WHAT IS YA ANYWAY? A CONVERSATION ON ONE OF LITERATURE'S MOST UNDERVALUED CATEGORIES: YOUNG ADULT

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Emma Cubellis, B.A.

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The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to my parents, who gave me the gift of education.

Many thanks,
Emma Cubellis

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Introduction

A Brief Story

I was fourteen the first time I felt shame about reading a book. The newest installment of *The Shadowhunter Chronicles* had just come out, and I was entranced. This series of books captured my attention unlike any other, and my heart ached to know that it was coming to a close.

I had ten pages left when John arrived and was shocked when he had the audacity to enter my reading room… while I was reading. I held up my finger to indicate, *Just one minute*, but what I really meant was: *Don't disturb me; I'm five pages away from having a mental breakdown… I mean finishing this book.*

When I shut the cover, he asked, blasé, "How was it?"

I launched into a bookish diatribe; his question unlatched the floodgate and every emotion poured out of me. I was so excited to talk to someone about this book I loved.

Right in the middle of my explaining how *devastating* it was that Simon would never get his full memory back, John cut in: "Please, stop talking. You're acting ridiculous. It's just a book, and it's not even *good*."

I felt like someone slapped me. "Have you read it?"

"No."

"Then, how do you know?"

Then he said words I will never forget: "Because it's just a stupid Young Adult book."

I never brought up my stupid Young Adult (YA) books again.

Entering college as an English major, I was excited at the prospect of finding a vibrant, excited, engaged group of YA-loving scholars. But I did not find that. Instead, I found silence on the topic. I heard none of the scholarship being done on these books.

I wonder how my conversation with John might have been different had I known that while he was branding my YA book as "stupid," there was a cohort of scholars—albeit small and under my radar—doing groundbreaking research. I wonder how my undergraduate years would have been different had I actively participated in the growing academic conversation on YA. What if I could have answered questions like: Why has YA so often been overlooked by scholarship that could learn from it? What *can* we learn by giving this category the critical attention it deserves? What work do these books do in the world? What do we miss out on by dismissing YA? And what *is* YA anyway?

It is from these questions that my podcast, *What Is YA Anyway?*, was born.

What Is YA Anyway? is a limited series podcast with fifteen episodes lasting roughly 40-60 minutes in length. Through candid conversation with YA's meaning-makers—its Scholars, Authors, and Readers—*What Is YA Anyway?* presents a detailed take on what makes YA, *YA* through the lens of those who know it best. I chose the podcast format because its dialogic nature mimics the entertaining accessibility of the category. It also allows me to illuminate my interviewee's firsthand knowledge in intimate and immediate ways that cannot be achieved through more solitary scholarship. Moreover, the real-time feel of the conversations within my research adds exigency, highlighting why we must pay more attention to and learn from these books. This category has much to teach about the untapped applications of YA in literary analyses, YA author's written craft, and YA's power to shape and change cultural landscapes.

The episodes and corresponding research I present aim to show that the complex nature of YA demands it be paid critical attention and be defined by more than an age rage. Adopting an incomplete definition based solely on age range and outdated biases does not help answer the questions about YA, nor does it adequately represent the category. Instead, I argue that a definition of YA must consider these factors: the category's history in publishing, scholarship, and pedagogy; its specific craft choices; and its readership in a way that is not constricted to an age range. Arrival at this definition provides an understanding of the complex role YA has come to occupy in the literary marketplace and proves YA a fruitful field for scholarly inquiry as well as an important cultural touchstone whose sphere of influence may start with the youth but reaches far beyond.

What Is YA Anyway? The Podcast: Methods and Limitations

One of the biggest draws of podcasts is their ability to educate entertainingly and engagingly; they, much like YA, are accessible to a broad audience. Therefore, it seemed only natural to use podcasting as the vehicle for my project. Moreover, the conversational nature of the podcast allowed me to achieve the same immediacy and intimacy characteristic of YA stories. All of my episodes and corresponding scholarship live on my website, emmalouisebooks.com. I created this website for ease of access to my podcast as well as to have a place where listeners could go to get a full overview of the project. In addition, a website was the best way to reach the largest audience and create a simple experience for the public.

To begin the process, I drafted questions to guide my thinking (see Appendix 1); however, I let the conversation take its natural course and be an authentic discussion rather than a scripted performance. Therefore, I did not stick to my questions verbatim but used them as a

preparation guide. Each participant was also asked to fill out a consent form (see Appendix 2) that confirmed their permission to record, release, market, and use the content in accordance with the goals of my thesis. I began the interview process with scholars because I knew these conversations would help inform my later questions for authors and readers. In these conversations, I learn as I listen, just like each of my listeners. I reached out to seven academics and received four agreements: Chris Crowe (*Brigham Young University*), Jon Ostenson (*Brigham Young University*), Robert Petrone (*University of Missouri*), and Roberta Trites (*Iowa State University*). In the following section of this thesis, I explain how their scholarship studies, understands, and creates the history of YA literature.

I sent out dozens of pitches to authors. Of the over two dozen pitches, I received four agreements, three declines, and the rest went unanswered. The author guests on my show are: Gayle Forman, Rachel Lynn Solomon, Christine Riccio, and Ebony LaDelle. While I did reach out to a diverse group of authors, men and women, my guests were all women; however, this is representative of the category, which is primarily written by and directed to females, a topic I discuss at length. I apply my conversations with authors to draw a picture of YA as a craft-intensive form.

My final round of interviewees were the readers. I reached out to a handful of YA content creators on Instagram, work colleagues, and students within the Georgetown graduate program. I was not able to have guests under eighteen due to legal restrictions. *What Is YA Anyway?* includes three conversations with readers and applies a reception theory lens to understand the power of fans to influence culture and how YA can be understood as a cultural touchstone reflecting societal interests and concerns.

Let us now turn our attention towards developing an understanding of what YA is anyway.

What Is YA Anyway?

Historicizing YA

The meaning of Young Adult literature depends on the meaning of its target audience: Adolescents. But what is adolescence? And who are adolescents?

Adolescent (as a noun) dates back to the mid-fifteenth century, drawing its roots from the Latin *adolescentem/adulescentem* meaning "young man or woman, a youth." Adolescent (as an adjective) dates back to 1785, is rooted in the same Latin, and is understood to mean "growing towards maturity." Adolescence refers to the time-period in which one is an adolescent and is defined as "the age following childhood, the age of growing," a definition rooted in old French and Latin (Harper).

Scholars sometimes give age ranges for adolescence; Douglas Harper has the period referring to ages "14 to 25 in males [and] 12 to 21 in females." While age ranges may be based on data about human development, they still raise considerable questions, such as whether or not they truly matter to a constructed category like adolescence. Essentially, these age-ranges only correspond to the word "adolescence" because it was constructed as such. Age ranges aside, the term adolescent generally refers to a person in the age group following childhood but preceding adulthood, a person in an immense period of growth that will end in their becoming an adult.

Categories like adolescence have fuzzy and contested edges. As Robert Petrone writes in "The Youth Lens," "how adolescence and youth are understood is always contingent on and constituted through social arrangements and systems of reasoning available within particular historical moments and contexts" (Petrone et. al 509). It is not easy, then, to pinpoint one

unchanging way to define adolescence across cultures or periods of historical time. In *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth,* Roberta Seelinger Trites notes one of the "most practical and least contextually-situated definition is offered by Lerner and Steinberg['s *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*], which describes adolescence as nothing more or less than 'the second decade of life' (2004: x)" (5). Preceding the 20th century, however, the term adolescence was not commonly used, because there was not a definitive separation between adulthood and childhood. In fact, "the years from ages 13 to 19 were not considered part of childhood until the turn of the 19th century" (Meyers, 2018).

While the word adolescent has existed since the 15th century, it was not until the 20th-century emergence of the middle-class teenager—who was afforded the "age of growing"—that it came to be understood as the moniker for a shared developmental stage. Twentieth-century understandings of the adolescence were significantly affected by G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence* written in 1905, which defined it as a "new developmental stage—created by societal changes—in which children grow into adults" and "ascribed this life stage as lasting from ages 14-24" (Meyers, 2018).

Education, both academic and vocational, contributed to the institutionalization of the term adolescence. The age at which people entered the workforce was pushed further and further back as more and more 12-18 year-olds enrolled in ongoing secondary education—and later, college—which resulted in the delay of the working life associated with full adulthood. With the push for this age group to grow in academic knowledge, the "National Council of Teachers of English also increased attention to the need for better reading material for school-age children, thereby influencing the caliber of books marketed to adolescents" (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 9). As Michael Cart writes in "From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young

Adult Literature," at this "same time… America began recognizing the teenage years as a separate part of the life cycle" (96), the country was also experiencing exponential economic growth following the Second World War. This provided teenagers pocket money for expendable goods. Some such goods? Books.

The category known as "Young Adult" did not appear as a literature category (in publishing) until 1967, after S.E. Hinton published *The Outsiders.* As Chris Crowe, a professor at Brigham Young University with over three decades of experience working in YA writes in "What Is Young Adult Literature?" *The Outsiders* "clearly established the realistic novel for the teenage book market," giving publishers a blueprint for what novels would succeed among these eager consumers. Publishers leaned into that, creating the "Young Adult" category, which Crowe defines "as any literature published since 1967 that [is] written for and marketed to young adults" (Crowe *What Is Young Adult Literature?* 121). There is still much basic information we do not know about, though—such as when YA started to appear in bookstores and libraries—because the archival research has not yet been done, proof that the category remains understudied.

Part of why YA has taken longer to grow stems from the fact that "institutions like MLA still only recognize Adult literature and Children's literature, but there's nothing in the middle" (Crowe, *What Is Why Anyway?* 3:21). The MLA, "founded in 1883 […] is one of the world's largest scholarly associations" (*The MLA's Mission*). While it does not equate to the whole of literary scholarship, with 23,000 members and four periodicals, the MLA's repertoire significantly influences the understanding, "study, and teaching of language and literature" (*About the MLA*). When YA is subsumed with Children's Literature it contributes to continued

confusion about what, in fact, constitutes a YA novel as well as the purpose and validity of studying YA *in its own right*.

