

College of William & Mary

Who is Young Adult?

How Teenager Became the New Bestseller

Caroline Kessler

Freshman Monroe Project

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When and where literature for young adults began are specifics likely impossible to pinpoint. As long as there has been a culture of literacy, youths have always found something to read. However, the moment that Young Adult literature emerged as a distinct market genre is easier to identify, and in its relatively short history, it has expanded and evolved at a pace like no other market in existence. From only coming of age within the last fifty years, to being pronounced nearly dead by its leading expert in the mid-1990s, YA has experienced a phoenix-like rebirth in the past two decades. The material produced today—in terms of sales, cultural impact, and diversification of content—and the readers who swear loyalty to it are nearly unrecognizable from their predecessors less than one generation prior. Just as the face of “young adults” has changed in response to the maturation of the Millennials, the definition of “Young Adult literature” has undergone a similar renovation.

The classic definition of Young Adult writing, used by publishers and librarians alike, has always been an approximation of intention. Brown and Stephens define YA as “literature written specifically for and about young people, ages eleven to eighteen” (6). The specific age range varies by source, but it has always been agreed that adolescents must be both the subject and, more importantly, the targeted audience. Critically, though, the “for” rather than the “about” was always the more integral feature, as Young Adult literature began as and continues to be a marketing strategy. We know this because while literature written about young adults has always existed—think *Romeo and Juliet*, *Little Women*, almost anything by Jane Austen—YA has not, and this is because, for most of human history, the teenager has not existed either.

While the titles listed above contain teenaged protagonists—as do *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace*, which would seem like obvious examples of early YA novels—they could not possibly be YA literature because there were as of yet no “young adults.” Certainly these

landmark works, by drawing attention to this under-examined age, must have aided the emergence of such a classification, but earning distinct cultural recognition was a slow process. YA expert Michael Cart writes, “until 1900 we were a society with only two categories: children and adults,” but making room for the new interstitial group would take almost another fifty years (*Young Adult Literature* 4). And seeing as, until very recently, YA was strictly synonymous with teenagers, there could be no capital-letter Young Adult literature without actual young adults to consume it.

It may be surprising, given that today’s adolescence seems to last well into one’s twenties, that teen years were ever overlooked. Yet in 1900, when only 6.4% of American high schoolers earned a diploma, the transition from child to adult was much more immediate. Time took until the Second World War for society to slow the precipitous threshold of maturity, when 1942 marked two important literate milestones. Firstly, it was in this year that the word “teenager” originally appeared in print, in the September issue of *Popular Science Monthly*. Here, a parallel between YA’s inception and its modern transformation becomes apparent: a cultural reevaluation of youth and the resultant delay of adulthood. However, 1942 is remarkable in our history for another reason, that being the publication of Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer*, the work of fiction largely regarded as the first modern Young Adult novel (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 3-11).

Though now over seventy years old, *Seventeenth Summer* contains many of the hallmarks of a contemporary YA novel. Told in the typical first-person narration, it was imbued with emotional immediacy, and by displaying real acts of teenage rebellion, it conveyed an honesty lacking in juvenile fiction (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 11). And while books like *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* lack neither honesty nor teen readers, *Seventeenth Summer* crossed

a barrier that many scholars judge essentially precludes the former titles from the realm of YA. The reasoning stands that these works and others, like *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, fail to take on the mindset of a young adult. They belong to another tradition, the *apprenticeship novel*, which involves an adult character revisiting an earlier period of his life, but only viewing it with the distance of his adult sensibilities. According to Jean E. Brown and Elaine C. Stephens,

The significant difference between young adult novels and adult novels about adolescents is perspective. In an apprenticeship novel, the point of view is often that of an adult reflecting on youthful experiences. The young adult novel, however, more often represents the perspective of youthful characters as they explore their world. (18)

Thusly, from the beginning, YA has carried a tradition of immediate character-reader relationships, the goal being to experience youth authentically and as in-the-moment as possible.

Now, in order to understand how today's Young Adult publications qualify as revolutionary, we must understand the homogeneity of the original source material. Over the developmental decades of the twentieth century, Young Adult readied itself for its present-day diversification, and though often prone to periods of languor, steadily the framework of YA fell into place, complete with historied themes, archetypes, and tropes of its own.

Wizards, vampires, dystopia—YA has always been susceptible to the fluctuations of trend, and its earliest years are no exception. For the better part of two decades, the stuff of *Seventeenth Summer* foddered the bulk of literature for adolescents. Despite its insistence that “It wasn't silly, like sometimes, when girls sit in school and write a fellow's name all over the margin of their papers” (Daly 3), it remains well-scrubbed, docile, and innocent compared to today's stories. Even with greater exploration into genre writing like science fiction or sports

stories, until 1967 and the publication of YA's most enduring title, teen novels remained as sweet and unvaried as hard-shelled candy. That landmark novel, of course, would be *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 19).

