

The Top Young Adult Book Picks from This Decade 1999–2009

Every decade, Ted Hipple would ask young adult (YA) literature experts to identify their favorite books. Using the United States Postal Service, he would send letters, tally all of the responses, publish the results, present those titles at a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention session, and distribute a handout at an Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN) workshop. Since Ted passed away in 2004 and because I was asked the last couple of times to participate in his survey, I decided to replicate the survey—with some modifications—in his honor.

The Question

Although admittedly unscientific, on March 16, 2010, I posted this question on the Adolescent Literature Forum of the NCTE Ning: “In your opinion, what are the 10 best Young Adult (YA) books published between 1999 and 2009, with 1 being your favorite and so on?” The following day, I emailed all members of ALAN the same question. In both forums, I requested that members forward my email request to all the YA enthusiasts they knew in order to get as many responses as possible.

The Method

From then until April 15, 2010, individuals could name their favorites. My question was forwarded by ALAN members and posted on several message boards, including Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and other communities on the NCTE

Ning. Respondents were asked to provide three bits of information: the name of the book, the author of the book, and their own professional role as a user of YA literature—university professor, secondary teacher, media specialist, or author.

All submissions were checked via Internet to establish the copyright date of the first edition of each book. Those respondents who identified a book outside of the 1999–2009 range were given an opportunity to modify their submissions. The data of those who did not respond to the request to revise were discarded.

Numerical points were distributed according to the rankings given. If a person listed the book in 1st place, that book received 10 points; 2nd place, 9 points, and so on so that the book in 10th place received 1 point (see Appendix 1: Example of Scoring System Using My Ranked Selections). Another count was done by simply tallying one mark each time a title was mentioned in a person’s top ten list, regardless of ranking.

The Results

In short, responses were obtained from 197 people: 70 university professors (see Appendix 2: Professors’ Picks), 63 secondary teachers (see Appendix 3: Secondary Teachers’ Picks), 44 librarians (see Appendix 4: Librarians’ Picks), and 20 authors (see Appendix 5: Authors’ Picks). In all, 456 young adult titles were mentioned. The following titles led the list; each appears with its earned score representing the points received:

- 662 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
 617 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
 595 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 459 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*
 by Sherman Alexie (2007)
 270 *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005)
 212 *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002)
 194 *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
 181 *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher (2002)
 175 *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
 (graphic novel, 2006)
 172 *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman (2007)
 162 *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007)
 141 *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2002)
 141 *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
 134 *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
 124 *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
 118 *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing I and II*
 by M. T. Anderson (2008)
 113 *Deadline* by Chris Crutcher (2007)
 102 *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (2002)
 87 *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2005)
 85 *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (2008)
 63 *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff (2004)
 39 *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman (2000)
 39 *Godless* by Pete Hautman (2004)

Mentioned in Top Ten (no points for ranking)

- 94 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
 83 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
 77 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 72 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*
 by Sherman Alexie (2007)
 42 *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005)
 42 *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
 33 *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang
 (graphic novel, 2006)
 31 *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002)
 30 *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher (2002)
 29 *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (2003)
 29 *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007)
 26 *Unwind* by Neal Shusterman (2007)
 26 *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
 24 *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2002)
 23 *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
 22 *Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
 22 *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing I and II*
 by M. T. Anderson (2008)

- 19 *Deadline* by Chris Crutcher (2007)
 19 *The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2005)
 17 *A Northern Light* by Jennifer Donnelly (2003)
 17 *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer
 (2002)
 17 *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork
 (2009)
 16 *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff (2004)

Discussion

When Ted Hipple published the results of his 2004 Best Young Adult Books of All Time survey in Don Gallo's Young Adult Literature column in the January, 2005, *English Journal*, only 149 different novels were named from 78 respondents. Extrapolated from the full report, these were the top ten at that time, with the parenthetical number representing the votes each received:

- *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier (27)
- *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (22)
- *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (19)
- *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (15)
- *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen (13)
- *Holes* by Louis Sachar (13)
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (13)
- *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher (13)
- *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff (12)
- *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse (11)

(Incidentally, in 1987, Ted Hipple conducted a very similar survey, and the top three in that survey were *The Chocolate War*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel.)

