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Illustration by Carly Hebert

We asked best-selling young-adult novelist  
Alyson Noel of *Saguna Niguel* what she  
knows about today's adolescents. Her answers  
give us reason to hope.

photo by Priscilla Szegyi

by Laura Saari



Author Alyson Noël had everything she could want growing up in Yorba Linda.

A big house. A horse named Lucky. Regular jaunts to the Broadway to keep up with the latest styles.

Then one day the Linda Vista Elementary sixth-grader came home to a kitchen-table talk with Mom: Dad had left and wasn't coming back. Her mother, a full-time homemaker raising Noël, 12, and her sisters, then 17 and 22, took a minimum-wage job at JC Penney to feed the family. Noël sold Lucky, dropped out of extracurricular activities, and took as many babysitting jobs as she could find.

She recalls feeling "financially alienated" from most of her upper-middle-class friends. "I grew up overnight. We no longer had the same things in common. I no longer cared about what boy was going to ask me out when we were eating waffles for dinner and couldn't even afford those."

Noël returns to that difficult time to make her popular teen series—*The Immortals*, *Riley Bloom*, and, starting this month, *Soul Seekers*—more substantial. Although Noël's characters sometimes visit the afterlife or go on fantastical supernatural journeys, her books aren't escapist. She explores the same tough issues teens tackle today. The themes have garnered Noël a loyal audience, including more than eight *New York Times* bestsellers in the children's paperback and children's series categories.

Striding into a Starbuck's near her Laguna Niguel home, Noël gives off a youthful vibe that belies her 47 years, and says she feels more comfortable writing in a young-adult voice. Though she has no kids of her own, she spends many hours with teens, especially those in her extended family.

With "Fated," the first book in her *Soul Seekers* series, coming out May 22, we asked Noël to tell us, in her own words, the things she knows for sure about today's adolescents.

**HOLLYWOOD-BOUND?**

The box-office success of "The Hunger Games" has made young-adult stories hot properties in Hollywood. The dramatic rights for the six books in Noël's *Immortals* series and the four in *Riley Bloom* have been optioned by Summit Entertainment, and Ridley Scott's Scott Free Productions has optioned her adult fiction title "Fly Me to the Moon." None are yet in production.



**1. Peer pressure is crushing.**

I'm amazed by the amount of pressure today's teens face, and I admire those who can shut out the noise and stay focused on what's truly important—that it's perfectly OK just to be you. Social media bring teens together but they can also be a pulpit for bullying. It's one thing to get bullied in school—and I was—but with Facebook and Twitter, it's 24/7. Now you go home, turn on your computer, and they're bullying you there. The "Am I Pretty or Ugly?" YouTube phenomenon [where 'tweens and teens post their photos for critique and get some ugly responses]—that broke my heart.

**2. They're expected to live up to a 'perfect' ideal.**

There's this huge pressure on kids to look beautiful and sexy and fit—and there's less appreciation of just being who you are. When I was growing up, I read *Vogue*, and everyone in there was so much older, I never felt it had to be me. Today, you're on your tablet, you're on the Internet, there's this constant reminder that you don't measure up. But there's nothing real about reality TV or a Photoshopped model. The media show this person who has it together, but they don't show how everybody's struggling, even the people whose lives look perfect.



### 3. They're incredibly creative.

The Internet has opened up the world in so many ways. For example, I get a huge influx of fan art. They'll create a piece of art around something in the book. One fan painted this beautiful portrait of [Immortal series protagonist] Ever, her version of what I described in "Shadowland." It's the wildest thing. Also, fan fiction. They'll continue the story. They'll make a book trailer, do casting for the Immortals movies, make me jewelry and art that I describe in the books.

### 4. They're visual.

We're in a time of great change with e-books, and some people see this as Chicken Little, "The sky is falling." They think it's the end of paper books. All I know for sure is it's not the end of storytelling. Story is what brings us together as a community, what differentiates us from other species, what makes us human. With e-books, you're going to see a lot more embedded content. Videos, click-throughs, gaming. My favorite children's book is "Harold and the Purple Crayon." Now there's an app on iPad; you can draw stuff with Harold. It's interactive. And for younger kids, the picture books will be things you can move around on the page. The written word will remain, but it may become more of a mix, including images.

### 5. They're pressured to grow up too fast.

They're living in a world that has a lot of violence—and I mean sexual violence, as well. We need girls to be really empowered to create their own boundaries. It bothers me to see padded bikini tops for little girls. I find the sexualizing of little girls troubling. They're also more bombarded by material things. They're being marketed this acquisitive lifestyle. It's everywhere. Teens are the target market.

### 6. They care—about people and the planet.

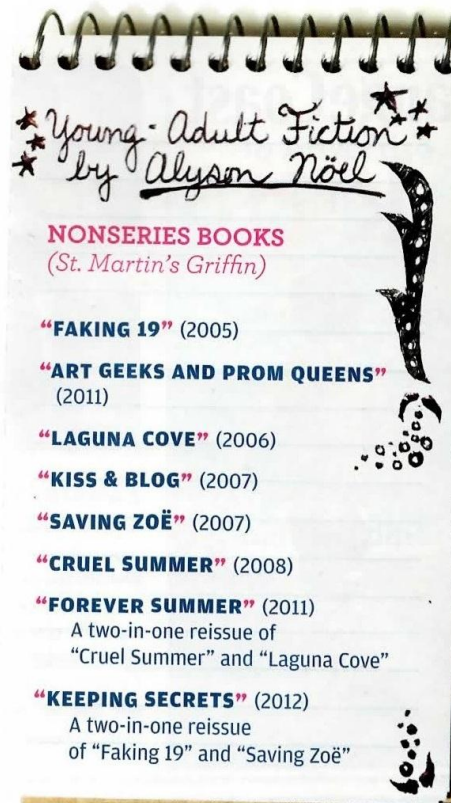
The Internet has made us all more aware of the challenges the Earth faces. But they're trying to do something about it. They're doing more charity work. A friend of mine's son is going to an Indian reservation in Minnesota. I'm very close to my niece and nephew. They're really aware of the importance of recycling, of what's going on in politics. I think they're building an awareness of community, of helping others, a respect for other ways of living. My world was much smaller than theirs.

### 7. They love to read.

People see teens playing video games, and they assume they're not reading. But the young-adult shelves are exploding. The YA market is one of the few areas of growth in publishing. Kids like to attach themselves to the journey of the protagonist. They look to the protagonist to find themselves.

### 8. They like their books action-packed.

The hottest book out there right now is Suzanne Collins' "The



Hunger Games." You care about these characters right off the bat. Teens are so pressed for time it's a miracle they're reading at all. But to keep their attention, you have to get in there. There's less patience for a slow book such as "Wuthering Heights," one I loved as a teen.

### 9. They see beyond their cul-de-sac.

Whether it's buying a pair of Toms shoes [with each purchase the company donates a pair to a needy child], volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, or traveling abroad with their families or school programs, kids today have a much broader worldview than previous generations.

### 10. They refuse to wait for their dreams to come true.

You have all these young tycoons. They're ambitious. When they want something, they find ways to get it, to go after what they want. They have few resources, but if they want to go somewhere or do something, they find ways to make it happen. They just see possibility. There's no reason to wait, and it's fantastic.

**Laura Saari**, the magazine's *Rituals* columnist since 2008, learns new things about teens daily while raising three children

