

# From Insider to Outsider: The Evolution of Young Adult Literature

Reading—naysayers to the contrary—remains a popular activity among teenagers in the United States. In fact, according to the National Education Association, “A solid majority of young people ages 12 to 18 (56 percent) say they read more than ten books a year, *with middle school students reading the most*” (emphasis added). Additionally, from the June/July 2001 *Reading Today*, we see that “some 70 percent of middle schoolers read more than ten books a year, compared to 49 percent of high schoolers.”

Knowing that teens enjoy reading about people their own age (or a few years older), I like to think a compelling reason for this popularity of reading among middle schoolers is the amazing abundance of good young adult books currently being published for them. Starting in the late 1980s, American publishers discovered the middle school market, and suddenly observers of the field noticed that protagonists of young adult novels were starting to “youthen”; traditionally 16–18 years old, an increasing number of lead characters were portrayed as 14 or even 12. Today one of the fastest-growing segments of publishing is the book market designated for readers 10–14 years old.

At first, this seemed bad news, as a bellwether for the death of young adult literature, which had traditionally been targeted at ages 12–18. As it turned out, there was no need for alarm. Quite the contrary, in fact, for starting in 1993, the teen population, which had stagnated from 1977–1992,

suddenly took off, becoming one of the fastest growing segments of the American population.

## What’s a Young Adult?

At the same time, how we defined “young adult” (as in “young adult literature”) began to evolve. Suddenly the traditional 12–18 range was no longer broad enough, for if “young adults” were getting younger, they were also getting older. Since the mid-’90s, the upper parameter of “young adult” has been pushed beyond the traditional cutoff age of 18 and now includes readers as old as 25. This is due, in part, to publishers embracing what is called the “MTV demographic” (15–25) in an attempt to expand their market. It can also be credited to the emergence of authors like Francesca Lia Block, Chris Lynch, and Philip Pullman whose sophisticated fiction defies easy categorization except as “crossover,” one of the hottest new buzzwords in publishing that means nothing more than unusually broad-based appeal.

Related to this phenomenon is the emergence of picture books for young adults that began with the publication in 1989 of *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. Their subsequent book, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992) was selected by the American Library Association as both a Caldecott Honor Book and a Best Book for Young Adults, and—hey, presto!—the crossover picture book was born, a fertile field that has been cultivated by such other new talents as Peter Sis, Maira Kalman, J. Otto Seibold, and a whole squad of others.

The fallout of this content- and reader-based expansion—in terms of the numbers of good books being published for readers 10–25—has been spec-

tacular. And we are, accordingly, smack dab in the middle of what I believe is a new golden age of young adult literature.

## YA Literature: Decade by Decade

Students of the history of young adult literature will know that the first golden age came very early in the life of this still relatively new genre, since YA literature—the genre formerly known as “realistic fiction for teens”—didn’t appear until 1967 with the publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender*. However, a case could be made that the first young adult novel was actually Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer*, published in 1942, about the same time that America began recognizing the teenage years as a separate part of the life cycle.

The 1940s and ’50s were decades devoted to genre fiction—romance, adventure, sports, science fiction, cars, and careers. The appearance of hard-edged realism in the late ’60s opened the door to writers who began exploring issues of relevance to the real lives of teen readers with art and insight—writers like Robert Cormier, M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, and Walter Dean Myers, to name only a few of the extraordinary cadre of talents who began writing in that memorable decade.

The ’70s was the decade of the problem novel—didactic works of social realism that sacrificed art on the altar of individual “problems of the week” (alcoholism, drug abuse, divorce, poverty, etc., ad nauseam). Perhaps in reaction to this, the ’80s returned to genre, principally romance but also—at the end of the decade—horror. The ’80s was also the decade of paperback publishing, especially in the form of original series like Sweet Valley, Wildfire, and (shudder) Fear Street.

The ’90s, as previously noted, ushered in the rise of middle school literature, the dawn of the YA picture book, and then—in the middle of the decade—an expansion of the audience, which freed authors to tackle more serious subjects and to introduce more complex characters and considerations of ambiguity.

## YA Literature Awards

And so, here we are again in the middle of a golden age.

If you want more evidence of that, consider the rise of awards for merit in young adult publishing. The most significant of these is the Michael L. Printz Award (see more below), but not to be overlooked are the National Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize.