Into Young Adult came a new authenticity that mirrored the thoughtfulness of apprenticeship novels more than its own YA peers. Ponyboy's world, where Greasers like him "steal things and drive old souped-up cars and hold up gas stations and have a gang fight once in a while" (Hinton 22) is the material formerly precluded by Young Adult authors. Important not only for revealing the long-ignored grit of modern teen life, *The Outsiders* truly marks the point when YA could first be seen as something traditionally 'literary.' This was a book that could inspire reactions more complex than a daydream, and as a result, it initiated the continuing discussion over whether YA could belong in a classroom. Even today, *The Outsiders* is taught in high schools and is used to explore themes of identity and violence. The first of its kind, this release shattered notions of YA's limitations and revealed a new standard both of quality and popularity for the market (Brown and Stephens 107).

However, high points are inevitably followed by low, and the greats are imitated to a point of disillusionment. Following *Outsiders*' illuminating turn into darkness, controversy became the norm, and the 70s became the decade of the *problem novel*. According to Sheila Egoff, problem novels are "very strongly subject-oriented with the interest primarily residing in the topic rather than the telling. The topics—all adult oriented—sound like chapter titles from a textbook on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion and death" (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 32). Quality storytelling and characterization gave way to flashy hooks, and the heart seemingly went out of Young Adult. Following critics' condemnation and readers'

dissatisfaction, from this era came some of the strongest and most lasting sources of YA stigma, the aftershocks of which can still be felt today.

In this mindset, many readers and critics still equate all of Young Adult literature with the meatless stories of the Seventies. And while undeveloped writing exists in every form, today we can see just how far YA has come from the 70s in Ellen Hopkins' 21st century elevation of the classic problem novel. Hopkins' books are distinctive not only for their novel-in-verse style or their catchy, monoverbal titles; each tackles with uncompromising honesty the most sobering topics teens face today. Making up only a third of her Young Adult oeuvre, *Crank*, *Burned*, *Impulse*, and *Tricks* deal with drug addiction, abuse, mental illness, and teen prostitution, respectively ("Books"). Yet, unlike problem novels of the past, her books are written with careful regard and are now read by "parents, librarians, and teachers, along with drug and school counselors, juvenile court officials, and rehab treatment specialists" alike (Hill 77).

Even though Young Adult literature had reached maturation with *The Outsiders*, the true revolution—the revolution that would allow for well-formed books like Hopkins' verse—was still beyond the horizon. The immediate response to the troubled and thinly storied 70s was a shift to romantic escapism, which, in turn, did no additional favors for YA's plummeting reputation. Discarding all the darkness of the 70s for breezy stories of first love, this reversal reveals another recurring influence of YA: nostalgia (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 37).

All juvenile literature, including Young Adult, exists in a creator-consumer imbalance that does not exist in the adult market, this being that "young readers, unlike other readerships and demographics, rarely produce the books they read; adults do" (Seymour 2). It is likely for these reasons the apprenticeship novel preceded the Young Adult novel; it is harder for adult authors to assume the mentality of a teenager than to observe one from their own grown-up

perspective. When attempting to assume a youthful voice, the immediate danger is to sound dated or unauthentic, authors drafting their own teen experiences onto modern youth. Evident today in the large audience of adult YA readers, nostalgia is both a lure and a vice within Young Adult literature (Garcia 16). In the 1980s, though, the romance revival was, as described by critic Margo Jefferson, “grown-up nostalgia repackaged for the young, very like those remakes of 1950s and 1960s songs by people in their 30s and 40s pretending to be ten or twenty years younger (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 38). For the majority of these works, eyes were widened back into innocence, toes were tucked back into line.

However, one such romance, Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat*, would at once typify and augment the genre. Turning the yearnings of love-hungry readers into an actual fairy tale, *Weetzie Bat* lives in the magazine-glossy city of Shangri-LA. The story runs more like a sugar high than a logical plotline, spangled with both genie magic and movie magic. Dazzled readers were met with astounding, off-beat originality, where “Weetzie and My Secret Agent Lover Man and Dirk and Duck and Slinkster Dog and Fifi’s canaries lived happily ever after in their silly-sand-topped house in the land of skating and hamburgers and flying toupees and Jah-Love blonde Indians” (45). Block’s world was so immersed in the tropes of the genre that it was in fact liberated from cliché. Though the language of the book may not live up to today’s standards of political correctness, based as it is on so many stereotypes of gender and race, *Weetzie Bat*’s popularity remains both contemporarily and historically significant.

