

## SLIS Connecting

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Volume 5  
Issue 1 *Youth Services*

Article 7

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2016

# Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art

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### Recommended Citation

Cart, Michael (2016) "Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art," *SLIS Connecting*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.18785/slis.0501.07

Available at: <http://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting/vol5/iss1/7>

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**Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art**  
Speech by Michael Cart for the Ezra Jack Keats Lecture  
at the 2016 Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival (unedited)

"Thank you. It's a great pleasure and privilege to be here this afternoon to present a lecture that memorializes the remarkable, groundbreaking Ezra Jack Keats, whose centennial we celebrate this year. It's in the spirit of his talent for innovation that I'll be talking today about young adult literature, a notably restless art, a dynamic, risk-taking literature that grows and changes as its context – culture and society – changes. It is, accordingly, a happy exercise **in** innovation -- and evolution -- and so it has been since its genesis in 1967, the signal year that saw the publication of what are widely considered to be the first two young adult novels, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. As they evidence, YA – in its inception -- was a literature of contemporary realism and though, in the nearly fifty years that have passed since, it has expanded to embrace a wealth of genres and forms – romance, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, novels in verse or letters, creative nonfiction and more – it has, nevertheless, remained **at its core** a literature of **contemporary** realism. Accordingly, I'll be talking a good deal about the contemporary this afternoon but before I do, I want – in the interest of establishing context -- to take a retrospective look at the prehistory of young adult literature.

For that we must return to the 1930s and the Great Depression, a watershed event in the creation of the then nascent literature in the sense that the Depression helped create a target **audience** for it as the dwindling job market drove young people out of the workplace and into the classroom in record numbers. Consider that in 1910 only 15% of American youth were in high school. By 1930 the number had increased to 50%, by 1936 to 65% and by 1939, it was fully 75%. The result of putting such large numbers of young people into each other's daily company in the classroom was the emergence of a youth culture populated by potential readers and centered on high school social life, including such courtship rituals as dancing and dating with their attendant etiquette, the subject of such popular books as *Etiquette for*

*Young Moderns*, *Hi, There, High School!* and *First Love*, all written by Gay Head, the pseudonymous author of the column "Boy Dates Girl" that appeared in *Scholastic* magazine and counseled young people on such pressing matters as how to make proper introductions, which fork to use at dinner parties and whether to wait for a boy to open your car door. By 1941 the target readership for Head's books and columns had become known, for the first time, as "teenagers," the first use of the term in print having taken place in the September 1941 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*. (The related term "young adult" first appeared in the professional literature in a 1944 publication by librarian Margaret Scoggin, though another more ambiguous term, "young people," antedated it and continued in widespread use until 1956 when ALA formed the Young Adult Services Division now known as the Young Adult Library Services Association.)

So, that said, we now turn to 1942 when appeared what some have called the first YA novel, Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*, the story of seventeen-year-old Angie Morrow's summer of love. Though **not** a YA book– it was published as an **adult** novel as was J. D. Salinger's 1951 novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, a more viable forerunner of the young adult novel than *Seventeenth Summer* -- Daly's book nevertheless was quickly co-opted by teenage readers, its success spawning a host of imitations, books actually published **for** teenagers and written by such authors as Betty Cavanna, Janet Lambert, Rosamund du Jardin, Anne Emery and others, books that were **not** yet called YA but -- rather patronizingly -- "junior novels," instead. Their content is neatly captured by the dust-jacket blurb for du Jardin's novel *Practically Seventeen*. I quote: "In recent years permanent recognition and popularity have been accorded the junior novel, the story that records truthfully the modern girl's dream of life and romance and her ways of adjusting to her school and family experiences. *Practically Seventeen* is such a book – as full of life as the junior prom." End quote.

So successful were these “junior novels” that the 1940s became a decade of romance fiction. The trend continued throughout the nineteen fifties, though space on the bookshelf was by then being made for books for boy readers as well, most of **their** books being about sports, adventure, occupations, hot rods and what might be called space rods, those space ship staples of science fiction, a genre that had emerged in the late 1940s in the work of Robert A. Heinlein and Andre Norton. Whether in outer space or here on earth, almost all teen novels of the time were, at their heart, inadvertent fantasies, giving – as they did -- the impression that every teenager was white and lived in a small middle or upper middle class hometown filled with white picket fences. The chief problem of the teenage protagonists in these books -- who to take to the junior prom – was about as relevant to the real lives of real teenagers as *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*.

The new decade of the 1960s would reject such irrelevance, but not at first, for while the times, to quote the singer/songwriter Bob Dylan, were a-changing, the literature was not . . . a-changing – at least not in the **early** years of the decade. No one remarked on this better than S. E. Hinton, who wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*, “Teenagers today want to read about teenagers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times. In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme with a horse and the girl who loved it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned. In short, where is the reality?”

