

Young Adult:

A Book by Any Other Name . . . : Defining the Genre

Children's. Bildungsroman. Adolescent. Juvenile. Teen. Young Adult—so many names for such a controversial body of literature.

As America's readership continues to shrink, marketing departments scramble for new strategies for getting books into readers' hands. Bookstores have reshuffled their shelves and recategorized their sections, drawing titles from both Children's and Grownup Fiction (Sadly, "Adult Fiction" doesn't ring the way I wish it could) to create the new Teen, or Young Adult, sections of their stores.

Because the Young Adult umbrella seems to shelter the many simpler, aimed-for-children books as well as the overabundance of catty, chick-lit-ish novels, this new category has brought with it certain negative assumptions from critics across the board. Young Adult Literature has been accused of being:

- For children only
- Somewhat simplistic
- Chick lit for teens
- Less than literary
- Not serious enough for use in schools
- A marketing ploy
- Written by less serious or amateur writers
- Experimental
- Not established enough to bid for spots in the canon

Indeed, a cursory riffle through a local bookstore's Young Adult section might lead a critic to these conclusions, especially with series

such as *The Gossip Girl*, *Clique*, *The Au Pairs*, and *The Seven Deadly Sins* deluging the market with what many consider pulp entertainment. If one were to judge the books by their covers, one might assume that the graphic-rich dust jackets, many pink with pop femininity, offer nothing but surface reading of candy writing. And indeed, many people have.

Other converted critics have embraced Young Adult so dearly that they have scoured the canon for any classics they could adopt into the Y.A. family. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* are just a sampling of the claimed classics, not to mention more recent Grownup novels such as Stephen King's *Carrie*, Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, and Markus Zusak's *I Am the Messenger*.

Still other critics have rejected the Young Adult expansion by challenging and banning books they thought contained subject matter too mature for children and teens. Among the most contested titles are some that many would consider Young Adult classics—Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, Judy Blume's *Forever* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret.*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, among others.

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All arguments considered, the majority of the academic, serious side of society still seems to cast negative light on Young Adult Literature. Many have asked, “What exactly makes Young Adult any different from Grownup or Children’s literature?” and “What does it mean for a book to be Young Adult?” Discussion has arisen about:

- The look and age of the characters—from the lightning bolt on Harry Potter’s forehead (J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series) to the shaved head of Egg (Cecil Castellucci’s *Boy Proof*)
- The location of the stories—from a 1452 AD copy shop in Mainz, Germany (Matthew Skelton’s *Endymion Spring*) to the exotic tarpits (Margo Lanagan’s *Black Juice*)
- The action and plotting—vivid, fast-paced scenes and action
- The core conflicts—blackmail (Markus Zusak’s *I Am the Messenger*), date rape (Chris Lynch’s *Inexcusable*), telekinesis (Stephen King’s *Carrie*), performance enhancing drugs (Robert Lipsyte’s *Raiders Night*), and poverty (Markus Zusak’s *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*)
- Tone, voice, and point of view
- The linguistic and structural tricks the writers employ
- The characteristics that define what many are calling a “genre”

I can’t help but feel transported back to English class, the way the above list showcases the long-heralded elements of quality Literature—Character, Setting, Plot, Conflict, Tone, Voice, and Point of View.

I would be lying if I, as an aspiring Young Adult writer, were to say these conflicts have not affected my world. Questions immediately shot up regarding the fiction project I set out to accomplish for my Masters of Fine Arts thesis, a Young Adult novel featuring two high school seniors and the clash between one’s identity as the school clown and the other’s descent into the football gambling world. Accomplished writers of Grownup Fiction doubted the validity and literary capabilities of a juvenile novel, expressing concerns about whether creative writing of that kind belonged in a graduate program.

When asked about his goal as a writer of Young Adult Literature, Newbery Award-Winning author Christopher Paul Curtis said, “if the novel lets one child see that there is a real potential for beauty and

fun and emotion in a book, I’m not greedy, I’ll happily take that” (Carroll 106). And I might add truth to his list. His words make me wonder if his goal is any different from the majority of Grownup writers. If “child” were changed to “person” or “reader,” then his statement would still seem a noble writerly cause.

This led me to choose twelve recent Young Adult novels, a wide variety of books from the past five years (2002–2006), to study as a sampling of Y.A. Literature, through which I could analyze what is going on in the “genre” today. My reading list included award winners and new releases, historical and futuristic fiction, single and multiple P.O.V., straight and homosexual relationships, science fiction and fantasy genres, smart kids and mental patients, school lit and high culture, and the outcasts. My hope was to get an up-to-date look at the current trends and decide for myself what makes a Young Adult book any different from its Grownup relatives.

