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Understanding and Defining Young Adult Literature

When the term “Young Adult Literature” is brought into a conversation, some recall fond memories of Holden Caulfield’s internal struggle, while others cringe at the commercialized love triangle of *Twilight*. In reality, “Y.A.” encompasses both and more, its orbit continuously expanding and shifting. While an array of critical theories is forming, many are left to wonder what allows a novel to fall into the Y.A. category, and how restrictive that title is meant to be.

In 2012, news outlet *The Wire* created a column entitled “Y.A. for Grownups,” self-described as, “a weekly series in which we talk about Y.A. literature—from the now nostalgia-infused stories we devoured as kids to more contemporary tomes being read by young people today” (Doll). They found themselves asking the same questions yet to be answered by literary theorists, and others interested on the topic: What classifies a book as Y.A.? Is it the age of the characters, or the age of the reader? The themes present, or the themes *not* present? The existence of didacticism, or the use of literary tools to transition young readers into picking up more “adult” texts? Or some bewitching combination of these things?

Perhaps one reason that many find themselves asking these questions *now* is because the popularity of Y.A. Lit is dramatically on the rise. Michael Cart, writer at Booklist magazine as well as Y.A. author himself, speculates that we have entered a new

golden age of Young Adult Literature. "Publishers are courting young adults in ways we haven't seen since the 1940s," he says (Goodnow). Jim McCarthy, literary agent representing a handful of prominent Y.A. authors, says, "There is a sense that this category is the bright spot in an increasingly challenging publishing universe." One of the upsides of this popularity, and likely a cause for the aforementioned bright spot, is the financial aspect. McCarthy continues, "Quite a few [Y.A. authors] make significantly more than their adult counterparts because there's been such a boom in the category over the past 10 years. Just by the number of midlist adult fiction authors making the shift to Y.A., you can tell that a lot of people actually see it as the real place to make money now" (Doll).

The Influence of Age

But the question stands, who is buying (and reading) Y.A.? And does that define the category? In *The Wire*, Rita Meade, a children's librarian in Brooklyn, explains, "I was 'officially' taught in grad school that Y.A. Lit is literature written with readers from ages 12 - 18 in mind. I'm sure there's a marketing angle involved somewhere, but from my perspective as a children's librarian, it is helpful to make a distinction between children's lit, Y.A. lit, and adult lit. That's not to say that there can't be crossover, or that one age group can't read books geared towards another age group" (Doll). Although Meade mentions 'official' teaching, it is clear that professors, publishers, and readers alike are still constantly having to update their notions of Y.A. age constructs to respond to the ever-changing landscape.

In his article, "Young Adult Literature and the Test of Time", Ted Hipple more or less agrees on the age range for "Young Adult Literature," the most straight-forward

definition. However, he is quick to chastise himself for doing so. “Even these boundaries are soft,” he explains. “Parents speak worriedly of the eleven-year-old who is, they say, going on twenty-five and, later, with equal worry about their twenty-three-year-old who ‘hasn’t quite found himself.’ . . . This is, I hasten to add, not indicative that YA literature is not read by persons outside this age range; it is, of course, by youngsters of nine or ten and oldsters of eighteen or fifty-three” (6, Hipple). The point Hipple and Meade are trying to make is that there is no cut-off, no shame intended to be brought to those who frequent the Y.A. section of their local bookstore long after their teen years have ended. This is perhaps one of the most common agreements about the Y.A. definition. While a reader’s age can play a role, it is by no means the ultimate factor. Part of this agreement is that Y.A. is *not* a genre. Both McCarthy and *The Wire* are explicit in noting this, saying that, “Y.A. is . . . a category, as with adult literature, containing all sorts of types of writing, from fiction to nonfiction” (Doll). For every supernatural love triangle, there is a lost boy wandering around Central Park curious about where the ducks go in the winter. Both can have value in their own right, as well as their own fan base, community, and designated age range of reader.

However, one prominent example of Y.A. Lit spanning both age ranges and genres is John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars*. In Margaret Talbot’s *New Yorker* profile of Green, aptly titled “The Teen Whisperer,” she explains that Green wanted to write “an unsentimental cancer novel” that offered “some basis for hope” (Talbot). However, Talbot points out that his previous novels offer just as much sophistication. Green’s novel *Looking for Alaska*, a Printz award winner, was published in 2005 and is still currently on the *New York Times Best Sellers* list for Young Adult paperbacks.