Scholars have been working since 1973 to unearth what makes a YA book a YA book. The consensus is this: YA books have "to be from a young adult perspective" (Crowe 4:52), meaning that "it's a teenage perspective looking back on a teenager experience" and not an adult perspective musing on a teenage experience (Crowe 5:17). The irony in this is that YA books are not written by young adults; one of the few exceptions to this is *The Outsiders*, written by Hinton at the age of 17. Therefore, it is imperative when studying YA to take into account "these adults […] creating young adult characters for young adults to consume" (Petrone *What Is YA Anyway?* 11:19) and how their adult perspective can skew an accurate representation of adolescence.

In addition to YA being written from a teenage perspective, there is usually "an absence of adults" and "the plot has got to be on top," though the "best have other layers below that" (Crowe *What Is YA Anyway?* 6:01; 7:18; 7:32). These two facets, though, were more true for YA books published in the late 20th century. Contemporary authors are pushing against these elements. For example, *New York Times* bestselling author Christine Riccio argues that "knowing what the parents' effect has been on the lead characters' psyche [is] really integral to understanding them as a layered human being" (Riccio 37:06). Moreover, while plot-driven, fast-paced subgenres like fantasy and thrillers continue to have favor, the popularity of character-driven realistic fiction has steadily increased since the early 2010s. One of the most notable examples of this is John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*—a love story between two teenage cancer patients, with very little in the way of plot and very much in the way of character. *The Fault in Our Stars* sold over 10 million copies (and counting), stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 78-straight weeks, and scored a blockbuster film adaptation (Yahr). These

examples are proof that while we can somewhat delineate the most commons aspects of a YA novel, those aspects are not necessarily included in all YA books, nor are they definite indications of whether or not the book will find traction with readers. Defining YA is a tricky and nuanced task; there is no single answer to my question of "what is YA."

However, there are a few characteristics to a YA book that vary little across the category's subgenres. English educators Rybakova and Roccanti write that these are: "the protagonist is a teenager, the plot does not end in a 'storybook' happy ending, and the content is typically a coming-of-age story (Cole, 2008, p. 49)" (3). In YA, though, coming-of-age does not culminate in adulthood, an important point that sets it apart from Adolescent literature.

You might be saying: Wait, did we not just establish that the terms Young Adult and Adolescent are synonymous? Yes, we did; however, Young Adult Literature and Adolescent Literature are *not* synonymous. The key difference is this: Adolescent Literature does *not* have a target audience (i.e. it does *not* target adolescents) whereas YA *targets* adolescents. (Think about your local Barnes & Noble where there is no Adolescent literature section, but there *is* a YA section.)

Roberta Seelinger Trites—a distinguished professor from Illinois State University who has been a scholar in the field for over three decades, published three books and countless articles on YA, and been lauded one of the authorities on the topic—delineates YA as being distinct from another category that she calls "Adolescent literature." In Episode 4, Roberta defines the parameters of Adolescent literature, saying, "Adolescent literature is this really big set… if it's about an adolescent or if adolescents read it I call it adolescent literature" (7:30). Some examples of books that are Adolescent literature include: *Little Women, The Catcher in the Rye, The Lord of the Flies,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. (You will not find these in the YA section

of any bookstore.) In Adolescent literature, take, for example, *To Kill A Mockingbird*; the narrative is told *not* from the perspective of a teenager, but rather from the perspective of the adult, looking back on their teenage experience. Adolescent literature follows the *Bildungsroman*, "a formula for novels about adolescence intended for adult readers" (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 11). In the *Bildungsroman,* the adolescent grows into an adult, and they narrate their coming-of-age journey with adult wisdom. In contrast, YA follows the *Entwicklungsroman* in which "the character grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem" (Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*, 12). The YA coming-of-age growth arc culminates in the resolution of the issue and is narrated from the perspective of the teenager, thereby embedding these books in the teenage experience and making them easily marketable, entertaining, and accessible to their key audience. Given that young adults control much of the popular culture, especially in the age of social media, this fact also ties the category to popular culture or low culture.

Why Hasn't YA Been Taken Seriously?

Stories that do not age out of adolescence and into adulthood are not given the same respect as those which do because adolescent interests are often shrugged as off as wanton whims that will, no doubt, shift as teenagers grow into adulthood. What the youth loves is fleeting—just as youth itself is. Therefore, stories sharing a specific representation of adolescence must also be fleeting. YA's intimate portrayal of the teenage experience, its commitment to entertaining, fast-paced, accessible storylines, and its relation to popular culture lead to its stigmatization, the roots of which stem back to the debate over high and low culture.

A part of YA's stigmatization can be traced back to The Great Divide. Theorists and critics such as Georg Lukács, Andreas Huyssen, Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno and others have written at great length on the manner in which The Great Divide manifests in art, including literature. The fundamental idea is that there exists a divide between high and low culture—high and low art, high and low novels—with the low culture being supported by postmodernists who were highly critical of authority, tradition, and hierarchies. This resulted in novels that tended more toward readability, intertextuality, and relatability. Robert Scholes notes that Lukács argued that the novel, "unlike other literary genres, was cursed by having an evil twin: 'a caricatural twin almost indistinguishable from itself in all inessential formal characteristics: the entertainment novel, which has all the outward features of the novel but which, in essence, is bound to nothing and based on nothing, i.e. is entirely meaningless'" (Lukács 73 as cited by Scholes 246). The "entertainment novel" belongs to the low culture. The canonical novel belongs to the high culture. The meaning of the canonical novel is opaque; it presents a complicated understanding of reality that one must be intelligent to understand. On the other hand, the entertainment novel, as art critic Clement Greenberg writes, is "mechanical and operates by formula" (10). This delineation between high and low culture lead to a disdain for entertainment novels "produced in reaction to the conditions of modern life," written in accessible prose, and "whose primary purpose may have been to provide comfort or pleasure" (Scholes, 267). The entirety of the blame cannot be placed on the Great Divide, though.

In the 80s and 90s scholars, such as Janice Radway, made moves to study low genre fiction like romance and thrillers; yet YA was left out of this conversation. Couple that with critical theorists'—like Greenberg's and Adorno's—knee-jerk reactions to associate popular literature with a lack of complexity or substance and the result was the continued ignorance of

YA as genuine literature, genuine art. According to Scholes, "genuine art, for Greenberg, is 'necessarily difficult' and requires work from the cultivated consumer" (Greenberg 15 as cited in Scholes 247). YA is by necessity of its target audience not difficult to read. However, accessibility does not constitute a loss of quality or complexity.

What constitutes quality or complexity, though? In order to understand this we must acknowledge the differences between literary fiction (that which is quality and complex) and genre fiction (the umbrella under which YA falls and that which is pulp and simple). In "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction," Rosen makes a compelling distinction between the two. For his definition of literary fiction, Rosen cites Joyce Saricks' *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* in which she "names style, poetic language, complex structure, the importance of character over plot, thought-provoking, serious subject matter, and slower pacing as some of the most common characteristics of literary fiction" (Saricks 165-6 as cited by Rosen 2018). The slower pacing common in literary fiction affords the space to build that complex structure that Saricks notes. Complex structure can be understood as language that is ambiguous—the kind of stuff you have to sift through with a fine tooth comb in order to *really* get the meaning of. Think of complexity as metaphors that run throughout whole books (Daisy and Gatsby's green light in *The Great Gatsby*) or symbols (the villain is left-handed). Günter Leypoldt writes that "writers become 'literary' when the authorities honor them for stylistic or formal innovations that expand a novel's aesthetic possibilities, a 'privileged' imagination or intellectual distinction resulting in 'world-disclosing' new visions, or an expressive representativeness that captures a cultural or historical moment or the way a culture thinks and feels about itself" (2018). Only the privileged, educated few can understand these "new visions" though, which directly ties quality to exclusivity and elitism.

On the flip-side, genre fiction is everything literary fiction is not. As Gelder writes in *Popular Fiction*, "much popular fiction is built around plot, action, 'scenarios', character conflict and dialogue" (28) and is written *for* the masses to understand. The fast-paced nature of the plot-driven novel does not afford the time for the same stylistic intricacies present in literary fiction. Information is given to the reader, and it is easily understood. This is not innately negative nor positive, nor is it to say that there is not an intentional structure to the language. It is merely different. It is only when viewed through the lens of elitism that a novel's accessibility becomes a negative. Once it is accessible, it is no longer elite. If a novel is simple enough to be consumed—without the guiding light of intelligentsia—by the masses, then what made it quality is no longer present. I argue, though, that quality and complexity are not sacrificed when mixed with accessibility. YA literature *is* complex. The category's complexity lies in its ability to grapple with and present sophisticated social issues in an engaging manner that excites a reaction from readers while still making poignant observations that, in the end, result in the very same "expressive representativeness that captures a cultural or historical moment or the way a culture thinks and feels about itself" as literary fiction does.

Professor Jon Ostenson speaks to how presumptions about the relationship between complexity and accessibility feed the academy's reluctance to study YA literature, saying:

> I often feel like other scholars of literature sort of look down their noses at Young Adult literature because they think… they don't write about meaningful stuff, they're just telling stories… who am I going to take to the prom and what dress am I going to wear and stuff like that. And sure there's literature like that for young adults, but there's also literature like that for adults. The audience doesn't change the fact that there's higher quality literature and lower quality literature. (47:15-48:45)

Ostenson goes on to share that scholars are then surprised when they finally do take up a YA and find analyzing the text to be a fruitful and challenging endeavor. This endeavor, though, should not be approached in the same way as analyzing the language of canonical novelists. Since YA is

written in a different manner, it necessitates different approaches. With these novels "the emphasis might then be on suggestive intertextuality, creative mimicry, the power of a text to transform media usage," and how the text plays upon the historical moment in which it was published (Scholes 256). This shift in focus brings *into focus* how YA's accessible narratives are able to connect and engage with the culture beyond them, commenting on issues extending far beyond lives of the youth and leaving a lasting impact on its readers; one example of a YA genre that does this astute work is YA dystopian fiction.