The answer, of course, was to be found in the pages of her own 1967 novel, *The Outsiders* with its mean streets setting and its theme of urban warfare between its teenage gang members, dubbed, respectively, the Greasers and the Socs. Hinton’s mean streets were located in her hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma; those of her equally innovative fellow author Robert Lipsyte’s were in New York City as depicted in the pages of **his** 1967 novel *The Contender*, which featured one of the first protagonists of color to appear in young adult literature, the African American teenager Alfred

Brooks, whose struggle to become a contender both in the boxing ring and in life it recorded.

This newly hard-edged, realistic fiction hit the ground running and a new genre, young adult literature, sprang into being, seemingly overnight; within two years such other noteworthy novels as Paul Zindel’s *My Darling, My Hamburger* and John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There It Better Be Worth the Trip* had embraced such real world considerations as abortion and homosexuality, respectively. Two years later 1971 found Hinton writing about drug abuse in *That Was Then. This Is Now* and in 1973 Alice Childress joined her with her novel *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But a Sandwich*. And then came 1974 and the publication of one of the most important and influential novels in the history of young adult literature, Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, arguably the first young adult novel to trust teens with the sad truth that not all endings are happy ones. In this unforgettable novel about teenager Jerry Renault and his steadfast refusal to sell chocolates for his school, an act with dire consequences, Cormier took his readers into the very heart of darkness and turned the lights on to reveal the bleak landscape there. In this and the fourteen other novels that followed, Cormier continued to dare disturb a too-comfortable universe by acknowledging, as he told an interviewer, “Adolescence is such a lacerating time that most of us carry the baggage of it with us all our lives.”

Thanks to Cormier and a host of other distinguished writers who emerged in the ‘70s and who, like him, became grandmasters of the form -- writers like Judy Blume, Lois Duncan, M. E. Kerr, Lois Lowry, Walter Dean Myers, and Richard Peck -- the decade became known as the first Golden Age of young adult literature. If that’s the good news, the bad news is that it was also the decade of the single issue problem novel with its formulaic focus on the problem du jour at the expense of such literary considerations as thematic weight and characterization. Sadly, the problem novel turned the gold to brass with its sensational, one dimensional treatment of issues in such exercises in wretched excess as the melodramatic *Go Ask Alice* by “Anonymous” and the florid *Just Hold On* by Scott

Bunn, two books that bracketed the seventies and dealt, respectively, with fatal drug abuse and –in the case of Bunn’s book -- a whole plethora of problems, including another kind of abuse, incest.

Is it any wonder that readers finally rejected this kind of awkward, overstated exposition and, instead, turned the clock back so that the decade of the eighties became, like that of the forties, one of rampant romance? Unlike the forties, however, these new romance novels were not known by their individual authors’ names but, instead, by the titles of their individual **series**, almost all of which seemed to contain the words, “Sweet Valley!” Significantly, these original paperback series were not targeted at the traditional purchasers -- librarians and teachers -- but, instead, at the teens themselves who were now flocking to their modern mecca, the shopping mall, and the chain bookstores located there. Beverly Horowitz, then editor in chief of the paperback publisher Pacer Books, explained that Pacer titles would be found in display racks in the malls “right between the fast food haven and the record store. There is a teen-aged consumer force out there,” she continued, “and the only way to reach them is to go where **their** action is.”

The success of the paperback romance spawned another kind of paperback series later in the decade, this one consisting of horror novels, all of which seemed to have been written by the ubiquitous Christopher Pike and R. L. Stine, who were once dubbed – perhaps deservedly so -- “the Beavis and Butthead of young adult literature.”

Despite the omnipresence of forgettable paperback series, the ‘80s, like the ‘70s, saw the emergence of writers whose work would dignify and enrich the field -- gifted writers like Francesca Lia Block, Chris Crutcher, Ron Koertge, Gary Paulsen, Cynthia Voigt, Virginia Euwer Wolff and, on the very cusp of the nineties, Jacqueline Woodson.

