master-slave relationships), Disability and Illness, Violence, War, and Identity. The examination includes how these elements are generally explored in fiction, but also how true they are to historical facts.

The final part of the thesis examines the front cover illustrations and how they connect the characters with the titles of the novels and the trilogy, against the historical backdrop of war (Cianciolo, 1970; Levinson, 1985; Reynaud, 2004; Wilsmore, 1985).

The aim of this thesis is to prove that Anderson portrayed the characters of enslaved children, and later, young adults, as a complex and multifaceted set, who are all different from each other in some way, yet they are all trying to survive and find their way in a world which deems them as lesser than everyone else.



## 2. Character Roles

To understand the portrayal of each of the enslaved four characters, their importance within the plot must be examined first. Nikolajeva (2002) categorises characters into two basic types: main characters (protagonists), and secondary characters. Secondary characters include supporting characters, satellite characters, and backdrop characters. Both main characters and supporting characters are central characters, whereas the latter two belong to the category of peripheral characters.

### 2.1. Main characters

A way in which the protagonist(s) of Anderson's trilogy may be determined is through focalization which "is connected to both the narrator's presence in the text and the character's point of view" (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 61). *Chains* (2008) and *Ashes* (2016) are told through Isabel's perspective, revealing her innermost thoughts, beliefs, memories, and understanding of the world she lives in. This type of focalization is described by Nikolajeva (2002) as internal focalization, where the reader is fully immersed in the character's experience and is only aware of what that character is aware of. This makes Isabel the protagonist in the first and the final novel. The situation is similar in the second novel of the trilogy, *Forge* (2010), but it is Curzon that is in the centre as the protagonist. As such, they are both central characters in all three novels, but considered main characters only in the novels they narrate, the rest of the time, they are supporting characters, as defined by Nikolajeva (2002).

To determine their role as narrators, Nikolajeva (2005) proposes two sets of distinction: the narrator's 'presence' in the story and 'distance' from the story. As protagonists who are telling their stories from their perspective, they are 'present', making them homodiegetic narrators. Furthermore, the narrator's 'distance' from the text (whether the story is happening right now, or at a different time) classifies the type of narrator as either intradiegetic or extradiegetic. In all three novels, Anderson subtly implies that the protagonists are looking back on the events, which would make them extradiegetic narrators, as well as homodiegetic. This is most evident by the journal-like form of all three novels, but also in Curzon's occasional addressing of the reader, such as: "You might find it dishonorable [...] You'd understand if I shed tears for the fathers and husbands and brothers and sons who died *that day* [emphasis added]" (Anderson, 2010, p. 29). Second person narration is not common, but it creates "the

impression of a personal relationship between the reader and the subject of a story” (Gamble & Yates, 2002, p. 37). The reader does feel closer to the events and to Curzon, but it is not clear whether he is telling the story in real time or retelling it. On the other hand, the wording Curzon uses here, gives the impression that he recollects what had happened in the past, despite expressing this on the same day as it actually happened in the reader’s understanding. However, there are instances in the same novel where Curzon expresses his thoughts in present tense, which makes it harder to determine the exact type of narrator in *Forge* (2010). Isabel never addresses the reader as a narrator, but the situation is just as confusing: “I thought it would be easy. [...] It was nighttime, after all, and folks would be asleep. Not in New York. Not in a city occupied by the Continental army” (Anderson, 2008, p. 65). It seems as if Isabel was looking back on the event with the knowledge she acquired only upon experience. She also occasionally expresses her thoughts in the present tense. What is clear in both Isabel’s and Curzon’s narrating, they do tend to reflect on some aspects of the past that happened before the trilogy takes place, or in between the events of two novels.

## 2.2. Secondary characters

With Isabel’s and Curzon’s establishment as the protagonists of the trilogy, the conclusion is drawn that Ruth and Aberdeen are secondary characters, which includes three types: supporting, satellite, and background characters. Nikolajeva (2002) describes supporting characters as “essential for the plot” (p. 112). Upon losing Ruth, Isabel’s focus through the final part of *Chains* (2008), the entirety of *Forge* (2010), and the beginning of *Ashes* (2016) is finding her. This goal guides all of Isabel’s actions and subsequently the plot, making Ruth a supporting character in the trilogy. Therefore, Ruth is a central character as well. However, she does not physically appear in *Forge* (2010) but is still a guiding force for some of Isabel’s actions in the novel.

Aberdeen appears only in *Ashes* (2016), and his most important contribution to the plot is accompanying Ruth, as she reluctantly reunites with Isabel after years of separation. He also joins Ruth on her daily commute while working in Williamsburg for a while. In this instance, his presence is crucial, and his role is that of a supportive character according to Nikolajeva’s (2002) classification. Without him, Ruth would likely not be willing to join Isabel’s and Curzon’s journey. However, as the plot of *Ashes* (2016) moves forward, his impact dwindles,

and by the end his role is that of a satellite character. His presence in the story, and the lack of it, affects Ruth and Isabel emotionally, but it does not steer the plot (cf. Nikolajeva, 2002).

### 3. Portrayal of Characters based on Genres

This section examines the genres discernible in this series, and which genre-specific characteristics are present in the portrayal of Isabel, Curzon, Ruth, and Aberdeen. As previously mentioned, this series predominantly belongs to historical fiction. The trilogy also relates to some other genres, such as the neo-slave narrative, coming-of-age story, and the problem novel. These incorporate a story of fighting against oppression, injustice, and prejudice.

Historical fiction is also commonly referred to as historical realism, as the plot is set in realistic circumstances of the past (Glazer, 1997). Fisher (2004) states that in its beginnings, historical fiction was mostly based on creating stories about relevant people of history. Stories based on imaginary characters in credible social circumstances of the past, appeared only subsequently. Anderson's *Seeds of America* belongs to the latter category. The four enslaved children are not real historical figures, but they are not wholly fictional either, as Anderson (2016) claims to have created them based on the written experiences of many former slaves. Relevant people from history appear as characters in the trilogy as well, but mainly serve the purpose of backdrop characters (cf. Nikolajeva, 2002), creating a more credible historic atmosphere.

#### 3.1. Neo-slave narrative

The occurrence of slavery and slave trade of African American children in the world of *Seeds of America* comes from racism, which is based on the idea that people of a certain skin colour are superior to all others. This notion, filled with prejudice and bias, permeated American society for hundreds of years (Smedley et al., n.d.).

Novels exploring these topics began appearing progressively following *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker in the 1960s, a written account based on the life story of Walker's great-grandmother, that had been passed down orally through generations (Rushdy, 2004). Hinton (2008) draws a distinction between slave narratives in the past, and their manifestation as neo-narratives today. The re-emergence of these narratives lies in the desire to "re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity" (Anim-Addo & Lima, 2017, p. 3). It is crucial for enslaved

Black characters in literature to be more than just the colour of their skin. There exists an aspiration to portray them more deeply, more truthfully to who they might have been, beyond the bondage that historically marks them. The four Black children in the trilogy are enslaved, but their portrayal goes beyond the surface layer, both collectively and individually. Their level of importance in the plot is different for each of them, and they are portrayed in more detail in accordance with that fact.

While in the past slave narratives were accounts of first-hand experiences following emancipation, the latter are fictional depictions of what enslaved life could have been like by authors who base their stories on available historical evidence (Hinton, 2008). Such is the case in Anderson's writing as well. This is not only evident in the story of enslaved children that she relates, but also in the structuring of her novels. Each chapter of the trilogy is prefaced by an excerpt from either a book or a letter, formal documents, cookbooks, newspaper advertisements, military reports, memoirs of former slaves, etc. All real remnants of the past, these examples bridge the gap between fact and fiction, and enable the reader to empathise with the characters more deeply. They represent the essence of what the characters go through in each chapter they precede. For example, Chapter 37 of *Forge* (2010) begins with the following:

I had thought only slavery dreadful, but the state of a free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse, for they live in constant alarm for their liberty.

