



Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?

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Young Adult Literature

CHRIS CROWE, EDITOR

WHAT IS YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE?

Have you ever wondered what exactly can be considered young adult literature (YAL)? If you've paid much attention to the book world around you lately, you've probably noticed that there seems to be some misunderstanding about what fits the YAL label and what doesn't. Unfortunately, this confusion has led some teachers and parents to believe that YAL is little more than cheap, pulp novels—the kind of stuff English teachers ought to teach their students to avoid. I understand some of the causes of this confusion and, in the space of this issue's column, plan to set things straight.

A couple of years ago, I visited a local junior high school to talk to English teachers about YAL and how they might be able to use it to turn non-readers into readers. My presentation went well, and I left feeling satisfied that I had helped a few hard-core literary classicists and one intractable grammarian discover the positive possibilities of YAL. On my way out of the school, I stopped off at the school library to take a look at their YAL holdings. As soon as I entered the door, I saw a wall of books on the far side of the library with a sign “Young Adult Literature” prominently posted above it. “Ah,” I thought, “the teachers I just talked to will have ample support from their librarian, a person who obviously knows books and teenagers.” I quickened my pace to see what kinds of books this school and its librarian had selected for young adults.

I was disappointed.

The “Young Adult Literature” section of this junior high library was stocked with Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, and novels by Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, Jules Verne, Louisa May Alcott, and such. Only a handful

of books by post-World War II authors appeared on the shelves, and the closest book I found to what I consider young adult literature was John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. The satisfied feeling I had when I finished my presentation evaporated when I realized that teachers or students who might come into the library looking for YAL would find instead a collection of adult books and classics that make up the bulk of the required reading in secondary school literature programs. If the teachers I had just talked to and their students trusted the “Young Adult Literature” label posted over these books, they would have the mistaken idea that young adult literature consists mostly of classic works that have been deemed suitable for study in junior high and high school.

Unfortunately, that's not the only false impression of YAL that exists. Just last weekend while shopping with my daughters in a large discount department store, I wandered over to the book area to see what the store had on display. Initially, I was impressed; they had nearly three full aisles of books with one entire section devoted to “Young Adult” books. I went directly to that section hoping to find inexpensive copies of some of my favorite books, but that chain's book buyer's notion of YAL quite obviously differed from mine. The racks displayed more than 250 titles, but instead of the kinds of books I had hoped to find, I saw mostly series books: Babysitters, Babysitters Club, Sweet Valley Twins, Sweet Valley Kids, Sweet Valley High, Full House Stephanie, Wishbone, Animorphs, The Saddle Club, Eerie Indiana, and an entire shelf of Goosebumps, with a few books by Christopher Pike and some movie and TV tie-in novels sprinkled among them. If parents, teenagers, or teachers breezed into this book section looking for YAL, they'd probably conclude that young adult literature is generally intended for preteen girls. The confusion about YAL is made worse by the various and sometimes vague terms used to categorize books for young readers. There was a time when most books were divided into two general categories: children and adult. Most of the time, it's pretty easy to determine what an adult is, but the stages of childhood ranging from infant to teen make the terms “child” and “children” a little too imprecise; just as imprecise is the term “children's literature.” Books for nonadults range from wordless picture books to fairly sophisticated novels, and many libraries and bookstores shelve all these books together in the children's sec-

tion. Some book people, however, realized the problems caused by labeling all nonadult books as children's books and came up with categories that were supposed to do a better job of targeting books for later stages of childhood: juvenile, middle grade, adolescent, young adult, etc. Some of these terms are synonymous with one another; others aren't, even though some people use them interchangeably. Instead of solving the problems, these ambiguous terms have only added to the confusion over the definition of YAL.

Even the prestigious Newbery awards complicate the issue. The American Library Association states that the Newbery Medal recognizes "the most distinguished contribution to American literature for *children* published in the United States in the preceding year" (*italics added*); a glance through the list of Medal and Honor books since 1922 makes it obvious that the ALA uses the term "children" in a general sense. Some of the Newbery Medal and Honor books seem suitable for teenage readers, but others appear to be more appropriate for preteens. This clouds the definition of YAL because many of us who pitch books to teenagers have relied on the Newbery Medal and Honor list as a guide for outside reading; teenage students who pick up *The Giver* or *Jacob Have I Loved* or *The Hero and the Crown* or *Dacey's Song* probably won't be disappointed, but some fifteen- or sixteen-year-olds might be insulted by the suggestion that they read books like *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* or *Frog and Toad Together* or *Strawberry Girl*. The Newbery list is a reliable guide to good books, but not all of the books on the Newbery Medal and Honor list can be considered YAL.