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12 Y.A. Novels under the Microscope

Feed by M.T. Anderson (Candlewick, 2002)

Hail the future of America! The moon, the 51st state, is an industrialized wasteland and not too different from Earth. Lesions are developing on people’s skin that turn out to be pretty cool when worn by the right celebrities. The Feed continues to provide the ideal entertainment experience for those who have taken the surgical step of progress. As Titus, a feed-wearing member of the teenage party scene, grapples with typical teenage issues cleverly translated for the future, he is driven to make the same decision we all have to make at some point—What are we going to let define us?

In this ALA 2003 Best of Y.A. novel, the voice is

the first thing to grab you—"The moon turned out to completely suck." "I'm so null." "I wasn't so skip when we were flying . . ." ". . . if any of them were youch." ". . . these fake birds that were the big spit."—all authentic and witty guesses at futuristic teen slang. People speak in post-email language, technobabble like "re: Violet" already a part of everyday use. Other linguistic tricks such as School™ and Clouds™ give the text a unique flavor. Just about when we begin to feel like "complete bonesprockets" in the face of this creative dialect, we meet Titus and his moon-partying friends. This cast of characters worries about clothing and social status, especially when celebrities start wearing their fashionable skin lesions with pride and popularity.

The Feed, an implanted device that sustains biological life and enhances communication, bombards them with advertisements of things they just have to have if they expect to keep up with the in-crowd. It also allows them to "null out" on some feed-altering drugs, which might not be considered drugs by some because of their lack of physical harm. In the middle of this party atmosphere, Titus is thrust into a relationship with Violet, a girl who teaches him more about himself than he was hoping to learn. This journey toward identity, combined with a budding relationship, pressure from friends, the hovering authority of the parental units, and the adolescent voice and use of language work together to fit this book for the label of Young Adult.

***Crispin: The Cross of Lead* by Avi (Hyperion, 2002)**

Crispin does not know his name because his father died years ago in the plague. "Asta's Son" is all anyone has ever called him. Doing their best to survive in meager conditions, he and his mother live among the poorest of the poor in fourteenth-century medieval England. When his mother dies, Crispin tries to learn the truth about his name and his father, a search that puts him in the hands of Bear, a wise, traveling jester with the right questions and answers to help a lad find himself.

This historical novel and winner of the 2003 Newbery Award features Crispin, a thirteen-year-old peasant boy without an identity, who has been awarded the derogatory label "Asta's Son" because he does not have a father. His mother dies, and he is forced to flee through the English countryside after he

is falsely accused of a crime, earning him the different label of "wolf's head," a name reserved for criminals who can be killed on the spot. Bear offers Crispin shelter from his pursuers in addition to teaching him the trade of juggling, something a poor, orphan boy could not hope to survive without. This exploration of personal identity is a common enough thread throughout Young Adult literature. Mix that together with the missing family relationships, an action-packed narrative, the mentor figure and older guide, and the intrigue of the medieval world brought to life through the eyes of an outcast teen, and you have the makings of a novel that belongs in the "genre."

***Bucking the Sarge* by Christopher Paul Curtis (Wendy Lamb, 2004)**

This humorous story features Luther T. Farrell, a young black boy and freshman in high school, who lives with and works for the Sarge, the dictator mom. With his best friend Sparky, his love for philosophy, and his hatred for Flint, Michigan, Luther gets promoted to head of the Sarge's group home. At the same time, he is trying to find a way to win the school's science fair for the third year in a row and somehow not ruin things with Shayla Patrick, the cute girl who just happens to be his greatest competition.

Working an after-school job like many teens his age, high school freshman Luther T. Farrell helps run the Happy Neighbor Group Home for Men with the Sarge, otherwise known as his mother. This job, the Sarge tells him, is a great way for a young black man like himself to work his way out from under the oppressive hand of society. For as tenuous as his home and work relationships are with the Sarge, his school life is just as uncertain. Luther dreams of getting to know Shayla Patrick but balks before taking any steps toward intimacy. The only time they ever seem to meet is at the school's science competition, something Luther has won for two consecutive years, a feat which cannot be good for his chances with her. Luther's friend Sparky tries to get rich quick by consulting with Dontay Gaddy, the flimflam lawyer at 1-800-SUE-EM-ALL, and Luther takes it upon himself to set his friend straight. First jobs, friendship conflicts, girls, school drama, and a little detective work to unearth an enormous secret are what put this ALA 2005 Best of Y.A. novel on the Young Adult map.