—Olaudah Equiano, mariner and former slave (p. 177)

The chapter itself is about Curzon meeting Isabel again, after their separation following their escape from New York at the end of *Chains* (2008). Having fought for their freedom and releasing themselves from the bondages of the first novel, they are once again captured. The excerpt proves that these situations historically (i.e. during the period of slavery) happened often, and no African American could ever be truly free, whether they were enslaved or not.

Isabel, Ruth, Curzon, and Aberdeen were all born into slavery and experienced being bought and sold. What happened to Isabel and Ruth before *Chains* (2008) is revealed once Isabel finds out the two of them will be sold following the death of their kind mistress, Miss Mary Finch. Isabel looks back upon the moment she, Ruth, and their mother were bought by her. She also explains that the reason for it was their previous owner's accumulation of debts. They are then sold to the Locktons, a New York couple, who later sell Ruth again, so Isabel

escapes to look for her. In *Forge* (2010), Isabel is caught and sold again. Curzon's past is also revealed in *Forge* (2010). He served in the Bellingham's household with his father until he was ten years old, when he was gifted to Bellingham's son James, and separated from his father. In *Ashes* (2016) Aberdeen reveals to Isabel that he was sold when he was eight years old and separated from his family. Just as with the enslaved Gabe Adams in *On to Freedom* by Mary Kennedy Carter and Virginia Hamilton's eponymous *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* (Kutenplon & Omlstead, 1996), their only chance of freedom from the situation they were born in is escape, but even that is not a guarantee that they would really be free.

### 3.2. *Coming-of-age story*

Lafuente (2016) states that a feature many young adult novels have is the "focus on a disruption in the life of the protagonist and the subsequent personal growth that the character experiences" (p. 33). Raynaud (2004) claims that in African American novels, childhood was never innocent and never safe, but filled with constant threat and pain. Chinn (2020) explores punctuating moments of enslaved childhood in slave narratives. Inhumanly violent, impactful, and life-changing moments of violence that the Black child is, unlike their White peers, openly exposed to, makes them realise the reality of their situation, essentially ending the "childish state of unknowing" (Chinn, 2020, p. 43).

Despite being enslaved, Isabel and Ruth lived mostly happily before the trilogy takes place, except for the moment of their father's brutal death, which only Isabel remembers. The true struggle begins with *Chains* (2008). At just twelve years old, Isabel finds herself in a situation where she has to fend for herself and her five-year-old sister, Ruth. After the passing of their mother the year before, they still lived and worked comfortably at the estate of their owner, Miss Mary Finch, who treated them with respect and kindness. The novel begins on the day of her funeral. Isabel naively believes that Ruth and herself will be freed, but the situation turns out to be quite the opposite. This is the beginning of Isabel's growth, and her coming of age. She essentially becomes her sister's motherly figure, in all ways that matter. Curzon's experience is somewhat different, but it boils down to the same result. Curzon was also enslaved for his entire life, but until the age of ten, he lived safely, even as a slave, with his father. The first disruption he experienced was the separation from his father, when he was

literally given as a gift to Bellingham. Curzon looks back on that situation in *Forge* (2010). When Curzon first appears in *Chains* (2008), he is a personal slave to Bellingham. He shares his master's idealistic beliefs of the Patriots' cause in the war, and helps Bellingham on this account, even acquiring Isabel to spy on her Loyalist owners, the Locktons. Bellingham had promised Curzon that if he joined the war on his behalf, he would be freed and rewarded financially. At fourteen years of age, Curzon does so, and finds himself captured and injured, with only Isabel attempting to help him. This causes him to change his opinion on Bellingham, but his belief in the Patriots' cause remains the same. He, himself, reflects on the events that propelled the process of maturation in *Forge* (2010): "There was nothing waiting for me in Albany. Nothing waiting anywhere. The shape of my life had altered when Bellingham enlisted me. It changed again when I escaped the prison. It shattered when Isabel left" (Anderson, 2010, p. 20). This is still only the beginning of the process of growing up he does by the end of the trilogy.

Lafuente (2016) goes on to say: "These disruptions often propel the main character forth on a journey – literal, metaphorical, or both – that leads to self-discovery, a higher level of emotional maturity, and in general, a greater awareness of identity" (p. 33). Throughout the course of the next five years, this is exactly what happens to the two of them. Isabel's primary goal is finding Ruth, and then taking her back to Rhode Island, the place that felt most like home. In *Forge* (2008), Curzon finds himself being pulled back into the war and eventually finds his purpose in fighting for the Patriots, still believing in the freedom they preach about. This takes them on a journey in both senses of the word that Lafuente (2016, p. 33) talks about. Progression of growing up can also be seen in Ruth. At the beginning of the trilogy, she is five years old, but clearly behind both mentally and physically, often being referred to as simple. After Ruth is sent away, the course of Isabel's journey begins to take shape. She spends the next five years, with only her sister in mind. When Ruth appears again in *Ashes* (2016), Isabel can hardly recognise her:

She was Ruth and she was not-Ruth at the same time. This lass was taller than me, though I could not think of how that was possible. The last time I saw my Ruth, she was so small, I could carry her a good mile before my arms got tired. The features of the girl before me muddled, as if water or a thick fog swirled over her face. Her broad, strong chin and wide cheekbones recollected our father; the beautiful skin and long neck was all Momma. Her eyes were only hers, my baby sister's eyes: warm and brown and filled with questions. There could be no doubt. (p. 24)

Isabel examines Ruth closely to convince herself it is really her. The years they spent apart were stolen from them, and Isabel has a hard time accepting how much Ruth has grown and changed. This can also be seen on later occasions. Isabel wishes to protect Ruth from hard work and dangerous people constantly, but Ruth advocates for herself, so Isabel comes to accept that her little sister is not as little anymore.

Reynaud (2004) talks about the importance of characters' understanding of the reality of their situation in African American stories. "To know and muster the mechanisms of racism, to understand the workings of his/her oppression rather than to fall prey to them is necessary for the black boy or the black girl to reach 'adulthood'" (p. 109). Had Isabel not understood this, she would never have run, never have stood up for herself, never have 'rebelled'. Perhaps the primary reason behind Isabel's self-consciousness is the stark difference between the life they lived on Rhode Island, and the unforgiving truth of being Black in eighteenth century America she learns more about while enslaved in New York.

The importance of historical events should also be taken into consideration when talking about African American characters in historical novels. The oppression people of colour had to endure for centuries has such a significant role that it must be evaluated in coming-of-age stories (Reynaud, 2004). In *Seeds of America*, that history is the American Revolutionary War. Isabel's, Curzon's, Ruth's and Aberdeen's lives are in a precarious position based on the colour of their skin. This situation is only exacerbated by the war they find themselves in. The close connection between the characters' journey and the past they are a part of can be surmised from the trilogy's cover illustrations, each novel's title, and title of the trilogy as well. This and the role of war in the trilogy will be more closely inspected in latter sections.

Another thing Reynaud (2004) mentions is the Bildungsroman, which is a genre focused on the process of coming of age. She claims that it both is and is not applicable to novels of African American experience, as it does not comply with its Eurocentric definition. Due to this problem, LeSeur (1995) introduces the term "Black Bildungsroman", to describe novels emerging in the 1960s, written by African American authors in the form of the traditional Bildungsroman, which tell the stories of four hundred years of Black experience in the United States. Laurie Halse Anderson herself is not African American, so this term is not quite applicable to *Seeds of America*. Perhaps the solution is somewhere in the middle. Moretti (1987) connects the notion of the Bildungsroman in European culture to two objectives: self-determination and socialisation. Self-determination is related to one's freedom of choice,



whereas the latter is connected to one's assimilation into society. Due to the historical and social circumstances of Isabel's, Curzon's, Ruth's, and Aberdeen's situation, these are not pre-given to them, but rather, through the events of the novels, they must step out of what is "permitted", to be able to grow and follow their own paths. Socialisation is an even harder task for them. There was little hope for enslaved African American people, even after the United States managed to secure their own freedom (Schneider & Schneider, 2007). However, Curzon was a soldier on the winning side, and Isabel & Ruth were enlisted alongside him in *Ashes* (2016), which could potentially give them the possibility of true legitimate freedom. There is not a complete resolution at the end of the novel. The reader does not know what happens to them after the final sentence is read. One can only presume, but at that point, the three of them are together and they are well, which, for Isabel, is enough. Aberdeen's situation is truly unknown. His involvement with the losing, British side, is an indication that he did not survive the Battle of Yorktown (cf. Anderson, 2016).