Published in 1989, *Weetzie Bat* would become a harbinger of the decade to come in terms of expanding readership. The book’s brazenness and unwillingness to edge around sensitive topics like homosexuality, AIDS, rape, and infidelity attracted an older crowd in addition to the typical teenaged lot. Inaugurated by Block’s short but sensational novel, a new classification of

YA readers emerged: *the MTV demographic*. “Broadly defined as those 12 to 34 years old,” this conglomeration of readers foreshadowed the age-defying audience YA would soon garner, and the genre “was now, increasingly, turning into what has come to be called crossover fiction, novels, that is, with multigenerational appeal” (Cart, “What Is”).

Indeed, in the multiverse of crossover, YA would soon find its gold rush, but that was not to come before the first few lean years of the Nineties. Due to educational budget cuts, school libraries could no longer support non-curricular materials, and this recession also quickly stemmed the slowly growing spring of multicultural literature that had begun previously in the 1970s. Teens had to turn to the trade market (meaning, bookstores) to supply their stories. Now, librarians and teachers were no longer the main conduit to Young Adult, so unsurprisingly publishers redoubled their marketing efforts to drive up sales. With the emergence of super-bookstores like Barnes & Noble and the debut of Amazon within arm’s reach, bookselling and marketing was about to change in a big way (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 52-55).

In attempts to profit off expanded audiences, like middle schoolers or twenty-somethings, Young Adult stories branched in two directions. The lighter stuff skewed young, and its concentration on the early teen and tween years began the tradition for a recently titled sub-genre, Middle Grade. The other half tended toward the mature, whether in character age or subject matter, in order to ‘edge’ their way into the sweet spot of late high school and college—those on the brink of their real adult lives. In part due to the marketing, in part due to the times, these books were often raw and unrepentant:

[Young adult] lives were becoming increasingly endangered by societal and personal problems that ranged from poverty to homelessness, from fractured families to violence...from increased drug use to sexual harassment, rape and—perhaps as a result of

all this—an exponential increase (200 percent in the preceding four decades) in teenage suicide. (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 54-55)

For a snapshot of the darkness, see Caroline B. Cooney's works of the Nineties. Aside from her Janie Johnson series, which deals with child kidnapping and cult activity, she also wrote about the violent aftermaths of both acts of terrorism (*The Terrorist*) and casual crime (*Driver's Ed*). Stories such as these were quickly labeled "bleak books," and with this outlook on life, it is not surprising they portended doom for YA (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 65).

However, just as Young Adult seemed ready to end with a whimper, a literary revolution erupted just in time to meet the new millennia, and possibly to define the transition. We now live in the aftermath of this upheaval, which can only be recognized as a post-*Potter* world. While in truth it is almost impossible to summarize the scope of all that the Harry Potter series has done for literacy and publishing among children, teens, and adults (script sales of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, the new Rowling-sanctioned stage play, are topped only by the record set by the release of *Deathly Hallows*, nearly ten years prior), it is possible to study the beginnings of the crossover boom alongside two other Nineties works (Flood).

Perhaps it was fitting that Britain, who had long claimed mastery of childhood tales, was the authority that extended youth to prolonged audiences. By the success of three works appearing within a decade of each other, adults were given a reason to return to the source of their love of reading, and those still young found an excuse to never leave it behind. *Potter* was, of course, instrumental in this development—and those of publishing trends for years to come—but preceding and succeeding *The Boy Who Lived* were *Lyra Belacqua* and *Christopher Boone*. From internationally bestselling works *The Golden Compass* by Philip Pullman (1995) and *The*

Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon (2003) respectively, they helped attune the world's eye and palate to the delights of "kidult" market fusion (Walton 389).

The two books achieved their eminence in different ways, yet they cross the same divide. In the greater scheme of things, Haddon's more recent title behaved in a manner not all that peculiar. Though released as an adult title, it found great popularity among the YA demographic. Likely the peculiar aspect was that its publisher did not make more of an effort to attract teenagers' attention in the first place. The appeal now seems evident as his book, along with contemporaneous stateside releases *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky and *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld, feature teenaged protagonists yet, by merit of their more explicit content, were packaged for adult audiences. Alone among them, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has made the leap and is now more prevalently found on YA shelves (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 114).