***The A-List* by Zoey Dean (17th Street Productions, 2003)**

Welcome to Hollywood 90210, the world of couture, parties, and hot young bucks. Having just flown in to live with her father for the summer, Anna Percy is the new girl in town. Cammie, Sam, and Dee are her problem. There is no way in Neiman Marcus they are going to let the new girl somehow win the love (or lust) of heartthrob Ben Birnbaum. If anyone has a chance at the sort of wishes that money and power cannot buy, it is her, which means there is only one thing to do with a girl like that—make her life miserable.

Boredom is just not possible with A-List members Cammie, Sam, and Dee catfighting with Anna for the rights to Ben Birnbaum. Among the books accused of watering down the Young Adult market, *The A-List* highlights the high-class battles for teen social status, the dysfunctional family relationships, multiple party scenes, close attention paid to clothing and outward appearance, and the internal struggles for identity, in such a way that this novel does not deserve to be excluded from the company of Young Adult, even if critics cringe at its inclusion.

***Crunch Time* by Mariah Fredericks (Atheneum, 2006)**

Four students band together their own SAT prep group in a story that delves deeply into matters of identity, where the worst thing you thought about people turns out to be true and that is all anyone sees. I guess it comes down to who you are at the end of the day—the sweet guy, the hot guy, the girl with nothing, the girl with everything, or the cheater.

High school students Leo, Jane, Max, and Daisy alternate points of view to tell this story in a back-and-forth style that, on numerous occasions, ends up in all four characters' minds within the same scene. This approach allows a 50/50 split between the male and female characters' narrative lines, offering the reader the clearly-portrayed thoughts and emotions of four characters. This novel goes so much further in its utilization of common Young Adult tools than most of its peers.

The IMs, answering machines, emails, notes, letters, blogs, and lists add a highly multitextual layer while also including recent technological devices natural to today's teenage world. Additionally, the classics are referenced in relation to the characters'

academic classes in school, novels like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Teachers and school administration are portrayed as the bad guys. Characters constantly compare their successes and failures to their peers. Money is an issue; alcohol is used and abused; and characters maintain a hyperawareness of their bodies in proximity to potential relationship partners.

Pretextual comments like "I want to scream . . .," "I'm about to say . . .," and "I don't ask any of this . . ." add to the already present internal monologues of the characters. The sections make frequent efforts to begin and end with strong lines. Fragments—"Bad moment. Really, really bad moment."—are employed to great effect, oftentimes coming in the form of active onomatopoeia—"Click"—and other times appearing in the form of repeated words—"Go, go, go, go." Nicknames such as "James the Pain," "Mr. I Know, Mr. I Tell It Like It Is," "Zo," and "The Big C" are doled out by characters in an effort to control their environments. Clever conceptual devices like the shaded "I., II, III, IV" are used to separate the different parts of the novel.

Crunch Time, arguably more than its eleven peers, efficiently and pervasively displays Young Adult tricks of the trade to tailor its narrative for teen markets.

***Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (Knopf, 2003)**

*Paul has known he was gay since his Kindergarten teacher wrote it in his report card. Since then, his life has not been as difficult as it probably should have been. The town he lives in is supportive, his family loves him for who he is, and Tony (also gay—they are just friends) and Joni (straight as a toothpick) are his best friends forever. Gay relationships and transvestite friends, such as *Infinite Darling*, the football team's quarterback, are commonplace at this school.*

This ALA 2004 Best of Y.A. novel relays the love story between two sophomores in high school who do not just happen to be boys. This openly ideological exploration of an inventively tolerant high school atmosphere is what allows unique characters like *The Infinite Darling* to flourish. As is often the case, characters are interested in some division of the arts, Noah being the one who introduces Paul to the secret art studio in his house. Parental relationships and their acceptance of the identities their children claim are

contrasted by Tony's oppressive home environment and Paul's accepting family.

Again, the classics are represented by Emily Dickinson, Oscar Wilde, and John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Multitextual layers like song lyrics, poetry, and notes passed in class add to the romantic nature of the story. Experiments with structure—a paragraph broken up by an A-Z list through the alphabet and parentheses used to add frequent inner-paragraph emphasis—are common in *Young Adult*. Lines such as “. . . every conscious part of me is in the hand that he holds” show the character's hyperawareness of his body. Characters are given nicknames that end up permanent in certain social situations—“ambisexual” and “duosexual,” “Seven” and “Eight.”