Universities, usually the font of all knowledge, aren't even sure what YAL is. Some of my colleagues in the English department call the books I read and study "kiddie lit." One of my department colleagues who teaches YAL uses an historical, literary approach and includes *Little Women*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* in his reading list. I, on the other hand, don't include anything published before 1967, the year S. E. Hinton's novel that clearly established the realistic novel for the teenage book market, *The Outsiders*, was published. My university library shelves YAL in its "juvenile" section, and some of the novels I use in my YAL course are the same as those used in the children's literature course taught over in the Elementary Education department. A pilgrim on a

quest to discover YAL at my university would probably conclude that none of us has any idea what we're talking about when it comes to books for teenagers. A bright pilgrim might even wonder why we bother with such labels in the first place.

Experience has taught me that it's not always wise to get into such discussions with bright pilgrims, so I'm not going to attempt to explore the pros and cons of age categories for books. I will attempt, however, to shed some light on what young adult literature is and on how it should be used in schools. I consider a "young adult" to be a person old enough to be in junior high or high school, usually grades seven through twelve. I define literature for young adults as all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults. Of course, everyone who works with teenagers knows that many young adults read books marketed above (William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, John Grisham) and below (Dr. Seuss, Jon Scieszka, Shel Silverstein) books marketed exclusively to teenagers, but YAL restricts itself to literature *intended* for teenagers.

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Though alarmists may claim otherwise, YAL isn't meant to water down the core of literary study in secondary schools. In some cases, selected works of YAL might serve as warm-ups or bridges to classic works. Joan Kaywell (*Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics* Volumes 1–3) and Sarah Herz (*From Hinton to Hamlet*) have produced wonderful books that explain how YAL can be used to enhance the study of the classics. When dealing with nonreaders, English teachers can use selected YAL in a "milk before meat" approach to hook nonreaders with high interest, fast-paced YA novels that might lead to more reading in the future. A number of books and articles have been written on this. (See back issues of *English Journal* and books like Bushman and Bushman's *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* and Monseau and Salvner's

Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom.) Finally, YA books can be used to accomplish the same English and language arts objectives as traditional literature; however, YAL has the added advantage of being more relevant to the lives of teenagers and is therefore more likely to overcome the resistance to “school books” and reading that afflicts too many teenagers these days.

Unfortunately, even such a narrow definition of YAL doesn’t eliminate poorly written, trashy, or just plain dumb books that occasionally find their way into print, and readers shouldn’t let one of these clunkers fool them into thinking that the entire lot of YAL is worthless. Experienced readers know that the adult book market has produced plenty of flops, but in most cases, those flops haven’t triggered a rash of book burnings; the nuggets still come rolling down the stream of adult books, and it takes only a little panning to uncover them. YAL also has its fair share of golden nuggets, and if they’re willing to give it a try, readers of all kinds—teachers and students, adults and teenagers—will discover a plentiful treasure of terrific books.

If you’re willing to do a little prospecting in YAL, dip your pan into the list of books that follows. Here are twenty of my favorite books for teenagers, and they’ll give you an idea of the variety of quality YA books waiting for you and your students.

The Book of the Dun Cow by Walter Wangerin Jr.

Blue Skin of the Sea: A Novel in Stories by Graham Salisbury

Deathwatch by Robb White

Demons and Shadows: The Ghostly Best Stories of Robert Westall by Robert Westall

The Giver by Lois Lowry

Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

Ironman by Chris Crutcher

Jacob Have I Loved
by Katherine Paterson

The Lion Tamer’s Daughter and Other Stories by Peter Dickinson

Make Lemonade
by Virginia Euwer Wolff

The Moves Make the Man
by Bruce Brooks

Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen

No Easy Answers, Don Gallo, ed.

The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton

Parrot in the Oven by Victor Martinez

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry
by Mildred D. Taylor

Striking Out by Will Weaver

The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle
by Avi

Toning the Sweep by Angela Johnson

The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman
by Louise Plummer

Memberships Available in the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award Committee

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on the Orbis Pictus Award will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to annually select the recipient of the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children and up to five honor books; to propose a session on non-fiction books at the Spring Conference and a session featuring the award-winning author at the Fall Convention; and to promote the use of nonfiction children’s books in the classroom. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by October 10, 1998, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Carol Thompson, Administrative Assistant to the Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.
