



Young Adult Literature: The Problem with YA Literature

Author(s): Chris Crowe

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Young Adult Literature

CHRIS CROWE, EDITOR

THE PROBLEM WITH YA LITERATURE

Despite their incredible success, J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, which, now that Harry is fourteen years old in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* can be comfortably considered YA literature, have had plenty of criticism. The cited faults of the Potter books are many, ranging from pedestrian writing to occult content.

Attacks on YA books are nothing new. For more than a century there have been vocal parents, teachers, and librarians who have attacked books written specifically for teenagers. Their complaints have varied over the years, but most objections generally fall into one of two categories: YA books are bad because

1. They aren't the Classics.
2. They corrupt the young.

Of course, I have to agree that many YA novels fall short of the depth and artistic development of the great works of the literary canon. And, yes, I suppose there are some YA books that might have a negative effect on certain teenage readers, but as a passionate proponent of the field, I am personally acquainted with the "lure" of YA literature. The lure, at least in the best books, is obvious: great writing, engaging stories, memorable characters. Good YA books can knock the reluctance out of reluctant readers, can provoke critical thinking in sophisticated readers, and can provide hours of pleasure for most all readers.

So, what's the problem?

One problem is what to call these books.

In an earlier column (September 1998) I talked about some of the labels placed on literature for teenagers in the last several decades and the inherent weaknesses of each. The label, whether it happens to be "YA" or something else, exists mostly for marketing. Publishers and librarians want to get

books for teenagers into the hands of teenagers, so some sort of label is necessary. Still, as Chris Crutcher pointed out in *Voices from the Middle* (December 1999), the YA label is as misguided and troublesome as any other the field has had. "Most teens I know don't believe we see them as adults, young or otherwise," wrote Crutcher. "So calling literature about them 'young adult literature' just doesn't ring true to them" (18). Crutcher's right. Teenagers naturally want to be seen as adults, so any label that marks them—or the books they read—as something less than adult is repulsive to them.

Another problem is quality. Because of a few bad YA apples, the entire field has come under fire. In an article in *US News* (9 August 1999) Holly J. Morris pointed out that YA books are often a tough sell to kids and their parents:

[Y]ears of bad marketing have made it difficult to convince teens that there are young adult titles worth reading. High schoolers, turned off by the schlocky romance and horror serials that crowd YA sections in bookstores, often give up on books altogether or skip from kid books to John Grisham and Stephen King. "They seem really cheesy," says 16-year-old Lacey Pearlman of Walpole, Massachusetts, whose recent reads include *In the Lake of the Woods*, Tim O'Brien's brutal, adult novel of post-Vietnam America. "When you see [a Sweet Valley High novel] next to what could be a really good book, it persuades you not to get [the good book]."

(www.usnews.com/usnews/issue/990908/nycu/books.htm)

It's no surprise that the range of quality is as broad in YA literature as it is in adult literature. We have a handful of classics, followed by a good bunch of brilliant novels, followed by an impressive collection of readable and entertaining books, but we also have some YA novels marred by weak writing and/or bound in repulsive juvenile covers. Unfortunately, the clunkers are the books that critics of YA literature seem to be most familiar with. If someone's looking for lousy books to use to condemn the entire field, it's easy to browse the shelves in a discount store and find an armful of poorly conceived, badly written, mindless books labeled "YA." Most teachers and librarians can quickly name popular schlock that often dominates the elective reading of many teenagers. And sometimes truly awful cover art is enough to condemn a book without even opening it. Whether we like it or not, teenagers—and YA critics—often do judge books by their covers, and amateurish or childish or sloppy cover art convinces many kids that these

books are not for them. When teenagers or their parents see or read one “really cheesy” YA book, it’s easier for them to dismiss the entire field.