Nevertheless, the dawn of that next decade, the ‘90s, found young adult literature to be in a bad way, near death many observers were solemnly pronouncing. What on earth had happened to the once vital form? Well, several things. First of all the teen population

had taken a fifteen-year-long nosedive that began as early as 1977 and lasted through 1992. Second, the purchasing power of schools and libraries, the traditional market for **hardcover** young adult books, had eroded thanks, in part, to shrinking budgets caused by taxpayer revolts like California’s notorious Proposition 13; as a result, the market changed from being 80 to 90% institutional to only 50-60% and shifted from schools and libraries to the retail, especially to the new superbookstores, which – unfortunately – considered young adult literature to be middle school literature, this thanks in large part to the rise of the middle school movement in the 1970s and ‘80s, when the number of such schools burgeoned from 499 to 6,003. Thus, we had a new market for **younger** YA and publishers went where the money was, “youthening” the age of protagonists from the traditional 16-17 to 10 – 14, instead. The distinguished editor-publisher Richard Jackson, surveying this, declared, simply, “young adult literature now stops at fourteen.” Lastly, the rise of reality television began poaching on the province of realistic fiction, which could not compete with TV’s more visceral view of reality. Considering all of this is it any wonder that editor-publisher Linda Zuckerman observed, “I think young adult literature is dying?”

And yet . . . and yet by the middle of the decade of the 1990s young adult literature had made a miraculous recovery to become one of the most vital and innovative areas of publishing. How on earth did **that** happen? Well, the answer is a multifaceted one. For one thing, the whole language movement had begun putting young adult books into high school classrooms, reviving their popularity and importance. For another, the teen population had begun to grow apace, increasing 16.6% from 1990 to the year 2000 when it totaled 32 million. For yet another, the superbookstores, recognizing the emergence of a new generation of consumers, had begun creating separate, stand-alone young adult departments. For still another, the library and education communities had simply refused to let YA die, resolutely focusing their supportive attention on the field. For example: the Young Adult Library Services Association held an important national conference called the Top 100 Countdown in the summer of 1994, the purpose of

the conference being the selection of the 100 best young adult books published since 1967, a process that reminded observers of the richness of the body of young adult literature. That same year, 1994, saw the publication of a seminal article in *School Library Journal*. Titled "Today's Young Adult Writers: Pulling No Punches," it was written by Chris Lynch, himself a young adult author, who in his article argued that "the teen experience is unlike any other, and it deserves its own literature." A year earlier the venerable *Horn Book* magazine had added a column about young adult literature to its pages. Titled "The Sand in the Oyster," it was written by the literary observer Patty Campbell. In 1994 my own YA-focused column "Carte Blanche" debuted in *Booklist* magazine. The next year, 1995, saw the publication in *School Library Journal* of author-editor Marc Aronson's provocative article "The YA Novel Is Dead and Other Fairly Stupid Tales." That same year my article "Of Risk and Revelation: the Current State of Young Adult Literature" appeared in *The Journal of Youth Services*. The year after that, 1996, saw the highbrow Children's Literature Association departing from its customary province, children's literature, to devote the entire spring issue of its scholarly journal to "Critical Theory and Young Adult Literature." That fall ALAN, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English, held its annual conference, this one with the bellwether theme "Exploding the Canon," (that's c-a-n-o-n), an exploration of the new viability of using young adult books in the classroom. Its context was the firm belief that the term "young adult literature" was **not**, as some had argued, an oxymoron but, rather, the name of a body of literature that could be taught and explicated as seriously as the constituents of the traditional literary canon. Later that fall two book-length works appeared, which furthered that argument: Don Gallo and Sarah Hertz's *From Hinton to Hamlet* and my own history of young adult literature *From Romance to Realism*. Finally, a second standing room only YALSA conference, this one held in 1996 with the theme "How Adult Is Young Adult?" passionately argued for the return of YA to its original audience of sixteen to nineteen-year-olds -- and beyond.

Publishers had obviously been aware of all this activity, for by the end of 1996 an honest-to-goodness renaissance of young adult literature was in full swing. And by then, YA authors had, as Chris Lynch had pleaded in his 1994 SLJ article, "taken the gloves off," to spar, bare-knuckled, with the at-risk realities of teen life. For it is a sad fact that young adult lives were, to a nearly unprecedented degree, at risk in the early to mid-nineties. Consider that one fifteen-nineteen-year-old was then being murdered every three and a half hours; one in five young adults was living in poverty; each year as many as 1.3 million teenagers were running away from home not, like Toby Tyler, to join the circus but, rather, to escape home lives that were, at best, hellish. Unfortunately, when these grim realities became the subjects of the new YA literature, the constituent books were dismissed as "bleak books" and the mainstream media went into a frenzy of condemnation, asserting, in effect, that teen sensibilities were too tender to be exposed to the unvarnished reality that YA books came to contain in the mid- to late '90s. That teens themselves found this condemnation to be ill-conceived was evidenced by an article written by a New York teen named Julia Rosen; it appeared in the pages of VOYA magazine. "Reading 'bleak' books," she stated, "helps us to realize what kinds of problems actual teens have. They broaden our outlook and help us become less apathetic about the world's problems. Until we live in a world where no problems exist, adults must learn to accept that some of the books we read will describe the harsh realities of life."