Of all those titles, only *Speak* was listed on both Ted's 2004 list and my 1999–2009 list; perhaps the comment made by this respondent captures why:

“. . . Certain books such as *Speak* are so powerful, memorable, and life-altering that they will always remain among my favorites. I can still remember the first time I read *Speak*. I was blown away by the author's deftly written prose and the way she blended humor and pathos throughout the story. Her skillful weaving of *The Scarlet Letter* and an English class and Melinda's own experiences was—and still is—impressive.”

Beyond *Speak*, one can only wonder which of the books mentioned in Ted's survey would replace some of the top picks from this current list—if any at all!

It was also interesting that the top four books of this decade were the only books listed on all four groups' top ten lists, and even then, all groups did not agree on the rank order.

- *Hunger Games* was the teachers' and librarians' top pick;
- *The Book Thief* was the authors' top pick;
- *Speak* was the professors' top pick; and
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* was not the first pick in any group, unless one looks at the professors' picks without ranking.

It was humorous that every time someone listed *Twilight* in their top ten, it was also accompanied by an apology of some sort. The following comment represents the predominant sentiment of those who included books from the *Twilight* series in their top ten:

"I chose these books as my top ten not just because I liked them. In fact, there are some I liked better on a personal level that I did not add to the list. I chose the *Twilight* series, for example, because of my students' reactions to them. Anything that instills a love of reading in today's teens deserves some recognition."

Several people hated being limited to "just ten," and some even included an addendum with "Honorable Mentions." Among them is another series endorsement:

"Honorable Mention: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (OK, the whole *Harry Potter* series is among the most fun reads—and I think that Ms. Rowling changed who was reading in middle school, so for that alone, I love her)."

The serendipitous comments by people who wanted to justify their selections (since I included no criteria for selecting the best books of the decade) were wonderful:

- "I selected these based on excellent and innovative craft, emotional resonance, and groundbreaking content."
- "I picked these because I feel they are important in some way. Beyond being entertaining, they made me feel more complete somehow after reading them, like I was a fuller person for having read them, either from a shift in perspective, a new insight, or finding a richness that hadn't been there before. That's why. I hope your research on this is successful, and thanks for the chance to participate."
- "I know folks will enjoy reading the article and

arguing over the merits of the books. I often laugh when someone asks me about my favorite book, since it's usually whatever book I happen to be reading at the time. . . . If you asked me another day, I might have a couple of titles that took the place of the ones above, but overall, these books speak to me, and I wouldn't ever want to see them go out of print."

Conclusion

Obviously, with technology, more people have the opportunity to participate, but the increase in the number of YA titles mentioned is astounding, especially since Hipple's survey asked for the Best YA Novels of All Time up to 2004 and mine limited people to one decade of 1999–2009. Another difference is that Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* is the first graphic novel to make the top ten list. When the survey is next conducted, will there be another kind of YA book that gets nominated—perhaps an ebook, interactive book, or a book with a role-playing game? Finally, what does make a good book good? Ted would say this Latin phrase, "De gustibus non disputandum est," which, loosely translated, means, "There is no argument when it comes to taste." As for me, I can honestly say that I have not read every book that was mentioned in the survey, and it is evident that YA literature has come into its own. If you're like me, you have a lot of new books to read. Enjoy!

Note: For a copy of the complete list, email me at kaywell@usf.edu. I'd also like to thank USF students Jenn Gilgan and Courtney Pollard for their assistance in compiling the data.

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Appendix 1: Example of Scoring System Using My Ranked Selections

1. <i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)	10 points	<i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
2. <i>Copper Sun</i> by Sharon Draper (2006)	9 points	<i>Copper Sun</i> by Sharon Draper (2006)
3. <i>Sold</i> by Patricia McCormick (2002)	8 points	<i>Sold</i> by Patricia McCormick (2002)
4. <i>Wintergirls</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)	7 points	<i>Wintergirls</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
5. <i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)	6 points	<i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)
6. <i>Unwind</i> by Neal Shusterman (2007)	5 points	<i>Unwind</i> by Neal Shusterman (2007)
7. <i>City of Ashes</i> by Cassandra Clare (2007)	4 points	<i>City of Ashes</i> by Cassandra Clare (2007)
8. <i>Touching Spirit Bear</i> by Ben Mikaelson (2001)	3 points	<i>Touching Spirit Bear</i> by Ben Mikaelson (2001)
9. <i>Deadline</i> by Chris Crutcher (2007)	2 points	<i>Deadline</i> by Chris Crutcher (2007)
10. <i>American Born Chinese</i> Gene Yang (2006)	1 point	<i>American Born Chinese</i> Gene Yang (2006)

