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# Young Adult Fiction and Its Impact on the Publishing Industry

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## Abstract

This article explores the inception of the Young Adult category through observation and secondary research, tracking its rise in popularity since the 1940s and its impact to date on the publishing industry. A focus of this paper will be the influence of readers on the development of content in addition to the role of social media platforms. Many of the challenges publishers face within this genre will be discussed along with examples of successful resolution.

## Key Words

Young Adult, Social Media, Reading Habits, Diversity, Fan Fiction

## Introduction

The term “teenager” was coined shortly after the passing of the Fair Labour Standards Act of 1938. This act, and its youth employment provisions, ensured that the educational opportunities for minors were protected (Society for Human Resource Management, 2017). At this time, more young people began attending school and youth culture emerged (Michael Cart, 2016)

In 1942 Maureen Daly’s novel *Seventeenth Summer* was released. Although initially published for adults, this novel about first love was embraced by the teen market and led to a host of imitations written and published specifically for this demographic (Michael Cart, 2016) The focus on romance remained throughout the 1940s and 1950s but, as times changed, so did the demands on the market. In 1967 S.E. Hinton’s more realistic and hard-edged novel *The Outsiders* hit the market and the young adult genre began its first golden age (Michael Cart, 2016).

The subsequent success of authors capturing the drama of the teen experience deteriorated into more formulaic narratives focused on a singular melodramatic issue. As Michael Cart states in his speech at the 2016 Fay B. Kaigler Children's Book Festival "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." The success of the romance serials of the 1980s did not spill over into the early 1990s. Teen population had dropped, and school budgets were cut drastically, in addition to this middle school literature was on the rise with younger main characters being celebrated and supported. This combination of factors left many wondering if the genre was dead (Michael Cart, 2016).

By mid-way through the 1990's the genre appeared to have entered remission and then emerge again into its second golden age. Teen population increased and Young Adult sections appeared in bookstores. Global hits such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games* were celebrated for their creativity and publishers created imprints or divisions specifically for this genre and the multi-generational appeal of the titles grew (Michael Cart, 2016).

### **Defining the Category of Young Adult Fiction**

The target demographic for Young Adult fiction is fourteen to eighteen, however, approximately 55% of Young Adult titles are purchased by adults (Publishers Weekly, 2012). Often mislabelled as a genre, the category of young adult fiction crosses genres and is not simple to define. Cheryl Klein, the editorial director at Lee and Low books, devised a working definition as a tool for evaluating manuscripts. Klein identifies the number one characteristic of Young Adult books as a plot that is central to the experience of its main character. A teenage protagonist who connects with the world is another "must have" along with a show, not tell, approach which includes dialogue over narration and is often written in the first person. In contrast to some adult fiction, Young Adult books require the events of the story to have an impact on the story line itself and have a recognisable start and conclusion. (Klein, 2009)

Above all, Klein notes the importance of having the text leave the reader with the feeling that the protagonist has a lot of life left to be lived. She eloquently adds, "Perhaps it should also leave the reader with the sense that life (and the reader's life) is worth living." (Klein, 2009)

## How Much Are Young Adults Reading?

Nielson.com (2016) reports that, as a leisure activity, reading ranks 11<sup>th</sup> place for American teenagers. Only one in five American teens read for pleasure on a daily basis though nearly half read on a weekly basis. By the time they reach seventeen, teens are reading by choice only a couple of times a year (Atler, 2014).

These rates have decreased considerably in the past thirty years: 8% of thirteen year-olds and 9% of seventeen year-olds reported that they did not read for pleasure in 1984. That number jumps to 22% and 27% in 2014 (Atler, 2014).

According to the Pew Research Centre sixteen and seventeen year-olds are very dependent on the library for reading and research materials and are more likely to receive recommendations there (Zickuhr *et al.*, 2012).

A report conducted by Scholastic revealed that fondness for reading declines as children move into their teen years. In fact, the number plummets from 54% among six to eight years olds to a mere 17% in the fifteen to seventeen year-old category (Eyre, 2015).

In the same study, 71% of respondents admitted that they knew they should be reading more. When they were asked what kind of books they wanted to read, 65% of boys and 61% of girls reported that they wanted to read books that would make them laugh (Eyre, 2015).

Common Sense Media reports that teens spend an average of nine hours a day on devices consuming media (Wallace, 2015), which may be part of the reason that reading as a leisure activity has dropped.

## Communicating with the Young Adult Consumer

According to Forbes contributor Steve Olenski's article, "Five Things Your Brand Needs to Know About Marketing to Teens", only 2% of teen's disposable income is spent on books and magazines. Scholastic understands the competitiveness of the market and that social media is the medium that resonates most with their target readers.

A Booknet search for Young Adult Fiction over the last five years shows that Scholastic has a firm hold on the market, holding six of the top ten spots. Penguin, Harper Collins and Bloomsbury Group also make the list.

Rather than resting on their laurels, Scholastic launched “This is Teen” as a Facebook page in 2011 and expanding to Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube has allowed the publisher to connect with their readers directly, introduce new titles and connect readers to authors.

In addition, the cross-platform audience allows the publisher to get almost immediate feedback; testing everything from covers to concept helps the publisher to identify trends, deepens the conversation with the audience and has an impact of the final product (Cox, 2015).

This intervention by the reader prior to the content being officially released to the public can be seen as a disruptor to the traditional communication flow as presented by Darnton in his Communication Circuit model (Darnton, 1989). Rather than the closed circuit explored in Darnton’s model where readers are the recipients of material created by authors and publishers, influenced by society and economics, produced by printers and brought to market by shippers and booksellers, this new reality sees the Young Adult reader influencing each stage of the cycle. The new diagram this dynamic creates is much more fluid and would account for the readers influence in each stage of the books lifecycle, from the selection of themes to the availability of the material for purchase.

While librarians, parents and teachers still have some influence as gatekeepers to young adult readers, the addition of bloggers and peer communities such as Wattpad further disrupts the traditional communication cycle and may remove the ability for these traditional gatekeepers to block access to material they deem inappropriate.

Wattpad, a Toronto based company has a total monthly audience of 55 million. It is free for users to read and share their own stories. Wattpad authors receive instant feedback from their readers and are unencumbered by traditional editorial gatekeepers. This access puts them in a unique position to react to trends and develop a closer relationship with their readers – a model that some established authors find appealing. Authors like Margaret Atwood are experimenting with the platform as a way of trying out new material and connecting with new readers. In the same vein established publishers are looking to partner with the innovative platform for sourcing new authors and for tracking trends.

Another disruption Wattpad adds to the traditional publishing model is the serialisation of content. Delivering small chunks of material allows end users to access and consume the material from their smart phone and fuels deeper engagement with the young adult market.

Criticism of Wattpad is twofold. First, that while revenue comes from Venture Capital investment, brand partnerships and digital ad placement writers are not compensated. The second criticism focuses on fan fiction. Because writers are not paid for their work copyright laws are sidestepped on the Wattpad platform. Names and details are changed if a mainstream publisher picks them up.

Content made available for free on platforms such as Wattpad tend not to be classified as literature. Because commerce is not attached, they are seen as less important work and certainly not high art. However, if we look beyond commerce we see that this work shares many of the characteristics described by Bourdieu in his description of the sub-field of restricted production (Bourdieu, 1993). His description of this category includes experimentation, symbolic competition for prestige and the production of art for art's sake -- characteristics that the Wattpad authors exhibit.

In 2014, Penguin UK closed down the Spinebreakers site, which had been launched in 2007 as an online community for teens to talk about books. Run by a teen editorial board with over 100 deputy editors, the site provided users with a shared space to communicate about books. The site was relaunched in 2010 by Anna Rafferty, managing Director of Penguin Digital. The ambition was for the site to act as a social networking site for books and book lovers. 10,000 to 15,000 unique visitors found the site each month, which, while offering branded promotions, was not a commercial venture for Penguin. Rafferty believed that "There are too many distractions out there for teenagers which pushes reading down the list of hobbies. Even other social networks are a major distraction for teens, which is why I hope giving reading its own social network, which is written and edited by teenagers, will help keep reading relevant in the digital age" (Barnett, 2010).

Virago, the self-proclaimed champion of women's voices, launched its Young Adult list in 2012 with a beautiful six book collection aimed at the Young Adult market. The books selected included *Slammerkin*, *Invitation to the Waltz*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Tipping the Velvet*, *The River and I know*, and *Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Page, 2012). The cover designs were created by New York Illustrator Mira Namet. Namet was chosen for her more commercial aesthetic to appeal to the Young Adult reader (Page, 2012).

While we are taught not to judge a book by its cover, publishers are hoping that we do. The cover is prime real estate for them to communicate to their audience. In the Young Adult fiction category, where genres are crossed, the book cover can provide cues to the reader indicating the genre of the book and, in some cases, even the target age of the prospective reader. As Gerard Genette notes in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Genette, 1997) as soon as the cover became available to publishers as a vehicle for communication it became a hot property and was used to its full extent.

As Genette discusses, the jacket is another opportunity for paratextual information to be communicated, “the jacket may also not appear until later, with a new edition or a new printing or simply when it seems warranted by some event, such as (and this is the preeminent example) the arrival of a film adaptation” (Genette, 1997, 17). For the Young Adult market, with movie tie-ins and merchandising opportunities, this is an area that publishers take full advantage of.

The 2014 re-release of Judy Blume’s iconic coming of age novels is an excellent example of how a book’s cover can be used to communicate with the reader. The editorial team at Simon & Schuster’s Atheneum Books were challenged to come up with seven new covers, five middle grade titles and two young adult titles. The team was careful not to fall into the nostalgia trap and the resulting design is bold, graphic and fresh. The new covers reflect the contemporary themes within the books, the decision to use iconography rather than photography allows readers to see themselves in the pages (Kim, 2014).

### **Diversity in Young Adult Fiction**

2017 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *The Outsiders*. As we celebrate the onset of the first golden age of Young Adult fiction is it possible to enter a third wave of young adult fiction that embraces, reflects and celebrates its diverse audience?

Research by the Cooperative Children’s Book Centre indicates that the number of diverse books published each year has been set at 10% over the past twenty years. A study conducted in 2015 by Lee and Low Books found that approximately 80% of publishing house staff identified as white and that Black/African Americans are severely under-represented compared to the general US population. The publisher suggests that this “mirrors trends among children’s book authors. In 2014,

just 2 percent of the books tracked by the Cooperative Children's Book Center were by black authors" (Low, 2016).

Lee & Low Books has been publishing for the youth market for twenty-five years and is the largest multi-cultural book publisher in the United States. They recognise that, though much in the industry has changed over the twenty-five years they have been in business, the lack of representation in books has continued. Pioneers in the industry then, they continue to make strides toward increased diversity in the present (Lee & Low, 2017). These initiatives include a diversity internship program, and annual awards for unpublished authors and illustrators of colour (Lee & Low, 2017).

Several organisations have been formed to address the issue of diversity in the Young Adult category:

We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization launched in 2014 as a response to a growing concern by the reading community that there was not enough diversity reflected in the pages of the books or in the publishing houses themselves ([weneeddiversebooks.org](http://weneeddiversebooks.org)).

Authors Malinda Lo and Cindy Pon felt that the characters in Young Adult fiction remained predominately white and heterosexual and created the website Diversity in YA Fiction and along with a speaking tour to convince their peers to embrace diversity within their pages ([diversityinya.com](http://diversityinya.com)).

Rich in Color is a resource dedicated to promoting YA fiction that is written by people of colour or from First Nations communities. Their goal is to promote work that allows teens to see themselves reflected in the pages of the books ([richincolor.com](http://richincolor.com)).

There are signs that the industry is listening. In 2010, John Green and David Levithan's novel *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* landed on the New York Times Children's bestseller list and provided a strong message to the publishing industry that gay characters are not a commercial liability (Williams, 2010). Note however that this is, to date, the only novel of Green's that has not been optioned for a movie (Berman, 2015).

A book focused on the Black Lives Matter movement topped the bestseller list earlier this year. *The Hate U Give* was hotly anticipated and movie rights have been optioned (Diamond, 2017). As we have seen with previous bestsellers in this category, these successes tend to breed copycats. If this

is the case we can be cautiously optimistic that more diverse stories will begin appearing and will be embraced and promoted.

## Conclusion

The Young Adult market has a history of being nimble and responding to its audience. Much of its success is owed to embracing the changing tastes of the teen and young adults it serves. In order to remain relevant and to continue reaping the benefit of the second golden age of young adult fiction, publishers must continue to partner with reader centric social media sites and peer to peer sharing communities. In addition, reflecting the diversity of their audiences must become a greater priority.

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