



## YA Lit as Springboard for Social Relevance and Classroom Research

One of the everlasting appeals of young adult literature is that it is a springboard for the discussion of almost everything—from teenage angst to midlife crisis, from coming-of-age difficulties to old-age joys and sorrows—this is a genre whose appeal is widespread and constantly growing. And as this spate of research reports suggests, the enduring presence of young adult literature has begun to give editors and publishers great pause.

It used to be that YA literature was thought of as a good “teen read.” Adults would cluck their tongues in polite amusement as if to say, “Yes, continue reading that ‘junk’ until you are ready to read more sophisticated fare.” You know, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Hamlet*, *War and Peace*. Nowadays, though, more and more adults are reading young adult literature and asking themselves, “Oh, is *this* what I’ve been missing?”

Publishers and authors alike have been noticing this trend and, as a result, have been asking themselves some very hard questions. Why the appeal? Why the fascination with books primarily aimed at

kids? And more important, as many academics ask, what is young adult literature saying about the human condition that our teens need to know? What are they learning as a result of their reading?

### Young Adult Literature and Teenage Sexuality

In “Beyond Forever: The Next Generation of Young Women Protagonists’ Sexual Motivations in Contemporary Young Adult Novels,” Caroline McKinley (2011) analyzes the sexual habits and proclivities of young female protagonists as portrayed in contemporary young adult novels. In the past, McKinley writes, female teens were often portrayed as “fending off” male advances, lacking desire, or facing punishing consequences for their sexual activity. Not anymore. In contemporary young adult novels, unwilling female adolescents are no longer the norm; their reasons for sex are “as varied as life itself” (McKinley, p. 38).

Examining twelve novels published in the last ten years (2001–2011), McKinley demonstrates that “yes, girls have feelings

and urges,” but the old stereotype of passive, unwilling females has been replaced by a more aggressive and self-conscious teenage protagonist. What McKinley underscores is that young adult novels that depict teens in the throes of sexual behavior reveal something that mere statistics cannot—the raw emotions that young people feel. In fact, contemporary young adult novels *supplant* the common stereotype that is often portrayed in popular culture—that teen girls need to be attractive to men and that sexual activity is risk-free. Instead, McKinley argues, young adult novels can pave the way to a more mature understanding of how sexual activity is a serious business that involves real consequences—physically, psychologically, and morally.

McKinley looks closely at 12 YA novels: Sarah Dessen’s *Dreamland* (2000), Dana Davidson’s *Played* (2005), Mary Pearson’s *A Room on Lorelei Street* (2005), Ellen Wittlinger’s *Sandpiper* (2005), Laura Ruby’s *Good Girls* (2006), Tanya Stone’s *A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl* (2006), Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die* (2007), Daria Snad-

owsky's *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* (2007), Kristen Tracy's *Lost It* (2007), Sara Zarr's *Story of a Girl* (2007), Jo Knowles's *Jumping Off Swings* (2009), and Lauren Strassnick's *Nothing Like You* (2009). She concludes that these YA novels should be front and center when discussion of sexual activity among adolescents is the topic of conversation. Too often, McKinley says, teen books that depict a more fully realized portrait of teenage sexual behavior are not even part of the discussion. This, she insists, must change.

Similarly, Jeanne T. McDermott's "Getting It On: An Examination of How Contraceptives Are Portrayed in Young Adult Literature" (2011) examines books for teens published between 1995 and 2010. The purpose of her review is to stress how important the depiction of sex and sexuality is in young adult literature as it provides for many teens (and adults) information that often cannot be conveyed as clearly and as sensitively in more traditional "how-to manuals."

McDermott's central premise is to question the quality of the information presented on sex and sexuality in novels where teens are engaged in sexual activity. Is the information presented accurate? Realistic? Factual? Honest? Or has the author simply portrayed sexual activity with no discussion of the choices the protagonists are making? Do authors of books for teens show teens navigating the question of contraception or do they simply ignore the topic altogether?

Of the 25 novels that McDermott analyzed—including *Things Change* (2004) by Patrick Jones,

*Unexpected Development* (2004) by Marlene Perez, and *Rules of Attraction* (2010) by Simone Elkeles—it should come as no surprise that only "six to eight provide enough details that might be helpful for a teen in need of information about contraception" (McDermott, p. 52). And of these, McDermott writes, only six books portrayed contraception somewhat positively. The implication, McDermott states, is obvious. Fiction is where young people go to read about sexual activity, but fiction, especially contemporary teen fiction, is not where they will find factual information that will help them make healthy, responsible choices about their sexual behavior. For that, nonfiction is still the answer.