Does Rosen's invocation of the word "problem" mean that "bleak" books were, then, simply a revival of '70's problem novels? Not at all. Instead they were serious, closely observed works of naturalism, fiction of the quotidian, informed by complex characters, artful plots, thematic weight, and well-realized settings.

The editor-publisher Richard Jackson put all of this into perspective when he said, "When reviewers today worry about bleak stories, they are worrying on behalf of the audience about the readiness of young readers to face life's darkest corners. But in America

there are kids *living* in those dark corners and they need our attention as much as the feisty, pert, athletic and popular youth so reassuring to adults. Even children in the sun will enter the darkness. They *all* need our tenderness. And we need our tenderness as art inspires us to feel it.”

The operative word in Jackson’s eloquent statement is, I would argue, “art,” for more than ever, YA advocates were stressing the literary character of young adult literature and the importance of finding some way of acknowledging, encouraging, and underscoring that fact. As a result, more and more people were calling for the creation of a YA award analogous to children’s literature’s Newbery. The author Avi waggishly suggested such an award could be called the Elderberry but, needless to say, that notion came to naught. Recognizing the opportunity I had as then President of the Young Adult Library Services Association to seize the moment, I appointed and chaired a task force in 1998 with the mandate to create such an award and so – though it took nearly a year – we did, naming it –not the elderberry (sorry, Avi) but, instead, the Michael L. Printz Award, named in honor of the pioneering Kansas school librarian. The award is to be presented annually to the author of the best YA book of the year, “best” being defined **solely** in terms of literary merit. The first Printz Award was presented, deservedly, to Walter Dean Myers in the year 2000 for his memorable novel *Monster*.

Looking back at the decade of the 1990s, I feel it marked the onset of a second golden age of young adult literature, one that continues today, notable for its art, its innovation, its creative energy, and its vitality. Recognizing this, publishers began, in 1999, to create separate, stand-alone young adult divisions or imprints, beginning with Avon’s *Tempest* and Simon and Schuster’s *Pulse*. There are now 27 such stand-alone divisions or imprints and more are being added on a regular basis, as YA has become the hottest area of publishing.

This is only one of many trends that have informed the field. The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw an explosion of them as young adult literature took off like a rocket. Indeed, in a 2005 speech I identified

**twenty-two** trends that were then hallmarks of the expanding field. There’s no time or need to reprise all twenty-two today but here are a few I haven’t already discussed that continue to inform the field:

1. Books with multigenerational appeal – so-called crossover books – were big news and big sellers.
2. As a result, the age range categories that had defined books for young readers were becoming increasingly amorphous.
3. More and more established adult authors were newly writing for YAs.
4. New and important book awards for young adult literature were springing up; in addition to the Printz these included the National Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize.
5. More literary fiction was being published for YAs.
6. YA had become international in scope as more and more YA titles first published abroad were being imported and reprinted in American editions. The Printz encouraged this phenomenon by making provision for giving the award to an author whose book was first published in another country. Indeed, the second Printz Award went to England’s David Almond.
7. Graphic novels and comics were becoming a vital force in the field.
8. A new kind of nonfiction was flourishing: one that borrowed literary techniques from fiction to create what was being called narrative or creative nonfiction.
9. Authors were experimenting with new narrative techniques like, for example, writing novels in the form of e-mails, letters, verse, or linked short stories.
10. A huge renaissance of fantasy was underway thanks to Harry whatshisname.
11. A new LGBTQ literature (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning) was beginning to flourish. And

12. As young adult literature was becoming ever bolder, rapidly increasing book challenges were becoming a disquieting fact of life for public and school librarians. One of the most vitriolic of these challenges subsequently appeared in 2011 in the *Wall Street Journal*. Written by one Meghan Cox Gurdon, it was an often patronizing, even more often sneering indictment of what it claimed to be the depravity of young adult literature. Gurdon set the tone with her question “How dark is contemporary fiction for teens?” And answered, “Darker than when you were a child, my dear.” The rest of her equally condescending screed was an example of exaggeration and specious extrapolation: “Kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings,” she wrote, “are now just part of the run of things in novels directed, broadly speaking, at children from the ages of 12 to 18.” I didn’t know that eighteen-year-olds were children but nevertheless, she went on to give the back of her mailed fist to such talents as the great Robert Cormier who, she charged, “is generally credited with having introduced utter hopelessness to teen narratives.” She saved her most outrageously vitriolic remarks, however, for champions of intellectual freedom. “Every year,” she sneered, “the American Library Association delights in releasing a list of the most frequently challenged books.” I’d say this is done more in sorrow than delight, but nevertheless, Gurdon continued, “The book business exists to sell books; parents exist to rear children and oughtn’t be daunted by cries of censorship. No family is obliged to acquiesce when publishers use the vehicle of fundamental free-expression principles to try to bulldoze coarseness or misery into their children’s lives.”