MTV, the publisher behind Chbosky's famous novel may explain its success. With a demographic that continued into some viewers' earlier thirties, this book slanted younger than many of MTV's other titles. However, the fact that it was so quickly embraced by the YA audience revealed a permeability in the market (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 92). Shortly to be embodied in the teen-to-adult television hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the adult-to-teen crossover *Sex and the City*, eighteen-to-twenty now appeared to be a marketing sweet spot, instead of a cutoff (Burnett).

The Golden Compass, in comparison, bridged the gap from the other direction. Following in the tradition of C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Pullman veils allegory as a highly imagined children's story. Younger readers will most likely absorb the thrills of his fantastic world that partners feats of speculative science with armor-plated ursine mercenaries.

Meanwhile, those more experienced may observe his carefully interwoven commentary on religion and his allusions to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. By producing a work worthy of a second, closer reading, Pullman's book is not simply a children's fiction that is enjoyed by adults; it is meant both *for* children and *for* adults. But perhaps he explains this best himself:

I don't know whether [*The Golden Compass*] is a young adult book or children's book or adult book that somehow sneaked its way into a children's bookstore. I don't actually think about the audience...If you asked what sort of audience I would like, I would say a mixed one, please. Children keep your attention on the story because you want to tell it so clearly that nobody wishes to stop listening. And the adults remind you not to patronize or underestimate the intelligence of the children. (Pullman)

Evidently, *The Golden Compass* and its two sequels are hard books to categorize. It is not a book that will coddle its reader; a child will often have to look up words in a dictionary and adapt to the invented terms with which Pullman labels his world. However, it is a book that rewards its audience, and for this reason, both children and once-children, veterans and greenhorns alike seek the story it provides.

Michael Cart argues that, like *Harry Potter*, Pullman's trilogy is intended to be read over time. Rowling's books increase in darkness and complexity as they progress, and just as the last three Potter books are often shelved as YA, Cart declares, "[*The Amber Spyglass*] is very clearly a young adult novel" (*Young Adult Literature* 104). This transitional voice, in which series age as they grow, had an unforeseen twofold effect. Firstly, this allowed readers to maintain their investment in the work, knowing that the complexity would keep up with their own development. Secondly, the elevated narration acted like a YA ultimatum: mature or be left behind. In the end, it was not *in spite* of their categorical peculiarity but rather *because* of it that

Pullman's books sold so well. Its publisher, Random House, was not ignorant of its crossover appeal; along with the \$250,000 invested in its marketing, the company released the work both to the children's and the adults' sections of the bookstore, only packaged with different covers (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 113-4).

This was not the first time republication was utilized to increase sales—many YA titles today have secondary “adult” covers, and movie adaptations always debut alongside matching paperbacks—but the practice does evidence a certain paradox: adults crave the stories of the young, but at the same time can be ashamed to read a product marketed to youths (Beckton 11). This stigma even dates back to the very originators of YA, as, over fifty years after her publication, Maureen Daly tries to distance herself from the Young Adult Label: ““I would like, at this late date,” she wrote in 1994, ‘to explain that ‘Seventeenth Summer,’ in my intention and at the time of publication, was considered a full adult novel and published and reviewed as such”” (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 11). However, fast-forward to 2015, and 80% of YA books are being purchased by those over the age of its titular demographic (Gilmore). Furthermore, they are not merely consumers; according to a 2012 study, 78% of adult YA buyers do so in order to read the books themselves (Garcia 16). So how does the paradox fare against today's numbers?

In the current market, though the number of readers has increased, the stigma and the contradiction still exist, most adamantly among “literary” circles—e.g., Ruth Graham's infamous article “Against YA,” in which she writes, “Adults *should* feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children.” Yet in the same article, among her respectable laments for ambiguity and honesty, she reveals the base argument that most adult YA-decriers revert to: “Not because it is bad—it isn't—but because it was written for teenagers.” But how did the

market come to a state where the merit and respectability of what was once a purely juvenile genre are now contested with such adamancy? Before our history can leave the Nineties behind, we must, of course, consider Potter. *The Golden Compass* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* both advanced the crossover market through their success across age groups, but any publishing movement pales in comparison to Rowling's juggernaut.

While the other two titles inspired curiosity across the child-adult divide in the way that one who reads in a public area can feel the none-too-casual glance of a neighbor peering over their shoulder, Harry Potter created a phenomenon that simply had no boundaries. Different critics will describe the books at once as "old-fashioned" and delightfully childish. Among these, Brown and Patterson try to intuit how exactly the same piece of literature could garner such extensive interest: "Older readers of Harry Potter, those who might be expected to appreciate the "grown up" stories of the later novels, invariably express a strong preference for the earliest books, those that transport them back to the innocence of youth." Concurrently, "young readers...prefer the later books because they are more exciting, *because* they are more frightening, *because* they are signifiers of grownupness" (Brown and Patterson). Now having sold over 450 million books, Rowling must no longer be seen solely as an anomaly—though, certainly, by success, she is—the unrivaled author was also the instigator and paragon for today's YA revolution. To use the phraseology of another YA heavy hitter, she was the Mockingjay long before Katniss Everdeen appeared on the page.