### Young Adult Literature and Teenage Sexual Identity

In "Codes, Silences, and Homophobia: Challenging Normative Assumptions about Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary LGBTQ Young Adult Literature," Corrine Wickens (2011) reviews a multitude of young adult novels dealing with issues of sexual identity. She has found that since the publication of John Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* (1969)—the first young adult novel to deal with issues of sexual identity—many authors have included LGBTQ characters in their novels and, more important, have portrayed them in a more fully realized, positive light. Gone, or at least portrayed less frequently, are negative stereotypes of LGBTQ literary figures; instead, they are portrayed more three-dimensionally. Wick-

ens presents several representative examples from contemporary YA novels that portray LGBTQ characters in a light that was previously considered unthinkable—normal, and even ordinary.

Drawing on Cart and Jenkins's *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content 1969–2004* (2006), Wickens compares and contrasts early texts that tackle the issue of sexual identity with many current young adult novels. She concludes that the sophistication of the narrative has made it possible for young adult authors to challenge and reposition heteronormative assumptions and adolescent gender behavior. Specifically, Wickens reviews *Eight Seconds* (Ferris, 2000), *Empress of the World* (Ryan, 2001), *Finding H. F.* (Watts, 2001), *Love Rules* (Reynolds, 2001), *The Rainbow Kite* (Shyer, 2002), *My Heartbeat* (Freymann-Wehr, 2002), *Keeping You a Secret* (Peters, 2003), *Geography Club* (Harteringer, 2003), *So Hard to Say* (Sanchez, 2004). She compares their depictions of sexual identity with *Boy Meets Boy* (Levithan, 2003) and *Totally Joe* (Howe, 2005). The result is a fascinating read that adds considerably to the growing body of literature on how YA lit explores the identification of sexual selves and the presentation of three-dimensional LGBTQ characters.

An equally fascinating study is "Analyzing Talk in a Long-Term Literature Discussion Group: Ways of Operating within LGBT-Inclusive and Queer Discourses" (Blackburn & Clark, 2011). This helpful research examined 18 transcripts of talk from a literature discussion group of 32 adolescents and

adults, including the authors, using 24 texts over 3 years in an LGBTQ youth center. The purpose of the study was to identify and analyze the nature of the discussions and the ways in which these talks were liberatory and/or oppressive. The findings suggest the discussions represented a “complex, reciprocal process among texts, talk, and context in which no discourse [was] monolithically liberatory or oppressive.”

Simply, conversation among participants revealed a comforting level of satisfaction that allowed direct references to LGBTQ concerns and their relatability in the many novels the groups explored. “In our discussions, especially about *Finding H.F.* [Watts, 2001], *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

[Chbosky, 1999], and *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* [Babcock, 2002], we often drew directly on the behaviors or actions of specific characters, which gave us language and images that afforded us opportunities to talk in particular ways” (Blackburn & Clark, p. 246).

## The Crossover Nature of Young Adult Literature

### The Appeal for Adult Readers

Librarian Angelina Benedetti makes an interesting point that we have known for quite some time: young adult literature is becoming increasingly popular among older adult readers. Coming-of-age literature, Benedetti surmises, appeals to a wide variety of readers, particularly adults, because of everyone’s mem-

ory of being a teenager. And as she notes, authors of young adult literature are validating her observation by more frequently writing books for more general audiences.

In “Not Just for Teens” (2011), Angelina Benedetti, a library manager with the Kings County Library System, Issaquah, Washington, writes that part of this crossover appeal stems from the sudden appearance and popularity of what she calls the Big Three—J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight series, and Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games series. According to Benedetti, these wildly successful series have prompted adult readers to also read less well-known but equally compelling adolescent novels, such as Sara Shepard’s *Pretty Little*

## Teaching Teachers the Benefits of YA Lit in the Classroom

Experienced teachers and preservice teachers alike can use some guidance in understanding the value of young adult literature and incorporating it into their lessons. The readings below supplement our reference list with research-based rationales and ideas for growing readers, writers, and thinkers in your classroom.

Bach, J., Hensley Choate, L., & Parker, B. Young adult literature and professional development. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 198–205.

Beumer Johnson, A. (2011). Multiple selves and multiple sites of influence: Perceptions of young adult literature in the classroom. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 215–222.

Byrne Bull, K. (2011). Connecting with texts: Teacher candidates reading young adult literature. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 223–230.