John Green may very well be the Harry Styles of Y.A. Lit. Talbot explains, “In recent years, whenever Green has appeared at a book signing he has been greeted by hundreds, often thousands, of screaming fans, mostly teen-age girls. The weirdness of this is hard to overstate. Green is a writer, and his books are not about sexy vampires. ‘Stars’ is a novel about young people with a deadly disease; its title is taken from Shakespeare, and it has an uncompromising ending” (Talbot). The fervent adoration in which teenagers express their love for something is as old as Beatle-mania, and likely older still. It is this dedication that is likely driving Y.A. book sales in the way that McCarthy described. But it is also a testament to what Y.A. readers are willing to wholeheartedly stand behind. Readers will not only line red carpets to gawk over Stephenie Meyer’s hunky werewolves and pouty vampires, but will also support the existentially-anxious love story of a boy with one leg and a girl with an oxygen tube in her nose.

Some speculate that the success of *The Fault in Our Stars* is owed to its crossover “adult” appeal – the complexity of its themes able to be grasped and grappled with by both teens and their parents. She touches on this notion, saying, “Green’s books seem calibrated for an era in which parents–vigilant and eager not to seem out of touch–often read the books that their children are reading” (Talbot). Perhaps the same could be said (and has been said) of *The Catcher in the Rye*, however both still have that undeniable Y.A. feel that goes beyond the simple concept of the reader’s age.

However, it seems unlikely that it is only with a watchful eye that parents are picking up their children’s books. Librarian Holly Koelling notes, “There has been an increase in the age of the protagonist, the complexity of the plotting and the content...I think it may be a reflection of a more sophisticated teenage population” (Goodnow). A

more emotionally developed group of teenagers is hardly something parents would frown at. Talbot, speculating about *The Fault in Our Stars*, says, “Such parents may be pleased that their child is touched enough by a book to cry over it” (Talbot). This is one example of many that combats the *Twilight*-induced stereotype of Y.A. being a non-nourishing genre, akin to Fabio-covered romance novels that lead to the rise of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Teens are not picking up Y.A. Lit simply because they have an age in common with the main characters, but because of a similarity in *feeling*. Green supports this, “I love the intensity teen-agers bring not just to first love but also to the first time you’re grappling with grief, at least as a sovereign being—the first time you’re taking on why people suffer and whether there’s meaning in life, and whether meaning is constructed or derived. Teen-agers feel that what you conclude about those questions is going to *matter*. And they’re dead right. It matters for adults, too, but we’ve almost taken too much power away from ourselves. We don’t acknowledge on a daily basis how much it matters” (Talbot). So whether it is the parents of the teenager, the still-existentially angsty twenty-three-year-old, the nostalgic elder, or anyone and everyone in between, the questions that Y.A. often asks matter regardless of age-range.

Green’s protagonists are most often “sweetly intellectual teen-aged boys smitten with complicated, charismatic girls” (Talbot). But, much like the Y.A. category in which Green is writing, his novels cannot be put in such a simple, quickly defined box. Talbot also explains that “they displayed a youthfully insatiable appetite for big questions: What is an honorable life? How do we wrest meaning from the unexpected death of someone close to us? What do we do when we realize that we’re not as special as we thought we

were?” (Talbot). These questions are hardly ones we stop asking ourselves after our teenage years, as proven by countless works of endlessly respected “adult” authors.

The Young Adult’s Search for Identity

It is perhaps these questions that are just as important as age in defining Young Adult Literature. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* is inarguably a coming-of-age novel, and, in comparing Green and Salinger, Talbot argues that today, *The Catcher in the Rye* would “almost certainly be marketed as Y.A.” (Talbot). And so perhaps it is not merely the concept of age that makes a novel fall into the Young Adult category, but the level of grappling with a sense of identity – which happens for many, most dramatically, during the teenage years.

In the 2003 article *Developing students’ critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction*, Thomas Bean and Karen Moni argue, “Adolescent readers view characters in young adult novels as living and wrestling with real problems close to their own life experiences as teens...At the center of all of these themes are questions of character identity and values” (638, Bean, Moni). Obviously, it is the young adult years where these concerns come most to a head. Thus one could speculate that the age of the Y.A. reader is simply a correlation, not a cause.

However, it is most likely a natural combination of both age and theme. In Talbot’s *New Yorker* profile, an old teacher reflects on Green, saying, “John strikes me in some ways as the same teen-ager he once was, just trying to figure out his place in the world. Only now the world is changing much faster and he’s an agent of that change, creating the world he’s trying to fit into” (Talbot). For many, the questions that plague them as teenagers continue to plague them far into the future, as they understandably can.