All things considered, *Boy Meets Boy* contains many of the markings of contemporary Young Adult Fiction.

Criss Cross by Lynne Rae Perkins (Greenwillow, 2005)

Debbie feels there is something more to this life, something she senses when she looks at her mother's old photographs and wonders if the people she sees had things figured out as much as it seems. Her wish for excitement comes true when her parents volunteer her to help with Mrs. Bruning, an elderly woman with fading health and a houseful of all things German.

Critics might argue that this 2006 Newbery Award Winning novel contains too many graphic illustrations to be considered Young Adult. Perhaps they are right. Or perhaps with a graphic novel such as Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* winning the prestigious Michael L. Printz Award in 2007, *Criss Cross* is more on-target than its critics realize.

At a surface level, the multitextual use of lists and song lyrics, haikus and Nancy Drew, and the reading of magazines such as *Mad Magazine*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Popular Mechanics* help add a teen element. A number of the classics are again mentioned—Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Frequent sections are formatted with experimental purposes in mind—an entire page written in italics to signal a person's thought process, a chapter formatted into columns to separate out two narrative points of view happening simultaneously, and dialogue formatted as it would be in a play.

At a deeper level, fourteen-year-old Hector's guitar lessons with Pastor Dan introduce a character's desire to delve into the arts, a common thread among *Young Adult*, not to mention its portrayal of a young man's pursuit of a desired skill under the tutelage of a wise adult. Debbie's cramped living quarters lead her to the discovery of her mother's old photo albums, connecting her to family members from the past, allowing her to see them when they were happy. Hector's struggle to pick up on and function within the social norms of the dating environment illustrate his awkward transition into adulthood. Debbie's time spent volunteering to help with the elderly German woman Mrs. Bruning add a multiethnic layer, as well as a young girl's grappling with a dying woman.

However, *Criss Cross* does not *feel* like a Young Adult novel, its tone and voice more like a midgrade, or children's book, its tensions, conflicts, and character desires more middle school than high school.

King Dork by Frank Portman (Delacorte, 2006)

Holden Caulfield, step aside for the new king in town: Tom Henderson, great American nobody, Chimo, Hender-fag, Sheepie, and King Dork. His Hillmont High School life is a combination of disappointments—from his exploits with girls, to his wannabe band that does not even have a drummer and amps . . . or guitars, to his father killed in a hit and run, to his subterranean position on the social totum pole.

The main character, tenth-grader Tom Henderson, is an outcast, a fringe player in the strata of Hillmont High School society. His nicknames are just the first layer of the Young Adult voice that rushes through these pages. The numerous names that he and Sam Helleman come up with for their rock band that has yet to acquire any instruments or a drummer are as off-the-wall as their characters—Easter Monday, Ray Bradbury's Love-Camel, The Mordor Apes, The Chimos!, and Sentient Beard, to name a few of their twenty-five. When they change band names to the Nancy Wheelers, their first album is entitled *Margaret, It's God, Please Shut Up!*, a hilarious twist on the classic Young Adult novel by Judy Blume—*Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*.

It is Tom's discovery of a forgotten box of his father's books, which includes a few of the Classics—John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*—that takes this deep into

Young Adult territory. The highlight of the stash is his father's copy of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* from when he was twelve. The copy is scribbled up and spilled on, with secret codes hidden throughout. The mockery of *The Catcher* cult teachers at school continues during Tom's detective-like search for some truth about his father as a teenager. From Tom's sexual explorations with the mysterious fake-mod Fiona, to the scandals in the school administration, to the Intro and Outro chapters, nearly everything about this novel screams Young Adult.

33 *Snowfish* by Adam Rapp (Candlewick, 2003)

Boobie, Custis, and Curl are the dark survivors at the fringe of society. What is particularly amazing is the way everything in this depraved world feels so cool and clean through Custis' eyes. Even though the three of them are on the run from the police because of what Boobie did to his parents and are looking for a rich family to sell Boobie's baby brother to, he holds out hope that his gat, the Skylark, and Curl's trick money are somehow going to hold their lives together.

When a novel starts out with a line like "On top of everything, Boobie's got the clap," I know I'm in for something unique. Obviously enough, the gripping dialect unique to the different characters was the first thing to grip me. The darkness of these characters' situation follows close behind. Baby in tow as they flee from the police for murdering their parents, these teens have a rough road ahead. Through the multiple points of view of Custis, Curl, and Boobie, this narrative plunges the reader into the minds of the most outcast of outcasts.