Another problem, for some people at least, is that YA books haven’t been around long enough to be canonized. In a recent syndicated column, Kathleen Parker’s attack on YA literature paralleled the concerns of many adults; she’s upset about “. . . the latest fad of shelving literary classics in favor of contemporary, more fun-to-read books, which is now being advanced by the nation’s oops-educationists.” She adds, “[W]e do children no favor by continually lowering the bar to accommodate their appetite for entertainment” (*Salt Lake Tribune* 26 Mar. 2000: AA1). Parker probably didn’t really mean to suggest that literary classics aren’t entertaining, but her argument relies on the traditional views that if something is entertaining, it certainly can’t be worthwhile, and that hard work, in this case reading the classics, though inherently unpleasant, is ultimately good for you.

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Not all teachers of literature agree, of course, and many use challenging YA books in meaningful ways and classic works of literature in entertaining ways. Often, however, some teachers and concerned parents (including me) have seen the adverse effects the classics can have on unprepared or reluctant readers. Because of this, we are sometimes guilty of what David Laubach lamented in an issue of *California English*: “In their desire to push young adult literature, these [NCTE] authors make the classics

villains” (Fall 1997: 15). Though most teachers would never advocate that YA books should supplant the classics, their defensive stance, which calls for the more reasoned use of the classics and the increased use of good YA books, probably makes critics feel that YA books are threatening the place of the classics in school curricula.

One of the most vociferous and articulate critics of the Harry Potter books, British writer and critic Anthony Holden, uses the same “classics” argument as Parker. In defending his actions in the Whitbread judging (which, in a heated debate, selected Seamus Heaney’s new translation of *Beowulf* over one of Rowling’s novels for the prestigious literary prize), wrote in *The Observer*:

We are a country with dramatically declining standards of literacy, increasingly dragged down to the lowest common denominator by the purveyors of all forms of mindless mass entertainment. The success of the Potter books is just another dispiriting proof of the Murdoch-led dumbing down of all our lives . . . These are some of the reasons why I said, during and after the Whitbread judging, that a victory for Harry Potter “would have sent out a signal to the world, like the monarchy and the Dome, that Britain is a country that refuses to take itself seriously.” I did not, as reported, further argue that children’s books cannot be great literature. Of course they can, if they are well-written, stretch the reader’s imagination and open virgin minds to the magical power of words.

(www.observer.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,335923,00.html)

Even though Holden admits that some books for young readers have risen to “classic” status, the problem is the “classic” label. We do have some novels that are indeed classics in YA literature, but the field simply hasn’t been around long enough to stand the test of time the way *Beowulf*, Shakespearean plays, *Pride and Prejudice*, *War and Peace*, and other works have. So, while there are some classic YA stories, there really are no books that fit into the generally accepted classification of literary classics, and for many critics of the field, this is a serious problem. There are adults who believe that young people should read the classics and nothing else. They feel that the reading and study of anything less than canonized literature handicaps readers’ cultural literacy, weakens students’ minds, and wastes valuable educational time and resources.

Although the “classic” argument against YA books has not diminished much lately, it has been overshadowed by a more recent concern about

“bleak” books being released by YA publishers. One of the first to note the increase in bleak YA novels was Sara Mosle, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* (2 August 1998). This is how she began her article:

Somewhere in America tonight, in a delicious rite of childhood, a teen-ager will curl up in a window seat or overstuffed sofa to devour a young-adult novel . . . about murder, incest, rape or drug addiction. These are the subjects of a spate of recently published young-adult novels. . . (34)

Her observation about this trend in YA literature led to an outburst of similar generalizations about the current state of the field:

- . . . the trend in teen-age literature has been toward stark, reality-based fiction. “Young-adult” books, or the books aimed at readers 12 years old and older, consistently explore themes such as rape, mental illness and murder. (Julia Duin, *Insight on the News* 31 Jan. 2000: 26)
- These books [*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The Buffalo Tree*, *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, *Smack*] and others that feature stark themes, complex plot lines and ambiguous resolutions are edging out the happy endings and conventional morals of the old-style teen “problem” novels, which would obsess over something like divorce, or an accidental pregnancy for 120 pages.” (David Spitz, *Time* 19 July 1999: 79)
- These examples [*The Pigman*, *The Goats*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*] are literature in the sense that *National Enquirer* reports on Pamela Lee are. This is the trash that plants the destructive seeds of violence, theft, and sexual perversion in the still malleable minds of children. (Marianne M. Jennings, *Deseret News* 13 Sept. 1999: A9)

