

## An Almost Young Adult Literature Study

It all seemed like a good idea at the time. Post-secondary educators engaged in the use and study of young adult literature (i.e., *literature written specifically for adolescents in grades 6 through 12*), particularly at research institutions, continually and consistently share anecdotal evidence that supports the notion that their colleagues, especially those in university English departments, perceive them as having lower professional status than other researchers. We, as such educators, could share some anecdotal evidence of our own.

Worse, our anecdotal experiences are depressingly similar to those voiced by our colleagues who teach young adult literature courses. These instructors commonly cite peers glancing dubiously at the titles in their office libraries and commenting upon their use for remedial or younger children while expressing doubt about research appropriateness. Students in their classes also report negative reactions when others observe the young adult texts they have been assigned to read.

While anecdotal, such experiences are commonplace among young adult literature professionals and widely discussed at their conventions, conferences, and other professional venues. Frankly, this information is chilling; if post-secondary educators and students are demeaned personally and professionally because of their association with young adult literature, how can the field advance? Advancement requires research related to usage, but when post-sec-

ondary educators are denigrated and discouraged from that research and their students are similarly treated, the very activities that would eliminate others' negative perceptions of young adult literature are stunted.

### Why the Negativity?

*Marketing:* Marketing may be one culprit in the widespread perception of young adult literature as “less than” other literature. Bookstores and online booksellers prominently feature displays or advertisements of lower quality titles—gruesome horror titles with lurid, titillating covers, light romances with cloying covers that target younger females. Any browser, in-store or online, could easily be dissuaded or manipulated by flashy displays and miss the many quality works located elsewhere.

*Lack of a consistent definition:* Questionable marketing is only exacerbated by the confusing and varied placement of young adult titles in stores, websites, or libraries: some are located in the children's section; others reside with popular adult literature (e.g.,

Stephen King, Nora Roberts); still others are mixed with older young adult titles that now possess contemporary covers and newer copyrights (e.g., Beverly Cleary's *Jean and Johnny* or Harold Keith's *Rifles for Watie*). A few may even be mixed with canonical classics not originally written for adolescents, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Lord of the Flies*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Such inconsistent placements may indicate that those working in the

---

**Students in their classes also report negative reactions when others observe the young adult texts they have been assigned to read.**

---

field do not share a common definition of young adult literature.

*Standards:* Ironically, what was intended to assure YAL's use and value to secondary classrooms may instead be its downfall: standards. In the NCTE/NCATE [National Council of Teachers of English/National Council for Accreditation of Teachers Education] *Program Standard for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts Grades 7–12* (2003), Standard 3.5 states,

“Candidates demonstrate knowledge of, and uses for, an extensive range of literature”; substandard 3.5.3 adds, “numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults” (10). Additionally, guidelines for acceptable and target standard assessments, state:

As a result, candidates will know and use a variety of teaching applications for numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults . . . . (10)

and

As a result, candidates will demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of, and an ability to use, varied teaching applications for numerous works specifically written for older children and younger adults. (10)

While the standard suggests preservice English education majors complete a course focused entirely on young adult literature, there is no guarantee that such courses will be offered or that the students will have the option of using YA literature in their public school classrooms. The fact is, most upper-secondary English teachers are prepared to teach and expected to teach the traditional adult canon. This reality is supported by the strictures and expectations of high-stakes testing, mandated assessment, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, traditional college preparation, and parental pressure.

Canonical classics are heavily represented on required standardized tests for middle school, high school, and post-secondary students alike. If such classical works remain the primary literature focus in preservice coursework and secondary curricula, the use of young adult literature will naturally decline.

