

BEFORE YOU READ: Have you ever 'code-switched' – that is, pretended to like something just to 'fit in'? What was it about, and how did you feel afterwards?

AMANDLA STENBERG

In *The Hate U Give* Amandla Stenberg plays Starr Carter, a student who 'code switches' – or flips – between two different lives. Starr lives in a tough working-class black neighbourhood but attends a rich, mostly white, private school. Her life is upended when a police officer shoots and kills her childhood friend Khalil right in front of her eyes. With her community torn apart, Starr must stand up for what she believes is right.

The 2018 film, based on the best-selling young adult novel, has been hailed as the "most significant account so far of Generation Z". Unlike Starr, however, Stenberg has had no problem finding her voice. She's an Insta-activist with over two million followers, and speaks out on racism, sexual harassment and the need to 'get woke' – or become aware and get involved in social issues. In fact, *Time* magazine has named her one of the 'next generation leaders'.

CURRENT catches up with the actress on her identity and activism.

CURRENT: You've said you only choose movie roles that have a strong social message.

I have no interest in films without a message. I always think about my responsibility as someone who gets to be a young black actress in America. The roles I choose are indicative of a larger plan: I want to create roles that I feel we haven't been able to see before, ones that are important to younger black women and girls especially – roles that are just good and nuanced.

CURRENT: Is that why you wanted to play Starr in *The Hate U Give*?

I read the book in one sitting, and went for the part before it had even been published. It tore my heart out of my chest, and I chased the project really hard. I only found out after we started shooting the film that the author Angie Thomas wrote the novel with me in mind.

CURRENT: Do you personally connect with Starr?

Totally. I grew up in Leimert Park in LA and my parents drove an hour and a half to get me to a school across town attended mostly by white privileged kids. At school, I did this strange policing of myself to fit in: to figure out what the white kids thought was cool, and front a little when they talked about their vacations, houses, clothes. Even if it wasn't their intention, if you couldn't participate in their culture you were excluded.

It's often necessary for us as minorities to learn the language of code-switching, and learn to survive and succeed in whatever environment we find ourselves in.

CURRENT: Why do you get actively involved in social and political issues?

I just think it should be everyone's moral responsibility – whether to express oneself online, sign a petition or go to a protest. It's what we should all be doing. But I have friends who have no interest in speaking out on any issues.

CURRENT: Is social media a positive tool for activism?

I think it's a fantastic tool and really important, and I also feel it can be really detrimental to the minds of teenagers. The images on social media can be consumed so quickly and easily – but that can be dangerous for kids in the way they see beauty and in the way they feel they need to present this cool identity.

CURRENT: Talking of beauty, you've embraced your natural beauty ...

I hated my hair growing up – I thought it was ugly. By the time I got to high school I was using a relaxer. When I was 16, I chopped off all the dead hair and started wearing it natural, and I realized that it was so beautiful and versatile! Anti-black beauty standards are so pervasive. I still have my moments when I feel insecure. But in those moments, I'm always inspired by the fact that being black is just so poppin'. I love everything about being black.

"It's often necessary for us – whatever minority we may be – to learn the language of code-switching."

IDIOMS WITH 'MIND'

Amandla says Angie Thomas " ... wrote the novel with me in mind". This means she was thinking of Amandla while she was writing. Here are five other idioms with 'mind'. Match them to the correct sentence.

- 1. a weight off my mind
- 2. to change my / your mind
- 3. my mind's gone blank
- 4. it blew my mind
- 5. I'm open-minded
- a) You are super surprised.
- b) You put on one pair of jeans, then wear another pair.
- c) You like to try new things.
- d) You are relieved.
- e) You can't think of an answer suddenly.

See answers on page 23 ->

WORDWISE

upended (adj): turned on its head or upside down – a dramatic change

to hail something as (v): to praise something as very important

harassment (n): the act of pestering, or bothering someone

indicative (adj): serving as a sign or indication of something

nuanced (adj): subtle, with small differences and many shades; complex

privileged (adj): advantaged, well-off

to police [something] (v): to carefully control something

to front (v, inf): to put on a fake personality

petition (n): a formal request for a common cause, signed by many people

detrimental (adj): harmful, negative

to embrace (v): to fully accept and enjoy something

relaxer (n): a chemical treatment used to straighten hair

versatile (adj): able to easily change

pervasive (adj): very widespread and accepted, whether good or bad

poppin' (adj, slang): cool, out there

1 Generation Z usually refers to 16- to 24-year-olds.



AMANDLA: FACT FILE

Born: the 23rd of October 1998 in Los Angeles, California

Name: Amandla is the Zulu and Xhosa word for 'power'.

Heritage: Her dad Tom Stenberg is Danish. Her mum Karen is African-American.

First fame: At age four she modelled for Disney, and later appeared in TV adverts for McDonald's and U.S. store Kmart.

Career credits: She played Rue in *The Hunger Games* (2012) and appeared in Beyoncé's music video *Lemonade* (2016). Last year she lit up the big screen in *The Hate U Give*, *The Darkest Minds* and *Where Hands Touch*.

Cool quote: Pop icon Beyoncé told Amandla, "I want my daughter to be just like you when she grows up."

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