

YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION¹

What is Young Adult Literature (YAL)?

- Someone facetiously defined a young adult as “those who think they’re too old to be children but who others think are too young to be adults”.
- YAL is usually written for people aged 12-18
- “Tweeners” books for middle schoolers sell well—adults still have influence on what is read and the books are therefore more “innocent” and less likely to be censored. Tweener books are also well suited to series where situations are resolved quickly
- The central theme in most YAL is becoming an adult, finding out “Who am I?”, creating an identity

Historical Overview

- All books used to be published for adult audiences. It wasn’t until the 1930’s that there were “juvenile” and “adult” divisions in publishing companies.
- The mid-1970’s through the mid-1980’s is often considered the “golden age” of YAL. YA books multiplied rapidly as they gained more acceptance. TV and movie producers wanted stories that would appeal to youth and in schools, many teachers were faced with reluctant readers and turned to YAL to help.

1800-1900

- Before 1800, literature was religious. In the 1800’s literature remained pious and sober, but paid more attention to life on earth rather than solely emphasizing the afterlife. One primary influence on literature of the time was the American Sunday School Union (established in 1824). It offered Sunday School lessons that combined religious teaching with educating young people in math and grammar and job skills. The Union was best known for moralistic fiction that called upon two major formulas: 1) A young child near death would remind readers of necessary virtues and then die; 2) A good child would temporarily forget his or her duties to parents and siblings and would get their come-uppance.
- In the late 1800’s Louisa May Alcott and Horatio Alger were nationally-known writers for young adults. Experts generally agree that Alcott’s books deserve to still be widely read while Alger’s are only read by historians or specialists. Alcott is best known for *Little Women* although she also wrote thrillers (anonymously) and other novels. Her work often emphasizes happy family life. Although her novels were sometimes seen as harsh, they were honest in portraying the difficulties of life. Alger, a Unitarian minister, wrote moralistic books that followed the same themes and formulas: a boy maturing and becoming respectable. The boy’s hard

¹ NOTE: Much of this information comes from Donelson and Nilsen’s *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, pp. 1-78. Some passages are verbatim. This text is on reserve at the library.

work and luck bring him to a higher level on the social scale. Although some call Alger's books "rags to riches stories," a better name might be "rags to respectability," since the main characters never really achieve riches.

- During the 1800s the most popular forms of reading were domestic and dime novels. Domestic novels (generally written for women and girls) dealt with home life. They preached morality and particular social roles like woman's submission to man, the value of cultural, social, and political conservatism, the value of religion and the Bible, and the value of suffering and self-sacrifice. Most domestic novels concerned a young girl (often orphaned and taken in by a benefactor) who meets a mysterious and shadowy young man and converts him. There is adventure amidst many morality lessons and the primacy of family and marriage is portrayed as the goal for "decent" women. Dime novels were written for men and were more concerned with thrills and adventures. The most popular type of dime novel was the Western, although other forms appeared, such as mysteries and early science fiction. While characters were largely moral, the lessons were not nearly so present as in the domestic novel. Characters in dime novels achieved more independence and adventurous lives.
- The American public library developed during the 1800's. In 1826 the governor of New York urged that school district libraries be developed. Early on, schools housed the public library until it was decided that state taxes should be levied to support public libraries in their own buildings. In 1863, there were 1000 public libraries across the U.S. In 1876 there were 3649 public libraries that contained 300 volumes or more. In 1876, Melvil Dewey and other librarians formed the American Library Association and the first issue of American Library Journal appeared. In 1884 Columbia College established the first school of Library Economy (now called Library Science) under Dewey's leadership. Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy and donation of millions of dollars for the creation of public libraries led to further expansion of the library system. There was some debate over libraries that included concerns about taxes, the government's right to levy taxes for such an institution, and concern over the type of books libraries might acquire.

1900-1940

- During the early 1900's there was much debate about what literature should be in schools—should schools be concerned with what students wanted to read or with what colleges required for entrance exams? Recreational reading still seemed to be looked down upon and the moral content of books was still considered quite important. Many English teachers were upset at the attitudes of professors in higher education who made decisions about college entrance exams and attempted to issue edicts about what should be taught in secondary English classrooms without consulting teachers themselves. Secondary school teachers argued for the value of high schools in their own right, not just as a pipeline for universities. The National Council of Teachers of English (established in 1911) was

rooted in this controversy. In spite of this, English curricula continued to be structured around the requirements of colleges.

- Research around reading continued to grow and gain prominence, as scholars began studying methods of teaching literature, asking, for example, what the value was in the intensive method (where books were studied for 4-6 weeks of detailed examination) versus the extensive method (where more books were read faster).
- Up to the mid-1930's, many complained that the quality of girls' books was far inferior to that of boys' books. This was considered a crisis in the literary field. Many authors responded by writing novels for girls, so many that by 1937 the crisis was considered over. During this time, many critics claimed that girls would happily read boys' books but that boys would not read girls' books. Therefore, literature selection should cater to boys. Critics of this stance claimed that this was not due to some innate characteristics of boys and girls but of the differing quality and the ways the authors treated their audiences. This debate continues into the present.
- School libraries continued to develop, though slowly. Sometimes rules were established for what age groups would be allowed to use the library at what times or how often girls could come to the library. The main question continued to be whether schools should depend on the public library or should establish libraries of their own. The National Education Association began working on establishing standards for school libraries.
- Other developments during this time included Edward Stratemeyer's literary syndicate. Stratemeyer wrote many series books that were popular. He gradually realized that he could quickly come up with more plot ideas and characters than he had time to write about. Stratemeyer would outline novels and then hire other writers to flesh them out. In this way, many series continued with great commercial success. Many of the series books continued to emphasize familiar themes such as the following: Sports produced truly many men; foreigners were not to be trusted; school, education, and life should be taken seriously; the outdoor life was healthy, physically and psychologically; good manners and courtesy were essential for moving ahead; work in and of itself was a positive good and would advance one in life; anyone could defeat adversity if that person had a good heart and soul; the good side (always ours and God's) always won in war; evil and good were clearly and easily distinguishable; good always triumphed over evil. (Donelson and Nilsen, p. 67)
- In the early 1930's publishers began establishing "junior" or "juvenile" divisions that more specifically focused on books for the young.

