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# Young Adult Fiction's Evolution and its Impact on Youth Culture

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## **Abstract**

This article journeys through the evolution of young adult fiction, addressing the impact it has had on the culture of its respective audience, otherwise regarded as youth culture. Themes such as diversity within the industry, audience progression and expansion, as well as the development of YA's reputation will be discussed. A focus will also be on the physical properties of young adult novels, and their significance in relation to their content and their readers. This paper will cover the underlying intentions behind this field of publishing and explore how publishers have acted in the best interest of YA in order for the genre to evolve.

## **Key Words**

Young Adult Fiction. Diversity. Youth Culture. Evolution. Reputation. Paratext.

## **Introduction**

Young Adult (YA) fiction occupies a large, loved and lucrative portion of the publishing industry. In terms of book history, it is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the term only coined in the 1960s as a way of describing titles catering for children between the ages of 12 to 18 (Haupt 2019).

Since its birth, YA has grown and developed under the dedicated watch of publishers all across Britain. It has continued to play a vital role in shaping the lives of its readers in

many ways: academically, socially and perhaps, according to views held by Abel (1996) and Coser (1982), its most important influence is on the *culture* of today's youth. And whilst culture, as T.S. Eliot (1948, 109) states, has multiple meanings and interpretations, the overall progression of YA – its motivations, obstacles it has encountered and the power it generates via its representation of diversity, etc. – is apparent in the way youth culture has accepted and embraced (and sometimes refuted) its presence.

But YA fiction, despite its label, is not reserved for young adults only. 'Approximately 55% of today's YA readers are adults' (Kitchener 2017), a statistic that only highlights the authority of YA further in its encompassing of multiple generations. Perhaps, as Addington addresses, this is a result of the fact that 'youth culture has taken over popular culture', with YA being so significant within publishing because it is 'the literary incarnation of a culture obsessed with youth' (2014). This could very well be because everybody, whether still doing so or not, has experienced childhood, meaning every demographic can draw something from within it.

### **The Motivations Behind YA**

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines a 'field' (the field in this instance being the YA genre of publishing) as a 'structured space of social positions which can be occupied by agents and organisations', in which their positions depend 'on the type and quantity of resources or "capital" they have at their disposal' (Thompson 2012, 4). There are numerous types of capital, covering an array of underlying motives (economic, human, social, intellectual and symbolic), and throughout its history, YA has dabbled in many, often simultaneously, despite Bourdieu's belief that the choice must be binary, pursuing either economic or symbolic, but never both. Echoing his argument is Unwin (1926), believing that this is potentially the only downfall of YA, arising from the lure of 'commerce' and 'profit' and veering away from the intent of being culturally prolific. However, if the industry really was split into either 'profession' or 'business' as Schiffrin (2010) believes, there would be many publishers no longer in the running.

As Thompson (2012) agrees, 'it's easy to see why publishers need economic capital', because publishing, at its core, is a business. With the rise of YA fiction, many publishers have begun to introduce new imprints dedicated to this genre, such as HarperTeen Impulse (of HarperCollins), Bloomsbury Spark (the YA-only imprint of Bloomsbury) and Swoon Reads (a community led publisher [Bookfox 2017]). This expands on their human capital, interacting with a refined audience and enhancing their social capital, both of which inevitably increases their economic capital. However, whilst Thompson understands the needs for these types of resource, it is the perhaps harder to acquire but 'enormously important' intangible asset of *symbolic* capital (Thompson 2012, 8) that has often been the driving force in their endeavours.

Thompson reiterates that 'publishers seek to accumulate symbolic capital just as they seek to accumulate economic capital': it is an intrinsic goal (2012, 8). It differentiates books that have simply been 'written to order' from those that include 'a wholehearted effort' to do otherwise (Faber 1934, 29). For YA, symbolic/cultural capital has often been acquired through the power of its content. The swell in popularity of novels such as *Harry Potter* revived and reenergised the genre from the 2000s onwards (Strickland 2015), where its success was drawn from, as Baker reiterates, the 'human exchange' (meaningful content) and not the fact that Rowling made her publishers financially prosperous (2016). Whilst publishers might rely on the financial aspects of the industry, readers do not care how much profit a novel generates. Publishers who understand that, focusing chiefly on their cultural impact, are able enhance their list and credibility. And it is the combination of content and the physical embodiment of the work itself that makes YA a progressively symbolic genre.

### **The Power of Physical Attributes**

YA fiction holds a distinct position in the marketplace. Compared to the array of genres available, YA is easily recognised often through the power of its paratext. Publishers rely largely on the visible portrayal of their products in order to differentiate them from all other titles available.

Genette's theory of paratext (1997) is an approach that examines not the content of the literary work, but the *being* itself, as if the book was an independent entity, and details how this is used in conjunction with both publisher and author to serve a specific purpose. Genette describes a book's paratext (the combination of the 'peritext', such as cover design and format decisions, and the 'epitext', surrounding elements accompanying the text, but existing beyond it) as a 'threshold' or a 'vestibule' which allows the world 'the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back', signifying that the paratext is the initial point of contact, the defining moment as to whether the potential reader commits to the novel or not (1997, 1-2).

Examples of this are evident throughout YA's existence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including the 2017 title, *The Hate U Give*. This multiple-award-winning novel addresses an array of themes that are present in today's society (Goodreads n.d.), however, the impact that it has had on youth culture is not drawn from the content alone.

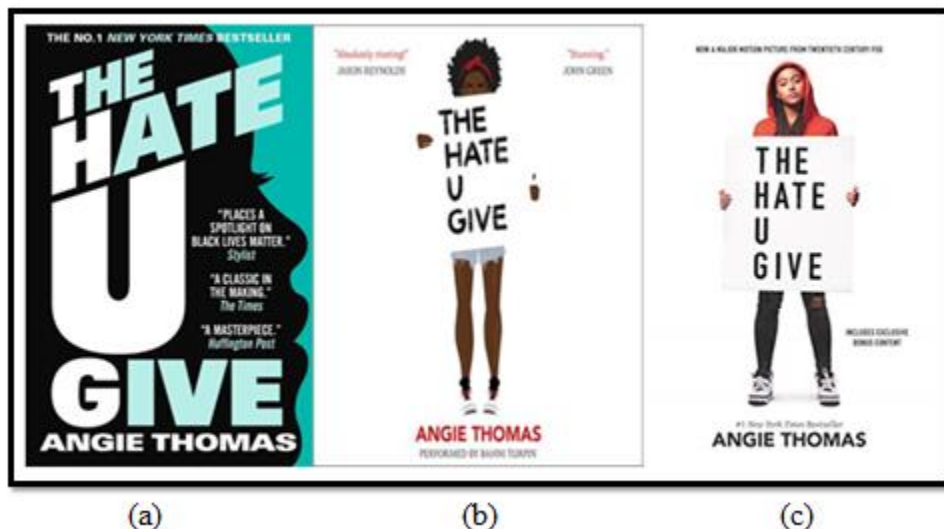


Figure 1 – covers for Angie Thomas' debut novel *The Hate U Give*.

The paratextual features of this novel are shown in figure 1. Within the title (peritext) is the term 'thug'. Evidently, on all covers, the title *alone* is conveying the powerful message of its content. It is utilising a controversial term, as well as being the name of an influential 90s album by Tupac Shakur, popular within that demographic. The author even noted that

the definition of the phrase 'thug life' encapsulates her intended message (Kirch 2016), immediately attracting awareness towards these themes. The publishers, Balzer + Bray, were careful in emphasising the issue of race by selecting a prominently white background and sign to contrast with the character holding it. The invisible crossover from background to the edges of the sign represents the issue bleeding into today's society. The rest remains minimalistic, so as not to distract the reader and to focus all attention on the nature of the book.

The impact of this paratext strikes from the first glance. Despite the reiterated notion, to not judge a book by its cover, it is often exactly that which influences a reader's decision to buy, with as much as 79% of participating readers (in a survey directed by Grilo [2010]) agreeing that cover design played a 'decisive role' in their purchase. This is because the cover is often the first point of communication with the market, the lasting first impression, the indicator, even more so when the title is not actively searched for and instead is an impulse or unplanned purchase.

As Genette states, a cover is a 'fairly recent phenomenon', with classical publishing making use of only the title page as the 'main site of the publisher's peritext' in the past (1997, 28). During what some regard as the very origin of YA (with many Shakespearean adolescent themes inspiring works of YA fiction [Seales 2016]), this literature lacked the paratextual opportunities and resources to capitalise on. If, in fact, Shakespeare *can* definitively be classed as YA, his audience would have arrived at that conclusion through their *experiences* with his work alone, as physical properties were non-existent during that era. And maybe that is a significant reason why Shakespeare is not commonly known as YA. However, once the 'possibilities of the cover were discovered', paratext has been continually exploited ever since. Genette goes on to emphasise that it is even the most *miniscule* of details – paper colour, epigraph, and so on – that can 'strongly indicate a type of book' (1997). This is an important factor regarding today's young-adult generation, one that is increasingly concerned with aesthetics and minimalism, where a 'single identity' or sole message is conveyed distinctly through appearance (Weinswig 2016). These generational traits affect publishers' choice of capital, because adhering to these

requirements increases the economic value and brands their paratext as a symbolic feature of YA. But the aestheticism of youth culture does not just apply to the physical embodiment of the text, either. With this eye-minded generation more likely to spend money on 'experience aesthetics' than 'possessions' (Rheude 2019), it is more important than ever for YA to justify their audiences' spending by engaging with them in the way they deem most significant: *visually*. And as Kantor (2017) states, the majority of YA readers, now, are online. Whilst cover design is still applicable in the online world, the tangible features are no longer relevant, diminishing what was once the defining aspect of publishing – the physical copy of the text – and reshaping it into an industry that has to rely more on factors like the content, the publicity and the publisher's reputation.

This *can* be done, however, with Genette himself noting that paratext evolves as 'culture' does (1997, 3). YA publishers are harnessing the focus of technology rather than trying to avoid it, by releasing texts about online bullying and marketing in internet-friendly manners, for example. Even traditional publishing has made use of the prevalence of technology, resulting in paratextual decisions such as *Figure 2*, incorporating a computer background, a username and digital grammar. This just goes to show that YA is evolving into a 'hybrid' of both digital-print content, where the most successful publishers are learning how to 'span both realms' (Blurb 2018).



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Figure 2 – the *Serafina67 Urgently Requires Life* cover.

### The Nature and Diversity of YA

Diversity across YA fiction is by no means a new concept. Whilst feminist and propaganda publishing were prominent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 21<sup>st</sup> century industry is now 'dominated by women' (Feijao 2018) and with the popularity of self-publishing and online sharing, content freedom is flourishing. In terms of book theory, the book is often regarded as both a narrative and a vessel, containing the power to depict certain issues, ignite discussion and inspire change.

Recent examples of this are shown by the many views declaring that YA was a predominantly 'white-dominated publishing industry' (Haupt 2019) in the past, but, referring back to the earlier example, novels such as *The Hate U Give* are working to change that, with Haupt (2019) noting that it was the 'Black Lives Matter' movement that inspired this novel, meaning the act of impacting culture is not something that is linear, but is in fact a loop. As Darnton highlights, 'the reader completes the circuit because he influences the author both before and after' (2006), and in this instance, it is not just an individual reader, it is an entire movement of people and their inherent beliefs that were the inspiration.

But it is not just *positive* reader principles that have fuelled YA's evolution. Research suggests that there are many white YA readers who are deterred by the inclusion of other races featured on the cover, as well as many males discouraged from reading books written by female authors, which is what led famous YA author Joanna Rowling to change her name to the more 'gender neutral' name of J. K. Rowling (Bold 2018). However, YA has begun to tackle these issues, to the point where, as studies confirm (Bold 2018), it is now regarded as having the capacity to prevent such prejudices by, in this instance, improving the 'reading ability of male adolescents, particularly reluctant' male readers. These examples highlight the importance of the communications circuit, demonstrating the influence the reader has

on the industry, encouraging publishers to recognise thus reflect (and repair) these matters back upon the entire culture.

There are numerous examples of YA activities which have challenged society. So much so, that Temple argues that it's the flexibility of today's teenagers – and by extension, it is those who write *for* and *represent* them – that will inspire 'a better world' (2017). Supporting this statement is Steven, expressing that the reason why YA is so powerful is because it deals in 'ideas and *undercurrents*; in values and ethics' allowing readers to arrive at their own conclusions organically, rather than having them forcefully imposed (2018). She notes that it is the *subtext* that allows readers to 'internalise' the content 'without even trying'. This argument links back to Genette's theory of paratext – showing that the most subtle of features are the most influential.

### **The Credibility and Reputation of YA**

However, whilst YA has proven impactful in many respects, it has also evolved into a genre that is often labelled as 'easy to read, easy to forget' (McGowan 2016). Many likeminded opinions state that much of YA is a 'lazy, disheartening mush of false problems, fake solutions', an opinion that diminishes its credibility. With YA frequently 'mislabelled' (McKay 2018), a stereotype has been built that discourages readers from involvement, regardless of whether or not the content is actually what they are seeking (Graham [2014] goes as far as declaring that readers of YA should be 'embarrassed'). This completely counteracts the idea that YA has any cultural influence, because it is implying that YA is often not granted even the *chance* to be influential. It cannot embed certain issues into readers' minds; it cannot shed light on important topics and implement solutions if it is not even being *acknowledged* by potential consumers.

