

# Canonical Angst in Young Adult Literature

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A syllabus for a high school classroom, SparkNotes pages, and the questions on a Trivial Pursuit card can each confirm that the canon of adult literature is alive and well. Whether we praise it for the authoritative structure it provides to our literary tradition or disparage it for its tendency to overlook and exclude, the so-called classics of English literature, from *Moby Dick* to *Pride and Prejudice*, live in the collective cultural consciousness. On the other side of human development, another canon exists—children’s literature also has its classics. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* or Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* have been analyzed by academics and taught in classrooms. Even in the genre of picture books, there are recognizable works that are cherished and introduced to new generations. For example, Eric Carle’s very hungry caterpillar and the rest of his vibrant menagerie remain must-haves in any elementary school library. Parents still delight their children with the beasts that populate Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*.

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In comparison, the canon of young adult fiction, like the most sullen, angst-ridden teenager, is neglected and ignored. According to the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a young adult title has readers ages 12–18 in mind.<sup>1</sup> While its subject can range from high school shenanigans to fantasy sagas, the most distinguishing quality of young adult literature is not merely the age of its target audience, but how it addresses these readers’ needs. Michael Cart, a former president of YALSA, posits that young adult fiction has

1. “About YALSA”

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the ability to acknowledge the challenges involved in growing up: a search for identity, the attempt to belong to a community, or a profound feeling of alienation. Cart sees great promise in the young adult book, asserting that it “has come of age as literature...that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.”<sup>2</sup> Yet for all its diversity, invention, and universal themes, teen fiction does not have many supporters as enthusiastic as Cart. The mere idea of having classic titles of young adult literature does not occur to most audiences, critics, or theorists. In most cases, teen fiction is regarded as a guilty pleasure—something to enjoy in one moment and outgrow the next. A book for the 12–18 range and a book to be remembered seem to be incompatible.

Part of the problem is history: The very phrase “young adult fiction” already occupies a dubious space. Whereas books themselves have existed for millennia, the notion of adolescence as a stepping-stone between childhood and adulthood is recent. Especially before the 20th century, the marker of adulthood was entrance into the work-force. With children as young as 10 holding jobs to help support their families, few entertained the existence of an in-between stage of development.

It was not until 1904 that American psychologist G. Stanley Hall defined and described adolescence. Although nearly 40 years passed before the word ‘teenager’ first appeared in print in 1941, Hall’s definition of a new life stage was a first step to acknowledging that there is a specific group of people with needs and interests unique to its age range.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this new awareness, the emergence of young adult literature was gradual at best. In the world of library science, teenagers were often lumped with small children. Even as the category of adolescence was gaining notice, the American Library

2. Cart, “The Value of Young Adult Literature”

3. Cart 2010: 4-5.



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Association (ALA) in 1930 still selected books for ‘young readers’ that drew from a pool of children and adult titles. The ALA came to realize that the older members of its intended audience were uninterested in children’s books and made a list of “Adult Books for Young People”—acknowledging the changing tastes of adolescents while reflecting the absence of a new category of literature. What finally allowed young adult fiction to gain traction was the discovery that teenagers make for a lucrative niche market, especially for books. After World War II, publishers became aware that teenagers would have pocket money to spend as a result of postwar economic prosperity and began to produce titles that catered to youth culture and tastes.<sup>4</sup> YALSA was finally founded in 1957.<sup>5</sup>

With such a short history, young adult fiction is already at a disadvantage. The canon of children’s literature may not have its roots in the time of Chaucer, but the genre underwent immense development over the centuries.<sup>6</sup> Seminal works of children’s literature have had the chance to be evaluated and discussed, solidifying their standing as classics. In comparison, young adult fiction has existed for barely 50 years. How can it have an illustrious tradition when it does not date back beyond World War I, let alone Shakespeare or Nathaniel Hawthorne?

Even more significant than the genre’s newness is its lack of credibility. Literary merit is one of the most obvious prerequisites for the creation of a canon—there can be no great books without, to name a few qualities offhand, excellent writing, fully formed characters, and reflections on the human experience. On this front, young adult fiction fights a losing battle to be taken seriously. After all, if young adult fiction is aimed at those in the throes and malaise of adolescence, one can only imagine what histrionic scenarios exist within its pages. Teen fiction only seems to promise maudlin romances, contrived fantasy worlds, or superficial examinations of ‘hot’ topics. In many cases, the most popular representatives of young adult fiction are not the most well-written. For example, Stephenie Meyer gives her fans an inventive premise with her *Twilight* series, but the writing is

4. Cart

5. “About YALSA”

6. Stevenson 2009

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amateurish and underwhelming. Similarly, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy successfully builds a reasonably intriguing dystopia and an equally compelling heroine, but Katniss's story does not sparkle with originality. While these books are entertaining and fun to read, they lack substance. To delve into their deeper meanings would more likely be an exercise in bombast than legitimate academic inquiry.

Gone with the  
Wind-fabulous



Young adult fiction rarely has an erudite authority willing to contemplate its tropes and themes. If the public's tone toward the potential excellence of the young adult novel is lukewarm, the world of academia disdains that possibility with a frigid silence. In what Cindy Lou Daniels calls the "theory barrier problem," a serious appraisal of young adult fiction, with the exception of a handful of papers about *Harry Potter*, is virtually non-existent.<sup>7</sup> While the average reader is unlikely to stumble upon a scholarly article at the local library or to seek one out for bedside reading, the absence of literary criticism reaffirms the assumption that there is nothing worth the analysis. But when even soap operas and pulp novels have spawned a dizzying array of papers examining everything from gender politics and audience dynamics, the lack of comparable inquiry into young adult fiction becomes a heavier blow to its claim to literary merit.