Carter, J. B. (2011). Graphic novels, web comics, and creator blogs: Examining product and process. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 190–197.

Comer, M. (2011). Young adult literature and alternative assessment measures. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 239–246.

George, M. A. (2011). Preparing teachers to teach adolescent literature in the 21st century. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 182–189.

Hayn, J., Kaplan, J. S., & Nolen, A. (2011). Young adult literature: Research in the 21st century. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 176–181.

Hazlett, L. A., Sweeney, W. J., & Reins, K. J. (2011). Using young adult literature featuring LGBTQ adolescents with intellectual and/or physical disabilities to strengthen classroom inclusion. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 206–214.

Henderson, S. C., & Buskit, C. (2011). Promoting the comprehension of teachers and students using young adult literature. *Theory into Practice*, 50, 231–238.

*Liars*, Cassandra Clare's Mortal Instrument (2007–2012) series, and recently published author Ally Condie's *Matched*.

Issues of identity and finding your way in the world are nothing new and, as David Levithan, a noted author for teens and editor at Scholastic, says, "never actually go away," (Benedetti, p. 40); they just become more compounded as we grow older—hence the appeal of young adult books that address "coming of age directly" and do so with angst and a flare for what matters most as a teenager: asserting one's identity in a universe that appears to be ever so brand new and equally confusing. The other obvious appeal, Benedetti asserts, is the excellent writing. The writing in young adult novels is not subpar; it is not "written down" for a teen audience. Instead, as testament to the many distinguished awards given to young adult literature, the writing is artistic, subtle, and equivalent to any book written primarily for adults, if not better. Young adult literature stands on a plane of high literary merit and thus, Benedetti insists, attracts a crossover audience of both teen and adult readers.

As Benedetti says, adults desirous of learning what their kids are reading are picking up young adult novels just to stay "hip" and in the know. They are certainly staying current when it comes to book formats; a 2011 *Library Journal* Public Library E-Book Survey asked librarians which age group used e-books the most; 61% said patrons ages 35–54 (summary available at [http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/887020-264/ebook\\_summit\\_kicks\\_off\\_with.html.csp](http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/887020-264/ebook_summit_kicks_off_with.html.csp)). Additionally, Benedetti remarks, the

Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project reported that the greatest market penetration for e-readers is with middle-age adults, 47–56 (Benedetti, p. 47). Clearly, the e-book appeal is there, and that can only bode well for the life and durability of young adult literature.

Similarly, in "Navigating the Flood: Exploring Literature for Children and Young Adults," Janet Pariza and Deborah Augsburger (2011–2012) write that the publishing industry has literally flooded the market with thousands of new titles each year that are designed to appeal to both adolescents and adults. As evidenced by the crossover appeal of many such works, the appeal seems to be working—both in print and electronically.

### Theory into Practice

Finally, let me draw your attention to a special themed issue of *Theory into Practice* edited by Judith Hayn and Jacqueline Bach (2011) that highlights the ability and necessity of young adult literature to diversify and unify the English language arts curriculum. Several articles discuss how the theoretical and literary constructs of young adult literature need to be examined in light of their continued presence in the secondary curriculum. By arguing for a more extensive use of young adult literature, these authors define the study of young adult literature not just as something relevant to reluctant readers, but as a viable, living, dynamic genre of literature that should be read, discussed, and researched by all devotees of literary theory and practice.

Studying young adult literature should not be relegated to education circles, these authors profess,

but subsumed by curriculum leaders and academic researchers across the curriculum in both secondary and university settings. The titles of some excellent articles are listed in the references of this piece; each reveals a particular aspect and current concern in the study of young adult literature.

### Conclusion

As this brief discussion reveals, the field of young adult literature has begun to blossom into a force that not only reveals societal trends and issues, but also anticipates and inspires discussion about topics that are hard to share, even for adults. Young adult books have long dealt with themes and issues—sex, drugs, abuse—that many educators have been hesitant to discuss with adolescents in classroom settings. Fortunately, these barriers are slowly but surely being dismantled as more and more public and private schools make way in their curriculum for open and honest discussion of issues and concerns that matter to today's young adults. True, these issues might be difficult to share with young people—whether they are yours or not—but as young adult novels prove time and time again, good books can reveal hidden dilemmas, untapped secrets, and the singular importance of how stories of life and love, of honesty and truth, of pain and reconciliation, can and do serve as a springboard for meaningful conversations and, ultimately, research. As teachers and adolescents know intuitively, books do save lives. What could be more powerful?

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