So where are we now? Since 2000, when the New York Times was compelled to inaugurate a separate Children's Best Seller List in the wake of Harry Potter dominating the adults' list for over seventy-nine weeks, the iconic newspaper has also added a Young Adult section (Garcia 17). From the Nielsen Children's Book Summit in September 2015, we know

that children's book sales have increased 12.6% since January of 2014 alone and 40% in the last decade. Within the year, 11 of the 20 bestselling U.S. titles were from the children's section, and adult print sales are starting to diminish. In a time when adults make up 80% of YA sales, we must truly reevaluate what it means to be both a 21st century young adult and a 21st century Young Adult novel (Gilmore).

In discussing Young Adult literature, the words 'teenager,' 'youth,' and 'adolescent' are used interchangeably and vaguely. What exactly is Young Adult? Again, we return to the traditional "for and about" definition. In the U.S. those with the highest critical authority are the American Library Association and its Printz Committee, which yearly awards the best YA title published in America. According to the award's criteria, an eligible work must be "designated by its publisher as being either a young adult book or one published for the age range that YALSA [Young Adult Library Services Association] defines as "young adult," i.e., 12 through 18. Adult books are not eligible" ("Printz"). This at first appears to make logical sense, as 12 to 18 neatly encapsulates the middle and high school years. However, the waters become a little murkier when one compares these criteria to that those of the Newbery and Caldecott, which specifically award children's books. For both committees, "children are defined as persons of ages up to and including fourteen" ("Newbery" and "Caldecott"). As one can see, the demographics overlap, and in no circumstances is this more clearly illustrated than Mariko Tamaki's graphic novel *This One Summer*, which received silver honor medals from both Caldecott and Printz panels. Picture book or novel, children's or Young Adult, who can say where it belongs?

Matters grow even more confusing when considering Middle Grade and the emergent New Adult book markets. Both can be seen to either exist under the umbrella of Young Adult, or float ambiguously along its borders. But regardless of which taxonomical approach is taken,

blurriness ensues. While Middle Grade may act as the bridge from true children's books to YA works, a maturative shift is occurring in both landscapes. According to Sue Corbett, "books for upper-middle-grade readers are increasingly tackling subjects once considered almost exclusively the province of books for teenagers: sexual awakening, sexual identity, mental illness, suicide, eating disorders, terrorism, and war... All of these issues are routinely cropping up in the plots of books aimed at eight-to-12-year olds." Complexity is building from the bottom up, as successive generations of more worldly readers need books to reflect their reality.

So meanwhile, as Middle Grade ages into YA, YA graduates to New Adult. The label has only existed since November of 2009, but the market is quickly growing, especially among e-book sales. In 2014, 326 works were categorized as New Adult, the majority of them romance or a romance genre hybrid. The strongest concentration of readers falls within the range of mid-20s and 30s, but the genre is also popular among late teenagers and college-aged adults. One reason for its resonance may be that here alone, outside the realm of adult fiction, the power balance between author and reader is restored. This is largely a genre in which its creators and consumers are social peers, unlike children's or even YA, in which an adult is the supplier but not the designated audience. In spite of this, New Adult is billed in vague terms, including "cutting-edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA" and "fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of an older YA or new adult" (Naughton). As a result, finding the dividing line between YA and New Adult is tricky. Once again, the difference seems to come down to age, as one matures in content and the other in market acceptance.

Yet regardless of how these books are separated out, no matter what limits and brackets different institutions place on these stories, the old "for and about" definition is wearing out. While exceptions will always exist—see *A Christmas Carol*, *The Book Thief*, and *Emma*

Donoghue's *Room* for three titles whose protagonists do not match their market—the “about” half of the equation stands about as true as it ever did. In contrast, the “for” half appears to be migrating northwards. Quality of writing could be one cause, that the books themselves are aging into complexity and therefore attracting more mature readers. Indeed, the increasing use of YA books in the schoolroom—admittedly, only as bridges to classics, YA not being the end goal of the lesson—attests to this belief (Glaus 408). Similarly, many believe that YA as a whole is sophisticating, and today's Young Adult are works that “just a decade or two ago, would have been considered adult: protagonists above school age, emancipated from the family unit, dealing with concerns and contexts more traditionally associated with the adult world” (Beckton 3). Diverging from the old standard of Young Adult, perhaps adult readers are not “reading down” as some critics may say; instead YA is raising the bar.