And a select few of those people even go on to write Y.A., potentially thinking of their younger selves in the process.

The Importance of Community in Y.A.

What may be more specific to age in relation to Y.A. is the sense of community surrounding it. Green's presence can create a One Direction-esque frenzy. Sarah Green, wife of *The Fault in Our Stars* author and former museum curator, agrees that "being a fan is so much a part of young life now" (Talbot). And John Green is on the forefront of leading the Y.A. community, or, to use a more modern term, the Y.A. Lit "Fandom." The community he has created around himself, his thoughts and his work is a shining example for other Y.A. authors as well as publishers.

Long before *The Fault in Our Stars* hit the big screen, earning upwards of \$300 million, Green was filming YouTube videos with his brother Hank, discussing their days, their lives, the world, and anything else they wanted. In 2006, *Looking for Alaska* had just won a Printz Award, and Green quit his job in order to write. But Talbot describes an initial loneliness that came from Green's isolation, "He got more writing done, but he missed the intellectual camaraderie that he'd always had with his peers. The YouTube project was, in part, an attempt to fill that void. (It was also a smart marketing stunt, though Green could not have predicted how smart)" (Talbot). Now their YouTube channel, Vlogbrothers, has more than 2.8 million subscribers. Green has nurtured the community so much that his fans made *The Fault in Our Stars* the No. 1 seller on Amazon six months before it was published, when Green announced the title. Green also promised to sign every pre-order, which ended up totaling more than 150,000 (he then

proceeded to document his journey of signing 2,000 books a day on his YouTube channel).

Not all Y.A. authors are taking to YouTube to garner their fan communities, but they are certainly aware of the success of Green and his brother's community (who call themselves "Nerdfighters"). Many nurture hefty followings on other social media sites, like Twitter and Tumblr. London now offers the world's first Young Adult Literature Conference (YALC) – an annual gathering where authors can interact with their fans in a space far from that of a typical book signing. While Green has yet to attend YALC, many other prominent modern Y.A. authors have, like Maggie Steifvater, Cassandra Clare, Nina LaCour, and David Levithan (who co-authored *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* with Green) (Waddell).

Is Y.A. Just a Stepping Stone?

The Y.A. Lit subculture has become practically impossible to ignore, but old ideas about the category of literature still exist, although they are visibly dwindling. One example is the antiquated notion that young adult literature is simply another term for transitional literature. In a dated article from 1970 entitled *Literature Study in the High Schools*, Dwight Burton states, "The major function of literature written expressly for adolescents is to provide a vital transition in the literary education." He continues to hypothesize that novels for young adults are meant to "prepare the young reader to comprehend mature works in later years," eventually leading them to the novels of Thomas Hardy or Nathaniel Hawthorne (24-25, Mertz).

While these works of transitional literature may exist, the concept as a whole has been heavily refuted. In a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* article, Cecelia Goodnow offers a

snapshot of the 2007 New York Times Children's Best Sellers list; at No. 7 is *The Book Thief*, "a Holocaust tale narrated by Death," and at No. 5 *Impulse*, "the tale of three suicidal teens who meet at a psychiatric hospital" written entirely in the format of free-verse poetry (Goodnow). If once this genre of work was meant to be merely a stepping-stone, devoid of intrinsic literary meaning, then that time is over. In 2000, the American Library Association created the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. The award "annually honors the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit" (American Library Association).

Even the *New York Times* agrees. As of 2015, the *New York Times* has gone through greater lengths to showcase Young Adult novels. The new implementation splits up the previous Children's section into two distinct categories: Middle Grade and Young Adult. Further, those categories were then split to offer hardcover, paperback, and e-book best sellers lists within them, which is the same model used for categorizing adult books. Speaking to *Publishers Weekly*, Pamela Paul, editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, says, "Given the relative unit sales of paperbacks, they would overtake the [bestseller] lists. New authors would find it hard to break into the list, and it was difficult for readers to discover new writers from those lists. So it made sense to return to the model we use in adult" (White).

For the week of March 27, 2016, at No. 6 is *This is Where it Ends*, a violent account of a school shooting, and at No. 8 is *We All Looked Up*, an apocalyptic narrative about overcoming a variety of stereotypes and stigmas. On the paperback list, having moved higher from its place during Goodnow's look, sits Zusak's Holocaust story narrated by Death himself, *The Book Thief*. Just like any other category of literature,

certain titles establish themselves as classics – their literary merit consistently placing them in the hands of readers.