However, the evolution of labelling from 'teen fiction' to 'young adult fiction' has actually been found to *encourage* a broader range of readers, with McGowan presenting the results of a Nielsen study, concluding that '80% of YA literature is read by people over 25' (2016). This is a resounding statistic, especially considering the notion that YA's target demographic is fourteen to eighteen year olds (McKay 2018), with some titles, such as *The*



*Loneliest Girl in the Universe*, encompassing even younger ages, being labelled as '13+' (Walker Books n.d.). But this might be understandable in light of the recent surge in more mature-themed novels, such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, by Jay Asher.

Whilst Asher's intent for this novel was to 'raise awareness in the young adult community' it has resonated amongst a much wider audience (Hicks 2014). In this sense, it is novels like these that *enhance* the reputation of YA, going so far as to 'save a life'. And it is apparent that the YA audience has also evolved, with today's young adults having matured beyond the scope of previous generations, now considered as 'more connected' in an era that is freely open to seeking 'inspiration' (Lankester-Owen 2016). Perhaps this is why YA has developed a newfound credibility. By understanding that their audiences are not static, they evolve, and often that means expanding and encompassing other demographics, too.

And as publishing continues to embrace change, one thing remains: its permanence as a means of communication. As Coser et al state, publishing has been and continues to be 'the guardian and the constant creator of our written culture' (1982, 362). Not only does it impact largely on the present day, it resonates from the past and into the future. A novel can be experienced universally and timelessly, meaning its impact is *continuous*, with the power of books able to endure for generations (Unwin 1926, 333). Examples of this lie in the YA link to Shakespeare, with literature (albeit in varying formats) with teenage characters at the centre, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, still appealing to 'younger generations so powerfully after 400 years' (Paravano 2017). So much so, that his work is still being taught throughout schools across the UK (Stylianides 2019). Paravano (2017) goes on to say that the interpretation of his works are shaped by the 'personal experiences' of his readers, meaning their cultural impact is both on the individual and on a national educational system, their credibility spanning an entire country, inspiring discussion and eliciting change.

### **The Role of the Publisher**

The foundation of publishing is to use the medium of literature to communicate with an audience. And if books convey ideas, then the publishers, as stated by Coser et al are ultimately the 'gatekeepers of ideas' (1982, 362). And as Abel proclaims, it is 'the best of

every generation of book publishers' who enable the 'progressive unfolding or evolution of the culture' (1996, 285).

Many agree that publishers have an essential responsibility as cultural guardians (Unwin, 1926), playing an omnipotent role in its 'evolution' (Abel 1996, 285). By actively immersing themselves in the YA community they can partake in activities to benefit youth culture, such as Epic Reads, HarperCollins' online YA community, partnering with a digital reading hub endorsed by YA-renowned celebrity, Emma Roberts, in order to address and unify 'female empowerment' (Kantor 2018), which escalates their cultural capital. Economically beneficial endeavours include publishers selling film rights (extending their IP), and building reputation through their recognised authors (who become a brand of symbolic capital in their own right, as Thompson remarks [2012]). These decisions support Thompson's view that publishers are able to seek out several types of capital simultaneously, by choosing to expand and redefine YA (2012). This is proven by Robehmed, who states that 'publishers can see more than a 10% lift in book sales around the time a movie version is released', with the impact of this lingering well into their future (2015). An example of this is the YA title *The Hunger Games*, published by Scholastic in 2008. 11 years later, it is still frequently purchased and acclaimed.

## Conclusion

It is book theory that allows us to see the lasting effects of YA. The combination of certain models, including Darnton's, Bourdieu's and Genette's, provides a deeper insight into how these YA novels, such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, have become such globally embraced successes. It is Darnton's 'communications circuit' that outlines the dependency on each individual component within the process in order to formulate books (2006), and with the inclusion of digital publishing, self-publishing, fan-fiction, etc., this dynamic circuit is still developing.

And with YA evolution being the focus of this article, central to its impact on youth culture, it is important to remember that YA is *still* evolving, having to mature as its audience and their culture does. And so far, so good. There is an influx of studies which

emphasise YA's potent influence as a cultural architect, such as Corbett (2018), declaring; 'YA novels have come of age – not just reflecting the world, but looking to change it' and Kokesh and Sternadori (2015), concluding that YA readers 'tend to use these novels as a guide to life'.

And what bigger culture is there than *life itself*?

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