The alternative to this, though not necessarily in opposition, is, of course, a cultural youthening. Current trends, including coloring books for adults, which, despite their title, are still professionally organized as juvenile, may hint at a desire to return to childhood (Gilmore). Or perhaps, our current culture reveals that people are not simply clinging to youth; rather, just like the early 1900s, we may be in a time of generational restructuring. Millennials (typically those born between 1980 and 2000) have experienced the longest childhood in history, but it's not all of their own choosing. Indeed, technology allows them to socialize with their peers instead of forcing them among adults by circumstance, but looking to the future, their outlooks are less certain than generations before. Statistics say that a Millennial will have an average of seven jobs before the age of 26, and, likely as a result of poor employment opportunities, more people aged 18 to 29 live with their parents than with a spouse. Yet this does not make them stunted, as modern innovations guarantee a longer lifespan than their parents or grandparents (Stein).

Allowed to develop at a different rate, the teenagers and twenty-somethings of today look for representation in a book market that has not kept pace with their own progression. YA and New Adult advocates cite this reason for genre loyalty, as these markets fulfill the needs of “people who are exploring identity, exploring their purpose in life, exploring what’s important to them” (Naughton). In his book *Juvenescence*, Robert Harrison gives this outlook a negative connotation. As summarized by Rachel Falconer,

Western advancements in medicine, science, and technology have contributed to fashioning a generation that both looks and acts younger than ever before. At the same time, today’s young people, growing up as many of them do, conjoined to their computer screens, are being robbed of the ‘dark continent of inwardness, silence, and attention.’
(286)

However, despite an apparent lack of inwardness and silence, reading rates in our age of blazing technology are increasing. One might expect reading, a well-known solitary activity to suffer in this era of socialization, but in recent years, those aged 18 to 24 have “undergone a particularly inspiring transformation from a 20% decline in 2002 to a 21% increase in 2008 (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 189). Furthermore, the young alone should not be targeted, as “the biggest group of adults buying YA books in the 21st century are between the ages of 30 and 44...account[ing] for nearly 30 percent of all YA book buying” (Garcia 17).

In fact, by disparaging today’s youthful culture, Harrison aligns himself with the oppressive body of Jessica Seymour’s “Youth Theory.” Youth Theory “constructs youth as a site of transition” and argues that “adulthood/childhood as a binary opposition is a disservice to the lived experience of both parties” (1 and 3). Referencing the power imbalance in juvenile literature, Seymour proposes that most fiction views adolescence as a period of indoctrination

into aetnormativity, which favors age over youth. In its earliest forms, juvenile literature arose from fables and parables that were used to carve lessons into impressionable minds. Today, to dictate the reading habits of others perpetuates this expectancy into the realm of Young Adult with the beliefs both that literature must impart some higher meaning, and that this meaning is only applicable at a certain age. While the first belief is a noble if not infallible pursuit, the second is an outmoded fantasy. For Millennials, adolescence no longer resembles a gateway to adulthood; instead, it forms a queue that wraps around the corner and down the block. Therefore, expecting instantaneous and irrevocable maturation is no longer plausible (Seymour 2-3).

But in many ways, all age groups share the same desires. How can one fault Millennials, who can fairly be labeled ‘the Harry Potter generation’ any more than those who experienced youth in the 70s and 80s, a.k.a. the Star Wars generation? If we are in a period defined by prolonged childhood and nostalgia, then it has been a long time coming. This year sees a revival of Rowling’s Wizarding World with *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, but within the last ten years, other major film franchises have been given a second (or third or fourth) life, among them *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Ghostbusters*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Jurassic Park*. So, while Harry Potter did help “propel youth culture as a key part of mainstream culture,” it was not alone; people have fallen prey to the “capitalistic practices of youth” for generations (Garcia 16).

Even if we pretend that books can be easily sorted into categories, humans cannot. Thus, we exist in a crossover culture, which, according to Candace Walton, “has significant relevance across disciplines, as scholars in literary studies, media and cultural studies, visual arts, education, psychology, and sociology examine the increasingly blurred lines between adults and youth in contemporary society, notably with regard to their consumption of popular culture”

(289). The stuff of YA literature is no longer exclusive to teens, and Young Adult emerges as a hotbed of new storytelling. And, if we turn to analyze films, we will find no shortage of YA book-to-movie adaptations. Hardly any major book release goes by without the film rights being snapped up by a major studio—sometimes occurring even before the book goes to print. In fact, YA has come more and more to resemble the stuff of summer blockbusters—larger than life stakes, multigenerational audiences, and massive profits (Garcia 18).

