

Developing a Love of Reading: Why Young Adult Literature is Important

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'Young adult novels seek to capture the intensity of adolescence, where truth is a pure value, exposure and secrecy are constant themes, and readers feel alienation with first force.'

(Marc Aronson, *Book List*, 1997)

Over the past decades there have been numerous debates on the value of Young Adult Literature (YAL). As a genre it has been referred to as:

- 'Adult Lite', not a *real* book
- a genre not in its own right, a step up to adult books (Aronson, p. 19)
- novels for slow learners
- books just about sex and drugs, dysfunctional families and dropping out, and
- a 'sub-literature' not worthy of discussion, especially in the class room (England and Mertz, p. 119).

As an Australian librarian working in an international high school in Hong Kong, I have encountered many misunderstandings from faculty, parents and students about YAL. Two consistent queries are, 'Is it of a high enough standard for mid to late teens to be reading?' and 'Is it relevant and important in the development of young people's academic and personal skills?' This article sets out to address these questions and to explore a genre that is fascinating in both content and format, though often controversial.

A Young Adult (YA) who develops the consistent habit of reading for pleasure would be well equipped to become a lifelong reader and learner. In this regard, it is essential that educators and carers of Young Adults (YAs) nurture, promote and encourage the reading of YAL. Teenagers need their own literature, stories that speak of their experiences, are in their own language and do not talk down to them.

There is a traditional reading drop-off during adolescence. At the same time, YAs are now exposed to a burgeoning variety of media choices. Getting word to YAs about the pleasure and sense of achievement that reading can give has never been more important.

What is Young Adult Literature?

In examining the issues and relevance of YAL it is first necessary to define the genre. YAL offers teenagers something that adult literature does not. YAL is created especially for YAs, hoping to give them a more mature understanding of self and the world. The stories tend to have a sense of immediacy, rather than nostalgia, and their focus is on the experience of an individual, usually a teenage protagonist. It does not always provide the answers, but rather portrays a young person in search of them (Jenkins, p. 135).

YAL is also frequently described as coming-of-age novels that tell of a young person's first experiences, be it love, death or adult choices and responsibilities. Aronson says that classic coming-of-age stories capture 'the innocent passion of adolescence, when children sense the layers of human existence, experience the desires, and work out the ideals that will add depth to their character and provide them with a road map on their journey' (p. 21).

The early history of young adult literature, as we know it today, can be traced back to J D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The book was originally published for adults but was quickly embraced by teenagers. *Catcher* introduced the important themes of adolescent angst and alienation. Such themes have now become synonymous with the genre of YAL.

In the 1960s YAL saw the emergence of realistic fiction - real stories about real people. During this period the landmark novels of the genre were first published, such as S E Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* (1967), Ann Head's *Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones* (1967), Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (1968) and *My Darling My Hamburger* (1969). These books pushed the boundaries of what had previously been seen as acceptable in books for young people. For instance, issues dealt with included gang warfare, the plight of African-American youth, teen pregnancy, death and abortion.

The YAL of the 1960s grew and developed in the 1970s giving the genre some of its modern



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masters, like Robert Cormier, Judy Blume, M E Kerr, Walter Dean Myers and Lois Duncan. The 1970s through to the mid-1980s has been described as the golden age of YAL, when a highly intelligent and demanding literature was written for young people that spoke to them with particular directness (Nimon and Foster, p. 11).

The 1980s saw the proliferation of series fiction for YAs. These books, usually the girl-meets-boy romance or grisly horror stories, were viewed as inferior to previous YA novels. Publishers seemed to want quantity over quality. Coupled with doom and gloom stories of teenagers not wanting to read anymore and government funding cuts in education and public libraries (especially in the United States), it was felt that the genre was at risk of dying out.

However, from the mid-1990s there has been a resurgence and reinvention of YAL. This is mainly due to authors and publishers challenging the traditional content, age limit and format of the teenage 'problem' novel. The Internet provided opportunities for YAs to talk to each other about their books without adult intervention. This, combined with the many attractive websites created by authors, publishers and fans, invigorated teenagers' reading.

In today's YAL there is virtually no topic that is off-limits. Readers can vicariously explore gay love, AIDS, rape, teen parenting, depression, violent acts (physical and psychological), passionate vampires and fairies, suicide, incest, murder, political choice and belief and concerns about money, society, the environment and the future. It can be said that publishers and writers now have greater freedom to be more creative. Styles may be surrealistic, poetic, realistic with a hard edge, or a highly personal blend of interior reflection and exploration of the outside world (Aronson, p. 8).

The format of YA stories is now more diversified and dynamic than ever. Gaining popularity amongst teens are YA novels presented as a picture book, script, diary, graphic novel or comic. It appears that YAL continues to keep pace with teen culture and is on the pulse of what is happening in their lives and society in general.