### 3.3. *Problem novel*

The problem novel, also referred to as social novel, or social problem novel, is a narrative that focuses on "a prevailing social problem, such as gender, race, or class prejudice, [which] is dramatized through its effect on the characters of a novel" (*social problem novel*, n.d.). The primary problem the four Black characters are faced with is the institution of slavery and their own position in it. However, they also go through the pains of growing up that others of their age can relate to, many of which are common topics in young adult fiction, such as family dynamics, friendships, war, disabilities, various types of violence, conflict, trauma, identity, etc. (Eccleshare, 2004). These topics will be further examined in the following sections.

#### 4. Family and Home

The institution of family comes in many shapes and forms and has an important impact on who individuals grow into, both in the real and the imaginary world (Trupe, 2016). Many stories deal with children whose family circles have been broken and are now left alone in the world to fend for themselves. In these stories, the parents, or other authoritative figures, have purposely abandoned the children they were in charge of (Avery, 2004). Avery (2004) also mentions stories where families were separated unwillingly by outside circumstances, such as Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War* (1973), where the sibling pair are separated from their parents due to the ongoing war. Such examples are acknowledged by Grenby (2008) as well, who claims that stories that focus on family are usually more filled with examples of disrupted, separated families, rather than content and complete ones. Aberdeen was separated from his family once he was sold away at the age of eight years old, never to see his parents and his brothers again, although he missed them deeply. This is in accordance with the historical state of the matter where "slave owners frequently sold individual slaves away from their respective family for financial purposes and punitive reasons" (Bickford III & Rich, 2014, p. 74). His family is divided, so their owner can make money. The unity of his family is second to his owner's desire for profit. The society's perspective of the importance of enslaved Black family units, is not an accurate representation of the character's situation in *Seeds of America*.

Although both Isabel's and Curzon's parents are dead by the time of the first novel, they are ever-present figures in their lives. The trilogy begins and ends with Isabel thinking about and addressing her mother, who passed away just a year before *Chains* (2008), leaving Ruth and Isabel orphaned. Upon the passing of their mistress, Isabel and Ruth find themselves completely alone, which leaves Isabel in charge of herself and her sister as they embark into unfamiliar territory. Despite being a child herself, Isabel takes on the role of a caretaker for her sister, as much as the circumstances will allow her. Similarly to Cynthia Voigt's *Homecoming* series (Trupe, 2016) the two girls are left on their own. This propels Isabel to become a strong, courageous, and caring older sister, for her little sister's well-being. In *Ashes* (2016), Isabel reflects on this relationship: "After Momma died, I did mothering things for her, like sewing dolls and making her wash her hands and teaching her prayers. I was all the family she had in the world. She was all I had too" (Anderson, 2016, p. 25).

Ruth is the most important person in Isabel's life. For most of the series, Ruth shares this sentiment. When Ruth is sent off to live on a plantation in South Carolina, she is essentially

adopted by Walter and Serafina, an elderly enslaved married couple, who take care of her and Aberdeen as their biological families would. However, even the two of them understand that Ruth belongs with Isabel and, with a heavy heart, part from Ruth in *Ashes* (2016). Ruth has trouble reconnecting with Isabel after their long separation, believing that it was on Isabel's account that she was sent away to the plantation in the first place. A large part of their eventual reconciliation are the stories Isabel was telling Ruth when she was sick with fever. Ruth wishes to hear some more afterwards, dubbing them as stories about "Momma and the garden" (p. 174). Therefore, it was Isabel's stories of their parents that, in a way, brought them back together. Their sister bond is the most important relationship in the entire trilogy. Isabel's love for her sister is the driving force which pushes Isabel to take action in a society which sees her and the likes of her as less than human. Even Curzon's story is heavily influenced by Isabel's actions. Her main objective is Ruth, and his is Isabel.

From the very first chapter of the trilogy, it is clear how important Isabel's parents were to her. They are not only the family that she lost, but an important part of her identity formation throughout the three novels. Curzon had never met his mother, but his father told him stories of her, such as the story of his name, before he, too, passed. Through Curzon's name, his parents and the memory of them lives on. Grenby (2008) states that the lack of parents often serves as a reminder of how important family is, making characters strive to recreate a family. Progressively, by the end of the trilogy, a new family is created, consisting of Isabel, Ruth and Curzon. This is cemented at the very end, when Isabel and Curzon get married. Searching for home is a theme often found in family stories (Avery, 2004). Isabel's plans for Ruth and her to go back to Rhode Island, the place they were happiest, is a large part of their journey. She fantasises about their possible future life after the war. It is not clear if her dreams come true, because the series ends with an open, not fully resolved ending regarding this, which makes it possible to only speculate on what comes next.

## 5. Spirituality and Religion

Babb (2017) deems religion and spirituality as “areas where black cultural autonomy often could be maintained. From the earliest black presence in what would be the United States, descendants of Africans held on to their own rituals and transformed the ones they were given” (p. 83). African American spiritual identity is an accumulation of African beliefs reframed into American Christianity. Although not in the centre of the story, religion and spirituality are an important connection between Isabel and her mother, Dinah, throughout the entire trilogy. On one side, there is the belief in God and Jesus, on the other there are traces of African beliefs, her faith in the ghosts of her ancestors. The latter is a constant in Isabel’s story. “The best time to talk to ghosts is just before the sun comes up. That’s when they can hear us true, Momma said. That’s when ghosts can answer us” (Anderson, 2008, p. 3). She believes in these ghosts, and believes they help her whenever the situation calls for it. An example would be when Isabel and Curzon are escaping New York at the end of *Chains* (2008). Cold and exhausted, Isabel sees and feels ancestral ghosts help her row:

I saw in the fog the forms of people. They never came close enough that I could see their faces. Once, I reached out, feeling a warm presence, but I near tipped the boat over and had to grab for the oar before it slid away. [...] I rowed and the tide pulled and the ghosts—who could indeed travel over water—tugged my boat with all their strength. (p. 299)

Isabel’s beliefs are where she finds strength and solace in challenging circumstances.

Young adulthood is a time of life when an individual is “questioning and challenging the values one has grown up with, as well as a period of adopting beliefs on one’s own” (Trupe, 2016, p. 189). The trials and tribulations of enslaved life, particularly the loss of Ruth in *Chains* (2008), disrupt the security of her beliefs to the point where she feels abandoned by the higher power: “I knew I ought pray for Ruth, or for Momma, or for anything; I ought just pray, but the words would not come. I feared the Spirit had left me” (p. 190). As she slowly regains her faith in herself, her Faith comes back as well. This is particularly evident in *Ashes* (2016), where her gratitude for finding and reconnecting with Ruth, solidify her questioning beliefs and she reestablishes her relationship with God and ghosts.

Religion and spirituality are not such crucial aspects to Curzon, Ruth or Aberdeen. They do not seem to question their faith. However, unlike Isabel, Ruth is scared of the ghosts that are so important to Isabel. What Isabel relies on, Ruth runs from.

## 6. Relationships

### 6.1. Friendships

Eccleshare (2004) states that examining “something as comparatively simple as friendship is every bit as important as delving into” (p. 550) more disturbing aspects of problem novels. In this trilogy, friendship is the most crucial part of the characters’ survival. Without each other, they would not have succeeded in achieving this aim. In more general terms, friendship cannot be easily defined from a single viewpoint; it is a unique, complex and caring relationship between people based on similarities, mutual understanding, and desire for friendship (Wrench, et al., 2020). Isabel, Curzon, Ruth, and Aberdeen find each other accidentally and their friendship grows mostly as a result of chance, similar age, physical proximity, and most notably their enslaved situations. Fehr (1996) claims that friendships are not likely between people of different “race, educational background, physical attractiveness, age, the way they dress, and so on” (p. 51). This idea is contradicted in the trilogy, since the four characters don’t just make friends with each other, but also with White characters and characters of different ages, thus also transgressing boundaries of propriety in a highly hierarchical society (Schneider & Schneider, 2007). The grounds for these friendships vary. It is the war (Curzon’s soldier friends from Valley Forge), oppressed situation (indentured Becky Berry, enslaved Walter and Serafina), and understanding of racial injustice (Lady Seymour) that brings them together to some extent.