As Comber and Nixon write, “Scholars of children’s literature have long argued that a good book for children is a good book for people of any age” (188), so it would make sense that YA would find an audience beyond its lexical demographic. However, given the success of book and film blockbusters like *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, it should be apparent that the widening scope of Young Adult is not something most people fear. The success of crossover titles indicate that YA and adult are not as polar as they may appear, and Denise Beckton reveals that “agents actively search for Young Adult manuscripts that mirror the content of bestselling adult fiction” (8). Look no further than this coming fall (September 2016), when the Young Adult adaptation of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* will hit stores. The adult novel, which has in the past been enjoyed by many teen readers, will now be available in a child-friendly format, sporting a new cover design and diminished page count. In short, the objectives of YA and adult fiction are not so very different (Deahl).

Finally, book publishing, like so much else, comes down to money; simply put, greater readership equals greater profits. In the Nineties, schools and libraries were still struggling under the budget cuts that had begun a decade earlier, so, in order to survive, YA needed to turn a profit in the private sector. Both in response to this commercial loss and as a result of the progression of time, Young Adult in the Nineties underwent a rapid literary evolution.

Previously, YA titles found their youthful readers in controlled environments, monitored by the watchful eyes of teachers and librarians. Freed from the traditional “gatekeepers” of juvenile literature, YA could embrace more mature topics that might have previously banned them from school premises, which, in turn, helped catch the eye of the older demographic. Yet again, this was no accident; as attention shifted to the trade market, YA received a simultaneous internal and external renovation. All at once, the reading lists began to look and sound like mature products. In conjunction with heavier writing, promotional efforts began catering more and more to adult buyers, whom marketers know to have deeper funds than teenage spenders. Today, bookstores do not hesitate to promote YA in their windows or by their doors, and any Barnes & Noble patron will find their perusing blocked by table laden with “What Teens Are Reading Now” (Cart, “Renaissance” 283).

And, in terms of garnering sales, YA has a strong business method. Since “event publishing was established in the high days of Potter, profits have been steadily growing (Cart, “Renaissance” 279). The YA label alone is often enough to grab a fan’s attention, and the promise of profit has attracted well-known and well-respected adult authors like Sherman Alexie, Francine Prose, Nick Hornby, and Meg Wolitzer to the field (Wolitzer). With built-in adult audiences, these writers only invite more grownups to the teen section, where they are met by possibly YA’s best strategy of all. Ever the hotbed of crossover innovation, YA is a breeding ground for popular genre hybrids like paranormal romance and historical fantasy. Yet, unlike other sections of the bookstore, all YA subgenres are grouped together. Rather, adult novels more often *separate* genre than *diversify* it. Like food on the plate of a picky eater, general fiction, fantasy, romance, graphic novels, memoir, and short story are never allowed to touch or—perish the thought—mix. In the Young Adult section, however, each genre shares shelf

space without a second thought. All titles and authors are presented at once, providing readers with every topic they could possibly desire. In this way, genre loyalists soon become YA loyalists, and the boundaries begin to blur once again (Cart, *Young Adult Literature* 95).

Truly, the ease of YA is one of its greatest assets, and here, ease refers not just to the approachable style in which most of the market is written. No, YA also flourishes because of the ease of accessibility. Like its readers, Young Adult came of age with technology, and it truly capitalizes on the promotional possibilities of the modern age. E-readers are commonplace these days among all demographics, but in the space of one year from 2011 to 2012, YA purchases skyrocketed by 300 percent (Beckton 11). For those adults who read YA but feel chagrin to publicize this matter, e-books are a lifesaver, as they free their owners to read their “guilty-pleasures” with anonymity (Rosenberg). Furthermore, social media like online blogs, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram allow for the unprecedented comingling of consumer and creator, as well as providing a breeding ground for fandom activity. Bolstering the genre-bending strategy used by authors, YA is also able to blend media like no other category. *Harry Potter*, the front-runner as ever, is notable for opening an entire theme park centered around its magical world, but many lesser-selling books nowadays earn at least a 30-second “book trailer” prior to their release (Garcia 4).

Additionally, with famous names like Meg Wolitzer and Lev Grossman proudly announcing memberships in kidult book clubs, the stigma against adult YA readers is lesser than ever. And they do not read purely for escape or nostalgia: “Not only do I feel an intense connection with my earlier, often more vulnerable and intensely curious self,” writes Wolitzer, “I also feel that I’ve been given access to a pure form of the complications involved with being young, now filtered through the compassion perceptions (and barnacles) of my older self.” Those

like Ruth Graham, who worry about the future of our literary legacy—about reading books that “contribute to your daily vitamin requirement,” to quote YA author Maggie Stiefvater—express fears that authors do not. Says Wolitzer, “The specter of, say, Emma Bovary, doesn’t loom over Hazel Grace Lancaster from ‘The Fault in Our Stars,’ booming in a French accent: ‘Read me, I am more important than she is!’ And as for the Y.A. war? When you’re deep in a good book, you won’t even hear the drumbeats.”

In the end, it is somewhat unfair to wonder why more adults are reading Young Adult than 20 years ago. It is much the same as asking why more people today use cell phones. Yes, YA has existed for some seventy-five odd years, but never in this scope and never at this caliber. Event publishing is now the norm instead of the exception for big Young Adult titles, as is the expectation that adults will be in attendance. Though the protagonists may remain young, the readers are certainly not so homogeneous. The two-part definition of old has shattered, as many—perhaps most—YA readers no longer see themselves reflected in the pages; rather they identify with the feeling. As Michelle Dean writes, “It’s the desire for stories substantial enough to withstand the ages, that are like smooth river rocks you can turn over and over again.” Studded with delicious crowd pleasers, YA too has changed and become a signifier of a good time and good company. The numbers are large because the interest is equally so; whether through the artistry of *The Book Thief* or the addictive, reality-TV inspired *Selection* series, YA is simply offering what people want to read.

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young adult definition: 1. a person who is in his or her late teenage years or early twenties: 2. books written for. Learn more. Meaning of young adult in English. young adult. noun. uk. Your browser doesn't support HTML5 audio. /jʌd.əl/ us. Your browser doesn't support HTML5 audio. Young adult may refer to: Young Adult (film), a 2011 American comedy-drama film. Young adult (psychology). Young adult animation. Young adult fiction, works generally targeted at ages 12 to 18. Adolescent. Juvenile (disambiguation). Youth, an age category. young adult (plural young adults). A person who has achieved sexual maturity but whose character and personality are still developing as they gain experience. Young adult actress Annie Jay wrote a book called Stars in Your Eyes Feet on the Ground giving career advice for young adult actors. This is a nebulous concept and no fixed ages can be sensibly assigned to the term. However: in psychology and medicine, age-ranges such as 18 to 40 or 15 to 30 are sometimes quoted. Young adult fiction (YA) is a category of fiction written for readers from 12 to 18 years of age. While the genre is targeted to adolescents, approximately half of YA readers are adults. The subject matter and genres of YA correlate with the age and experience of the protagonist. The genres available in YA are expansive and include most of those found in adult fiction. Common themes related to YA include friendship, first love, relationships, and identity. Stories that focus on the specific challenges Young adult. A person between the ages 18 to mid-to-late twenties who is in the life stage of finding where they fit in life. These people are in the process of getting secondary education, graduating, finding jobs, keeping jobs, building careers, getting fucked by student loans, and learning about relationships. This age group usually realizes they have commitment issues and make up for their lack of emotional detachment through casual sex with many partners. They also struggle with making adult decisions on the daily during the week while also being tempted and

young adult definition: 1. a person who is in his or her late teenage years or early twenties: 2. books written for. Learn more. Meaning of young adult in English. young adult. noun. uk. Your browser doesn't support HTML5 audio. /ˈjʌŋd.əd/ us. Your browser doesn't support HTML5 audio. Who can forget the first time they met irresistible, fast-talking Anne Shirley in Anne of Green Gables ? Or the years that they spent growing up with Harry, Hermione, and Ron? Or the breakneck, can't-tear-your-eyes-away sequences that made The Hunger Games an international phenomenon? Luckily for us, it truly is the golden age for young adult fiction right now, as YA authors today continue to take the genre in new and incredibly exciting directions. Indeed, young adult books have stepped up onto the literary stage as a powerful genre in its own right, creating role models for all of us and lea Young adult fiction (YA) is a category of fiction written for readers from 12 to 18 years of age.[1][2] While the genre is targeted to teenagers, approximately half of YA readers are adults.[3]. The subject matter and genres of YA correlate with the age and experience of the protagonist. The genres available in YA are expansive and include most of those found in adult fiction. Common themes related to YA include: friendship, first love, relationships, and identity.[4] Stories that focus on the specific challenges of youth are sometimes referred to as problem novels or coming-of-age novels.[5].