The author Sherman Alexie would argue that there is already misery in children’s lives and did so in a rebuttal published in the journal *Rethinking Schools* and titled “Why the Best Kids Books Are Written in Blood.” Responding in it to Gurdon’s grumblings, he wrote, “Does Ms. Gurdon honestly believe that a sexually explicit YA novel might somehow traumatize a teen mother? Does she believe that a YA novel about murder and rape will somehow shock a teenager whose life has been damaged by murder

and rape? Does she believe a dystopian novel will frighten a kid who already lives in hell?”

“I write books for teenagers,” he concluded, “because I vividly remember what it felt like to be a teen facing everyday and epic dangers. I don’t write to protect them. It’s far too late for that. I write to give them weapons – in the form of words and ideas – that will help them fight their monsters. I write in blood because I remember what it felt like to bleed.”

Unfortunately, words and ideas are precisely what challengers perceive as dangerous, a sad trend that continues today. In fact, young adult books are now challenged more frequently than any other type of book, a reason ALA’s 2015 Banned Books Week showcased YA. According to Judith Platt, the week’s planning chair, “This Banned Books Week is a call to action to remind everyone that young people need to be allowed the freedom to read widely, to read books that are relevant for them and to be able to make their own reading choices.” Hear-hear!

But enough about censorship for now. Let’s return to trends. A significant one I didn’t mention in my 2005 speech was the advent of so-called chick lit, which began in England in 1996 with the publication of the adult novel *The Diary of Bridget Jones*. The phenomenon arrived here on our sunny shores in the year 2000 with the publication of the British YA title *Angus, Thongs and Full Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison. It’s only a slight exaggeration to say it took the country by storm, for not only was it a bestseller but it also won a 2001 Printz Honor Award. As it happens, it was only the tip of an iceberg that quickly became known as mean girl lit, a form epitomized by Cecily Von Ziege’s Gossip Girl series, which debuted in 2002. A *New York Times* article about this series and others of its ilk was headlined “Poor Little Rich Girls Throbbing to Shop.” For make no mistake, consumables were as much a part of these series as sex. One academic study of the Gossip Girl and two ancillary series that it spawned – Clique and the A List – found 1,553 brand-name references in the books’ collective 1,431 pages, slightly more than one “commercial” per page. Cultural observer Naomi Wolf said of these series, “Success and failure are entirely signaled by material possessions, specifically

by brands. Sex and shopping take their place on a barren stage, as though for teenagers, these are the only dramas left.”

Before we leave the Gossip Girl series, we should note that it was emblematic of three other trends that continue to impact the field today. First, it was an example of the new commercial fiction -- fiction, that is, that is produced entirely for the retail market without any consideration being given to the traditional institutional one. (And speaking of retail, this is as good a parenthetical place as any to acknowledge the significant influence that retail bookseller Barnes and Noble has come to exert on publishing,. As early as 1997 the New York Times reporter Dorajean Carvajal was writing, “Publishing executives in search of oracles have begun turning to the dominant chains like Barnes & Noble and Borders for guidance about a broad range of issues – from dust jacket colors and punchy titles to authors’ precise sales histories and forecasts of customer demand.”

Of course, Borders is no more, but such “guidance” from the surviving Barnes and Noble was still – post 1997 -- being taken very seriously as I can testify from personal experience. When, at the end of the nineties, I served as a consultant to Houghton Mifflin on the development of its prospective new series *The Best Nonrequired Reading*, I was flown to New York from California to meet with Barnes & Noble’s then juvenile book buyer Joe Monti to solicit his views on the very viability of the prospective series and to ask whether it should be published as a YA or an adult title. Later, in the mid-aughts, when I was developing my YA literary journal *Rush Hour*, my publisher also sought advice and feedback from Barnes & Noble regarding such considerations as marketing, jacket art, and price points. Whether, nowadays, such “advice” ever turns into dictates is a bit cloudy; suffice it to say, as I noted a moment ago, the “advice” is still taken very seriously, perhaps too seriously?) But now before I forget, let’s return to those two other Gossip Girl -related trends I promised:

First, the series came with significant crossover potential; that is, though published as YA, it showed

widespread appeal to readers in their twenties and early thirties. And, secondly, it was produced by a book packager – Alloy Entertainment in its case. Packers -- a vital force in today’s YA world – typically field a stable of writers for hire much like the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s Stratemeyer Syndicate, the so-called “fiction factory,” coming up with ideas for projects and pitching them to publishers. If the publisher accepts, the packager then produces a ready-to-publish manuscript. And the result is the next Gossip Girl, *Clique*, *Au Pairs*, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *Privilege*, *Luxe*, *A List*, *Carlyles*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and so on and on. Many of these are extraordinarily successful; Gossip Girl, for example, sold 1.3 million copies in its first two years in print; more importantly, it was a sterling example of synergy, spawning as it did, that Holy Grail of modern publishing, a successful spin off television series as, later, did *Pretty Little Liars*.