In "Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult Fiction," Jon Ostenson and secondary school teacher Justin Scholes take an academic approach to studying YA dystopian literature. In particular, Ostenson and Scholes try to locate similarities within YA dystopias to discern if there is a trend in the content, which might have influenced the rapid increase of the genre's popularity during the early 2010s. Ostenson and Scholes found that all of the most popular YA dystopia novels of this period—*The Hunger Games, Matched, The Uglies*—contained a variety of multifarious elements such as: "Attempts to Erase or Revise Society's History," "Measures to Cover Up Flaws or Lies in Society," "Media Manipulation and Propaganda," and "Excessive Measures to Police Society." These elements were then drawn out through nuanced character development, composite world-building, and acute observations of the youth's role in government and politics. After years of both teaching and studying YA, Ostenson told me in Episode 5 that young readers are most "drawn to writers who take them seriously as readers. Who recognize their capacity to think deeply about meaningful issues, to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. They gravitate towards…literature that does that for them" and "the best examples of dystopian literature" are those that give readers—both adolescent and adult—the intellectual stimulation they crave (6:48). It is not only dystopian fiction authors that

press young readers to dig below the surface, though. Realistic YA fiction author Gayle Forman says, in Episode 7, when writing books, "I always assume the most of my reader. I assume they can handle what I am throwing at them" (44:08). Literature as such requires, as Ostenson explains, a reader "who can go with the protagonist, intellectually" (7:51). With stories that probe the reader to grapple with nuances, difficulties, and uncertainties not only do these novels grant adolescent readers the agency they are so hungry for, but they also prove themselves a rich ground for pedagogy and analysis.

Teaching and Studying YA

Up until the late 1990s and early 2000s, YA research was "influenced toward praxis [and] away from theory" (Hunt 8). Scholarship on YA began in the early 1970s but did not begin to circulate widely—in such periodicals as the *ALAN Review* and the *NCTE*—until the 1990s. The first MLA-published article on YA literature was in 1973. Between the periods of 1973-1993, there were 28 articles published on the subject. Compare that to the twenty-two-year period between 2000-2022 which saw 637 articles on the topic, and it is clear that YA has experienced exponential growth in the past two decades. Rather than articles taking a theoretical approach to studying YA, early studies focused on how the texts could be incorporated into secondary education to engage students. Notably, collegiate courses on YA continue to be taught to Education majors, rather than English majors, which contributes to YA's delayed representation in curriculum; English students do not know about the courses outside their field, nor are their professors exposed to YA in their training. The early pedagogically focused scholarship proposed YA novels that stand up to intellectual scrutiny— *The Chocolate War, We Are Okay, The Giver*—be used as "bridges" to canonical texts. In this method, a canonical text is

paired up with a YA, helping students understand the more enigmatic text of the classic by first having them read similar, accessible narratives that serve to mitigate potential "adverse effects the classics can have on unprepared or reluctant readers" (Crowe, *The Problem with YA Literature*, 147). Scholars Susan Santoli and Mary Elain Wagner suggest "coupling the novels of Louis Plummer with Jane Austen" to help students hone "their ability to analyze literature and to evaluate themselves" in a manner which feels exciting and relevant to them (72;70). In this type of instruction, "students can be empowered to connect the discourses of their worlds with those of literature through varied dimensions of response, using the texts of popular culture as analysis tools" (Bean and Moni 646). Response to these arguments was overwhelmingly positive. In my conversations with the scholars—who had also been secondary school educators—all agreed that incorporating YA texts into their classroom leads to increased engagement with and desire to read. Note, though, that the inclusion of YA in a secondary syllabus is entirely up the teacher and not mandated by state education boards. Therefore, if a teacher has not been exposed to this kind of training, they will likely not include YA books on their syllabus; state and institutional jurisdictions largely control syllabi content. Nevertheless, any inclusion of YA in secondary classrooms is a great step to getting students interested in reading.

While articles defending the merits of YA text were a promising start to including the category in literary study, "these objectives and goals focusing on foundational English/Language Arts methods situate YAL as a companion to traditional methods in English education, not as a worthy genre in its own right" (Strickland 13). In her 1996 article "Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists," Hunt proposes that part of why YA was only studied in the context of education has to do with the fact that YA, as a literature category, was never officially established in academia "*as such*" (Hunt 4). This resulted in a lack of foundational

understanding of what YA was, and the "good grasp of what is going on generally in a field [that] makes the leap to theory possible" was not there (10); this lead to "a striking lack of theoretical criticism" on YA texts, especially in contrast to other literature categories (Hunt 4).

More recent scholarship, however, is moving the needle *away* from praxis and towards theory. This is not to discount the research on including YA in secondary education; using YA as a bridge is a valid and beneficial teaching tool, one that can and should be included in the high school English classroom. YA novels, though, can be more than appetizers, and recent theoretical work points to this. Robert Petrone, a professor from the University of Missouri, is one scholar doing theoretical work on YA. Petrone applies the Youth Lens (YL) of theoretical inquiry to YA. In Episode 6 of *What Is YA Anyway*? Petrone explains the Youth Lens as "an analytic approach or way of seeing—whether that be texts or spaces or context or language or discourse—to understand the way that conceptions of age, conceptions of youth, conceptions of youth or childhood or teenage-hood are being represented or what assumptions are being made about those concepts and the people towards whom those concepts point" (7:33). This way of reading asks scholars to dissect "how age is being represented or understood and what are the underlying […] deeper […] philosophies or ideas or ideologies that are underneath those surface level representations" (9:24). Though this form of inquiry is not limited to YA novels, it is a particularly fruitful way to analyze them because one of the critical elements of these books is their representation of adolescence.

Scholars and adult readers who challenge theoretical approaches to YA attack the novels' ability to hold up to critical intellect. More often than not these attacks crop up in popular news sources—not scholarly journals—such as *The New York Times, The Guardian,* or *Slate*. Take a 2012 *New York Times* article, written by *Time* magazine columnist Joel Stein in which Stein

argued that YA books will never reach "the depth of language and character as literature written for people who have stopped physically growing," as if physical growth rate of a book's intended reader directly affects the quality of writing. Here is the problem with only associating YA with teenagers, a population that society views in overwhelmingly negative terms: irresponsible, immature, selfish. While teenagehood is shunned, childhood is glorified: "It's okay to grow up and be childlike… [but] it's not okay to be all the things that we negatively associate with teenagers" (Trites 36:23). In terms of literature, this makes it so we do not "have to outgrow *Winnie-the-Pooh*, but [we] do have to outgrow *The Hunger Games*" (Trites 36:00). Ironically, *The Hunger Games* is Stein's main victim, though he admits to having "no idea what *The Hunger Games* is like," because he has not bothered to read it, nor will he until "finish[ing] the previous 3,000 years of fiction written for adults." Read: Never.

Stein goes on to say that "maybe [*The Hunger Games*] delves into issues of identity, self-justification and anomie that would make David Foster Wallace proud." Of course, this is all tongue-in-cheek. But what Stein does not realize—on account of his pointed ignorance—is that these very novels, like *The Hunger Games*, that he dismisses can and *do* hold up to the same critical scrutiny as novels for adults.

Dozens of scholars—including myself—have performed critical examinations of *The Hunger Games*: see, Janice Bland's "Popular Culture Head On: Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games," Roberta Trites' "Becoming, Mattering, and 'Knowing In Being' In Feminist Novels For The Young," and Tom Henthorne's book, *Approaching The Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis.* Moreover, Robert Petrone used the Youth Lens to analyze *The Hunger Games.*

Petrone and colleague's Youth Lens examination of *The Hunger Games* notes how at the beginning of the novel "Katniss assumes responsibilities that many might consider to be adult," functioning "as 'the head of the family,' a role she assumed at the age of 11 after her father's death" (522). It is only after she is taken to the Capitol as a Tribute for the Games that she becomes an adolescent because her "survival depends on her performance of normative tropes of" adolescence (522). Through Katniss' reversal, from adult to adolescent, the article concludes that "Collins's text not only exposes adolescence as a donning of a specific discourse but also shows this discourse functioning robustly within specific settings and institutional spaces" (523). This argument proves that while the writing in these books is more accessible that does not mean that it lacks complexity. One simply has to be willing to see the puzzle hiding beneath the "simplicity;" Stein, unfortunately, was not. Perhaps, though, by educating others on the possibilities of including YA in literary criticism, people will feel less inclined to take Stein's arguments at face-value. Maybe they, like me, could even start to see the value in studying these books by taking a closer look at *The Hunger Games*.

More YA books than *The Hunger Games* have been studied using a theoretical lens, though, and there have been a range of other theories applied. Theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism have been used to study YA novels. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Trites employs a multitude of critical theories to analyze YA texts including both feminist and psychoanalytic. Sam Morris's article, "Pain Demands to Be Felt': Language and Power as Structures in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*," applies a semiotic lens to its novel of interest. And Alice Monaghan examines *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* through the scope of narrative medicine. So, while one is less likely to see theoretical analysis of a YA novel, it is not unheard of. When it comes to theorizing YA, fellow Georgetown English graduate student and

YA reader Racquel Nassor says, "critical theory is your best friend when you want to look at a text that isn't talked about" (54:06). It is all about educating yourself on the approach you wish to take and the text you wish to dissect. The world is your critical theory oyster. Do not let anyone tell you otherwise.

Performing this kind of analysis on YA literature shows that these books can be fruitful grounds for literary scholars. The texts can and should be read with the same analytical lens as scholars read canonical texts because they *do* hold up to that scrutiny. (This is not to say that every YA book will hold up to analysis; however, neither will every adult book hold up to analysis. This fact does not discredit the category as a whole, though. The same consideration should be taken when speaking of YA.) Analyzing YA texts also shows how they can be beneficial teaching tools to include in the classroom; and, as our conversations with scholars have noted, YA books perhaps even more so because they have been shown to draw a higher engagement rate from younger students who feel more attached to and interested by the content. Both students and scholars can benefit from applying critical approaches to these novels.

Moreover, analysis of these novels can lend to a unique and intimate understanding of the teenage experience, especially from those novels set in the first-person perspective. Narratological analyses can be especially poignant when the character from whose perspective the story suffers from a mental illness. In "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult Fiction: The Case of Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*," Alice Monaghan analyzes how Chbosky represents mental illness in his main character, Charlie. She argues YA narratives—like Chbosky's—can be effective and powerful representations of mental health struggles because of their firsthand narrative style. Monaghan goes on to suggest these novels can offer "a narrative medicine scholar a prolonged and authentic view into what it's like

to be a teenager and to be dealing in some way with illness" (34). This viewpoint can then potentially increase the level of care and empathy doctors—and parents or even teachers—are able to offer teens. Thus, it is not only literary scholars that can gain from paying closer attention to these books, but others as well. When we do play closer attention to these YA novels what we are also doing is validating the experience and emotions of adolescents, which are so often stigmatized or undervalued.