In regard to the complexity of friendship, alongside its positives, it also opens ground for a heartfelt betrayal (Fehr, 1996). For Isabel, this is seen in the first two novels. She has a hard time trusting anyone after her sister was sent away, and she was branded in *Chains* (2008). In *Forge* (2010) she doesn’t want to rely on Curzon, until another boy, Gideon, truly breaks her trust. Curzon has a mixed relationship with his soldier friends in *Forge* (2010). As the only Black person among them, they do not understand his position in society. Ebenezer, his closest friend of all of them, doesn’t understand Curzon’s anger after a brief exchange with a wealthy racist man who doesn’t take Curzon for a soldier due to his skin colour. Although his family doesn’t own slaves, Ebenezer’s view of Black people is heavily influenced by the racism in society and in the judicial system. This sparks a heated discussion between the two young men: ““They can’t be free, Curzon. They’re slaves. Their master decides for them.” “What if

they ran away?” “Then they’d be breaking the law.” “Bad laws deserve to be broken”” (p. 65). Curzon tries to explain to Ebenezer the similarities between the American fight for freedom, and the situation of enslaved people. Ebenezer does not see his point. He sees Curzon as a friend, beyond the colour of his skin, but does not understand the implications of this in their society. The discussion ultimately ends with Curzon saying Ebenezer is not his friend, and their friendship halts for a while. But the two of them want to be each other’s friends, and they eventually mend their relationship.

Wrench, et al. (2020) write about friendship being a fluid relationship where the involvement of either party is not always equal. Jackson (2023) states that there is an indebtedness to one another present at all times, which pushes the friendship forward and makes it possible. He claims that “equality between friends is always deferred. As with gifts, [...] with trade or barter, what is given is neither returned immediately nor returned in kind, and it is this sense of something owing that sustains a friendship over time” (p. 44). This notion is particularly relevant for Isabel’s actions in *Chains* (2008), and for Curzon and his friends in *Forge* (2016). In the first novel, a huge fire starts in New York and flames engulf Lady Seymour’s house, where Isabel was staying at the time. Isabel sacrifices Ruth’s doll, the last remnant she had of her, in order to save Lady Seymour and some of her valuable property, the most important being a portrait of her late husband. When Isabel escapes at the end of the novel, she visits Lady Seymour, now almost completely paralyzed, in her room. Isabel discusses with herself whether it would be right to take money “from somebody who had showed me kindness” (p. 290) to help her on her way. Lady Seymour wakes up and in her disabled state encourages her to take it as a sign of gratefulness. She “cut her eyes at her husband’s small portrait [...], then to the coin purse that weighed down my hand. She gave a sharp nod of the head, one side of her mouth turned up in a smile” (p. 291). Thus, some debts are repaid. Another similar situation occurs immediately after this. Isabel ponders Curzon in jail and debates whether she should help him: “’Twas Curzon who made sure I survived. ’Twas he who had been my steadfast friend since the day they brought me here. I couldn’t. [...] I shouldn’t. But I had to. I had a debt to pay” (p. 292). This indebtedness follows Curzon and Isabel throughout. With each of them believing the other is just repaying a debt, and, in a way not admitting to themselves that they are friends (or more), until the very end of *Ashes* (2016). Sense of indebtedness is partially the reason Curzon finds himself a soldier in *Forge* (2010). When readers, and Curzon himself, are first introduced to Ebenezer, he is fighting a British soldier. Curzon, inspecting the scene nearby, helps Ebenezer survive. Ebenezer repays this debt by helping him enlist as a free

man and hiding stolen property Curzon had at the time.

Many authors of fiction write stories of different genres about friendship and its importance in the lives of children and young adults in (Eccleshare, 2004; Fisher, 2004; Gamble & Yates, 2002; Trupe, 2006). Friendship is necessary for the characters in this trilogy as well. When they lose friends, they mourn them, as is the case when Aberdeen is gone. Having friends, people who are different, people who care for the well-being of one another is one of the foundations of the trilogy as it is. The novel in which the idea of friendship goes beyond the bonds between Isabel and Curzon, is surely *Forge* (2010). Curzon, so different from the friends he makes in the army, truly alone for the first time, develops deep and strong friendships, partially as a result of the harsh conditions of the Valley Forge encampment. These friendships are Curzon and Isabel's final salvation from the bonds of slavery, and they remain free until the end of the trilogy.

## 6.2. Romance

Romantic feelings most prominently develop between Isabel and Curzon. To a smaller extent some romantic feelings are visible between Ruth and Aberdeen, but as they are still quite young, Anderson doesn't delve into particularities. Rather, she portrays it more as a close caring friendship, mistaken for love. Eccleshare (2004) writes that "most teenage romances are still told from the girl's angle" (p. 545), as they are general readers of romance. *Seeds of America* is not a trilogy with a focus on romance. The love that develops between Isabel and Curzon is a result of years of a close friendship, and is perhaps the expected progression of their relationship. Additionally, the first appearance of romantic feelings comes from Curzon in *Forge* (2008), who, as a young man, is not likely to do so. Moreover, there are no indications of any kind of sexual relationship between the two of them, which is oftentimes explored in teenage novels (Eccleshare, 2004), but there is evidence of physical attraction. In their attempt to escape Valley Forge, Isabel dresses like a man, which causes an expected reaction from Curzon:

I could not speak. [...] I pointed, still speechless. Isabel wore breeches. I'd never before seen how breeches allowed one to gaze upon the entire length of leg of the wearer, as well as a good eyeful of that person's rump. When boys or men wore breeches, I'd not taken notice of this. But with the breeches upon Isabel, it was all I could think of. (p. 273)

Despite this instance, their love for each other grows slowly and is mostly based on emotions, rather than bodily desires. Physicality occurs occasionally, in the form of a kiss, but these happen during and after displays of emotion, or when revealing their own thoughts and secrets to each other.

Paul & White (1990, as cited in Dickson, 2001) describe adolescent relationships as being convenient, with participants focused particularly on themselves rather than each other, also stating that such relationships lack significant emotional connection, unless occurring in later adolescent years. In *Ashes* (2016), adult Curzon admits to having been in love with Isabel since the moment they first met, and he is devoted and loyal to her, even in their earlier teenage years. Isabel is the one who is more focused on herself, i.e., her sister, and does not fully come to terms with her love for Curzon until the very end:

I'd been so afraid to admit love, terrified that my affection would be scorned. To love someone leaves you vulnerable. To admit love opens the door to the possibility of pain and sorrow. However, to ignore love, [...] guarantees not only pain and sorrow, but a withering of your very capacity to love, blaspheming the holy purpose of our days on this earth. *I must tell him. No matter what comes of the confession, I must tell him.* (pp. 242-243)

Isabel is fearful but she realises that the only way forward is to admit the truth. In the end, it is her that proposes marriage to him.

### 6.3. *Master-slave relationships*

Enslaved people in American colonies, and later in the United States, were forced to work in multiple areas. They would either work on large plantations, smaller farms, or as household servants (Schneider & Schneider, 2007). In the first two novels, Curzon is a personal and household slave. Aberdeen lived on a plantation before he left it in the final novel. Isabel and Ruth experience all three types that Schneider & Schneider (2007) mention. The work they are forced to do depends on their enslavers.