The National Book Award, presented by the National Book Foundation (which also sponsors National Book Month), was created in 1950. A Children’s Literature category was added in 1969 and flourished for 15 years before being retired in 1984. If that’s the bad news, the good news is that a new category, called “Young People’s Literature,” was established in 1996. The more expansive new name allows its judges to consider not only children’s but, for the first time, young adult books, as well. Indeed, the first award in the new category went to a young adult novel, Victor Martinez’s *Parrot in the Oven*, and so—it could be argued—has every one since. The other winners include *Dancing on the Edge* by Han Nolan, *Holes* by Louis Sachar, *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* by Kimberly Willis Holt, and *Homeless Bird* by Gloria Whelan. The principal audience for the last three, of course, is the reader of middle school age.

And so it is with this year’s recipient of the Los Angeles Times Book Prize: Jacqueline Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys*. For the record, the first two winners of this prize, established in 1999, were Joan Bauer’s *Rules of the Road* and Robert Cormier’s *Frenchtown Summer*.

The Printz Award, established in 1999, is presented annually by the Young Adult Library Services Association to the best young adult book of the year, “best” being defined solely in terms of literary merit. To be eligible, a book must be published as a young adult book. Since YALSA defines “young adult” as persons 12–18 years of age, there is the same opportunity for ambiguity that visits the other two major awards; i.e., it’s possible that the same book could win the Printz or Na-

tional Book or L.A. Times award and *also* win the Newbery Medal, presented by the Association of Library Service for Children to “the most distinguished book for children.” The problem derives from the fact that ALSC defines “children” as persons up to age 14. There is, thus, a two-year age overlap, 12–14. Talk about “voices from the middle”! The most important feature of the Printz Award, however, is not this area of ambiguity but, rather, the completely *unambiguous* fact that it recognizes literary excellence, evidencing that young adult literature has come of age at last.

Other aspects of the Printz Award are important in terms of defining this as a golden age of young adult literature. Consider, for example, that it can be given to a book first published in another country. Indeed, the winner this year, *Kit's Wilderness* by David Almond, was first published in England. To me, this demonstrates that young adult literature has come of age not only in the United States, but globally. Remember, too, that the award is not limited to fiction. It can be presented to nonfiction, to poetry, to short story collections and anthologies, even to graphic novels. All of these areas have merged as places of extraordinary creativity over the last 15 years, and each represents a singularly salutary trend in contemporary young adult literature. The appearance of “literary” nonfiction in the 1980s from such talents as Russell Freedman, James Cross Giblin, Milton Meltzer, Rhoda Blumberg, and others ushered in a new golden age of narrative or literary nonfiction that was enhanced by the sophisticated uses of visuals pioneered by British publisher Dorling Kindersley.

## Today's Trends

The adult short story renaissance of the '80s has now “trickled down” into YA in the form of exciting new theme-based collections of original short stories; think of Don Gallo's *On the Fringe*, Marilyn Singer's *I Believe in Water*, James Howe's *The Color of Absence*, or (if I may) my own *Love and Sex: Ten Stories of Truth*. There are also exciting new col-

lections of stories by individual authors—Walter Dean Myers's *145th Street*, Kathi Appelt's *Kissing Tennessee*, Ellen Wittlinger's *What's in a Name*, and others. Now the newest—and arguably most exciting—trend in the ongoing poetry renaissance is the appearance of the novel in verse, pioneered by Mel Glenn but recently brought to new levels of artistry by Karen Hesse and Sonya Sones.

The importance of visual elements to today's teens is transforming the design of YA books. For more about this, don't miss Eliza Dresang's seminal study *Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age*. In the meantime, take a look at Walter Dean Myers's Printz Award-winning novel *Monster* for a cutting-edge example. And look, also, at the graphic novel—the comic book come of age—to see how words and pictures are working together in fresh, original, and exciting ways to convey both story *and* fact (see *Pedro and Me*, Judd Winnick's graphic biography of AIDS activist Pedro Zamora, or Molly Bang's *Nobody Particular: One Woman's Fight to Save the Bays*).

As if all of this weren't enough, this is also a golden age of fantasy for young adults. Yes, we can thank that young mage-in-the-making Harry Potter for part of this, but don't forget Phillip Pullman, whose *Golden Compass* was not only one of the first crossover titles but was the tip of the emerging speculative fiction iceberg. There is so much going on with fantasy—and with its joined-at-the-hip twin, science fiction—that YALSA devoted an entire preconference to it this year in San Francisco.

Big doings, ladies and gentlemen. Big doings. In my opinion there has never been a time when more of moment was happening in the world of books for young adults—whether they be middle schoolers, high schoolers, or even Gen-Xers! For book lovers and those who love working with young readers, it's a wonderful world of opportunities.

## Reference

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