## Researching Young Adult Literature

Unfortunately, young adult literature also lacks quantitative research. Of course, *The ALAN Review* and

*SIGNAL* feature numerous articles about young adult literature and specific reviews of novels. Many of these pieces are typically unit plan ideas, author interviews, or title compilations from various genres. Occasionally, *The English Journal*, *Voices from the Middle*, and the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (and perhaps a few others) carry similar articles. In fact, at the 2009 Commission on English Education's Conference session “Young Adult Literature: Defining the Role of Research,” Hayn reported that in the past ten years, only 27 articles that could be described as peer-reviewed and designated as quantitative or qualitative research have been published in the field.

In Kaplan's 2006 article, “Dissertations on Adolescent Literature:

2000–2005,” he categorizes these research articles by dividing them into two categories: *Dissertations of Young Adult Literature* and *Dissertations about Young Adult Literature*. The first category includes 9 dissertations covering uses of young adult novels in classroom settings; the second refers to 23 dissertations and 1 master's thesis analyzing young adult works as a literary genre. These are promising, but this small number culled from five years of research demonstrates the area's lack of study (51–59).

## Launching a New Study

In order to add to the quantitative research regarding young adult literature and discover its level of use and appreciation among language arts educators from secondary (i.e., middle and high school) levels, three members of the Conference on English Education's (CEE/NCTE) Commission on the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature designed a with NCTE's secondary section members. The survey's population, generated from NCTE's membership base, was set at 360. Using Krejcie and Morgan's table, “Determining Sample Size for Research Activities” (607–610), 186 questionnaires were required for validity. Survey respondents were selected from NCTE's master list by using Gay and Airasian's simple random sampling (101–117).

---

**. . . guarantee that [courses on YA] will be offered or that the students will have the option of using YA literature in their public school classrooms.**

---

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with respondents in three states whose primary teaching responsibility was secondary English/language arts. Respondents reported that the survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete and identified various problematic study features, such as unclear, redundant, or off-topic questions. This feedback was applied to the survey.

### Identifying Respondents

Of the 617 mailings, 55 were returned. Of those, three were discarded as incomplete (more than three-fourths of the questions were unanswered), leaving only 52 respondents. This represents a return rate of only .09 percent. The survey showed 12 male respondents and 39 female; some respondents did not answer each question, while others provided multiple answers, so numbers did not always total 52. Forty listed their age as 41+, with 11 at the 21–30 age range.

On the question about teaching experience, results showed 38 respondents had 25+ years, 3 had 6–15, and 10 had five or less. Education levels revealed 17 doctorates, 25 master's degrees, 6 bachelor's degrees. Fifty respondents self-identified primarily as White, one as Black/African American, and two as Hispanic/Latino.

These respondents (numbers in italics) fit the U.S. Census Bureau's (2003; see all three reports) compiled data stating two-thirds of educators are female (39/75%), their average age is 44 (40/77%), and they hold a master's degree (25/48%). The national age group with the most teachers is 40–49 (40/77%), with 50+ coming in second. Whites account for over two million educators (50/96%), compared to some 200,000 Blacks (1/.01%) and 169,000 Hispanics (2/.04%). Other groups comprised less than 0.05 of educators (0/0%).

Respondents identified several teaching responsibilities: some listed “high school language arts” while others cited specific courses, such as 11<sup>th</sup>-grade Composition or 12<sup>th</sup>-grade World Literature. All public school respondents stated they taught “Language Arts,” with Composition the most frequently cited specific course at 21. Six indicated responsibility for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Twelve stated they taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but did not indicate if they were located as part of a middle school or if they were part of a traditional four-year high school.

Post-secondary respondents also taught various courses, with most also identifying several areas. English Methods was most frequently listed (16), with Adolescent Literature next at 7. Courses were then almost evenly distributed among Reading in the Content Area, Composition, Grammar, and other specialties.

Public school size showed the majority reported student populations of 901+ (25); class sizes were distributed more evenly, with 11 reporting 36+ students per class, 9 for both 29–35 and 21–38, and 10 with 12–20.