The Creation of Y.A. Classics

Although having only been published in 2005, *The Book Thief* is an established example of a Y.A. Classic. Hipple argues, “A work cannot be a classic unless and until it has been read by generations of readers beyond the time of its writing” (6, Hipple). And in its mere eleven year existence, *The Book Thief* has done that. And in explaining this, Hipple also offers a look at one facet of the “Young Adult Literature” definition. He explains, “In popular parlance [‘young adult’] refers to someone between, as they say, puberty and adultery, or at least someone in the teen years, say twixt twelve and twenty...But when the term is used with literature, ‘young adult’ is much more narrowly described: we are usually referring to someone between eleven or twelve years of age and fifteen or sixteen, in other words, some within about a four- or five-year span” (6, Hipple). Thus, he submits that a generation for a Young Adult novel is that same four- or five-year lifetime, and if a novel, like *The Book Thief*, can strongly continue outside of its original generational existence, it is just as classic as S.E Hinton’s *The Outsiders* or J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Thus, one could argue that *The Book Thief*, a classic in its own category, is equivalent to Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* – also a classic, simply a different category.

Dealing with the Big Questions

Readers and theorists alike have always based literary merit on a myriad of changing criteria. Once rejected works have later found homes amongst the most prestigious of creations. Dwight Burton’s conception from 1970 that Y.A. Lit’s intrinsic

function is to educate teens on how to read “proper literature” is near officially debunked. As for the official decision on what constitutes Y.A., the world is still waiting; there are no boxes that must be checked for a novel to be shelved in the Y.A. section of a library or bookstore.

Of course, there are some common themes – but for nearly every one, there is a multitude of exceptions. Y.A. protagonists tend to be teenagers, but that term is loose: Harry Potter was eleven-years-old when he first went to Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, and acclaimed Y.A. author Rainbow Rowell writes of a college-aged girl in her popular Y.A. novel *Fangirl*. Clearly Y.A. cannot be defined by genre, either. For every vampiric love triangle or prep school drop out, there are also stories of sickness and love, of grief and suicide, of drugs and sex, of wizards and assassins and students who are bad at math and everyone in between. Some characters struggle with identity in regards to race, or sexuality, or stereotypes, or the fact that they are secretly a fallen angel attempting to rid the world of evil. For Y.A. genres and themes, there is no mold, and it is often the destruction of common tropes that make the most successful Y.A. novels.

It is perhaps John Green who defined Y.A. best when he spoke about his respect for the intensity teenagers feel about love and grief (Talbot). Adults often look back on their teenage years and think, “oh, I thought I had problems then, but look at life now!” While many teenagers may not be struggling with figuring out how to provide for themselves or how to feed a family (although, some of them *are*, or are dealing with other unthinkable things like cancer or the holocaust, a la *The Fault in Our Stars* and *The Book Thief*) like adults are, they are perhaps filled with more existential anxiety than any other

age group. The teenage years are an undeniably intense time of transition; in them, we are being ripped from childhood and thrust into adulthood, and attempting to figure out what that means. Previous worldviews crumble and we attempt to pick up the pieces in order to build something new. It is perhaps the first time in our lives where we begin to truly feel the impermanence of what we know. It is the strange juxtaposition of our lack of earthly experience and the impact we believe even small things can have on our lives – everything feels like the end of the world because we have yet to build a world of our own.

Yet even in this uncertain time in life, many Y.A. novels end in hope. The last words of the *Harry Potter* series are “All was well.” After coping with the death of his best friend and first love, Pudge from John Green’s *Looking For Alaska* decides, “We need never be hopeless, because we can never be irreparably broken.” *The Fault in Our Stars* ends with the main character knowing she is going to die, but realizing that her short life was worthwhile and meaningful. While these may be slightly extreme examples, perhaps the category of Young Adult Literature could be renamed Stories for those who Feel Things Intensely, Have Uncertainty about their Place in the World, and Are Seeking Some Sense of Hope. Those emotions do not magically go away on our twentieth birthdays.

Green argues that those big questions matter for teenagers, and that they matter for adults too – adults are simply better at ignoring them. Y.A. Lit does not always offer answers to the big questions, but in one way or another they offer solidarity for those asking them. They speak in a modern way, particularly accessible to the amorphous age group “young adults,” but are undeniably relevant for all. Young Adult Literature should

continue to have no boxes to check in order to satisfy requirements; the definition should remain as fluid as those who pick up the books. And if we are in the midst of a Y.A. Lit renaissance, then there is no telling what exciting innovation may come next.

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