With the above developments in both content and format, YAL is moving into closer connection with adult literature. Societal changes, technological advances and the mass media have, in many ways, pushed young people to an earlier maturity. However, what is often perceived as knowledge or maturity is only at a surface level (Vandergrift, p. 1). Therefore YAs still need time to distance themselves and

reflect upon the positives and negatives of their immediate community as well as wider society. Opportunity for such meditation is possible through the reading of YAL.

The ages of 12 to 18 years is identified as the group for whom YAL is written and to which it has its greatest appeal. Within this age range there are two distinct categories - 12 to 15 and 15 to 18 years (Aronson, p. 9). The younger group is excited to read about themselves and the experiences of being a teenager. However, the older group is generally eager to leave their teen years behind and wants to read about more mature and pragmatic experiences of life. They also want to be recognised as adults. As a result, each of these age groups requires many different sorts of stories written for them. For this reason, YAL produces some of the most contentious and insightful as well as profound and fulfilling novels currently available.

When encouraging teens to read YAL the process can be hindered by ranking YAL into categories of younger and older readers. For example, within a school environment there are various reading levels within age groups, especially those for whom English is a second language or those who have learning difficulties. Quality YA novels will challenge and engage most teens regardless of their age. For instance, Robert Cormier's *I am the Cheese* is usually promoted at the middle school level. However, because of the story's mystery, intrigue and espionage it could also be enjoyed by the older YA as well as adults.

The Characteristics of YAL

The following is a list of the characteristics of YAL. It must be said that no one book will have all of the characteristics discussed. Furthermore, the list is not exhaustive. However, the points outlined generally describe the style of stories that are written for YAs.

YAL involves a teenage protagonist and often reflects and interprets their views. One way to attract YA readers is to write through their eyes or to have a young narrator tell their version of a story, even if the story belongs to someone else (England and Mertz, p. 120). The average age of a central character is about fifteen. With a protagonist that is similar in age, readers are able to develop an awareness of how other teenagers learn to move on from often painful and threatening situations. YAL strives to be relevant to YAs by mirroring their attitudes, issues and concerns.

YAL is fast-paced. Generally, its dialogue is direct and confrontational, and the language is sparse (Nilsen and Donelson, p. 27). In many YA novels

the action moves at a frantic pace, perhaps reflecting the reality of the overloaded and hectic lifestyles of today's teenagers. Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* and Tim Winton's *Lockie Leonard: Human Torpedo* are notable examples. The stories of YAL are focused and usually take place over a limited period of time, for example, a school semester or vacation, a period spent adjusting to a new environment or recovering from an illness.

YAL includes a variety of genres, themes and subjects (Nilsen and Donelson, p. 30). Included are the genres of: historical fiction, romance, mystery, thriller, espionage, fantasy, science fiction, future earth, war stories and realistic fiction. Examples of the themes found within these books are: loneliness, alienation, relationships, drug use, multiculturalism, threats to social order, a search for personal values and the destruction of the environment.

YAL is basically optimistic, or at least hopeful (England and Mertz, p. 123). As previously suggested, many YA novels deal with the stark, brutal and unfortunate realities of life. As a result, the characters portrayed in YAL must face and deal with these hardships. From this experience they are able to mature and accomplish new values and a deeper understanding of self through the difficult circumstances they encounter.

Australian Young Adult Literature

In any analysis of YAL one cannot ignore the significant contribution that Australian authors have made to the genre. The following is an overview of the key elements that distinguish Australian YAL from that of other English speaking countries.

Nimon and Foster state, 'in the last thirty years, the greatest growth in Australian fiction for children and adolescents has taken place' (p. 18). They go on to comment that 'during this time, the role of imported materials has moved from being central to being supplementary in the case of both audiences' (p. 18). Since the 1970s the popularity and volume of Australian YAL has grown enormously. A reflection of this was the 1987 decision by the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBC) to divide its annual book awards into two distinct categories, that of Book of the Year: Older Readers and Book of the Year: Younger Readers. Nimon and Foster say that the 'need to highlight the division was in itself an indication of the volume of adolescent material being published' (p. 19). A

further indication of the growth of Australian YAL is the Cross Pen Prize for Young Adult Fiction awarded by the State Library of Victoria.

Australian YAL has all the characteristics of YAL from other English speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. That is, within Australian YAL you will still find the adolescent protagonist searching for meaning and identity within their world and beyond. The social issues most relevant to young people are explored in depth.

However, Australian YAL is distinctive in that it relates to and identifies experiences that are uniquely Australian. This is expressed in the way the genre portrays the Australian landscape, its myths and its definition of the 'true' Australian (Nimon and Foster, p. 28). The stories of Australian YAL 'are not simply set in particular places; places produce particular plots and people in these texts - place often works as metaphor and as mental landscape' (Parsons in Comber and Nixon, p. 187).