These bleak generalizations about novels for teenagers have fanned the critical fires of adults who are already worried that YA books corrupt the young. Unfortunately, this negative press has also caused concern among some people who previously had no problems with YA literature.

Attempts like Kimberly Coniff’s in *Brill’s Content* to explain this new bleakness in YA books have done little to pacify critics:

The trend toward hard-core literature is partly a ploy to lure those older teens back to the young-adult category . . . This is today’s new teen novel: gritty, immediate, and brazenly hard-core. The characters deal with any number of controversial issues, from incest and sexual abuse to suicide and murder. Suddenly those dog-eared pages of Judy Blume’s *Forever* don’t seem so racy any more. (Sept. 1999: 23)

Coniff makes it sound as if publishers are pandering to the more prurient tastes of today’s adolescents. If adults who aren’t familiar with YA books believe her assessment, they’re sure to be willing to join the assault on YA literature. How many parents or teachers want their children or students reading and studying what, according to these bleak generalizations, is essentially R or NC-17 rated material?

This overly negative perception of today’s YA books is a *big* problem.

Fortunately, not all YA books are so awfully bleak, and not all attempts to explain the bleak trend in YA publishing feed the negative hype. One of the most articulate and thoughtful supporters of YA literature, Michael Cart, weighed in on this phenomenon in his *Booklist* column (15 Sept. 1999):

Why has all this happened? To some in the media, it is a product of publishers’ frantic efforts to “tempt” or “lure” (such words crop up repeatedly in reports of this phenomenon) teens back to reading by publishing R-rated books. Concerned adults are invited, thus, to view publishing personified as a dirty old man, approaching a group of teens and wheezing, “Hey kids” (lurid pause), “want some—heh, heh, heh—books?”

Although I don’t doubt that market forces are a part of the edgy book phenomenon . . . I also think sensationalizing by the mainstream media impugns the integrity of the editors who are devoted to young-adult literature and patronizes the teens themselves. (248)

Publishers are indeed turning out some very bleak books, but those dark stories aren’t the only kind they’re publishing. The problem is that the media hype surrounding bleak books has obscured the many other fine YA books being published each year. The robust YA market continues to offer a wide range of books for all kinds of readers.

Bleak stories are nothing new; just take a close look at *Oedipus Rex*, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, or *The Grapes of Wrath*. The literary canon is not as bleak as these works, and it would be unfair to categorize the entire canon as dark, negative, and cor-

ruptive based on a few prominent stories. Not all teenage readers are ready for stories as heavy as these, just as not all teenagers are ready for *Weird on the Outside*, *The Facts Speak for Themselves*, or *When She Was Good*. Some kids, however, are mature enough, smart enough, and thoughtful enough to read these classic and YA dark tales and benefit from the experience. It's up to parents, librarians, and English teachers to know books and to steer young readers to the literature—YA or classic—for which they're best suited.

Discoveries: New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading

Biography for You, Laurie Lanzen Harris, ed. (OmniGraphics, Spring 2000). This perfect-bound paperback profiles eleven contemporary personalities, including authors Beverly Cleary, J. K. Rowling, and Christopher Paul Curtis, athletes Lance Armstrong, Mia Hamm, and Rebecca Lobo, and celebrities Brandy and Will Smith. Each profile includes photos and a brief bibliography.

Buried Onions, Gary Soto (HarperCollins, 1997). If your students liked Victor Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, they're sure to love Soto's book, the story of nineteen-year-old Eddie's aimless and sad existence in the barrios of Fresno, California. This is one of Soto's best novels yet.