I will now close read a passage from the contemporary YA romance novel *We Can't Keep Meeting Like This* by Rachel Lynn Solomon; in doing so, I illuminate the virtues of studying YA novels that I have mentioned above. I take inspiration from Monaghan's article in this analysis, paying close attention to how Solomon's narrative choices help to convey Quinn's experience as a teen with OCD. Since this project is not one dedicated to close reading YA, this example is brief; however, it could easily be turned into a longer piece that examines the whole of Solomon's narrative structure in this book as well as her other novels.

Analyzing YA in Practice

I check my bag, make sure I have my wallet, keys, phone. I zip it up, and then I unzip it and check it again. Wallet, keys, phone — those three things everyone needs before going out, and yet my brain takes it a step further. I know my wallet and keys are there, but as soon as I zip my bag, I question it. I start wondering whether I can believe my brain, my eyes. So I do it again. It's a strange feeling, knowing you're doing something illogical, being unable to stop yourself.

– Rachel Lynn Solomon, *We Can't Keep Meeting Like This* (35)

Rachel Lynn Solomon's *We Can't Keep Meeting Like This* follows the story of our eighteen-year-old Quinn — as told from her perspective — over the course of one summer, during which she is forced to reckon with untended wounds from her childhood, an unfinished relationship, and whether or not she belongs on the path she has always been *told* to follow.

Quinn is many things — a harpist, a cat-lover, a daughter, a sister — but she is also a girl who struggles with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Rather than granting it only a brief, off-handed mention, Solomon writes Quinn's OCD with an immediacy reflecting the realities of anxiety disorders.

The first way Solomon achieves this is through the first person present narration of the text. We are *inside* of Quinn's mind; we *are* Quinn. "*I check my bag, make sure I have my wallet, keys, phone*"; Quinn is the "I," but so are we, too, the reader. Now, Solomon could have stopped the scene here. She could have made this a brief detail that moved Quinn out of the house and onto her errand. However, Solomon keeps Quinn (and us) in what should be a brief, inconsequential moment far longer. This one thought—one sentence—spirals into two thoughts, into a whole paragraph. And we are inside Quinn's mind for it all, following along her thought process as if it were our own.

Solomon's sentences are quick and simple, much like the action Quinn is performing. Quinn remarks: "*I know my wallet and keys are there, but as soon as I zip my bag, I question it."* The structure of this sentence imitates the flow of thoughts. Notice, Solomon does not break up the thoughts. This is one action: Quinn sees her wallet, keys, and phone in her bag, zips it, and immediately questions it. It all happens in quick success because of this one thought. There is no pause between knowing her items are in the bag and the question of whether they are there. The anxiety is immediate, as exemplified by Solomon's tagging on, "*I question it*," with a comma rather than making it its own sentence. If the anxiety was an afterthought to the action, then Solomon might write: "I know wallet and keys are there. I zip up my bag. However, as soon as I do, I question it." Quinn's anxiety, though, is constant and immediate; the sentence structure imparts that anxious feeling to the reader.

Quinn is conscious of the near absurdity of her actions. However, knowing and *knowing* are two different things when it comes to OCD, which Quinn tells us when she says: "*I start wondering whether I can believe my brain, my eyes."* This tells a reader, who might not be familiar with OCD, that this kind of anxiety is not resolved by knowledge because it causes you to question your own senses and knowledge; it is a type of self-alienation in which you are not in control of your own senses or mind. Quinn can confirm that her wallet, keys, and phone are in her bag, but that isn't the problem. It's trusting her mind. Quinn explains: "It's a strange feeling, knowing you're doing something illogical, being unable to stop yourself*."* Here, Solomon switches from "I" to "you," in a direct reference to the reader. She could have written: "It's a strange feeling, knowing *I'm* doing something illogical, being unable to stop *myself."* This is the logical structure, given the book is written in the first person. Instead, Solomon takes the sense of immediacy she's already created one step further, by making this sentence not about Quinn, but about us. It is an invitation to empathy. Instead of Quinn being the only one knowing she is doing something illogical, but being unable to stop, we, the reader, are drawn into this experience—and implicated in the described emotional state. It is *you* who feels this emotion; it is you "doing something illogical, being unable to stop yourself."

This narrative shift does one other thing, too. Quinn characterizes her feeling as "strange." Foreign, not entirely hers. That shift to the "you," detaches herself from the action, placing it on us. It makes that action exactly what she feels it to be: "Strange." Not hers, but *yours.* This yours is both us, and not us. Both Quinn, and not Quinn. And that is what it feels like to live with a brain that is not entirely *yours,* leaving you wondering whether you can believe it or not, but at the same time, "knowing you're doing something illogical, being unable to stop yourself." It is an accurate representation of mental health struggles, written by an author who,

herself, has struggled with these very same issues and whose writing, by virtue of its accessible language "has this duality of helping people understand what it's like to have that brain and also helping people see that there are other people who have these exact same obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors" (Solomon 36:07). It is the language that accepts what is occurring and paints it as it is, leaving readers with a feeling of understanding of and oneness with Quinn's struggle, even if they have never, themselves, experienced it.

Writing the Elements of a YA Book

Gayle Forman, Rachel Lynn Solomon, Christine Riccio, and Ebony LaDelle have each written bestselling novels (for more information on each novelist see Appendix 3). How did they do it? What elements did they include and why? What can we learn about craft from their stories?

YA is grounded in the teenage perspective, typically achieved through a first-person present POV. Gayle Forman wrote her first YA book, *If I Stay*, in 2009. She says at that time she had no idea writing in first-person person present tense was "considered a no-no" (7:36), but that she did so because it felt the most natural way for her to connect with the main character, Mia. Gayle told me "there's just something about the immediacy of emotion and feeling in writing young adult" from the first-person present that is "almost therapeutic" and produces a rawness that resonates with readers (8:35). Author Rachel Lynn Solomon shared Forman's sentiment, telling me she "love[s] the immediacy and the urgency of first-person" because "with YA everything is just really internal" and first-person represents that most authentically (35:16;18:30). Christine Riccio, too, was drawn to the first-person, explaining, "I feel so much closer to the protagonist when it's in first person […] I want my books to feel really raw and

internal monologue-y" (44:18-44:53). First person allows the author to step wholly into the mind of the character and portray their experiences as authentically as possible. Debut author Ebony LaDelle said, "I knew I wanted to get into the mind of the characters," but that it was even more paramount to do so because "I was writing a love story and specifically a Black love story […] I wanted a reader, specifically a non-Black reader to read this story and really understand like 'oh you gotta deal with all this while you're trying to all in love?'" (10:01-10:53). The near magic power of the first-person is its ability to place readers in the shoes of the protagonist, thereby getting them to see the world from a perspective that may not be their own, but from which they can grow, learn, and find connection.

Character growth and relatability, no matter the POV, are large draws to YA novels; however, one of YA's most popular and notable features is its emphasis on a fast-paced, plot driven story. Plot-driven books written for the purposes of entertainment have a history of being denigrated for lack of substance and simplistic writing. However, as we learned from Ostenson in the previous section, readers are not drawn to overly simplistic narratives. YA readers want "fun and engaging" novels, but they also want writing with "some real strong life lessons in there" (LaDelle 20:48). Finding this balance, Ebony LaDelle says, "really challenges you in a way that forces you to be a really strong writer" (23:03). YA is, as Philip Pullman says, some of "the hardest writing to do because those kids don't care about your flowery language and your convoluted plots, they just want good story" (Petrone 46:34). But they still want a story that takes them seriously as readers, and books that do so go on to find the most success. Having written several *New York Times* bestselling books, Gayle Forman is a testament to this. On writing, Forman will "always assume the most of my reader [and] assume they can handle what I am throwing at them" (44:08). Teenagers' want for respect and to be viewed as independent and

agentic is a desire that translates into the category's particular attention—and inattention—to the parent-child relationship.

Traditional understandings of YA note the absence of parents as essential to the category. Much of this notion is rooted in the American ideal of individualism, and YA—being an American-made category—reflects the belief that "as a culture […] we must separate from our parents to become adults" (Trites 55:00). The quintessential YA hero narrative "valorizes the rough rugged individual over community" and supports the "Freudian notion […] that teenagers need a parent to rebel against" (Trites 59:00; 55:00). Absent parents afford adolescents greater agency. There is no need to ask for permission from parents to stay out after curfew or rebel against the government because there are no parents to contend with.

Contemporary authors, though, are more and more rejecting the absent parent narrative, believing instead that the parents are "really integral to understanding" the protagonist "as a layered human being" (Riccio 37:06). Growing up, Rachel Lynn Solomon saw few YA books with "present parents and positive relationships with parents," which lead her to want to write supportive adolescent-parent dynamics "to combat" the tradition of "absent parents or bad parents" in YA (19:53). Of course, art imitates and life, and no parent-child relationship is perfect, nor are they all positive. Nevertheless, Gayle Forman argues that "whether you have a great relationship with your parents or not, generally speaking they're a major force in your life as an adolescent, so to leave them out of YA just seems completely wrong" (35:23). In agreement, Christine Riccio believes that writing an authentic, transformative character arc necessitates an understanding of "what [the parents'] presence is doing to the main character" because "if your parents are alive they're a part of your life and a part of how you consider your future and what they think affects what you do very deeply." An understanding and inclusion of

the parents, then, helps to more fully form the "lead character's psyche" (Riccio 35:10; 37:06). From this it can be seen, though, that even as YA moves away from absent parents, it retains the Freudian notion that parents—whether present or absent—ineffably affect expressions of who we are and how we show up in the world.

Parents are only one factor that affect characters' inner psyche. The YA novel orbits around a coming-of-age moment in an adolescent's life. These moments are crucial in all teenagers' lives, but as Sandra Hughes-Hassell writes in "Multicultural Young Adult Literature as a Form of Counter-Storytelling," "for teens of color and for indigenous teens, coming of age is integrally tied to the process of racial and ethnic identity formation" (218). What happens to readers who do not see themselves reflected in the pages of their favorite novels? As a young, Black woman, Ebony LaDelle "loved reading about these different people," but found herself wondering, "Can I read about myself too?" (44:32; 45:23). Rachel Lynn Solomon shared a similar sentiment; growing up, she says, "I truly felt like I didn't have any models for seeing Jewish characters in a contemporary book," and this lack of representation is what propelled her to write novels with Jewish protagonists. Authors like LaDelle and Solomon show "how YA really pushes the boundaries" of publishing and keep "the industry moving forward" (LaDelle 18:03). Both LaDelle and Solomon are participants in counter-storytelling, "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told," that in doing so "highlight exclusionary practices and policies" and help "teens of color and indigenous teens gain insight into how other teens who share their racial, ethnic, or cultural background have affirmed their own identities" (Hughes-Hassell 214; 215; 219). Showcasing these diverse stories not only gives all teens a point of a recognition, but also "allows teens in the majority culture to see how the world looks from someone else's perspective," thereby teaching young adults to empathize with

one another. Because at the end of the day "the goal of YA [is] to make better people" of its readers—no matter their age (LaDelle 19:38).