Rapp does not employ any of the "tricks" that so many of his peers do. He uses the characters' desire for a place to call home, their unique vantage point on adolescent life, and the utter darkness of their situation to hit the reader with a blizzard of Young Adult hope at the end.

***It's Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini (Miramax, 2006)**

Craig Gilner looks like your everyday modern kid, chilling with Aaron and hoping for something more with Nia, until he sneaks out in the middle of the night and admits himself into a mental hospital. Not until the wild parties, Argenon (mental) Hospital, crazy roommates, Egyptian music, Brain Maps, and the

Brooklyn Bridge, does Craig finish his journey from Broken, to Healing, to Normal, to Real, and finally, to Alive.

Nominated to the ALA 2007 Best of Y.A. list, this journey of New York teenager Craig Gilner's is one of hope in the face of depression and suicide. After the SATs and years of academic labor to get into Manhattan's Executive Pre-Professional High School, Craig begins to see that he might not make it. This world is not for him. His world includes witty labels for serious things—Tentacles, Cycling, The Shift—alcohol, marijuana and amphetamines, suicide attempts, visits to shrinks, and internal dialogues with the soldier in his stomach that starves him at will. During his stint in Argenon, we see his hyperawareness of body when he is with Noelle, especially during the third best sex scene of the year according to the Henry Miller Award panel. We see his tendency toward doling out nicknames—Blue Streaks and Humble. We see an inventive display of onomatopoeia—*Ffffffft!—Hooooooooo-ee!—Bzzzzzzzt! —Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.—and Waaa-taaa. Waaa-taaa.*

Craig's story journals his journey toward identity, a discovery that he needs a place to call his own, a realization that other people's labels and expectations on his life may not be the best for him, an awakening to the fact that his family loves him and wants the best for him, no matter what he decides. Craig's time in the hospital allows him to discover his love for art, and specifically drawing. Along with the other teen elements, the personally-tailored brain maps that he draws for the people around him supply this narrative with a feel that is distinctly Young Adult.

***Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld (Razor Bill, 2005)**

When Cal Thompson moves to New York City and spends the night with Morgan, his desires and passions change forever. He finds out he has been infected by the parasite, but not in the worst way. Yes, he is a Peep, or Parasite-Positive, which means he will develop superhuman strength and senses, start to hate the sunlight and everything else he has ever loved, and begin to crave human blood. However, he is only a carrier, which means he may be able to control his desires, to a point.

This vampire story features a nineteen-year-old protagonist who is forced to locate his progenitor, the

girl who gave him the parasite. Their relationship hovers on the edge of romance and business the entire time, as Cal's detective work brings him ever closer to uncovering the magnitude of New York City's problem. The voice throughout the narrative goes the furthest toward making this book Young Adult. The first person and past tense allow Cal to get us to feel a bit of his paranoia through the every-other-chapter lessons on parasites. Fast-paced, grippingly action-packed, featuring teen characters and their love lives in light of the parasite, and explaining all vampire myths from the past, this book cannot help but feel like Young Adult.

***The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak (Knopf, 2006)**

Narrated by Death and set in a small town outside Munich during World War II, this is the story of nine-year-old Liesel Meminger, a German girl taken into Hans Huberman's household as a foster child. As likeable as she is well-developed, it is amazing to watch a young girl remain so strong in the face of human tragedy, impossible hatred, and adolescent

love. This story pays tribute to the simple power of words, to their ability to change our minds, destroy our lives, move our souls, recount our memories, and yes, heal our world.

When Death starts telling stories, teens are likely to listen. When the story is about a nine-year-old girl in World War II Germany, teens might stop. Death often interrupts the narrative to insert his own factoids and commentary, the last of

which will chill readers to the bone. The center pages of the book feature an illustrated booklet designed over the torn-out pages of a copy of *Mein Kampf*. The frequent fragmented sentences give the language a structure geared for teens that conveys a much older voice, something Death cannot help but bring to his story about this pre-adolescent girl. First published in Australia as a Grownup novel, *The Book Thief* does not embody very many Young Adult elements, which

does not mean that it is not a powerfully-crafted novel. It only means that Liesel is perhaps too young, the narrative too grand, and the voice too somber to fit with the rest of the expanding genre.