No matter how successful the Gossip Girl and other mean girl series were, they were soon eclipsed by the spectacular success of the Harry Potter books, surely one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of publishing. The Potter books single handedly ushered in a new era of speculative fiction, which became the most important trend of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As for the statistics generated by the series, we’re all familiar with their magnitude: the seven Potter books sold more than 375 million copies and were translated into sixty-five languages, making their author, J. K. Rowling, richer than the Queen of England! The fourth title in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, enjoyed a first printing of 3.8 million copies, the largest for any book ever. By the time the seventh, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, came along, the first printing had mushroomed to 12 million and the book sold a staggering 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours of its publication – that’s 58,000 copies per minute, folks. No wonder publishers fell all over themselves in their frantic quest to find the next Harry Potter. In the meantime, the Potter books had ushered in an era of event publishing with its embargoes, franchises, hoopla, gimmicks, synergy, and relentless focus on the next “big, high concept thing.” Further, they had come, seemingly, to dictate that virtually



every new book must now (a) be part of a series and (b) must be at least 3 to 400 pages and more in length, for -- after all -- three of the last four Potter books had exceeded **700** pages in length. I can personally testify to the fact that volume 5, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, weighed in at 870 pages, not because I dropped it on my foot but because I was retained by the Los Angeles Times to review it and given a scant two days to read the behemoth and write a thousand-word review. Why only two days? Because the book was embargoed, which meant advance reading copies weren't available. That's why I found myself standing in a serpentine line with a passel of costumed, overstimulated kids to buy a copy at one minute past midnight on its pub date. At that, the assignment wouldn't have been so bad if the publication date hadn't coincided with the annual ALA conference, which meant I was obliged to attend programs and events all day, leaving only the wee hours for reading. I pulled two consecutive all-nighters -- shades of my college days -- and finished the task on time, though barely.

I make light of this now but the fact is that the Potter books **were** responsible for ushering in this age of behemoth books. It's hard to believe now but there was a time when young adult books were unofficially restricted to a maximum of only two hundred pages, the idea being that teens had an attention span no longer than that of a hummingbird on twelve cups of coffee. How times, thanks to Harry P., have changed.

One thing that did **not** change in the wake of the Potter phenomenon was the frantic search for the next publishing sensation. It was found in Phoenix, Arizona, in the work of a previously unpublished young woman named Stephenie Meyer. "It," of course, was *Twilight*, the first in what would ultimately become a four-volume saga about a girl's love for a vegetarian vampire who had been seventeen years old since 1918. Suddenly the next new trend was found in the runaway success of the paranormal romance that *Twilight* spawned.

If Harry Potter and *Twilight* visited revolutionary changes on YA, a third series threatened to put those

two trend-setters into the shade. I refer, of course, to Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy.

Inarguably well written, fast paced and with an irresistible premise and characters, the series has sold more than 65 million copies and the three volumes spent more than 260 consecutive weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. If Harry Potter ushered in an age of speculative fiction and *Twilight*, one of paranormal romance, the *Hunger Games* reintroduced readers to the dystopian novel, in whose field dwells the next phenomenon as well, the *Divergent* books of Veronica Roth. I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge here the seminal influence of Lois Lowry's *The Giver* on the dystopian novel, for it is surely the modern progenitor of the form.

Well, as we surely know by now, trends come and trends go and the newest trend on the block here in the twenty-teens is a welcome return to YA's roots, the novel of contemporary realism. This is thanks in large part to a single author, the teen whisperer, John Green. Green hit the ground running with his first novel *LOOKING FOR ALASKA*, which copped the 2006 Michael L. Printz Award, and he has never looked back as he has become not only a wildly successful author but a force of nature as well, with 1.4 million Twitter followers and named to *Time* magazine's list of 100 most influential people and to *Forbes* magazine's Celebrity 100 list. While Green is surely sui generis, his work does have something in common with Harry Potter, *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*: it is being turned into blockbuster movies. It's interesting to remember that twenty or so years ago, a book was not seriously considered for publication unless it promised success as a subsequent paperback edition. Now it's potential success as a motion picture that drives publishing considerations. As David Gale, Editorial Director at Simon & Schuster told me in a recent interview, "It's all about movies now."