The Power (and Irony) of YA Readership

One cannot speak of YA without speaking of its readers and their incredible impact on our understanding of the category. YA, created with the intention of pleasing a certain demographic of consumers, is one of the most reader-driven markets in publishing. It is also one of the most lucrative. During the first quarter of 2021, over 8 million YA books were sold, a 60% increase from 5 million in 2020 (Curcic). These sales are the direct result of several factors—social media, marketing initiatives, the pandemic—each one directly correlated to consumer trends driven by readers. YA enthusiast, contributing writer for BookRiot, and Georgetown English graduate student Racquel Nassor told me, in Episode 12, that from "the early 2000s to today[…] YA has become more of its own powerhouse, and it's because the fans are so loud about what they love" (16:03). To understand just how loud these fans are, let us turn to the 2000s-period Nassor speaks of that forever changed the landscape of YA.

Do you remember where you were July 21, 2007? This was the day the last *Harry Potter* book came out. *Harry Potter* is both the best-selling fantasy series of all-time and the best-selling series of all-time (WordsRated); as of 2018, the series has sold over 180 million books in the United States alone. After the books' success—and the subsequent blockbuster movie franchise—publishers picked up a staggering number of YA fantasy novels. Readers could not get enough. Releases of *Harry Potter* books and movies were met with fans waiting in hours-long lines outside bookstores and movie theatres. The series' final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, has been fastest selling book in history, having "sold [in the US] 8.3 million

copies in the first 24 hours – that's 96 books per second" (WordsRated). The final movie, "*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* broke a domestic box office record for a midnight opening […] hauling in $43.5 million" (Martinez). For readers and watchers, these releases were more than just a chunk of change; they were watershed moments in adolescence. In an interview with *Harry Potter* fans ahead of the final movie, reporter Michael Martinez recorded one fan saying, "I feel like it's finally my childhood coming to an end and I'm no longer innocent and naive. ... I have to grow up." While fans understood this sentiment, many outside the community perceived this as just another silly interest of frenetic and flippant teenagers—most of them young women—fueled by hormones and hysteria. What people did not, and do not, see are how complex and varied teens' investment in these stories is. How the stories affect readers' conceptions of self; how the stories pull readers through difficult times; how the stories represent readers' childhood, innocence, and freedom; how the stories fuel readers' love of books, and perhaps for people like myself, shape the rest of their lives.

Without a fuller understanding of YA's readership, we will never be able to understand the category's power to pull in millions of readers. To help get to that underbelly is reception study. One of the most famous examples of reception study is Janice Radway's breakaway book, *Reading the Romance*, which defends the romance book through in-depth interviews with readers. Radway's work helped solidify the legitimacy of the romance novel in literary study. Though Radway's work is often thought of as a work of reader-response theory, scholar Patricia Harkin pushes against this. She cites *Reading the Romance* not as a work of reader-response but as one of reception study, and I agree with her. Patricia Harkin uses "the term 'reception study' to refer to an inquiry into a text's effect on a specific class of readers"; "reader-response theory, by contrast, is properly an effort to provide a generalized account of what happens when human

beings engage in a process they call 'reading'" (411). Thus, "Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, which describes the uses to which certain women put certain kinds of romance novels, is an instance [of reception study]" (Harkin 411). Since *What Is YA Anyway?* follows the effect of YA texts on a specific class of readers it, too, is a reception study. One that seeks to define yet another aspect of YA literature—its ability to capture the hearts of its readers.

There is perhaps no other genre with such a devoted, loyal following than romance. While this project is not about the romance novel, aspects of the genre align with the YA, such as its stigma, its connection to capitalist culture, and its gearing towards a particular demographic. In *Reading the Romance*, Radway implores us to "remember that texts are read and that reading itself is an activity carried on by real people in a pre-constituted social context"; in doing so, "it [then] becomes possible to distinguish *analytically* between the meaning of the act and the meaning of the text as read" (441). The act of reading is indelibly connected to the reader: each person comes in with a bias that affects their reception of the text. It is thus that the act of reading changes a text. A reader aware of the negative stigmas might then bring with them preconceived *negative* biases, which will change the meaning of the text, regardless of the intention set out by the author. In this sense, readers are the ones who make meaning, not the author. Whether reader or author takes primary role as meaning-maker is a theoretical conversation to be battled with in a much different project. Nevertheless, the relationship between book and reader changes the reception of the text, both as it relates to the masses and the individual. Books with mass followings—popular fiction—are by and large received negatively by critics. Popularity becomes a demarcation of simplicity; if the book can be comprehended by the masses, then certainly it is not worth time studying. The more a book is a commodity, the less it is a piece of *art*. The irony is that the publishing industry desires novels

with a wide readership, while at the same time often devaluing the entertainment novel and celebrating novels that are opaque in meaning. This is, perhaps, no more true than it is for the YA novel, which critics laud for its entertainment value while berating it for the very thing that makes the book entertaining: its accessibility. The role commodity culture plays in popularizing these books, then, is equal to the role it plays in devaluing them.

Think back to Lukács' disdain of the entertainment novel. What is popular, what is commodified, what is *accessible* is ridiculed (and often feminized); what is niche, what is protected, what is dense is glorified (and often masculinized). So much so that when readers attempt to raise the former to the level of the latter, they are instantly met with pushback. On some level, we know society has groomed us to associate ambiguous, "complex" language with value, but, as with many other scenarios in life, it is hard to fully grasp while enmeshed in the system. As Radway points out, we might think we understand, but the truth is "we may not yet understand the complexity of mass culture's implication in social life as well as we might" (448).

Reception study attempts to untangle these implications and "the complex social interaction between people and texts known as reading" (Radway 441). In the case of stigmatized novels, one might enter a text with preconceptions that: this is trash, this is formula fiction, this is for people who cannot understand literature. However, Radway found that women who read romance did not read it for its simplicity nor "out of contentment, but [rather] out of dissatisfaction, longing, and protest" (445). Their reading the romance was far more complex than society played it out to be. Society, though, as Rachel Lynn Solomon points out, is "really quick to judge and write off things that geared toward women, even when those things are healthy and progressive" (14:02). YA literature, which is largely female-authored and written for

a largely female audience, is similarly stigmatized and devalued; YA readers facing much the same judgement as romance readers do.

A quick once over of the YA section at Barnes & Noble alight with Barbie pinks, girls in ballgowns, and a majority female authorship (publishers do not report exact author demographics) tells you YA is a category marketed to gendered females. Though it is not surprising to find that YA is geared towards young women readers when "a 2018 study of children at age 15 found that more than 40% of girls reported reading at least 30 minutes a day, compared to only about a quarter of boys who did the same [and] the same study found that 44% of girls said that reading was one of their favorite hobbies, while only 24% of boys said the same." (Auxier et al.) It follows, then, that publishers would market to girls when they are the ones doing the most reading. The stereotypical teenage girl—obsessive, infatuated, hysterical, hormonal—perfectly fits the stereotype of the YA reader, too. These girls are the ones who will wait hours in line for the latest book release. The ones who will scream so loud your eardrums pop at a movie premiere. The ones writing fanfiction until the early morning hours. The ones driving YA sales… or are they?

In 2018 "60.5 percent of the young adult books sold were purchased by women" (Dahl). Young adult women… right? *Wrong*. *Publishers Weekly* found that "55% of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 — known as YA books — are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44, a group that alone accounted for 28% of YA sales" (*New study: 55% of YA Books Bought By Adults*). Now, you might say: Well sure they are buying for their kids. *Wrong*, again. This same study reported that "78% of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading." But wait… had we not *just* established that YA is for adolescents age 12-18?! Yes, in fact, we had. However, while YA might be *marketed* to teenagers, this does

not mean the category is *confined* to them. YA is enjoyed just as much, if not more so, by adults—many of them adult *women.* One reason for why this could be that these women buying YA as adults were, in their adolescence, the ones reading it. Gilligan and Brown's *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, a celebrated work of psychological theory behind women's development, argues that women lose important elements of themselves while coming-of-age; over the course of five years, Brown and Gilligan asked one hundred girls what they had to give up in their adolescence in order to grow into womanhood. Brown and Gilligan noticed that in an effort to recuperate this lost sense of self, grown women often return to elements of their girlhood as a psychological resource that helps them better understand *who they are* by exploring *where they came from* and *what they lost*. Many of the girls answered that as they grew they lost their voice. They lost the confidence to share what they loved for fear they would be shamed for it. Brown and Gillian's findings remind me of my experience with John and about why Rachel Lynn Solomon thinks YA has been stigmatized. Society's judgmental attitude conditions young women to hide what they enjoy—or give it up all together. These sentiments also teach young women that they must grow out of pleasurable things because if they do not, then they cannot and will not be taken seriously as an adult. Yet, that judgment does not negate the pleasure these books give young women. In fact, the insistence that young women must grow out of these girlish delights may only spur them to further seek them out in their womanhood and find that self they were forced to silence. It follows that if those older women were readers in girlhood and cite certain books as being important to their construction of self, then they might return to those specific novels or seek out ones that could give them a similar feeling—all in an effort to recuperate that adolescent, joyful self they were required to sacrifice.

Despite a large group of adult readers who enjoy YA—for any number of reasons—there remain many adult readers who belittle YA for being 'less-than' adult fiction. Julia Guilardi, a YA reader and an editor for BookBub's YA fiction category, says that there is "problem with YA that doesn't lie within the writing of YA, but that lies within a readership of older people" (8:49). These older readers open up the book expecting to feel the "same feeling but […] not acknowledging that they as a person have grown mentally and emotionally" and wanting "that YA to still be written for them, and it's just not anymore" (Guilardi 8:56; 12:36). So, when they do not get the same feeling they had as a teenager—when the book does not recuperate the self they lost while coming-of-age—they lash out against it. Lisa Parkin, who runs the Instagram @UpperCaseYA, agrees, saying that much of the issue with YA comes from "expectations from adult readers expecting the content to be more adult" while still capturing the certain emotion they felt when reading as teenagers (17:21). What, exactly, is the emotion that both young adult and adult readers are seeking, though?

Much like Radway sought to understand the motives behind why women read romance, I sought to understand the motivating emotion behind why people (of all ages) read YA. I read YA for the book's unique ability to absorb me in the world so wholly. When reading YA, I am nowhere. I am nothing. I am the book. I am the character. Hours go by like seconds. As an adult, I am forever searching for the replication of the emotional tidal wave that came over me while reading *The Hunger Games* trilogy.

To my interviewees, I asked: Why do you read YA? Here are some of the responses:

> *Julia Guilardi, Reader*: "You get so lost in a story that everything else in the world like just becomes second to whatever you're reading is such a special feeling especially when you're a teen, and I feel like as an adult I'm still always chasing." (3:03)

> *Christine Riccio, Author*: "Reading YA […] you immediately connect really hard to these characters and you can immediately see yourself in that world, and I feel like that's part of YA's magic like how easy it is to slip in." (52:40-53:38)
>
> *Racquel Nassor, Reader*: "[It's] a sense that this is the person and this is the space that they live in and you can understand something about the world and the way they operate in the world based on their interactions." (51:22)
>
> *Lisa Parkin, Reader*: "For me it's the idea that anything is possible and maybe not knowing who are exactly yet and figuring that out." (37:09)

For my readers, it is YA's first-person narration, its expertly timed plots, and its authentic, raw depiction of the teenage experience that draws them in. They feel connected to this writing. They feel understood by this writing. They feel like they can be anyone and do anything in this writing. It is this ability of YA books to be "both windows and mirrors [with which to] you can see yourself in but also something that other people can look in on and learn about from someone else's perspective" (Solomon 51:23-51:54) that makes them particularly ripe for the telling of diverse stories.

In recent years, publishing houses have been taking initiative to publish more diverse stories. Julia Guilardi notes that there has, especially in YA publishing, been "a notable expanse of stories that are being told. There's not just one big book by an author of color that everyone's talking about there are a lot different books across a lot of different subgenres in YA" (Guilardi 24:33). Young readers are able to see their experiences told from a narrator whom they can identify with. With adolescence encompassing the most formative years of life in which a person comes to understand their identity as being either socially accepted or rejected, the importance of diversity in YA cannot be overstated. Lisa Parkin has noticed that her over one hundred thousand followers "want more stories from specific cultures," and they "want something that's different,

[that] they haven't read it before, fresh voices from cultures and backgrounds that they haven't heard of yet" (12:31). Readers want to see all perspectives represented.

Failing to see their unique viewpoint represented in popular culture—whether that be movies, books or other media—is detrimental to adolescent identity formation and self-esteem. Though YA is making strides in the publication of diverse perspectives, reader Racquel Nassor points out that "reading diversely is [still] not something you can do accidentally because of the way publishing is structured. So, you have to be very intentional about seeking out books" (32:13). Nassor tells me that she seeks out queer protagonists in her YA books—naming *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender as one of her favorites—because those are the stories that most closely align with her sense of self. Though one must still make a pointed effort to read diversely, book companies like BookBub and social media pages like Parkin's, have been pushing to promote more diverse stories on their platforms. Julia tells me that one of the things she has noticed about BookBub's YA readership is their eagerness to "to see these sorts of stories that we've been seeing from popular YA fiction authors but featuring characters that maybe reflect more of the experiences they've had in their own lives" (25:48). After all, the power of YA books lies in their ability to connect with their readers, so if the stories do not reflect a wide range of experiences, then the core strength of these books weakens.

For readers, YA is not defined by its age demographics or its clout or its subject matter. It is defined as a type of writing that is able to capture their feelings, experiences, and perspective. It is writing that has an unmatched power to pull you in. To ensconce you in the story like you fold yourself into a freshly made bed. You open a YA book and you slip beneath the covers and into that world. It is a testament to the craft that authors are able to write "in complex and interesting ways… [with] prose that feels very dynamic and interesting and absorbing while still

keeping a younger audience and a younger readership in mind" (Guilardi 41:56). That prose works because of these authors who are able to craft a "really compelling narrator in first person [that] it makes it so easy to get lost in a book and […] makes it easy to imagine yourself in the scenario" (Guilardi 4:12). YA authors carefully construct a character arc where the reader feels as though he/she/they is the one "coming into yourself as a person who engages with the world" (Nassor 1:02:57). The accessibility and reality of the experience—communicated through that immediate narration—is a way that readers can consume the story both as a young adult or an adult and be able to find a point of connection in the narrative. The universality of these stories, by virtue of the fact that we all experience adolescence, makes YA an undeniable literary force.

Conclusion

YA has gone overlooked, undervalued, and ill-defined for too long. In breaking away from a narrow age-constricted definition, the picture of YA comes into focus. This category started as a marketing invention; the category did well—and continues to do well—as such. However, to limit our understanding of these books to the narrow definition created for money-making purposes is to disregard the complexities of these books.

The YA conversation cannot—and will not—stop here. While my podcast series on YA is limited, it could easily be expanded to an ongoing project wherein these conversations continue to build on one another and respond to contemporary arguments. As new authors rise in popularity and scholars continue to note the rich possibilities of studying these books, there will be more and more to say. The louder the conversation becomes the less likely it will be for others to dismiss or ignore this category's impact. In the future, *What Is YA Anyway?* could join forces with other notable bookish podcasts like *Book Riot- The Podcast* or David Naimon's *Between the Covers* or *The New Yorker's: Fiction*. As I was completing my podcast, Christine Riccio and

Natasha Polis announced their podcast, *Those Forking Fangirls*, dedicated to "all things nerdy pop culture and how fandom factors into adult life." There are more and more people hungry for this kind of content, and as the numbers show those people are not only young adults. People hold these books near and dear; YA books have changed people's lives. They have defined people. They have stood in for lost pieces of identity. And continue to do so. If that were not the case, then there would be no group of adults chasing the feeling YA books gave them as a teenager.

That adult readers continue to chase the feeling that comes along with reading YA and that YA books have—and continue—to leave indelible marks on readers' lives is a testament to the craft of these novels. The history of YA is rich, and there is much that literary scholars, adults, and adolescents can learn from it. Digging into these books, scholars can learn about craft and notice the many intentional choices YA authors make in order to comment on the peculiarities of adolescence, the importance of parents, and the power of youth to disturb and change cultural and political landscapes. Reading these books adults can once again feel and relish in the magic of finding a book that wholly absorbs and understands them. By validating the importance of these stories youth can be empowered to claim what they enjoy and share it. Amplifying the conversations I have had here ensures that these important voices—and the books they champion—are heard. YA books are much more than flimsy whims of the youth. They are pedagogical tools. They are ripe fields for literary analysis. They are watershed moments. They are cultural touchstones.

In presenting a piece of scholarship that touches on the many elements of YA, I have shown traditional understandings to be inadequate. Through conversations with those who know the field best, I have shown that there is a lively array of researchers, authors, and readers whose

voices we can learn from. I, too, learned and continue to learn by listening. Let us continue to listen to every voice, to every reader, to every author, to every scholar, no matter the literature they love. And why not start by listening to my podcast?

Gone are the days of simplifying YA; the days of overlooking this category; the days of academic hierarchy getting in the way of examining YA's craft; the days of dismissing readers who love YA. Today, every type of literature has a place in the academic conversation.

Appendix 1: Interview Prep Questions

General Scholar Questions:

1. What made you **want to study** YA literature?
2. How do you **define** YA literature? What are its main attributes?
3. How has the **YA field developed** in the past decade?
4. What makes for a "**researchable**" YA book?
5. What books **changed** the landscape of YA and why do you think they made such as impact?
6. What is the **role of marketing** in YA? How does it affect the titles both teens and adults are exposed to? Does it hide potential gems?
7. What **attributes** do you look for when choosing YA books to study?
8. How/where does YA **fit into** the high school and collegiate classroom?

Chris Crowe Interview Questions:

Chris Crowe — *The Problem With YA Literature (2001)* & *What Is Young Adult Literature? (1998)*:

1. You wrote some of your pieces on YA in the late 1990's and early 2000's, how has the field **changed** since then?
2. Can you talk about some of the trouble with delineating between children's and YA literature?
3. You talk about how many feel that the "the reading and study of anything less than canonized literature handicaps readers' cultural literacy, **weakens students' minds**, and wastes… educational resources" (Young Adult Literature: The Problem with YA Literature 147). Is this something that since writing this piece in 2001 you have **noticed to become less true**, or do you think that there is a still a large population of adults that believes this about YA?
4. Can you talk a bit about some of the **adverse effects** of reading the classics that you have noticed, both as a parent and a teacher.
5. You're a professor at Brigham Young. Much of the research on YA has to do with the benefit of including it in the high school classroom. However, you also teach it at the **collegiate level**. How does your approach to teaching YA in the university setting differ from in the high school setting?
6. "Universities, usually the font of all knowledge, aren't even sure what YA literature is." (Young Adult Literature: What Is YA Literature? 121). You wrote that in 1998. **Do universities know what YA is now**? What kind of research is being done in universities now? Is there a consensus on what YA literature is today?
7. You talk about the **"milk before meat"** (Young Adult Literature: What Is YA Literature? 121) approach to YAL in the secondary classroom. Can you explain what this is for listeners who aren't familiar. How do you see YAL moving from **a crutch to a piece of study in and of itself**?

8. There are, of course, benefits to using it as a **bridge, but I feel that discounts** a lot of the incredible YAL novels that can be critically analyzed on their own, without being viewed as feeder novels. Do you agree?
9. Why was ***The Outsiders*** (published in 1967) such a pivotal moment for YAL? Do you still see it imitated today?
10. Does YA literature **fit more neatly into a category** today than it did in the early 2000s or have the lines become even more blurred? Now there are **New Adult** books, where do they fit into this equation?
11. Where is the place of YA in academia?
12. How does marketing affect the reception of YA?
13. Does the same **stigma of entertainment** value follow adult books like it does YA?
14. What are some of the books in the **YA canon**?
15. Why is it that YA books prompt such **negative backlash** sometimes? Book burnings, banning, etc? How does this speak to their power?