Stephen James-Smoult, co-editor of the Australian online children's and YA book review journal, YARA, suggests that some of Australia's pioneer YA books are the early works of Colin Thiele, Allan Baillie, Frank Willmot, Penny Hall, Gary Crew and Victor Kelleher (8 May 2002). Ivan Southall, winner of the Carnegie Medal in 1971 for *Josh*, is an outstanding author.

Another characteristic of Australian YAL is its 'gritty realism' (La Marca, p. 43). This type of realism is often controversial because of its subject matter: youth homelessness and street life (Margaret Clark's *Back on Track: Diary of a Street Kid*), dysfunctional parents (James Moloney's *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove*), youth suicide (Sonya Hartnett's *Wilful Blue*), domestic violence and homicide (Kelly Laurene's *I Started Crying Monday*). Australian YA fiction is characterized by innovative style. Some Australian novels present possibilities and probe into questions that have not yet been raised in North American literature for young adults (MacMath, p. 239).

The novels cited above are good examples of another feature of what Australian authors do well: writing books for the more mature YA reader. This is an area where Australian authors are truly making a name for themselves. Such books can also be described as 'crossover' novels that provide a bridge of transition into mainstream fiction (La Marca, p. 43). Nick Earls's *48 Shades of Brown* and Helen Barnes's *Killing Aurora* are further examples.

In any analysis of YAL one cannot ignore the significant contribution that Australian authors have made to the genre.

In the stories written by Australian authors for YAs, several distinctive themes are explored in relation to what it means to be Australian, personally and as a society:

If YAs are to be encouraged to become lifelong readers then it is imperative that they are given the time and material to develop the habit of reading just for the pure enjoyment of it.

- multiculturalism and the migrant experience (Rosemary Haye's *Blood Ties*, Gary Disher's *Divine Wind*, Maureen McCarthy's *In Between* and Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem's *Only the Heart*)
- attitudes towards life in town or the 'bush' - city and country life styles (David Metzenthien's *Stony Heart Country*, Leonie Stevens's *Eat Well and Stay out of Jail* and Libby Hathorn's *Feral Kid*)
- Australians' relationship to the natural landscape, physically and psychologically - exploration of its beauty, terror and sometimes isolation (John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began*, Sonya Hartnett's *Sleeping Dogs*, Maureen McCarthy's *Cross My Heart* and Colin Thiele's *February Dragon*)
- the history of White Australia and its influence on the identity of the contemporary Australian (Anthony Hill's *Soldier Boy*, Nadia Wheatley's *The House that was Eureka* and Jackie French's *Somewhere Around the Corner*)
- the historical and present-day experience of Australian Aboriginal people (Phillip Gwynne's *Deadly, Unna?*, James Moloney's *Doug* and *Gracey*, and Allan Baillie's *Songman*)
- class structure and the notion of an egalitarian society - despite the realities of the social divisions that have always, and continue to exist in Australia (Maureen McCarthy's *Queen Kat*, *Carmel* and *St Jude Get a Life*, and Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*)
- Australians' search for their own distinct identity (these themes were first explored in the classic novels, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* and Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* - today, some Australian YAs find these books just as enjoyable and insightful as when they were first published in 1894 and 1901 respectively) and
- Australians' attitude towards authority - and some critics and academics say this is what truly identifies Australians (Nadia Wheatley's *Vigil* and Scott Monk's *Raw*).

In summary, in classifying Australian YAL and defining how it stands out from the YAL of other English speaking countries, it is important to

identify how the author expresses the ideals, values and attitudes of what it means to be Australian, in relation to its people, culture and landscape. Also essential is how the author defines the Australian adolescent protagonist and audience. All of the above books are excellent examples of the distinguishing characteristics of Australian YAL.

YAs and Reading

With regard to the reading habits of YAs there exists a dominant negative view that 'teenagers don't read' (Aronson, p. 100). However, in 2001 the National Education Association (NEA) of the United States published an encouraging report titled 'Poll on the Reading Habits of Adolescents' (Hart, p. 1). This poll appears to contradict such downbeat statements on teens and their reading behaviour.

The poll was conducted among 509 Americans between the ages of 12 to 18. It claims that the overwhelming majority of young people are positive about reading, describing it as stimulating, interesting, relaxing and rewarding. A solid majority of 56% said that they read more than 10 books a year, including 41% who report reading more than 15 a year. They recognized reading as a critical skill that they needed to master in order to be successful in life. The favorite types of books YAs like to read are first fiction (66%), thrillers, mysteries, their own culture and heritage and, science and fantasy fiction. For nonfiction (26%) subjects included sports, history and other cultures (Hart, p. 4).