He might as well have said, "It's all about the bottom line now." For so it has been since the early nineties when independent publishing houses began to be gobbled up by international infotainment conglomerates headed by people who had no

experience whatsoever of publishing and accordingly expected to reap unreasonable profits. As a result, every effort and resource are now being put behind bestsellers and potential bestsellers at the expense of midlist titles, which are issued without fanfare and left to find an audience without any assistance from their publisher. It is become an age of the superlative statistic. And where it will end I do not know. In the meantime, though, the statistics speak to both the volume of current publication and to its ever-expanding audience. Twenty-five years ago it was considered a good year for the young adult field if 250 titles were published. Today it's 5 to 6,000 and up. How long the market can sustain this volume is anybody's guess, though Simon & Schuster's David Gale tells me he thinks YA is currently being overpublished. Yet sales remain stratospheric – up 22.4% in 2014 alone, while **adult** sales actually declined by 3.3% in the same period.

YA has truly become the tail that wags the dog of publishing. Part of its runaway success is due now to its expanding audience, one that is defined by the word "**crossover**," for, studies show, an astonishing 65% -plus of YA book purchases are now being made not by YAs but, instead, by adult readers, lured by the siren songs of Rowling, Meyer, Collins, Roth, Green, and a sixth author whose name should be mentioned in this context, Rainbow Rowell.

Not everyone is happy about this. A journalist, Ruth Graham, writing in the online magazine *Slate*, had this to say: "Adults should feel embarrassed about reading literature being written for children. Life is short," she continued, "and the list of truly great books for adults is so long." To make her point she then spent most of her article denigrating young adult literature.

The most damning of Graham's allegations was arguably her claim that "These (young adult books, that is) are the books that could plausibly be said to be replacing literary fiction in the lives of their adult readers. And that's a shame." The real shame is that Graham apparently believes there are no literary young adult novels. On the contrary I can offer as examples all the winners of the Michael L. Printz Award and the many Printz honor titles as well, all of which – remember -- represent the best YA novels of

the year of their publication based **solely** on literary merit.

So is it really true, as Graham concludes, "Fellow grown-ups, at the risk of sounding snobbish and joyless and old, we are better than this?"

Notably, the distinguished adult author Meg Wolitzer seems to disagree, writing, in the *New York Times*, "I don't feel obliged to cast off my teenage reading habits as if they were the Earth Shoes I wore at 13. Books not only sometimes stay with you; they can become you. And as for the YA war? When you're deep in a good book, you won't even hear the drumbeats."

Let these be the last words on **that** vexing subject as we return briefly to the important consideration of audience, another feature of which is the emergence of a new category of reader being called "the new adult," nineteen-twenty-five year olds, that is, a population sometimes also called adultescents or kiddults or boomerangers. The category started to appear when, because of economic hard times, more and more twentysomething Americans began returning home to live with their parents delaying their commitments – to professions and life partners alike – until their early thirties. Further complicating the issue is new research that confounds our long-held belief that the human brain is fully wired by the age of twelve. Now scientists have demonstrated that the brain continues to grow until the early- to mid-twenties. "The age at which Americans reach adulthood is increasing," according to psychologist Robert Epstein. "Thirty is the new twenty and most Americans now believe a person isn't an adult until age twenty-six."

All of this has had an ineluctable impact on young adult literature as its content has become ever increasingly more sophisticated in order to reach not only older teens but also the "new adult" reader as well. Accordingly, I now see more and more YA books being published for readers in grades 10 up, the "up" being purposely left nebulous.

If the audience and content of young adult books are expanding and changing, one area of young adult

publishing remains sadly deficient: I refer to multicultural literature.

Consider here some statistics: From 2000 to 2010 America's Asian population increased from 10.2 million to 14.7 million. The Black population grew from 34.7 million to 38.9 million; the Hispanic population grew from 35.3 million to a whopping 50.5 million. In 2012, Census figures showed that young people aged 10 to 18 represented 13.6 % of the total population. More than 16% of them were Black; 12.2% were Asian, and 17.7% were Latino. Together the minorities totaled some 46% of the youth population and at the present rate of change, it is projected that as soon as 2018 children and teens of color will have become the majority youth population.

Given these extraordinary statistics and the sweeping social changes they contemplate, one wonders if we are managing to offer young readers a viable literature of similar diversity and complexity. It's very difficult to marshal reliable statistics to answer that question but the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin Madison is a staple supplier of them. Jason Low, publisher of Lee & Low, one of the country's few minority-owned publishing houses, has said, "Diversity is the missing piece of the puzzle in books for young readers and the CCBC has had its fingers on the pulse of this issue from the very beginning."

Based on an analysis of the 3,500 books it received from publishers in 2015, the CCBC notes that a mere 98 were by African Americans, 8 were by American Indians, 105 were by Asian Americans and only 78 were by Latinos.