Tying Up the Threads

The question still needs an answer: What characterizes a book as Young Adult? What makes it different from its Children's or Grownup relatives?

In her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Madeleine L'Engle says that "a children's book is any book a child will read." This approach would mean that a teen's reading of Plato's *Republic* would qualify the philosopher's writing for membership. Further exploration of this idea would mean that if a Grownup were to pull *Criss Cross* off the shelf for reading, it could be claimed as a Grownup novel. This definition seems deficient.

Brown and Stephens say in their book *Teaching Young Adult Literature* that if a book is written about teens and for teens, then it is Young Adult. This approach might allow critics to say that any of the classics with a teen protagonist belongs to the category. They might also look at "written for teens" and argue that no one can tell for whom a book is written. Marketed for Grownups in Australia and Young Adults in the United States, Zusak's *The Book Thief* is a prime example. When I talked with Zusak at the 2006 Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, he said that he did not completely understand the marketing strategies, that all he tries to do is write a good book.

Still others have claimed all coming-of-age novels as Young Adult, labeling them various German words: the *bildungsroman* to tell the story of a protagonist's growth into adulthood, the *kunstlerroman* to tell the story of a protagonist's growth into an artist, and, as Chris Crowe coins, the *sportlerroman* to tell the story of a protagonist's growth into an athlete. Despite which German words are used to categorize a novel, not all "romans" can be adopted as Young Adult. James Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, a *kunstlerroman* by definition, obviously does not fit the mold.

Since there does not seem to be a clear definition, please allow me to offer mine. As I see it, *the label "Young Adult" refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an*

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adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its "Grownup" peers.

1. Written about Teens

Out of my twelve Young Adult reading selections, all but Zusak's *Liesel* from *The Book Thief* are teen protagonists. Cal Thompson from *Peeps* is the oldest at nineteen. While adult characters may play prime roles, it is the adolescent we care most about in these novels. He or she is the one we follow and care for, and in the case of first person narratives, the one whose mind we know and live through.

2. A Distinctly Teen Voice

Eight of these novels are told in the first person, while only four are in the third person. This 67% told in first person is drastically higher than both Grownup and Children's fiction. Nine of them are in the past tense, with three of them in the present tense. Twenty-five percent may not seem like much, but in my experience, compared to Grownup and Children's fiction, it is significantly higher.

Statistics aside, the narrative voices of Young Adult novels, especially when in first person, are as unique as the protagonists who embody them. The lingo is modern. The pace, fast. The desires, youthful. The observations, distinctly teen.

3. The Journey toward Identity

Liesel's developing love for books, words, and writing in *The Book Thief*, Cal's grappling with his life as a vampire in *Peeps*, Paul's claiming of his sexual self in *Boy Meets Boy*, the four students striving toward college in *Crunch Time*—at the heart of all twelve novels lies this journey toward individual identity.

4. Tackling the Adult Issues in Teenage Lives

From the school administrator's videotaping of minors in *King Dork*, to the fraudulent finances and rampant litigation in *Bucking the Sarge*, to the mental sickness in *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, to the kidnapping and murder in *33 Snowfish*, to vampire mythology in *Peeps*—this sample set of novels mirrors its

field of Young Adult peers by daring to tackle the themes that critics continue to insist belong to the Grownups.

5. The Same Potential for Literary Value as Grownup Novels

In a perfect world, everyone would understand this concept, and a book's literary value would not be judged solely on the age of its audience. With a careful scan of the canon one can easily notice the numerous books featuring adolescent protagonists—Charles Dickens' *Pip* (Philip Pirrip), J.D. Salinger's *Holden Caulfield*, Jane Austen's *Elizabeth Bennet*, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, Alexandre Dumas' *Philippe*, and many more. These are, however, only the books that lasted. Many more did not. Things are not any different now. Some books survive, and most are forgotten, Children's, Young Adult, and Grownup books alike.

There are, of course, other smaller factors that add to the Young Adult environment—experimental form, technology, social status, self-image, young love, friends, work, and parental units—but these are not, what I consider to be, the crucial elements. For these twelve novels, the term Young Adult serves as both an age demographic and a genre. Sure, it might be a tool used by marketers to put more books in the hands of readers, but that tool is grounded in the reality of the writing itself.

Robert Cormier once said, "I write to affect people. Everything is to affect the reader" (Carroll 106), and that's what a quality Young Adult novel does. It takes its readers, youth and adult alike, to a place where adolescence lives on, a place where that journey toward identity continues to happen.

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