Thirty-nine respondents reported having taken no young adult courses in their undergraduate preparation, and 30 having none in graduate programs. Seven had taken one such undergraduate course, while 10 had taken a course at the graduate level. Only 4 had two or more undergraduate courses, and 7 indicated two or more graduate courses. Thirteen stated their young adult literature course was helpful to their teaching of young adult literature, but 16 felt otherwise.

The majority (33) identified reading journals *outside* of language arts, such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Education Digest*, or NEA publications. Nineteen cited *The English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and *English Education*, and 6 listed *The ALAN Review*, *College English*, and *Voices from the Middle*. Three other sources were mentioned by one participant: *English Leadership Quarterly*, *Ideas Plus*, and *SIGNAL*. Others included various reading journals, middle grades publications, and/or journals from state affiliates.

As for memberships and convention/conference participation, only 7 held ALAN membership, while 8 stated unfamiliarity with the organization. Twenty had never attended an NCTE convention, 18 had attended five or fewer. As for NCTE presentations, 34 said they had never presented, while 10 had made five or fewer presentations. Thirty-nine had never held an NCTE leadership position, with 7 respondents having held five or fewer such positions. Regarding ALAN workshops, 43 had never attended one, and 9 had attended five or fewer. Fifty had never presented at ALAN, and 51 had never held ALAN leadership.

This is unsurprising; the NCTE and ALAN 2009 websites, respectively, show ALAN's membership at approximately 2000, with some 400 attending its yearly workshop—a small number considering NCTE's 2009 secondary membership of approximately 20,000

and total membership of over 60,000.

State affiliate conferences fared somewhat better, but 23 had never attended one. Sixteen reported attending five or fewer, 9 had attended 6–10, and 6 had attended more than 11. Numbers dropped regarding presenting, with 31 never, 17 five or fewer, and 6 reporting 6–15 times. Numbers were lower still regarding leadership: 42 had held no positions, 14 five or fewer, 3 with 6–10, and only one reported 11–15 positions.

When asked if their affiliates offered young adult literature sessions, responses were mixed as 22 reported yes, 3 no, and 29 did not know. Of sessions regarding young adult literature, 17 regularly attended, and 36 did not. Seven respondents indicated ALAN membership, with 9 having attended five or fewer ALAN Workshops.

### Analyzing Comments

The next survey sections contained both numerical and open-ended questions regarding young adult literature. These questions essentially asked for identical information, but were worded differently and placed throughout the questionnaire. Both the numerical *and* open-ended questions showed strong contradictions. The majority of respondents marked both *yes and* no to identical questions having only slight wording variations.

For example, survey items 35–37 state: *I have been discouraged from using young adult literature in my teaching by colleagues, administrators, and parents*, respectively; 41, 46, and 44 respondents correspondingly reported that they had *not* been discouraged by these groups. However, survey item 47 reads, *I wish my colleagues, administrators, and/or parents would be more accepting of young adult literature*. Although this question essentially summarizes questions 35–37, 32 indicated yes; this might seem contradictory, but might indicate instead that regardless of the support they are receiving, they might desire more support.

A Likert scale of one to five (1 = never, 5 = always) was used to analyze responses to numerical questions. Discarding the 3s and the N/As, results were evaluated by adding the ones and twos together as a category, and then the fours and fives. The first numerical set asked respondents to identify current practices using young adult literature. Twenty-two

stated that young adult literature is incorporated into their curriculum; 17 said it was not; 13 used young adult literature even if absent from curricula; 16 did not use it at all. Twenty-six read these works for pleasure, but 15 did not, and 26 reported their school had a wide variety of titles, with six reporting otherwise.

Numerically, 36 said young adult literature was canonical and should be taught in both high school and middle grades, but in other survey responses, these same 36 respondents gave some surprising answers: 10 said that adult classics were of superior quality, 2 reported never using young adult literature, 13 felt it was best with remedial students and/or in the middle grades, and 1 stated that these works were only suited to suburban or private schools.

Twenty-nine said they had always used young adult literature or had increased their usage, with 35 teaching young adult literature, the majority of which (23) used the unit plan. However, in other numerical and written sets, this same group of 29 stated that young adult literature was used only for independent reading or Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), to complement adult classics, or to fill summer reading lists.

Twenty-nine reported that their school held no events involving young adult authors, though 19 did indicate involvement in such events when responding to the Likert scale items. The open-ended, written comments indicated that 19 respondents acknowledged school-sponsored events featuring young adult authors, with four of these 19 involved in the activities.

Twenty-four stated their student teachers were familiar with young adult literature; 8 disagreed, but indicated in question 43 that they felt student teachers were knowledgeable about these works. This translates to 24 respondents saying both yes and no to student teacher familiarity, 19 reporting a unanimous yes, and 8 a unanimous no. Nineteen felt their colleagues were current regarding young adult literature,

---

**This same group of 29 stated that young adult literature was used only for independent reading or Silent Sustained Reading (SSR), to complement adult classics, or to fill summer reading lists.**

---

and 11 did not, but elsewhere, 43 said their colleagues were current. In other words, of the 43 respondents who affirmed that their colleagues were current in young adult literature, 30 seemed to contradict that assessment on another question; 11 stated their colleagues were not current regarding young adult literature.

On the plus side, 41 stated they had never been discouraged from using young adult literature by colleagues (5 said they had been), 46 had not been discouraged by administrators (5 had been), 44 had not been discouraged by parents (7 had been), and 38 had not been hampered by censorship issues (6 had been). However, these responses represented, if not

a contradiction, at least a desire for more acceptance, since 34 stated they wished their colleagues, administrators, and parents would be more accepting of young adult literature (7 disagreeing).

The last open-ended question asked whether the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and increased standards/assessment/accountability affected use of young adult literature.

To paraphrase, 20 indicated no effect, 5 marked N/A, and 16 acknowledged an effect that meant returning to adult classics with less young adult literature, less critical thinking, and fewer creative projects, among others things. Respondents commented that such a return produced students with weaker language arts skills overall due to the increased use of worksheets, quizzes, tests, etc. that are products of such objective-based classrooms. Only one respondent stated *less* use of young adult literature would increase language arts skills.

The final numerical questions asked respondents about their current interests regarding young adult literature. Twenty-five stated they wanted to use it more frequently, 30 were interested in reviewing novels, and 28 wanted to become more professionally active regarding young adult works. However, the largest category of journals regularly read by respondents was *outside* of language arts, with only 7 holding ALAN

membership. Forty-three had never attended an ALAN workshop, and 50+ had never presented at a conference or held ALAN leadership positions. The respondent percentages of those interested in increased young adult literature usage (48%), reviewing (58%), and professional activity (54%) seem high, despite the reported low readership of young adult-themed journals and membership in related professional organizations.

## Reflecting on the Results

What conclusions can be presumed from this admittedly invalid survey? The results echo Jennifer Claiborne's dissertation, "A Survey of High School English Teachers to Determine Their Knowledge, Use, and Attitude Related to Young Adult Literature in the Classroom," which served as the basis for her published 2004 survey of 138 Tennessee educators. She received a respectable return rate of 67%, 73% of whom reported not using young adult literature in their teaching; those who did use it in the classroom favored adolescent works considered canonical by Donelson and Nilsen in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Educators showed an awareness of young adult titles, but their most frequently stated reason for not using it in their teaching was that these titles did not exhibit the relevance or quality deemed worthy of classroom study. Respondents who were NCTE members totaled 40%, with only one ALAN member.

Those involved with adolescent literature will have read nothing in this report that is surprising; presumably, most readers, including the authors, have anecdotal evidence mirroring the above. These results and Claiborne's study restate the decades-old research found throughout Dewey, Iannaccone, Silberman, and Lortie, as well as Stigler and Hiebart's 1999 assertion that regardless of their post-secondary education, once novice educators begin teaching, they replicate the practices of those who taught them and those with whom they are teaching (97-101).

Like the results themselves, reasons for the low response rate are doubtless contradictory. Those who feel strongly about an issue usually make themselves heard, but most respondents did not appear to take a stance either way. Were so few returned because those who utilize young adult literature did not feel a survey was necessary? Were teachers too busy to

---

**Their most frequently stated reason for not using it in their teaching was that these titles did not exhibit the relevance or quality deemed worthy of classroom study.**

---

take time for a mailed survey? Does the result reflect declining professionalism, as evidenced in low organizational membership and professional meeting attendance?

Perhaps the only answer for this low return rate is, “Who knows?” We end with the ubiquitous invitation from most scholarly studies: “More research in this area is needed.” Ubiquitous, yes, but true. We invite, or perhaps *challenge* others to replicate this survey with the hope they will receive a return rate that allows for reliable and valid data regarding secondary and post-secondary educators’ uses of young adult literature. We can assure potential researchers it will seem like a good idea at the time.

**Lisa A. Hazlett** is a professor of secondary education at The University of South Dakota, where she teaches courses in young adult literature and middle/secondary education. Her publications and presentations focus upon various aspects of young adult literature.

**Angela Beumer Johnson** is an associate professor of English and Teacher Education at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, where she directs the Integrated Language Arts Education program. Her interests include young adult literature, media literacy, and the teaching of reading and literature.

**Judith A. Hayn** is an associate professor of Graduate Secondary Education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock where she teaches English Language Arts Methods and Adolescent Literature. Her current interests include establishing a research agenda for adolescent literature.

### Works Cited

Claiborne, Jennifer. “A Survey of High School English Teachers to Determine Their Knowledge, Use and Attitude Related to Young Adult Literature in the Classroom.” Diss. University of Tennessee, 2004. Print.

Cleary, Beverly. *Jean and Johnny*. New York: HarperCollins, 1959. Print.

Dewey, John. *The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1904. Print.

Donelson, Kenneth R., and Alleen P. Nilsen. *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 7th ed. Boston: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon, 2004. Print.

Gay, Lorrie R., and Peter W. Airasian. *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications*. 7th ed. Upper Saddle River: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003. Print.

Golding, William. *The Lord of the Flies*. New York: Farber and Farber, 1954. Print.

Hayn, Judith. “Young Adult Literature: Defining the Role of Research.” Commission on English Education Conference, Elmhurst, IL. June 2009. Speech.

Iannaccone, Lawrence. “Student Teaching: A Transitional State in the Making of a Teacher.” *Theory Into Practice* 2.2 (1963): 73–80. Print.

Kaplan, Jeffrey S. “Dissertations on Adolescent Literature: 2000–2005.” *The ALAN Review* 33.2 (2006): 51–59. Print.

Keith, Harold. *Rifles for Watie*. New York: Thomas J. Cromwell, 1957. Print.

Krejcie, Robert, and Daryle Morgan. “Determining Sample Size for Research Activities.” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 30.3 (1970): 607–610. Print.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperCollins, 1960. Print.

Lortie, Dan Clement. *School-teacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975. Print.

NCTE/NCATE. *NCTE/NCATE Program Standards: Program for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts Grades 7–12*. NCTE/NCATE, 24–25 October 2003. Web. 5 Sept. 2006.

Silberman, Charles. *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of an American Education*. New York: Random House, 1970. Print.

Stigler, James W., and James Hiebert. *The Teaching Gap*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. Print.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Charles L. Webster, 1884. Print.

United States Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington: GPO, 2003. Print.

United States Census Bureau. *Population by Race and Hispanic Origin*. Washington: GPO, 2003. Print.

United States Census Bureau. *Public Elementary and Secondary School Teachers—Selected Characteristics: 1999–2000*. Washington: GPO, 2003. Print.