Jon Ostenson Interview Questions:

1. Dystopia is so much more than a postapocalyptic societies rife with political problems. Can you tell us a bit about the **nuances** of dystopian fiction, and what the **main components of this genre** are?
2. What made **Lois Lowry's *The Giver*** one of the seminal works of YA dystopia? How has her model been **imitated** since its publication?
3. If you had to choose one dystopian novel from the past, let's say 20 years, that you view as having the greatest impact, which one would you **choose and why**?
4. What role do these books fulfill in **teenagers' lives**?
5. Dystopian YA was really having a hay-day when you and Justin Scholes wrote this article in 2013. There was the *The Hunger Games, Divergent, The Maze Runner, Matched.* **What contributed to the prolific publishing of these books during this time** period, and what YAL genre is the **"new dystopia"** today?
6. Do you think that YA dystopian fiction can have the **same impact on adults** as it can on teens? Why?
7. Where does YA dystopian fiction fit into the **high school classroom**?
8. Do you think YA dystopian fiction has a place in the **college classroom**? In academic research?
9. How can this genre not only be a **bridge** to other, denser literary texts, but also to other areas of study, especially history and civics?
10. Some other scholars have talked about how adults are sometimes hesitant to include these texts in the high school classrooms because they have **bleak themes**. I see some of the appeal of these stories for YAs actually *being* the bleak themes. What do you think about that?
11. You write that "part of why they liked these books is because they were driven by the main characters' personalities" (Understanding the Appeal of Dystopian Young Adult

Fiction 6), to that end, how is the **POV of dystopian fiction** a huge part of what makes these books successful?

12. YA dystopian fiction often **plants seeds of doubt** in teenagers minds about the stability of society. Do you view this as dangerous? Productive? Both?
13. You write that often in these novels there is a sense of **isolation** for the protagonists, and that is something that teens can often relate to. Now, you wrote this article almost 10 years ago, do you think that in the age of social media and coming out of the pandemic, that has increased? And if so, do you **predict** that books with themes like isolation will gain popularity in a big way again? Are we **perhaps headed for another YA dystopia** zeitgeist with the state of the world?

Robert Petrone Interview Questions:

1. Can you **define what the Youth Lens** is and its place in literary analysis?
2. You argue that adolescence is a **construct**. Can you talk a bit about that and how we see this construction **function in society**. Do you think a large part of it is a business/ **marketing strategy**?
3. How, **in this particular moment in time**, is adolescence constructed?
4. You define some of the most famous YA characters in history, like Holden Caulfield, as **emotional space-holders** for the certain context they were written in. Who do you think some of **those characters are today**? Do you think that there are characters, like Holden, **who are able to hold space and be relevant in different time periods than the ones in which they were created**? Who are they? Is that what makes those characters canonical?
5. You make an important point that I think we — or at least I — often forget about YAL and its that these YAs in the books are **written by adults**. The Youth Lens draws attention to this theory theory of **aetonormativity** and the extent to which childhood is othered and adulthood is the norm. Can you define this theory of **aetonormativity** for our listeners. Why is it especially important to **remember the adult author behind YAL**? Do you think that the — whether purposefully or not — seeping in of that adult voice in teen characters is **part of the reason these books appeal to adults**?
6. I would also argue that this is a big reason that YA literature appeals to teens, too. They feel a sense of **agency and adultness** while immersed in these worlds. Often because these teen characters are in very adult positions. Do you think it's accurate to say that the adult voice that comes through in these characters **is appealing to teen readers**?
7. How does the **type of narration** affect the story? I'm thinking specifically of YA books narrated by adults.
8. Speaking of youth as a construct, I had a talk with my advisor and I asked her how is *Little Women* considered YA level reading. I mean sometimes this book is placed in the children's section of bookstores, and I just do not see how that level of writing could possibly be fully understood by young readers. It's complex and there is so much more going on than I think you realize when you're young reading it. Is this a reflection of youth as a construct? And the changing landscape of how YAL is defined?
9. In this article, you do a reading of my absolute favorite book ***The Hunger Games*** through a youth lens. I think that this text is so rich, and like *Little Women*, there is

absurd amount going on under the surface here. I am honestly shocked Scholastic even marketed this to YAs. So I thought maybe we could do a brief dual analysis of one scene that you talk about. The one in which **Cinna is viewing Katniss** for the first time.

   a. "He walks around my naked body, not touching me but taking in every inch of it with his eyes. I resist the impulse to cross my arms over my chest." (*The Hunger Games*, 64)
   b. Two sentences but there is so much going on here. How does the adult gaze function here? How does Katniss' reaction to this, support this idea that rather than going from adolescence to adulthood, at least in the first novel, she is going from adulthood to adolescence?

10. How can a youth lens be **applied to adult literature**?
11. What **assumptions does YA make** about its readers? Do adult texts make similar assumptions?
12. Why is it **important to teach young readers to analyze** how they are represented in the literature marketed to them?
13. Do you think that using a youth lens to analyze these texts might be one way that we can **elevate YA to the level of canonical texts**? In terms of academic study.
14. You also mention using the youth lens to **evaluate pedagogical texts**. Why is this important and how can it **affect the way we teach YAs going** forward?

Roberta Trites Interview Questions:

1. Why did you start studying YA?
2. How would you **define** YA?
3. How do you go about **teaching YA novel**s to college students? Why is it important?
4. Do you think YA has a place in **theory**?
5. How has the field **changed** since you began working in it?
6. How would you define the relationship **between the material and the discursive** as it relates to YA?
7. How do you **distinguish between the terms** adolescent and young adult?
8. You talk about the way discourse affects our perceptions and expressions of gender. Can we say that **discourse alters the perception of adolescents**, too?
9. Do you think **representations of gender** are more exaggerated in YA fiction? How does this affect young girls?
10. What is the difference between **epistemology and ontology**? And how does it affect our studies of **identity**?
11. What role does **ontology play in our understanding of YA literature**? Does its role change as we change?
12. Do you think there is an **adolescent epistemology**?
13. The **desire to *become*** never truly leaves us, do you think this might be why **adult readers** also resonate with YA literature?
14. Can you **define intra-actions** for us? And how it manifests in and impacts YA texts?
15. Can we apply theories of **ecofeminism** to more than the environment? How can its application help us understand the **interconnected nature** of all of our actions?
16. What is the role of **Theory of Mind** in reading? Do you think it plays a larger role in YA than in adult literature?

17. How does the **physical space** a reader is in affect their cognition?
18. You write about **cognitive narratology**. Can you define that for us and explain why it's important in studying YA?
19. Obviously adults have more experience and preexisting conceptualizations about our world than teenagers do. Do you think that these **entailments affect their responses to YA**? And vice versa: Might the **lack of extensive conceptualizations** about the world impact how **YA's interpret** and attach themselves to texts?
20. In follow-up: How do our **preexisting cognitive conceptualizations influence knowledge production** in relation to what we are reading?
21. I love **rereading** my favorite YA books. After reading your article I wondered how to what extent my brain is changing my memories and reception of these texts in ways I might not even realize. How my adult life is affecting my teenage favorite books. Or does my mind remember and transport me back to that time, which might be why I love rereading them so much. Anyways, this brings me to my question: **How can our cognitive responses change during rereads**?
22. Why are **metaphors of growth** important in YAL? Do you think **young adults respond more to metaphors than adults**? Or perhaps experience them in different ways?
23. In the first chapter of *Disturbing the Universe* you say that maturity in a YA novel does not occur until the adolescent reconciles themselves with the "power entailed in the social institutions" in which they must interact. Where, then, do **YA novels where the protagonists overthrow those institutions fit into the mix**?
24. What role does **power** play in YA novels?
25. What role do **parents** play in YA novels? Do you think that YA novels need to have a parent figure — real or imagined — in order to be a YA novel?
26. Many **YA novels are written in 1st person present** perspective. Why do you think this is? Does it give power to the reader?

Gayle Forman Interview Questions:

1. Why did you want to write YA books?
2. Do you read YA books, yourself?
3. How do you get into the **headspace of writing from a teenage perspective**? Why did you choose 1st person to write in?
4. Do you **follow certain steps** when writing your books? Or does each one come about differently?
5. In my edition of *If I Stay*, there is a section where you answer questions about creating the story. In that, you mention Mia came to you **fully formed**. Did Allyson from *Just One Day* arrive in a similar manner? How do you go about creating relatable, real characters in these books?
6. Why were you drawn to include **Shakespeare** as the backbone in *Just One Day*?
7. Do you think that *Just One Day* could be used as a **bridge to reading** some of Shakespeare's works, such as, *As You Like It*?
8. I couldn't help but notice how different the **role of the parents** are in *Just One Day* versus *If I Stay*. What was the reasoning behind these choices?
9. *If I Stay*, while a love story between Adam and Mia, really feels more like a love story between Mia and her family. [GIVE INFO ABOUT HOW PARENTS ARE USUALLY

ABSENT IN YA BOOKS] Why do you think that **it's important to write this kind of familial/parental relationship i**n YA books?

10. YA and Adult books both reflect the same story premises. Do you find that **writing YA** is really all that different from writing adult fiction?
11. **What kind of stories did you want to read** when you were a young adult? Did you end up writing those stories?
12. How do you tap into your own **emotional experiences** to write your stories? What life experiences informed your books?
13. How is your **younger self, and/or your adult self, reflected** in your characters?
14. You teach writing online. What made you want to **teach writing**? What is one piece of advice you'd give to an emerging writer?
15. *If I Stay* is a #1 New York Times Bestseller, it got a film adaptation, and has been lauded by critics. How did it feel to **experience that kind of success**? Did you ever expect the book to take off like it did? Why do you think the story **resonated** with so many readers, adult and young adult alike?
16. What do you think the role of YA books is in an **educational setting**? Do you think that they can play one?
17. If you were going to **teach your books** to either high schoolers or college students, how would you go about doing so?
18. Do you think that you could **rewrite these books for the adult genre and have them retain their messages and power**?
19. What, in your opinion, are the **most important elements in a YA book**?
20. What are some of your favorite YA books? Why?
21. Do you think that YA has a **place in the canon**?

Rachel Lynn Solomon Interview Questions:

1. Why did you decide to get into YA?
2. In *Today Tonight Tomorrow*, Rowan is a romance writer. In the book, she talks about how people often don't take **romance seriously**. There's a scene, too, where she says it's often the same case for YA. **Have you noticed this** in writing YA and your adult romances? Have you had any **negative reactions** like Rowan?
3. What do you say to those people who think YA/romance is a **"lesser" genre**?
4. How do you get into the **headspace** of a teenager?
5. **Why do you choose to write realistic/romantic** fiction versus another genre?
6. What is the **difference** between writing **YA and writing adult**?
7. What has been the **hardest book for you to write**? Why?
8. Do you see a future where YA/romance has the same clout as the "**white men in peril" novels**? Do you think that we are getting any closer to that day?
9. What authors **inspired** you to write?
10. Do you **read YA**? Who are some of your **favorite authors**?
11. **How do you** go about writing your YA books? Is there a certain process you follow or is it different for every book?
12. THE ROLE OF THE PARENTS: In all of your books the parents are kind and supportive, but in *We Can't Keep Meeting Like This* and *Today Tonight Tomorrow*, Quinn and Rowan struggle to tell their parents what they really want to do, because they

fear disappointing them. It's a bit different in *See You Yesterday*, where Barrett's mother plays more of a friend role and Barrett feels free to share everything with her. How do **you make the choice of what role the parents** are going to play? Lots of YA books leave out the parents entirely, why do you think it's important to **include them**?

13. What are the **must-have themes** in any YA book?
14. Your books, though highlighting romantic relationships, always have strong friendships. What do you see as the **role of these friendships** to your characters? How do you go about **creating** them? How do you ensure that these **side characters feel three dimensional**?
15. You write characters that are wholly relatable. They are real people with real problems and it's refreshing that they actually *talk* about them. Quinn struggles with OCD and anxiety and in her first person POV we really get a feel for how that affects her. How do you represent these mental illnesses in a way that feels authentic rather than forced?
16. If you had to choose **a favorite character**, from your books, who would you choose and why?
17. Do you draw on your own **personal experiences**? If you do, and they are from your adult life, how do you tailor them to be more "teenage"?
18. Your books do an incredible job of including diverse characters and giving their cultures the space they deserve. [Insert personal detail about her heritage] Do you think it's **especially important to include diverse characters in YA books** so that young people can be exposed to different people?
19. Do you think **readers make different meanings** of your text than you do? Is the making of meaning in the hands of the reader, you think?
20. Do you want your **readers to feel your intention while they read**? Or do you want to become a nonentity and for them to assume the role of agent?
21. How much do you **think about your reader** when you're writing?

Christine Riccio Interview Questions:

1. What book got you **into reading YA**?
2. You were one of the first book influencers. What made you decide to **start your YouTube**? What was it like when you started getting invited to book events and asked to interview authors?
3. There's a lot of disagreement about what age constitutes a "young adult." But in your author's note for *Again, but Better*, you mention why it was important to you to write a book with a character who, instead of being in their mid-teens, was actually in their very early twenties. What made you decide to write **this as a YA and not as an adult book**?
4. What was it like going from **YA fan to YA author?**
5. Did you ever become **disillusioned with YA** as you got more into the professional side of it?
6. What **advice** would you give to young authors?
7. In *Again, but Better*, there's a **very painful scene between Shane and her parents**. Why did you write them in the manner in which you did? Can you imagine an alternate story in which her parents play a different role? Do you think that the **parents have to be**

somewhat removed in order for the YA protagonist to really and truly come into their own?
8. What the **must-have themes** to include in your books?
9. What draws you to a YA book? Or, what makes a **book compelling** to you?
10. You wrote *Again, but Better* when you were in your twenties, and you were writing from the perspective of a twenty year old. Do you think that this short gap between the age you were writing and the age of your character made it **easier to get into her headspace**? Do you think it would have been harder if you were more **removed from your YA years**?
11. Follow-up: As you get older, do you think you'll venture into **writing adult lit**?
12. How was writing your second book different from writing your first book?
13. I've always felt like there is something about a YA book that just sticks in your soul — hits you right in your feels. And I still feel the same way, whether I'm reading them at 13 or at 23. What do you think the **magical quality** is in these books?
14. How much do you **pull from your own experiences** to write your books? Both *Again, but Better* and *Better Together*. Do you find it harder or easier to write scenes that you pull from your life?
15. Why do you choose to write in **1st person perspective**? Benefits of writing in first person.
16. Again, but Better blends genres — there's a bit of **magic**. Would you ever write a fantasy novel? Why did you choose to write this **genre** blend?
17. How do you view the role of **romantic relationships** in your books?
18. If you were to **teach any of your books**, what would you focus on analyzing in the novels?
19. Did you study YA at all in your college years?
20. Do you want your **readers to feel your intention** while they read? Or do you want to become a **nonentity and for them to assume the role of agent**?
21. How much do you **think about your reader** when you're writing?
22. Why is YA worthy of more **careful attention** in scholarship?

Ebony LaDelle Interview Questions:

1. What made you want to become a **YA author**?
2. Why did you **choose to write romance** over another genre?
3. When writing how much do you pull from **personal experience**?
4. This is your debut novel. What did your **writing process** look like?
5. How did you go **about constructing both Dani and Prince's** characters?
6. How do you get into the headspace of writing from the **perspective** of a teenager?
7. You write in first person perspective from both Dani's POV and Prince's. How was writing each of them **different**? What influenced your choice to **write in first person versus third person omniscient**?
8. *Love Radio* has an incredible cast of **supporting characters**. How do you go about **writing these characters** so that feel close to as fully formed as your leads? What did you know you wanted **to include in these characters**?
9. Dani is inspired by incredible **Black female authors** like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, bell hooks and others. What role did **these authors** play in inspiring you, too?

10. There has been an increase in the Young Adult category in terms of representation. However, according to the **2019 survey** from the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) — and this survey was done on a little over 3,000 books — **only 11.9%** of them had Black main characters. There is clearly **so much more work to be done**. Can you speak to being a **Black female author in this space**? What has your **experience** been? How does **it impact your writing**?
11. One of the biggest misconceptions – both of the YA and romance and perhaps especially YA romance — is that these books don't contain anything beyond surface level fluff. *Love Radio* is a clear counterpoint to that. This book **speaks to so many difficult topics** and you write about each one with great **deft and care and empathy**. What do you say to people who think rom-coms and/or YA doesn't hold up to **deeper scrutiny** or speak to larger issues? How do you go about **writing these difficult topics** like Prince's mother's MS and Dani's assault?
12. I absolutely adored the scene where Dani brings Mook and Prince books to apologize after the scene in the library. Also, I thought that Prince's comeback to Dani's semi-judgmental comment in the library was just fantastic. I wrote in the margin "damn." Anyways, the books Dani brings to Mook are ones that have little boys who look like him. How important is it for young adults to **see themselves represented in books**, especially coming of age books? Do you think that the field has **made strides in that area**? Where is there **still room for improvement**? **And how can we all contribute** to making sure that everyone feels represented in YA?
13. You paint a vivid picture of culture in **Detroit**. Why did you choose to **include the details** you did? I'm thinking specifically of the skating scene. It was so vivid and fun and I could just feel the energy leaping off the page.
14. *Love Radio* leaves us on a bit of an open end. Do you see this **story continuing one day**?
15. You host **Why not YA? With Belletrist and Epic Reads** where you interview YA authors. I found this after I started this project and I was so excited because it's very similar to what I am doing with my thesis. What **lead** you to that? What have you **learned** from talking to other YA authors? Is there an **interview** that sticks out to you?
16. Do you think that **YA appeals to adults**, too? In what ways?

Reader Interview Questions (all):

1. **Why** do you read YA?
2. How do you **feel** when you read YA?
3. Are you still **attached** to the books you loved as a young adult?
4. What was the **first** YA book you read? What was the first YA book you read that made you feel something?
5. What **age** did you start reading YA?
6. What is your **favorite** YA book? Why do you love it?
7. What **themes/tropes/characters** do you look for in a YA book?
8. What is your **favorite genre** of YA? Why? Do you change the genres you read?
9. Do you **reread** your favorite books? How do your **perceptions change** based on rereads?
10. Have you ever been **shamed** for liking YA books? How did it make you feel? Did you ever feel the need to hide that you liked these books? Do you feel the **stigma**?

11. Do you or did you participate in **YA fan communities**? In what way? Did you bond with others?
12. What is the **last** YA book you read?
13. What do you think makes a "**good**" YA book?
14. Do you think there's potential to **perform critical scholarship** on YA books?
15. What keeps you **coming back** to this genre?
16. Do you think that YA has **become better/worse** over the last decade?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

PROJECT: WHAT IS YA ANYWAY?
DATE OF RECORDING:

Dear Contributor,

Thank you for contributing your experience and knowledge to the Project referenced above ("What Is YA Anyway?"). Emma Cubellis acknowledges that you control the rights to your name and likeness. In consideration of the opportunity to participate in this Project, you irrevocably agree that:

- You grant Emma Cubellis permission to record your contributions ("Recordings");
- You grant Emma Cubellis the right to use your name, likeness and the Recordings (and any clips from the Recordings) for marketing and promotion of the Project;
- Emma Cubellis is not obligated to use the Recordings and you agree not to sue and you release any claims which you now have or may have against Emma Cubellis in connection with the use or non-use of the Recordings;
- To the best of your knowledge and belief, the Recordings do not infringe the copyright or any other rights of any third party and are not defamatory;
- You may not enjoin the production or distribution of the Project;
- This release contains the entire agreement between you and Emma Cubellis and it cannot be modified except in a written agreement that both you and Emma Cubellis sign;
- You will have the opportunity to review any media or product that uses your interview and make recommendations for edits;
- You are of legal age and have the right to grant these rights.

I have read this release and fully understand and agree to its terms.

If you agree and accept the above, please sign in the signature line below to confirm your acceptance and acknowledgment. Thank you once again and I look forward to your participation in the Project.

CONTRIBUTOR SIGNATURE: _____

PRINT NAME: _____

DATE: _____

Appendix 3: Author Information

For more information on my author guests, please visit their websites.

Gayle Forman: https://www.gayleforman.com

Rachel Lynn Solomon: http://www.rachelsolomonbooks.com

Christine Riccio: https://www.christinericcio.com

Ebony LaDelle: https://www.ebonyladelle.com

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