1940-1965

- 1940-1965 revealed a country with gaps and separations: generational, racial, technological, cultural, and economic.
- During this times advocacy for letting adolescents read what interested them grew. Proponents claimed this would encourage more reading and lead to greater reading skill. Reading teachers could then build upon this skill to teach the classics. Librarians and scholars also talked about how adolescents need to form identity and test their identity against models—these models can come from literature. People came to understand that adolescents tend to gravitate to books in which they can identify with the characters, themes, or setting to a certain degree.
- Although the term “bibliotherapy” was coined in 1929, by this time period bibliotherapy had become more common. By the 1950’s, the idea of using books to help people overcome emotional and other problems was established.
- Paperbacks became a mass marketing tool during this time. By 1951, paperback sales had reached 230 million per year. Librarians complained about the paperbacks, saying they were difficult to catalog and easy to steal, but paperbacks appealed to adolescents and some parents and teachers because of their availability, size, and price.
- A key development during this period was the *bindungsroman*, a novel about the initiation, maturation, and education of a young adult. These are often referred to as “coming of age” novels.
- The quality of young adult literature continued to rise and series books became less prominent (with the exception of some like Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and Tom Swift). Reader sophistication increased. Plots became driven by high school events like dating, parties, romance (devoid of sex, of course), and popularity. There were still some taboos that remained unspoken. Some adult writers transcended the taboos and set the stage for modern young adult literature: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, and Alan Paton are included in this list. William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* were extremely influential. Many “classic” young adult authors also began writing during this period, including Robert Cormier, Paul Zindel, Isabelle Holland

Ambivalence about YAL

- Advocates of YAL point to its diversity, how it speaks to youth, its appeal to imagination, its comfort (showing adolescents others go through the same things they do) and its high interest level.
- Critics of YAL worry that YAL is too depressing and deals with too many problems and that it is not rigorous or challenging enough.

Characteristics of YAL

- Writing from the viewpoint of young people
 - Often accomplished by using the first person and featuring young people as the main character
- Ditch the parents
 - In YAL, young people are often free to pursue adventures, take credit for their own accomplishments, and gain independence. While some books feature parent-child relationships positively, many neglect this area.
- Fast-Paced Stories
- Variety of Genres and Subjects
 - Where it used to be taboo to read and write about race, class, sex, gender, sexual orientation, pregnancy, drug use, and other topics/issues, these are now common in YA books
- Basically optimistic texts with characters making worthy accomplishments
 - Characters take on tasks or problems that are respected by the audience
 - Authors create characters that readers can admire for the way they face up to challenges
- Deal with emotions and issues important to young adults
 - Gender and sex roles
 - Understanding and accepting one's body
 - Social structures and friendships
 - Achieving independence from parents and other adults
 - Preparing for sex, marriage, parenthood, jobs/occupations
 - Developing a personal ideology and ethical code
 - Discovering who you are in relation to a larger community

Stages of Literary Appreciation

Psychologists have identified several stages of literary appreciation and the age levels that usually go together. Not everyone goes through these stages in the same way or at the same time. Although they appear linear here, there is some flexibility and variation in how people experience these. What stage are you in? Sometimes the stage depends on your familiarity with the type of reading you are doing.

1. Pleasure and Profit from literature (early childhood): “Hey, if I read the TV Guide, I know what to watch!”
2. Learning to read/decode (primary grades): addictions to only one kind of book are common—they give the child comfort that helps them develop speed and skill; “I love Nancy Drew—that’s all I read!!”
3. Losing oneself in a story (late elementary): “What? Time to quit already?”
4. Finding oneself in a story (junior high): “Hey! That’s just like what happened to me!”
5. Going beyond the self (high school): Asking why, demanding logic—“Hey! You can’t really build a radio from a coconut!”

6. Aesthetic appreciation (adulthood): reading as social activity, central in one's life

How can I find these fabulous books?

- Bibliographies: these are compilations that list books and describe them
- Public libraries: although libraries vary, many libraries have a section for YAL and librarians that know about it and how to find the books you need
- Internet: many individuals and organizations compile book lists of various sorts, from the individuals that post their favorite lists at Amazon.com to the American Library Association who does more scholarly critiques
- Publications and organizations
 - [ALAN Review \(through the National Council for Teachers of English\)](#)
 - [Horn Book magazine](#)
 - [VOYA \(Voices of Youth Advocates\)](#)
 - [School Library Journal](#)
- Award winners
 - [Printz Award](#)—for the best book for kids 12 yrs and older
 - [Alex Award](#)—for the best book written for adults but enjoyed by teens
 - [Newberry Award](#)—best children's literature (lots of tween books win)
 - [Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards](#)
 - [Genre awards](#)—[Edgar Award](#) for mystery, [Nebula award](#) for science fiction, etc.