Why such miniscule numbers? Well, there are many reasons. For starters, there aren't enough editors of color. Fully ninety percent of them in a recent *Publishers Weekly* survey self-identified as white. A second reason is there aren't enough writers of color producing books for diverse audiences; a third is a perceived lack of demand for diverse books; most teens seem uninterested in reading them, for virtually no multicultural novels are to be found on the various Top Ten Lists of books selected by the

teens themselves. And a fourth – and discouraging reason – is that gatekeepers, David Gale of Simon and Schuster confirms, aren't buying them, which means that even more teens lack an awareness of the field.

What to do about all of this? Well, attention must be paid and so a partial answer may be found in the formation of an already influential new grassroots organization called We Need Diverse Books. It sprang from a protest campaign inspired by the lack of diversity among speakers at the 2014 BookCon. According to its mission statement it "advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of **all** young people." How's it doing? Cofounder Ellen Oh answers, saying "There was this hopelessness. But now there's such energy. We want to work as hard as we can so that a lack of diversity is no longer an issue."

A bit of good news here is that at least one area of diversity **is** improving. I refer to LGBTQI literature (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersex, that is). Since the first YA book with gay content, John Donovan's *I'll Get There It Better Be Worth the Trip* was published in 1969, the growth of the literature has been slow – VERY slow -- but relatively steady despite being fraught by book challenges. Happily, since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the pace of publication has quickened dramatically. In 2015, for example, a record number of sixty-four books with LGBTQI content were published; that's 24 more than were published in the entire decade of the eighties and only eleven less than were published throughout the nineties. The content is newly various as well, featuring, for example, the first two books ever with intersex characters; three with bisexuals, three with transgenders, and one each with gender fluid and genderqueer characters. Clearly LGBTQI literature is alive and flourishing.

As, I hope I have demonstrated, is young adult literature itself. Chockablock with trends, it continues to be the fastest-growing area of publishing. 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 transition, in search of self; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage in between called “young adulthood” is a singular part of their lives, distinguished by singular needs that are – at minimum – 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 an inducement for them to read, another compelling reason to value it, especially at a time when adolescent literacy has become a crucially important issue. In fact, the Alliance for Excellent Education has declared a literacy crisis, finding that the majority of students are now leaving high school without the reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college and a career.

Another of the chief values of young adult literature, I would argue, is its capacity for offering readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension. On the one hand, YAs have an all-consuming need to belong. But, on the other, they are inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as being unique, which – for them – is not cause for celebration but, rather, for concern. 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 perceived as outsider. Thus, to see oneself reflected in the pages of a young adult book is to receive the blessed assurance 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.

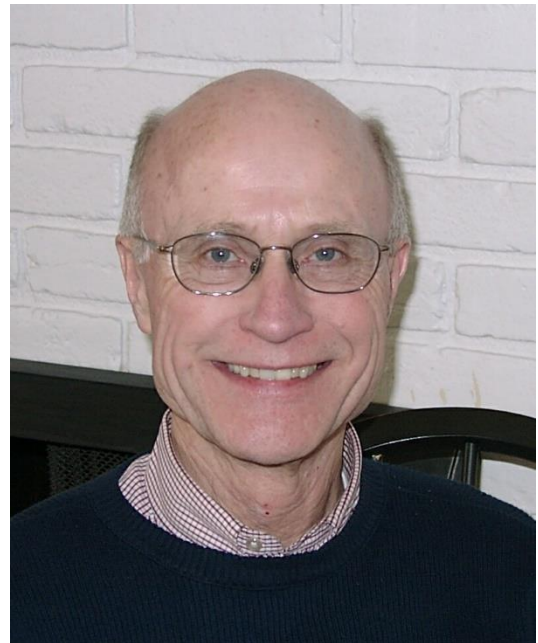
Still another value of young adult literature is its capacity for fostering, in its readers, understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who – if

not for the encounter in reading – might remain forever strangers or – worse – irredeemably “other.”

Finally, another value of young adult literature is its capacity for telling its readers the unvarnished truth, however disagreeable it might sometimes be, for in this way it equips readers to deal with the realities of impending adulthood and for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

By giving readers such a frame of reference, it helps them find role models, find a way they want to be, make sense of the world they inhabit, develop a personal philosophy of being, determine what is right and, equally, what is wrong, cultivate a personal sensibility. To, in other words, become civilized and, in due course, one hopes, enlightened. And thank God for that, for civilization itself, in these troubled times, is at stake.

Thank you.”



In addition to being a columnist and reviewer for *Booklist*, Michael Cart is the author or editor of 23 books including his history of young adult literature *From Romance to Realism* and his novel *My Father’s Scar*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults.