

Young Adult Novels

Influencing Social Consciousness

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AS CHILDREN, WE ALL HAD A BEST friend. You might have heard of mine. He has jet-black hair, a weird scar on his forehead and was misunderstood until he became the most popular boy in school. This boy also taught me how to believe in myself, the most important kind of magic, and I'm a better person for it.

The resurgence of young adult (YA) literature over the past 15 years has strengthened new generations, especially my own, in a way that wasn't available to adults when they were growing up.

Now more than ever, the book market is targeting the teenage demographic with novels that marry fully fleshed-out characters and imaginative, compelling plots in order to teach young people that what they have to say is important. YA literature is a genre that empowers adolescents and gives them hope and a voice.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Contrary to popular belief, J.K. Rowling did not conjure up the first literary series to appeal to teens. Michael Cart, author and former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA),

reveals that the term "young adult" was coined by YALSA during the 1960s to represent the 12-to-18 age range.

He explained how the first golden age of YA novels: "started with the authors who the parents of today's teens recognize: Judy Blume, Lois Duncan and Robert Cormier. The young adult books of the 1970s





remain true time capsules of the high school experience and the drama of being misunderstood." Classics in particular such as Blume's "Are You There God? It's Me Margaret" and S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders" offer mature, contemporary realism directed at teenagers.

However, Cart claimed that those books soon devolved into a trite formula of what he called "single-problem novels" focusing on topics like divorce and drug abuse that quickly turned stale to adolescent readers. According to Cart, YA books

did not make a comeback until a baby boom in 1992 that "resulted in a renaissance among teen readers and the second golden age beginning in 2000."

HOW IT HELPED US GROW

Adolescence is a time when there is the most confusion and vulnerability in a person's life and social media and cyberbullying are now considered normal coming-of-age practices that most children today are expected to face. It is the saving grace of not only the book market, but to all teenagers that they have their own widespread genre to turn to in order to overcome the old and new challenges of growing up.

To begin with, young adult books present morals, advice and depict everyday struggles. These novels disguise themselves as escapist literature to draw in teenagers when, in actuality, they provide lessons about ordinary problems, flawed characters and the gray area between good and evil.

Books that dive into dystopian worlds and feature mystical elements help teenagers draw their own conclusions by answering some of life's bigger questions. For instance, in Lois Lowry's "The Giver," Jonas is presented as an average teenager whom the reader roots for when he defies his strict, sheltered community by learning about the truth of human nature.

Young adult literature also comments on societies, communities and relationships — fictional and realistic alike but always relatable to the reader. In "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" by Stephen Chbosky, high school freshman Charlie struggles with getting over his past, including his best friend's suicide and making new friends.

This is an example of just one YA bestseller that encouraged readers to think for themselves, problem solve and value relationships as well as self-love in moments of insecurity.

WHO THE AUDIENCE IS: OLD AND YOUNG ADULTS

Before the resurrection of YA literature, there were only children's books, juvenile books and adult literature. The lack of transitional books offered to teenagers resulted in a decline of reading. Which is why contemporary young adult novels which focus on first love, magic and post-apocalyptic societies are not only appealing to

adolescents but to adults well past college age too.

For starters, parents want to know what their children are reading. By reading YA literature, adults are able to recapture their youth through remembrance of their own rocky transition between childhood and maturity. In addition, parents are interested in how the role of adult authority in these stories affects their children's pattern of thinking.



Of course, english professors complain about how the writing style of most YA literature is prosaic and plain. I once had a teacher tell me he did not like reading the Harry Potter series to his daughter because he cringed every time Rowling used an adverb to describe the way a character spoke. However, YA novels do not strive to be high-brow works of poetry but are meant to appeal to everyone on a shared human level.

Overall, young adult books feature some of the bravest storytelling that helps all generations discover and rediscover the type of person they want to be and the way in which they will impact the world. ■