When examining White characters in children's literature about slavery Bickford III & Rich (2014) discovered that "Whites' benevolence, verbal encouragement, or active aid was present in nearly three-quarters ( $n = 29$ ) of the selected books" (p. 78). Such incorrect representations give away a wrong impression to readers and portray an inaccurate picture of



historical facts. They also state that “while there were historical examples of White slave owners’ encouragement and non-owners’ support, these were the exceptional few and are not representative of Whites in general” (p. 79). The four characters have different experiences of slave life between each other, and the ways Anderson created each of their owners differ. The relationship between Aberdeen and the overseer Prentiss on the plantation is only evident in the beating he gives Aberdeen upon his failed attempt to escape. Bellingham appears to be benevolent, and Curzon himself is conditioned to look at him as such in *Chains* (2008). But his lack of action when Curzon was in jail, and re-enslaving him and Isabel in *Forge* (2010), changes Curzon’s view. The silent cruelty of Bellingham becomes prominent. The most evidentiary examples being the iron collar that Isabel had to wear, and threatening of hurting her if Curzon fails to comply with his wishes. The worst of all is perhaps Madam Lockton in *Chains* (2008), who uses violence and manipulation to demean and hurt the two sisters as much as possible. Slave narratives generally portray slave owners as being cruel and enslaved life as inhumane (Brooks & McNair, 2008; Kutenplon & Olmstead, 1996). There is only one exception to the slaveholders mentioned above – Miss Mary Finch. She is portrayed as being kind and respectful. Isabel remembers her as such. It was her who taught Isabel to read, and was generally thought to have “odd notions” (Anderson, 2008, p. 9) by other White slaveholding people.

## 7. Disability and Illness

Sklar (2015) writes that authors are inclined to portray characters unlike what themselves and most people are like. In *Seeds of America*, a character that is different from others in terms of intellectual development is Ruth, Isabel's little sister. Young adult fiction has a history of stereotyping and misrepresenting disabilities and disabled characters, with some authors making mistakes in regard to quality, accuracy and sophistication, and in some cases, fully defining characters by their disabilities (Harris & Baskin, 1987). Anderson's portrayal of Ruth depends on how she is perceived by others, particularly by Isabel. The author does not attempt to overly delve into Ruth's psyche, but simply portrays her as mentally younger than she truly is, with occasional seizures. Eccleshare (2004) writes that in the past, disabled characters were "tamed by learning to live with their disabilities or reformed by overcoming them" (p. 551), which often makes them resort to "self-pity while screaming 'unfair'" (p. 551). This is not the case with Ruth. Her beliefs that Isabel loves her less for who she is cause her pain and insecurities, which she believes are justified. Isabel herself disproves these notions by telling her of everything she has been through to find her, ultimately calling her "perfect" (Anderson, 2016, p. 173).

There are several ways in which Anderson reveals Ruth as a character with disabilities, starting in the very first chapter in *Chains* (2008), where Isabel describes her as having a "peculiar manner of being" (p. 3). At the age of five, Ruth doesn't speak much, soothes herself by rocking and sucking on her thumb, and has the falling sickness. At the age of twelve, in *Ashes* (2016), Ruth has grown physically and mentally, but she keeps up these patterns of self-soothing when stressed and experiencing occasional seizures. However, she is also talkative, more aware of the world around her, has a great memory, and doesn't shy away from expressing her opinion. It is mostly Isabel who sometimes doubts her capabilities. Anderson strays of labelling Ruth strictly based on what makes her different from other characters, as some authors do (Sklar, 2015), but rather gives the reader an opportunity to form their own view of Ruth, based on everything they have found out.

Despite this, Ruth does fall into some stereotypical archetypal categories regarding intellectual disabilities in works of fiction. Sklar (2020) describes eight different categories that disabled characters may belong to, also stating that some characters are likely to belong to more than one. The categories Ruth could belong to are that of the Overgrown Child and Kind Simpleton. Ironically, in *Ashes* (2016), Ruth, at the age of twelve, is physically taller and

stronger than Isabel was at that age. She is oftentimes described as simple, but is generally affable. Perhaps the best description of Ruth in regard to her intellectual capabilities is that by Isabel in *Ashes* (2016):

Ruth had not been like other children. She learned things slower and needed to be shown the doing of a task one hundred times instead of one. But when she finally understood the hows of a chore, she never forgot it. A few called her “simple,” but our mother did not hold with such language. Ruth was just Ruth, and that was good enough for us. (p. 26)

Although Ruth is generally favoured and loved by most characters, she is also demonised on account of her seizures by Madam Lockon in *Chains* (2008), which is one of the reasons she is sent away: ““It’s the Devil!” [...] “She has the Devil in her!” [...] “She’s possessed,” Madam sputtered. “I will not have a demon-child in my house, Elihu.” [...] “I will not have evil in my house”” (pp. 93–94). Ruth is, therefore, doubly ostracised as a result of the colour of her skin and her disability/illness. This sort of misrepresentation of people (characters) with disabilities is conclusive with the dehumanisation and villainization in history and in literature (Sklar, 2020). Anderson herself doesn’t take this stance, but rather portrays Ruth as a child in need of support from her sister and friends as she is trying to navigate the world by herself.

Another thing that helps her greatly in doing so are animals, which serve as friends and companions. Animals appear more frequently in children’s literature, than in young adult literature, as children have a closer connection to nature in general (Gamble & Yates, 2002). Ruth, still a child in age, and even more so due to her intellectual disabilities, does possess the child-like propensity to be connected to the natural world on a deeper level than other, older characters in the trilogy. She understands animals better than other characters seem to do, and they offer her comfort. Although not quite anthropomorphic, Ruth perceives them as equal with the people in her life. “Deen’s safe. He’ll watch Nancy Chicken and Thomas Boon and Serafina and Walter. They’re all safe” (Anderson, 2016, p. 265). Nancy Chicken, a chicken, and Thomas Boon, a donkey, are two animal characters from *Ashes* (2016), that Ruth essentially adopts, names, and takes care of. Even the donkey’s surname, Boon, indicates how important the animal is, not only as a cart-hauling animal, but also as a companion. The two animals themselves, however, are portrayed realistically, and they possess the role of satellite characters (cf. Nikolajeva, 2002), by not being essential to plot, but are emotionally important to Ruth. The realistic portrayal is evident in the disappearance of Nancy Chicken one night: “Nancy

Chicken wandered off whilst we slept and did not return. Ruth understood the meaning of this tragedy as well as we did. She lay on her back and cried quiet, with her hands covering her face” (Anderson, 2016, p. 79). The “tragedy” for Isabel, Curzon and Aberdeen being the loss of eggs the chicken laid, whereas Ruth experiences the loss more deeply, and weeps for the loss of what was essentially a friend to her. The two animals are not the sole indication of how close Ruth is with the natural world. She also takes care of kittens, talks to horses, and mourns the animals who lose their lives due to the war.

## 8. Violence

The themes of physical and sexual abuse are often present in slave narratives (Kutenplon & Olmstead, 1996). This is not surprising, since historically enslaved men and women were subject to the will of their owners in horrific and gruesome ways (Schneider & Schneider, 2007). The four Black characters experience physical violence. These events are portrayed explicitly in the trilogy. However, sexual violence is not clearly stated, but rather implied in relation to Ruth.

### 8.1. Physical violence

Research carried out by Bickford III & Rich (2014) shows that displays of violence are often omitted from literature aimed for younger readers, and more likely to occur in historical fiction set during time of slavery than any other genres. As Aberdeen first appears in *Ashes* (2016), he is injured having been beaten by Prentiss: “his eyes were red rimmed and bruised from a beating, plus he favored that injured arm” (p. 27). The violence Isabel and Curzon experience is more brutal and unforgiving given they are just children, when the most horrid examples occur. In *Forge* (2010), Curzon retrospectively reveals that Bellingham’s father, forced Curzon’s father, Cezar, to beat him “with a leather strap on my naked back” (p. 147), when he was ten, after trying to escape. This a punctuating moment of his childhood (Chinn, 2020), and Curzon reveals it only after he meets Bellingham again in Valley Forge. Bellingham was portrayed relatively neutrally by Anderson until that point. Curzon also experiences bullying on account of racism by one of the soldiers in his company, John Burns. Taxel (1988) writes that “many of these upper-class champions of liberty are rarely shown to be sympathetic to those less fortunate than they, and they often disparage those below them on the social scale” (p. 165). Burns is the only other character, aside from the slave owners in the trilogy, who resorts to violence and bullying in connection to the four Black characters. Although they are both soldiers, Burns constantly disparages him due to his skin colour, and also has him beaten up on false claims and steals his boots. The worst example of violence and brutality is Isabel being branded on her cheek with the letter ‘I’ for insolence, as a result of her reaction to Ruth being sent away by Madam Lockton.

