

The Value of Young Adult Literature

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Abstract: This White Paper will discuss the nature and evolution of young adult literature with particular emphasis on its current condition and its value to its intended readership. In discussing its increased viability as a body of critically lauded literature, it will also discuss its importance in meeting the life needs of young adults and its increasing value in enhancing adolescent literacy. It will conclude by affirming the Young Adult Library Services Association's commitment to evaluating, promoting, and supporting the most widespread availability possible of this literature to American youth.

Background: The term "young adult literature" is inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms "young adult" and "literature" are dynamic, changing as culture and society — which provide their context — change. When the term first found common usage in the late 1960's, it referred to realistic fiction that was set in the real (as opposed to imagined), contemporary world and addressed problems, issues, and life circumstances of interest to young readers aged approximately 12-18. Such titles were issued by the children's book divisions of American publishers and were marketed to institutions — libraries and schools — that served such populations.

While some of this remains true today, much else has changed. In recent years, for example, the size of this population group has changed dramatically. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of persons between 12 and 19 soared to 32 million, a growth rate of seventeen percent that significantly outpaced the growth of the rest of the population. The size of this population segment has also increased as the conventional definition of "young adult" has expanded to include those as young as ten and, since the late 1990s, as old as twenty-five.

"Literature," which traditionally meant fiction, has also expanded to include new forms of literary — or narrative — nonfiction and new forms of poetry, including novels and book-length works of nonfiction in verse. The increasing importance of visual communication has begun to expand this definition to include the pictorial, as well, especially when offered in combination with text as in the case of picture books, comics, and graphic novels and nonfiction.

As a result of these newly expansive terms, the numbers of books being published for this audience have similarly increased, perhaps by as much as 25 percent, based on the number of titles being reviewed by a leading journal. Similarly, industry analyst Albert Greco states that the sale of young adult books increased by 23 percent from 1999 to 2005.

Though once dismissed as a genre consisting of little more than problem novels and romances, young adult literature has, since the mid-1990's, come of age as literature — literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.

Evidence of this is the establishment of the Michael L. Printz Award, which YALSA presents annually to the author of the best young adult book of the year, "best" being defined solely in terms of literary merit. Further evidence is the extraordinary number of critically acclaimed adult authors who have begun writing for young adults — authors like Michael Chabon, Isabel Allende, Dale Peck, Julia Alvarez, T. C. Boyle, Joyce Carol Oates, Francine Prose, and a host of others. As a result of these and other innovations young adult literature has become one of the most dynamic, creatively exciting areas of publishing.

Position: YALSA is acknowledging this growing diversity by expanding the number of book-related awards and lists it presents and publishes. Audio books and graphic novels are only two of the new areas that YALSA is targeting. Meanwhile it continues to promote excellence in the field through such established prizes as the Printz, ALEX, and Margaret A. Edwards Awards and such recommended lists as Best Books for Young Adults and Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers.

YALSA also acknowledges that whether one defines young adult literature narrowly or broadly, much of its value cannot be quantified but is to be found in how it addresses the needs of its readers. Often described as “developmental,” these needs recognize that young adults are beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage called “young adulthood” is a unique part of life, distinguished by unique needs that are – at minimum — physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal in nature.

By addressing these needs, young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers. And by addressing not only their needs but also their interests, the literature becomes a powerful inducement for them to read, another compelling reason to value it, especially at a time when adolescent literacy has become a critically important issue. The Alliance for Excellent Education has declared a “literacy crisis among middle and high school students” in the wake of research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress that finds 65 percent of graduating high school seniors and 71 percent of America’s eighth graders are reading below grade level.

As literacy has become another developmental need of young adults, organizations like the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English have begun to recognize the imperative need for “a wide variety of reading material that they (young adults) can and want to read” (IRA), books that “should be self-selected and of high interest to the reader” (NCTE), young adult books, in short.

As a literature of relevance that meets developmental needs – including literacy skills — young adult literature also becomes a developmental *asset*, which YALSA’s *New Directions For Library Service To Young Adults* defines as “a factor promoting positive teenage development.” The independent, nonprofit Search Institute offers a framework of forty such developmental assets.

YALSA finds another of the chief values of young adult literature in its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension. On the one hand young adults have an all-consuming need to belong. But on the other, they are also inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as being unique, which – for them — is not cause for celebration but, rather, for despair. For to be unique is to be unlike one’s peers, to be “other,” in fact. And to be “other” is to not belong but, instead, to be outcast. Thus, to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the reassurance that one is not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.

Another value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *un* like the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who – if not for the encounter in reading – might forever remain strangers or – worse — irredeemably “other.”

Still another value of young adult literature is its capacity for telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be, for in this way it equips readers for dealing with the realities of impending adulthood and for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

By giving readers such a frame of reference, it also helps them to find role models, to make sense of the world they inhabit, to develop a personal philosophy of being, to determine what is right and, equally, what is wrong, to cultivate a personal sensibility. To, in other words, become civilized.

Conclusion: For all of these reasons the Young Adult Library Services Association values young adult literature, believes it is an indispensable part of public and school library collections, and regards it as essential to healthy youth development and the corollary development of healthy communities in which both youth and libraries can thrive.

Reference

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