It is thus unsurprising that young adult fiction is not a staple of the classroom, which is also a major site of the canon's development. Texts endure when they are anthologized and presented to students as important works that must be read. James Griffith and Charles Frey observe the strong relationship between the canon of children's literature and pedagogy, remarking, "'Literature' is what we and our forebears have been taught to revere."<sup>8</sup> In the case of young adult fiction, few titles have successfully wormed their way onto syllabi or required reading lists. Those that do can only achieve this feat in a brief window of time. It is now increasingly common to see a high school freshman reading *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier or *Speak* by Laurie Halse Andersen for a homework assignment, but as

7. Daniels 2006: 78

8. Griffith and Frey 1992: 23.

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students enter high school, there is an inevitable shift in focus to the canon of adult fiction. In the pursuit of college preparation, improved language skills, and other educational goals, teachers turn to the “real” classics of literature. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which had a younger audience in mind, may be the exception that proves the rule: a rare example of a crossover book that appeals to readers of all ages.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these many challenges, to say that a young adult canon is impossible is a rash and pessimistic pronouncement. In fact, there are already inklings that a canon is in the making. Mention *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, and many would argue that this rough-and-tumble coming-of-age story should be read by future generations. Over a decade has passed since the publication of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, yet the candor and strength of Charlie’s narration and his feeling of infinity continue to resonate with readers despite the occasional dated pop culture references.



Rather squirrelly

Perhaps the most direct attempt at ‘creating’ a kind of canon occurred when NPR asked its listeners and readers to vote for the “100 Best-Ever Teen Novels” this past summer. With a phrase as bold as “best-ever” and 235 nominations that span genres and publication dates, it was clear that the list would be on a grander scale than what had been seen before. Even YALSA has never published such a definitive selection, only releasing lists for the best books published in a given year.

From the beginning, the poll caused controversy. Some were upset to see their favorite titles excluded from the 235 nominations, prompting NPR to publish a post online detailing how panelists made their selections.<sup>10</sup> However, these murmurings paled in comparison to the criticism levied at the poll when the final results were released: Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, proclaimed, “This just might be the whitest YA list ever,” with only two books featuring protagonists of color. In response, NPR was happy to concede that

9. Daniels 2006: 78

10. Mayer

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its poll was not foolproof, citing sample bias and acknowledging that a popularity poll does not have all the answers.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the survey and its criticisms illustrated the complexities specific to evaluating and canonizing young adult fiction. With children's literature, Deborah Stevenson observes, "The forces behind [its] approval and canonisation...constitute a complex Venn diagram."<sup>12</sup> Likewise, young adult fiction is judged by a wide range of individuals, including (and certainly not limited to) publishers, librarians, parents, educators, and the readers themselves. The encounters of these different viewpoints destabilize the definitions of young adult fiction.

The NPR poll clearly demonstrated the effects of such conflicting, subjective judgments. For instance, some books that were popularly considered young adult titles were actually aimed at children as young as eight. The panel's choices also brought up the issue of gatekeeping. Some titles, like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *Ender's Game*, were excluded because their themes were too mature.<sup>13</sup> Even the poll's respondents, many of whom were adults, remained one step removed from a teenaged audience, preserving the possibility that the results of the poll may not actually reflect what a teen reader would want to see in a canon. Yet what if there had been a person of color on the original board? Was the lack of diversity just a natural consequence of shortcomings or a reflection of deeper prejudices and partialities?

For all its shortcomings, NPR's attempt to define the cream of the crop in young adult literature still made a bold pronouncement: There is such a thing as thoughtful, well-written teen fiction. Whether it is formally acknowledged or not, the list of young adult novels that deserve recognition is endless. John Green, author of *Looking for Alaska* and *The Fault in Our Stars*, creates extraordinary characters whom readers will follow to the edge of the earth. In *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* Ann Brashares injects issues of race and class into her tale of friendship and female adolescence. She devotes a major

11. Schumacher-Matos, "When a Popular List of 100 'Best-Ever' Teen Books Is the 'Whitest Ever'"

12. Stevenson 2009: 108

13. Mayer

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subplot to Carmen, who is half Puerto-Rican and feels betrayed that her recently remarried father has abandoned her for his new blonde family in a cookie-cutter South Carolina suburb. Perhaps the elegant and moving story of *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak will allow it to attain the status of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a book with the exceptional power to find fans over and under 18.

Even in their infancies, canons are tricky. But if given the time to develop and transcend misconceptions, the canon of young adult literature has great potential. As the backlash to NPR's poll shows, there is the possibility for such a canon to contain genuine diversity, featuring novels with protagonists who claim different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, identify with different sexual orientations, and hail from different families and locales. If we pay attention, the excellent writing that waits patiently behind colorful covers and punchy premises can enrich our understanding of exemplary literature. After all, if a canon is supposed to comprise texts that testify to the hardships and triumphs of being human, where better to find such titles than in a genre where growing up, the most harrowing and insightful of all experiences, forms its core?

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