Earth's Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology, Betty Bonham Lies (Fulcrum Publishing, 1999). Finally a book of mythology that will appeal directly to female readers. This is a collection of more than sixty Greek and Roman myths with women as central characters. The stories are arranged into six thematic categories.

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy, Sonya Sones (HarperCollins, 1999). Told in a style similar to Karen Hesse's Newbery Medal-winning *Out of the Dust*, this is the moving and lyrical account of a younger sister watching her older sister's downward spin into insanity.

The \$66 Summer, John Armistead (Milkweed, 2000). In the 1950s, white, thirteen-year-old George spends the summer with his grandmother in a small Alabama town. While trying to earn extra money with his best friend, who happens to be African American, George stumbles into events that reveal a secret murder and the latent racism of this small town.

The Century That Was: Reflections on the Last One Hundred Years. James Cross Giblin, ed. (Atheneum, 2000). Eleven essays on various aspects of the twentieth century: Russell Freedman on nineteenth century predictions of life in the twentieth; Eve Bunting on immigrants; Albert Marrin on World War I; Bruce Brooks on sports; Jim Murphy on the evolution of transportation; Penny Coleman on the expansion of women's roles and rights; Walter Dean Myers on civil rights; Lois Lowry on fashion; Milton Meltzer on the presidents of the last century; Katherine Paterson on religion; and Laurence Pringle on eco-heroes of the twentieth century.

The White Dove, Lois Thompson Bartholomew (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). Set in an alternative time and place, this is the heroic adventure story of Tasha, the white dove, and her escape from an oppressive dictator who hopes to establish himself as king of Lomnor. It's a well-written classic tale of good versus evil.

Time Capsule: Short Stories about Teenagers throughout the Twentieth Century, Donald R. Gallo, ed. (Delacorte, 1999). Another of Gallo's creative collections of YA short stories, this features ten stories, one set in each decade of the twentieth century, written by popular YA authors like Richard Peck, Graham Salisbury, Chris Crutcher, and Bruce Brooks. The themes vary, but each story will give readers a vivid insight into a particular period of the last century.

Tomorrowland: Stories about the Future, Michael Cart, ed. (Scholastic, 2000). A collection of ten short stories set in the future, this is a great companion to Gallo's *Time Capsule*. Cart has gathered thought-provoking stories from Jon Scieszka, Katherine Paterson, Lois Lowry, Jacqueline Woodson, and other talented YA writers.

Safe at Second, Scott Johnson (Philomel, 1999). This is a great coming-of-age story about two baseball players—Todd, a high school pitcher with major league potential, and his best friend, Paulie, whose love for baseball is exceeded only by his lack of talent for the game. Both boys' lives are thrown a curve when a line drive smashes into Todd's face, blinding him in one eye. The two friends are forced to reexamine their friendship and their futures.

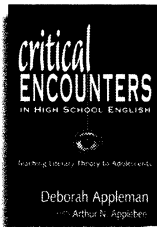
Vanishing, Bruce Brooks (HarperCollins, 1999). Alice and Rex are both very smart and very sick, but there is one essential difference between them. Something malignant is killing Rex; Alice is

starving herself to death. As in many of Brooks's stories, these two characters are precocious and insightful, and their conversations about life, death, love, and families have a beneficial effect on them and on the reader.

Whirligig, Paul Fleischman (Henry Holt, 1998). This may be one of the most creative YA nov-

els since Louis Sachar's *Holes*. While driving home drunk and depressed from a high school party, Brent causes an accident that kills a high school girl. His sentence is to place a whirligig in her memory at each of the four corners of the United States. The experience changes him from a self-centered, self-pitying adolescent into a thoughtful young man.

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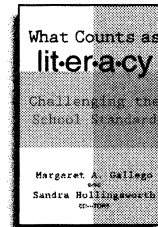
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