However, while the above figures about teen reading are heartening, the fact remains that in the lives of today's YAs there are many competing forms of leisure (such as music, sport, the computer, being with friends, and watching television) as well as academic commitments (e.g., school, homework and organised after-school activities). It appears that it is not that teenagers don't read or do not enjoy reading, it is just that reading is one part of a much larger mix of media, academic and social activities.

If YAs are to be encouraged to become lifelong readers then it is imperative that they are given the time and material to develop the habit of reading just for the pure enjoyment of it. In the world of MTV, the internet and television entertainment, YAs have unlimited access to 'adult material' and this affects how quickly they develop their view and sense of the world around them. A well-written YA novel can give its reader the chance to take time to ponder the characters' problems and solutions. Likewise,

it can take several months or sometimes years for an author to prepare a quality YA novel, therefore they too must ponder and get to the heart of the story (Nilsen, p. 35).

Nimon says that reading also allows people to examine issues at their own pace and it is in this role that fiction poses its greatest potential to educate (p. 21). She goes on to explain that the role of good literature is to explore the complexities of difficult issues (p. 23). Therefore, it can be said that sophisticated thinking and analytical skills are enhanced and developed through consistent reading of literature. Also, another important factor in regard to Australian YAL is that it is designed to speak to its Australian YA audience at a significant phase of their intellectual and emotional development, asking them questions of 'Who are we?' and 'How were we formed?' (La Marca, p. 55). In addressing these questions it has the effect of maturing the personal and cultural physic of what it means to be Australian.

Patrick Jones, in a speech given in 2000 titled *Connecting YAs and Libraries*, stated that 'Kids who read succeed' (p. 28). He went on to say that 'reading provides teens with assets - the words provide them with support, the ideas empower them, it is a constructive use of their time and it solidifies their own commitment to learning' (p. 28).

The Future of YAL

Some current trends in YAL include:

- new YA book awards (e.g., introduction in 2000 by the American Library Association, of an award for the best YA book of the year, named the Michael L Printz Award and the new Australian readers' book award YARA (Young Australian Readers Awards) introduced in 2001. The latter includes a readers' choice award for older readers. Also, the YARA website offers a comprehensive list of national and international YAL as well as teen reviews
- more books being marketed directly to teens - there are now exclusive areas for YAs to buy their books and other multi-media in bookstores and online, as well as being able to chat via email about YA novels and issues of concern to YAs (e.g. Borders bookstores and Target in the US, Amazon.com, Grouchy.com and Sharyn.org)
- more edgy, 'bleak' YA fiction (Robert Cormier's *Tenderness* and Louis Sachar's *Holes*)

- the crossover book; this includes repackaging earlier releases of YA novels into paperback and making them look more adult (Annett Curtis Klause's *Blood and Chocolate* and Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*)
- the internationalisation of YAL (Jaclyn Moriarty's *Feeling Sorry for Celia* and Beverly Naidoo's *The Other Side of Truth*)
- picture books, graphic novels and comics for YAs (John Marsden's *The Rabbits*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus: a Survivor's Tale* and Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma*)
- novels in verse (Stephen Herrick's *A Place Like This* and Mel Glenn's *Who Killed Mr Chippendale?*)
- the short story (Francesca Lia Block's *Echo*) and
- fantasy fiction renaissance (the J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels and Nancy Springer's *I am Morgan Le Fay*).

So what is the future of the YAL? As previous sections of this article have suggested, YAL has evolved and developed along with its audience. It is predicted that this element will remain a strong and positive force. There will likely be an increase in the variety, volume and popularity of the above outlined trends in YAL.

However, there is no doubt that the rapid pace of technological change in the way information is presented and received will continue to have a significant influence on the YA novel of the future, as well as the reading habits (linked to the recreational and educational priorities) of teens. It is predicted that the portability and convenience of books, especially novels, should continue to grow and further develop in content, format and presentation. However, to ensure that YAL remains a force in the publishing world and in the lives of teens, novels will be seen to increase their connection to other multi-media formats and products, such as:

- the internet (online forums, the online publication and marketing of all, or part of YA novels)
- music, magazines, and ezines (books being promoted and talked about on MTV, in teen magazines and ezines - also ezines devoted to particular themes and subjects of YAL)
- increasing movie and TV tie-ins
- online and CD ROM interactive computer games linked to popular books (in particular, fantasy and science fiction and, thrillers and mystery stories) and

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- the purchasing of books and multi-media items via the 'virtual bookstore'.

Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson conclude that the dramatic changes in the field of library science toward information technology threaten to remove the support of both children's and YA literature that was so vital to the young people of the 20th century (p. 246). What is now critical about the future of YAL is that librarians and educators of YAs do not let the demands of learning, teaching and managing technology take over the importance of sharing and promoting this very unique literature that is written exclusively for YAs. In nurturing the YA reader to become a lifelong reader, it is imperative that the recent dynamic growth of YAL is not eroded and its relevance in the lives of YAs is supported and promoted.

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