## 8.2. *Sexual violence*

Chinn (2020) explores the punctuation of Black female childhood into girlhood as a result of sexual abuse, which is often present in slave narratives, and not always specifically mentioned. Anderson implies Ruth was sexually violated by the overseer Prentiss in a few ways, without directly mentioning it. This is evident when Prentiss talks about Ruth in his sole direct appearance in *Ashes* (2016), where he mentions her in his conversation with two British soldiers: ““I wished ye coulda seen her, a fine lass, she is”” (p. 43). Walter and Serafina are careful to keep him away from Ruth, who is scared of him. Even Isabel realises Ruth looks years older than she is: ““Though only twelve years old, Ruth resembled more a maid of sixteen”” (p. 43), and that Prentiss not only wants to hurt her, but did hurt her in the past. The implication of sexual abuse is that there is an obvious added motive by the other characters to get Ruth as far away from Prentiss as possible.

## 9. War

One of the most influential and prevalent issues in the trilogy is certainly war. Taxel (1988) writes that there had been a double standard in novels about the Revolutionary war aimed for young readers between 1899 and 1976, with most authors displaying racial attitudes in their writing about the war for freedom. Most such books are written from the perspective of wealthy White slaveholding characters who, like the authors who wrote them, seem to be oblivious of the contradiction between the American fight for freedom and the perpetual enslaved position of Black people in the American society of the time, with only one novel focusing on a Black protagonist (*When the World's on Fire* by Sally Edwards) (Taxel, 1988). Unlike the Black characters in the previously mentioned books, who are incorrectly portrayed as docile and uncaring regarding both the war and their own social standing, the characters in *Seeds of America*, as it truly was the case in reality, are not only aware of it, but directly engage into it, especially Curzon and Aberdeen (Taxel, 1988). The happenings of the war directly and indirectly affect the four characters throughout the entire trilogy. War changes their lives, their perspectives and their opinions about such conflicts and life. Isabel's stance on war is perhaps the most realistic and understandable one. Having been trusting and consequently betrayed by both sides in hope of gaining freedom from the Locktons in *Chains* (2008), she stops caring for the war itself. However, Americans seeking their freedom inspires her to seek her own, and prompts her to escape from New York: "If an entire nation could seek its freedom, why not a girl?" (p. 272). Still, her opinion of the war remains neutral, fuelled with anger and disappointment at both the Americans and the British almost until the very end of the final novel: "'I don't trust the British,' [...] 'I don't trust the Patriots, either,' I said. 'The winner of this ridiculous war matters not to me'" (Anderson, 2016, p. 139).

Fox & Hunt (2004) argue whether the theme of war is appropriate for children as it is not only fictional children, but also fictional adults who find themselves in disempowered positions in stories depicting war. However, the enslaved Black characters in the trilogy are able to gain freedom and independence partially due to the war and the social collapse it causes. This is more historically correct than what the authors of the books that Taxel (1988) lists wrote about, as many enlisted enslaved people or runaways, were promised and possibly gained freedom as a result of their service on either side of the war, which encouraged them to enlist (Neimeyer, 2007). Such is the case with Curzon and Aberdeen. Curzon finds himself a soldier three different times, in each of the novels; always on the side of the Patriots, but with different

motivations behind his enlistments. In *Chains* (2008), he enlists on behalf of his master Bellingham who offers him freedom in return. He ends up imprisoned and injured. In *Forge* (2010), he finds himself back in the war accidentally, while running away from his former employer. In this case, he is pulled out of the war midway through the novel and taken back under Bellingham's ownership. In *Ashes* (2016), he finally joins the war completely willingly, reunites with his former friends, joins Rhode Island's Black Regiment and creates the possibility of post-war freedom for himself, Isabel and Ruth. Curzon is a true Patriot who believes in the American cause and in the benefits of his own involvement in it.

Civil wars can cause conflict between friends as a result of "divided loyalties" (Trupe, 2006, p. 231). Isabel does not care, Curzon is a passionate Patriot from the start, and Aberdeen becomes a British spy. The war physically and metaphorically separates the group of four Black children who spent weeks travelling together as friends in the first part of *Ashes* (2016), with each of them pulling the others in their direction. The one thing they have in common in this case is affection for their friends, and their desire for true, irrefutable freedom. By creating characters in the same social position, each with different perspectives of the war, Anderson does not attempt to justify the deeds of either warring sides, but takes "a revisionist, [...] postcolonial, balanced view" (Fox & Hunt, 2004, p. 500) of the war and is more focused on portraying problematic position of Black people in an uncertain situation where everything could go either well for them or completely wrong whichever side they choose to support. This is evident at the end of *Ashes* (2016). Aberdeen disappears from the narrative, presumably dead, and Curzon's idealistic views of the Patriots' cause are shattered once he finds out how they treated the runaway Black soldiers of the British side:

He talked at length about the injustice of the circumstances, the horrible hypocrisy of it all. [...] "I had faith in them, Isabel. Even when they handed me back to Bellingham, I convinced myself that things would change; they just needed to see our dedication, how smart and hardworking and patriotic we were." "You've always believed in the Revolution," I said carefully. "You had a mountain of faith in it." "I was wrong." (p. 270)

At his darkest moments of despair and hopelessness, it is Isabel, the unlikeliest of all, who offers him hope and faith in the future; not only for them, but for all children of Africa. Harrison (1987) explains that war stories depict "the depths to which human beings can plummet and the heights to which they can rise" (p. 69). Isabel and Curzon' final conversation on the matters of the war and the unresolved situation of Black people in American society



portrays both of these extremes. As an answer to Curzon's painful realisation, Isabel shares a new outlook on the future, offering hope of freedom, which they will fight for together. Thus, Anderson manages "to take hope by the hand and to coax it back to life" (Harrison, 1987, p. 88) in a story so filled with injustice and uncertainty.

## 10. Identity

Shaping one's identity apart from their enslavers' is most explored in Isabel's case, and to a smaller extent in Curzon's. Black people were generally robbed of their identity in slavery (Schneider & Schneider, 2007). The characters' last names are dependent on their owners, with Isabel's full name being completely changed at one point into Sal Lockton by the Locktons in *Chains* (2008). Vitullo's (2022) study into displacement in young adult literature shows that aspects of young adult characters' identities change when they are faced with testing circumstances. The question of identity for Isabel and Curzon in *Seeds of America* is connected with their shaping of who they are outside of their enslaved situations. Curzon gives himself the last name Smith, substituting the last name of Bellingham he held previously in order to enlist in *Forge* (2010). In this way, he completely removes his identity from his enslaver. Lafuente (2016) writes that "hardships in the journey to find one's identity are magnified when coupled with the dangers of living under an oppressive political system" (p. 45). Isabel takes her entire life into account when trying to figure out who she is in *Chains* (2008). Her identity-shaping involves not only removing herself from the bonds of slavery, but also connecting her identity and her scars with her parents, who are prominent figures throughout the trilogy.

The scars on Poppa's cheek had been three lines across his cheek, carved with a sharp blade. He was proud of his marks. In the country of his ancestors, they made him into a man. I traced the *I* with my fingertip. *This is my country mark*. I did not ask for it, but I would carry it as Poppa carried his. It made me his daughter. It made me strong. I took a step back, seeing near my whole self in the mirror. I pushed back my shoulders and raised my chin, my back straight as an arrow. *This mark stands for Isabel*. (p. 286)

Isabel takes the mark, not as branding of her shame, but as a proud proclamation of who she is. This is her connection to her father. The new last name she adopts is connected to her life with her mother and Ruth on Miss Finch's Rhode Island farm: "I closed my eyes and thought of home; [...] Showing Ruth what was weed and what was flower ... I opened my eyes, dipped the quill, and wrote out my true name: *Isabel Gardener*" (pp. 287–288). In *Chains* (2008), Isabel's progression from child to young adult is most evident. In the rest of the trilogy, Isabel's shaped identity allows her to grow into a mature adult.

## 11. What the Titles and the Cover Illustrations Reveal

As previously stated, the historical background runs parallel with the characters' stories. This connection is automatically discernible from looking at the cover illustrations and titles of the novels. Levinson (1985) writes that the title of a piece of work is more than just words used to refer to it, but a central part of what it stands to represent. His findings are true for all artwork. Wilsmore (1985) applies these claims to literary work specifically. Cianciolo (1970) talks about the importance of illustration in children's literature in general, stating that the quantity of illustrations is not as important, as how well the existing illustrations are able to encompass what is written. There are but three (cover) illustrations to consider in this trilogy, all three interacting with their respective titles and plots within the trilogy. The titles and the cover illustration come together and establish a clearer understanding of what each novel, and the trilogy itself is about, without even turning a page.

Levinson (1985) classifies titles into six categories, depending on their purposes. The titles of these novels, *Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010) & *Ashes* (2016), belong to the category of what Levinson (1985) calls "focussing titles". These titles serve the purpose of distinguishing the most relevant theme of the work, drawing attention to it, and enabling a specific kind of interpretation of the work they represent. In less specific terms, focussing titles belong to the more general group of "interpretative titles" which "serve to announce or support an interpretation of the work as a whole, in a fairly sharp and central way" (Levinson, 1985, p. 37). Regarding the interpretation of literary titles, Wilsmore (1987) states that they are "sometimes guides to the interpretation of the literary work, altering out listening, seeing, or reading of the work, and pointing the way to its correct perception" (p. 403). Titles of literary works encourage readers to focalize their understanding of the work before and as they are reading it, to comprehend it more accurately in accordance with what the author deems most important in their work. Wilsmore (1987) also expresses the importance of the relationship between the author, the work itself, and the reader, as the ultimate essence of the work is an amalgamation of all three. Another crucial element that should be considered to fully grasp this trilogy, are the cover illustrations. Illustrations have storytelling properties and reveal another aspect to the story, and the characters they depict (Cianciolo, 1970).

In the case of the *Seeds of America* trilogy, all of the above is true. Each novel title and accompanying cover illustration reveal the reality the characters deal with, not only in their personal situation, but also against the backdrop of the historical circumstances as mentioned

by Raynaud (2004). Each novel title is also mentioned in the novel it represents, connecting the two more closely, and allowing for a closer inspection of the characters and the world they inhabit.

The cover illustration of *Chains* (2008) (see: *Figure 1*) shows Isabel, the main character of the novel, an African American girl. Her arms are raised and ‘chained’ together by a banner that incorporates the title of the novel, which indicates bondage. On either side, there is a flying bird, each representing one of the two sides of the American Revolutionary War, the Americans and the British. The American bird is carrying an olive branch and arrows in its claws which represent the “power of peace and war” (*The Great Seal*, 2018), and is aiming upwards. There is irony in this illustration. Isabel’s hands are literally tied, whereas the two birds have wings which enable them to fly wherever they wish. It is as if they are mocking and taunting Isabel. In the novel itself, she does not fail to notice the reality of her situation on a couple of occasions: “I was chained between two nations.” (p. 182), and “*She cannot chain my soul.*” (p. 246). The first remark is a result of two situations; Isabel’s failed attempt of gaining freedom by relaying information to Patriots about her Loyalist owners, and another failure where she hoped the British army would hire her and save her from the cruel Locktons she serves. In both cases, Isabel is regarded as property by law, and neither side can help her, even if they wanted to. The latter remark is related to her realising that no matter what her owners did to her to subdue and punish her, she still commands her spirit, and she will not have them take that away from her.

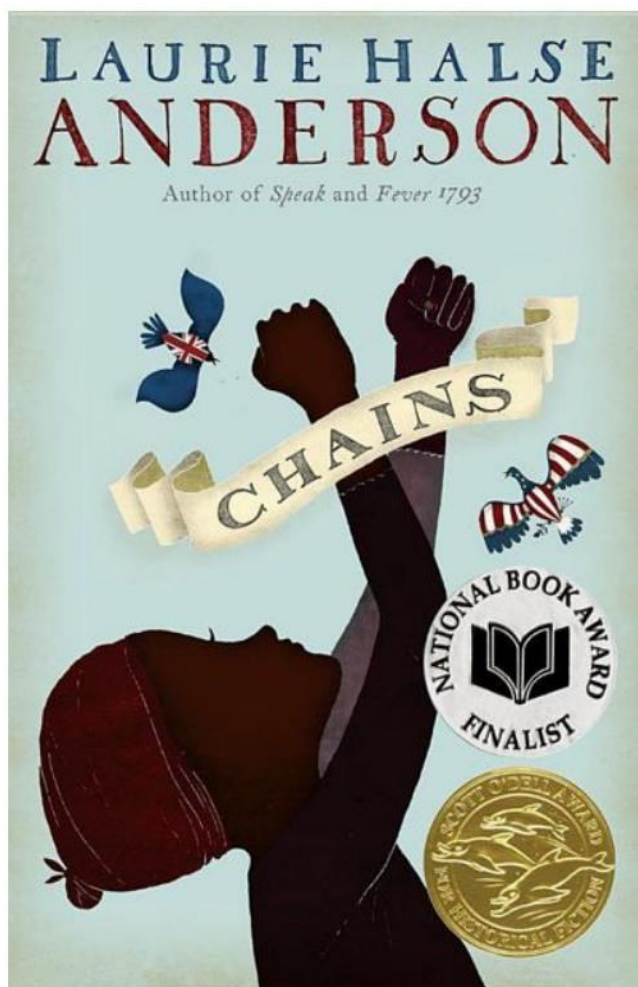


Figure 1: Anderson, L. H. (2008). *Chains*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Front Cover Illustration. Illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal.

The protagonist of *Forge* (2010) is Curzon, who is depicted on the cover illustration of the novel (see: *Figure 2*). This is obvious to readers familiar with the previous novel, due to the red hat that he is wearing. Two more things can be inferred from the illustration. Curzon is holding a rifle in a kneeling position, indicating his position as a soldier in the war. Another interesting thing is the falling snow, showing brutal weather conditions. Both of these are huge parts of what Curzon goes through in the novel, and it also corresponds with the war situation. *Forge* (2008) follows the process of Curzon's growing up more closely. As a soldier, he spends the winter in Valley Forge, a military encampment. One of Curzon's comrades observes that the "camp is a forge for the army; it's testing our mettle. Instead of heat and hammer, our trials are cold and hunger" (p. 121). The cover illustration confirms that. As the American army

is changing and becoming a solid fighting force, Curzon deals with more than just that. He is re-enslaved, and finds himself planning to ensure his and Isabel's escape from the bondage they are once again trapped in.