Appendix 2: Professors' Picks

Top Ten Professors' Picks with Points (n = 70)

303	<i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
271	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie (2007)
264	<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak (2005)
171	<i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)
130	<i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang (graphic novel, 2006)
120	<i>Feed</i> by M. T. Anderson (2002)
106	<i>Monster</i> by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
102	<i>Looking for Alaska</i> by John Green (2005)
90	<i>Whale Talk</i> by Chris Crutcher (2002)
75	<i>Sold</i> by Patricia McCormick (2002)

Mentioned in Top Ten (no points)

(NOTE: Two in **bold** not included in top ten.)

40	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie (2007)
36	<i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
34	<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak (2005)
27	<i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)
24	<i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang (2006) graphic
21	<i>Monster</i> by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
18	<i>Looking for Alaska</i> by John Green (2005)
15	<i>Whale Talk</i> by Chris Crutcher (2002)
15	<i>Feed</i> by M. T. Anderson (2002)
14	<i>The First Part Last</i> by Angela Johnson (2003)
11	<i>The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing I and II</i> by M. T. Anderson (2008)
11	<i>Sold</i> by Patricia McCormick (2002)

Appendix 3: Teachers' Picks

Top Ten Secondary Teachers' Picks with Points (n = 63)

264	<i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)
165	<i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
140	<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak (2005)
116	<i>Unwind</i> by Neal Shusterman (2007)
104	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie (2007)
72	<i>13 Reasons Why</i> by Jay Asher (2007)
70	<i>Deadline</i> by Chris Crutcher (2007)
68	<i>Stargirl</i> by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
65	<i>The Lightning Thief</i> by Rick Riordan (2005)
64	<i>Wintergirls</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Teachers' lists - no points)

(NOTE: Four in **bold** not included in top ten.)

37	<i>Hunger Games</i> by Suzanne Collins (2008)
23	<i>The Book Thief</i> by Markus Zusak (2005)
22	<i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
16	<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian</i> by Sherman Alexie (2007)
15	<i>Unwind</i> by Neal Shusterman (2007)
13	<i>13 Reasons Why</i> by Jay Asher (2007)
12	<i>The Lightning Thief</i> by Rick Riordan (2005)
12	<i>Monster</i> by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
12	<i>Twilight</i> by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
10	<i>Stargirl</i> by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
10	<i>Wintergirls</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
9	<i>Whale Talk</i> by Chris Crutcher (2002)
9	<i>Deadline</i> by Chris Crutcher (2007)

(NOTE: 15 Harry Potter series if added all together)

Appendix 4: Librarians' Picks

Top Ten Librarians' Picks with Points (n = 44)

- 190 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
- 124 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
- 98 *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005)
- 92 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
- 54 *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (2002)
- 48 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)
- 44 *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
- 35 *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007)
- 35 *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
- 33 *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff (2004)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Librarians' lists - no points)

(NOTE: Two in **bold** not included in top ten.)

- 26 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
- 18 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
- 16 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
- 14 *Looking for Alaska* by John Green (2005)
- 11 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)
- 9 *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
- 8 *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer (2002)
- 8 *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
- 7 *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007)
- 6 ***Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002)**
- 6 ***The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson (2003)**
- 6 *How I Live Now* by Meg Rosoff (2004)

Appendix 5: Authors' Picks

Top Ten Authors' Picks with Points (n = 20)

- 89 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
- 37 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
- 36 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)
- 35 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
- 29 *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002)
- 25 *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman (2000)
- 23 *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
- 19 *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (2008)
- 19 *Godless* by Pete Hautman (2004)
- 18 *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing I and II* by M. T. Anderson (2008)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Authors' lists - no points)

(NOTE: Two in **bold** not included in top ten.)

- 9 *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (2005)
- 6 *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie (2007)
- 5 *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008)
- 5 *Feed* by M. T. Anderson (2002)
- 4 *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
- 4 *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
- 3 *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing I and II* by M. T. Anderson (2008)
- 3 *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman (2008)
- 3 ***Crank* by Ellen Hopkins (2004)**
- 3 ***Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2005)**
- 3 *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman (2000)