

Uncovering Emotional Representation in Young Adult Literature

The University of Northern Iowa project studied a curated corpus of 54 award-winning young adult novels to examine how emotional expression may differ across authors from traditional and diverse backgrounds. Young adult fiction shapes how millions of readers understand identity, emotion, and representation, yet little is known about whether certain emotional patterns are emphasized or constrained in ways that reflect broader social biases. Understanding these trajectories can surface disparities in representation and inform how educators and publishers evaluate books recommended to young readers.

The team modeled emotional trajectories across each novel to compare how eight emotions evolved throughout the narrative. They developed a computational pipeline that identified emotionally charged words, mapped them to an emotion-intensity lexicon, and adjusted their influence based on surrounding context. These emotion signals were then aggregated across normalized book positions to reveal patterns in how stories build anticipation, trust, fear, and other emotions.

Anticipation - Average Trajectory by Award Type

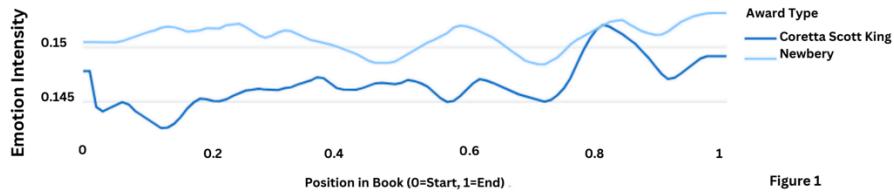


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows average anticipation levels across two major award groups, illustrating modest but meaningful differences in how narrative tension develops across different author groups. Figure 2 displays the full emotional arc of a single Newbery novel, highlighting sharp rises in joy and anticipation at key turning points. These patterns demonstrate how computational text analysis can reveal subtle dynamics in representation and storytelling that are difficult to detect through traditional reading alone.

Emotion Trajectories Across the Narrative Arc

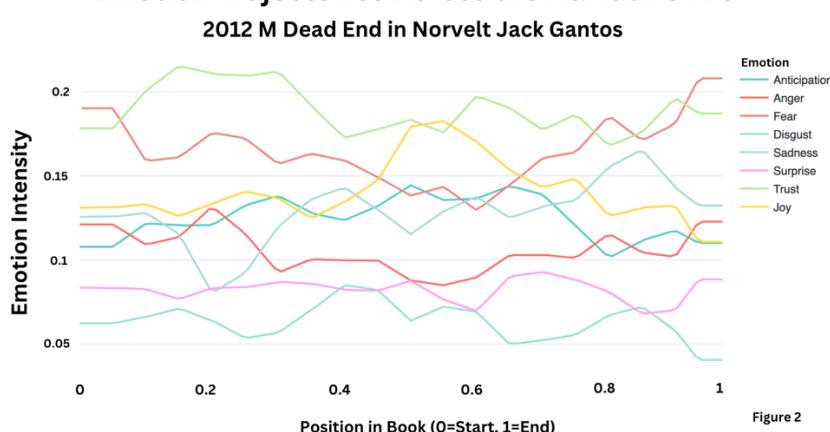


Figure 2