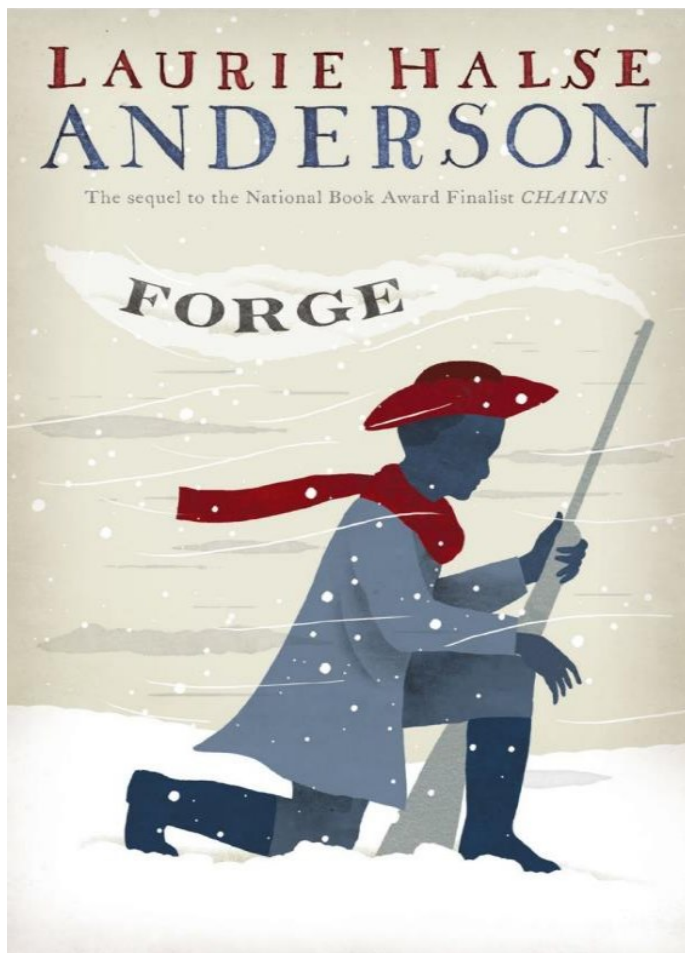
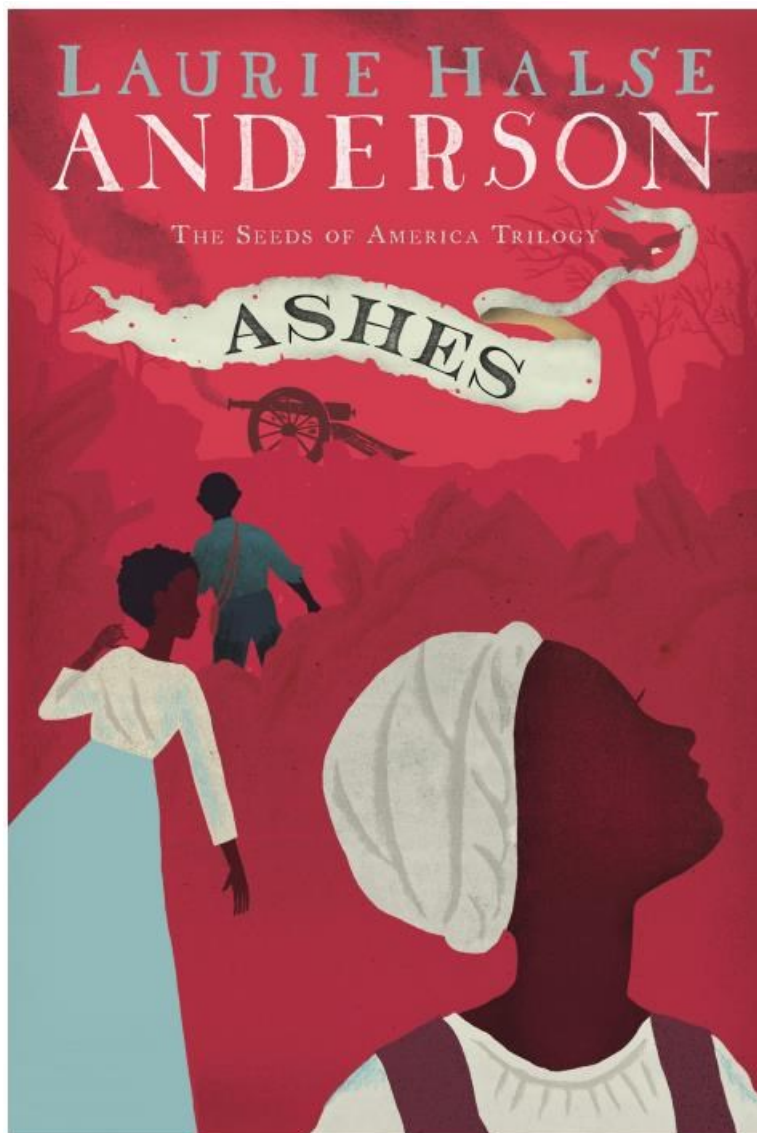


Figure 2: Anderson, L. H. (2010). *Forge*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Front Cover Illustration. Illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal.

The third novel of the series, *Ashes* (2016), is the end of Isabel, Curzon, and Ruth's story. The cover illustration (see: *Figure 3*) portrays all three of them on what appears to be an abandoned battlefield. The three of them are walking upwards, as if climbing out of all that has happened, towards the future. It is uncertain what the future holds, but they will figure it out together. The banner at the top contains the title of the novel, with a bald eagle on the side representing America. The country's future is also uncertain at that point, but they have

managed to free themselves, as have the trilogy's characters. The term 'ashes', is mentioned many times in the novel, mostly inconsequentially, but repetitively. Perhaps the most important mention is "*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust*" (p. 164). In the novel, this phrase, generally used at burials, comes to Isabel's mind as she and Ruth encounter dead bodies of Black people in the woods. A likely interpretation in the novel's context is the number of innocent lives lost in the war. Death lingers in all three novels, and it is necessary for the central characters to reconcile with it, in order to move forward and live their lives to the best of their abilities.



*Figure 3:* Anderson, L. H. (2016). *Ashes*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Front Cover Illustration. Illustrated by Christopher Silas Neal.

The significance of the title of the final novel is clearer when observed in combination with the previous two titles. When examined together, the words ‘chains’, ‘forge’, and ‘ashes’ indicate a progression. The beginning state of an object has gone through trial and change, and something entirely different was the result. The characters who were enslaved at the beginning, had to forcefully ensure their freedom, and all that is left of their bondage is dust.

The title of the trilogy, *Seeds of America*, is a reference to Isabel’s packet of seeds. A remnant of her mother, and her old life in Rhode Island, this prized possession follows her everywhere. Just as the characters do, the seeds change in the course of the trilogy. At the end of *Ashes* (2016), Isabel compares the seeds to America, both in their initial stages, Isabel emphasises the importance of what is likely to come, and how they, and people like them can contribute: ““Freedom never gets handed to anyone. You told me that, over and over.” [...] “We have to fight for it, my friend, no matter how long it takes. We must claim it for ourselves and our brothers and sisters”” (pp. 272-273).

These observations prove the connection between the history, the characters and the plot of the trilogy (Reynaud, 2004), and link them with the titles and the cover illustrations (Cianciolo, 1970; Wilsmore, 1985).



## 12. Conclusion

The analysed trilogy offers an interesting insight into the historical period of the Revolutionary War in America through fictional lives of Isabel, Curzon, Ruth and Aberdeen. The author created a multi-faceted set of characters which have different roles in the story, with Curzon and Isabel being protagonists, and Ruth and Aberdeen secondary characters. The characters have different levels of importance, with each offering another perspective of what enslaved life was like. Anderson allowed for each of the four characters to be portrayed as multilayered personalities of various depths based on genres and the thematic elements present in the trilogy.

*Seeds of America* is a work of historical fiction set against the backdrop of the American Revolutionary War. The author employs features of the neo-slave narrative, the coming-of-age story, and the problem novel in developing the plot, which allow for the enslaved characters to develop into adults through testing circumstances and situations they find themselves in. They would not have achieved this without each other and the friendships they develop along the way. These four characters deal with the trauma of violence caused by the war and by the institution of slavery.

Isabel is the character which offers the most. The trilogy begins with her losing her home, and the life she knew and loved. Through trial and torture, she manages to break free and become who she wants to be. This causes her to question her relationship with the higher power. At the end, she is finally in a happy place, being fully reunited with her sister and married to Curzon. Curzon, another protagonist of the trilogy, also goes through changes and challenging situations, always believing in the freedom the war is set to achieve. However, when he is deeply hurt by the prospect of not achieving all that he is fighting for, it is the sceptical Isabel who helps him find faith and believe in the future. Ruth, the youngest and the only character with a disability, experiences the separation from her sister, believing she was abandoned by Isabel. She is the silent sufferer of the series. Aberdeen, the character least explored by the author, has his own ideas of gaining freedom. However, he is the only one who does not seem to acquire it.

Through portraying different characters, whose stories begin in similar situations, Anderson shows four different lives that some people may have truly lived. It is evident that the author did extensive research to tell a believable story, with a diverse set of young Black

characters. Therefore, it is surprising the trilogy has not earned more response from a critical standpoint.

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## **Izjava o izvornosti rada**

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

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(vlastoručni potpis studenta)