Young Adult Literature: YA Boundary Breakers and Makers
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Young Adult Literature

CHRIS CROWE, EDITOR

YA BOUNDARY BREAKERS AND MAKERS

Vincent van Gogh. Pablo Picasso. Georgia O'Keefe. Jackson Pollock. Andy Warhol. These painters, all incredibly famous now, were at one time on the fringe of the art world, creating their own kind of art, work that pushed back the boundaries of artistic conventions, broke traditional rules, and produced paintings that redefined “art.” Their paintings are so well known now that it’s easy to take for granted the impact these artists had on the art world, but their challenges to existing standards and forms have had a lasting impact on modern art.

Young adult literature has also had its share of people who have stretched—and broken—traditional boundaries of literature for children and adolescents, and their contributions have been instrumental in creating and shaping what we today know as young adult literature. It would be impossible to mention everyone who has had a significant effect on YA literature, but I’m going to review a few of those people who are most familiar to me. Consider this article a starting point for a discussion or study of the foundations of YA literature. Then on your own you can fill in the gaps I’ve left unfilled and the names I’ve left unmentioned.

Though I cannot bear to read the novel, I have to admit that Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868) had an immediate and lasting effect on books for young readers. Her story about the March girls appealed to teenage readers of her day and continues to interest many modern young adults. Of course there were popular novels before Little Women, but its success alerted publishers to the market power of books for young women. In the same year, Horatio Alger published Ragged Dick (1868), the first of his “rags to riches” stories. Alger’s novels would never reach the level of literary acceptance of Little Women, but the sheer volume of his work made a lasting impression on young American boys in the late nineteenth century and on the publishers who had discovered teen boys—and their parents—as a viable market. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Edward Stratemeyer published the first of his juvenile books, and its success eventually led to the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate, which produced hundreds of novels and series books, including the Rover Boys, Nancy Drew, Tom Swift, and the Hardy Boys over the next several decades. The books of Alcott, Alger, and Stratemeyer rubbed against some of the literary standards of their time, but their popularity pounded a wedge into the wall of Literature, creating a permanent opening for writers who would follow them.

The Stratemeyer Syndicate churned out novels popular with young readers but not with their teachers or librarians, and these pulp novels characterized many of the books for teenagers published in the early twentieth century. At the time, most authors and publishers of juvenile novels were more interested in selling books than in creating works of lasting literary quality. In 1938, however, the field took a step away from its pulp foundation with John R. Tunis’s Iron Duke. Tunis was one of the first writers for young readers to successfully combine the elements of effective storytelling with good writing. His sports novels raised the literary standard for the writers of juvenile novels who would follow him.

It was also in the 1930s that Dora V. Smith, a professor at the University of Minnesota, launched the idea of separating books for teenagers from books for children. Her classes were the first adolescent literature courses taught in the United States. Smith’s protege, G. Robert Carlsen, continued the tradition of teaching adolescent literature and in 1967 published Books and the Teen-Age Reader, one of the earliest books to focus on the interests of young adult readers and the literature that was most likely to benefit them. Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, both former students of Carlsen, further solidified the study of adolescent literature with the publication of Literature for Today’s Adolescents in 1980. Their textbook, widely used in university young adult literature courses, is now retitled Literature for Today’s Young Adults and is in its sixth edition.

S. E. Hinton’s The Outsiders (1967) blew open the field. Hinton’s remarkable narrative voice captured the imagination of millions of teenage readers and helped to establish the publishing category of adolescent literature. This debut novel, written by
a teenager for teenagers, is still the standard against which most young adult novels are judged, and after 1967 nearly all major publishers realized that ignoring teenage readers would be a costly mistake. In my YA literature classes, I tell my students that contemporary YA literature began with The Outsiders.

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After Hinton helped to draw the boundaries of the YA literature field, a number of important books followed that expanded those boundaries by introducing genres adapted to young adults. The success of Stephen Dunning’s edited collection of poetry for teenagers, Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle (1967), established a long-overdue niche for YA poetry. R. R. Knudsen’s Zanballer (1972) was the first modern book for teenagers that featured a female athlete as a protagonist. In 1974, Sandra Scoppetone published Trying Hard to Hear You, a YA problem novel that dealt frankly with homophobia. Beauty (1978), Robin McKinley’s retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” opened the door for later YA revisions of classic fairy tales. Donald R. Gallo pushed YA short fiction into the spotlight in 1984 with his Sixteen: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults. In 1986, Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Story introduced many young adults and their teachers to graphic novels. Russell Freedman’s Lincoln: A Photobiography (1987), won the 1988 Newbery Medal and reminded teachers, librarians, and readers that nonfiction is a legitimate literary form. Nonfiction for Young Adults: From Delight to Wisdom (1990) by Betty Carter and Richard Abrahamson further justified the place of nonfiction in secondary school curricula by making it clear that teenagers read—and enjoy—nonfiction. Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (1993) pushed the YA boundaries a little wider by demonstrating that sophisticated and creative picture books aren’t just for children.

The boundaries of a YA novel’s form have also been redefined in recent years. Virginia Euwer Wolff’s Make Lemonade (1993) breaks the lines of the text into a form that resembles poetry, and it is frequently called poetry, even though it’s not. Wolff went against prose narrative tradition when she chose to present the lines in a way that mimicked the rhythm of her narrator’s voice. Karen Hesse’s Out of the Dust (1997), winner of the 1998 Newbery Medal, is a YA novel written in free verse, effectively challenging the literary tradition that defines novels as prose narratives. Walter Dean Myers’s Monster (1999), winner of the American Library Association’s first Printz Award in 2000, pushed boundaries of the YA novel form even further. Myers’s story uses a multigenre blend of two prose forms, the personal journal and the screenplay, to tell the story of a young man involved in a murder trial. Finally, J. K. Rowling’s 734-page Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2000), moved YA books into a new dimension. The heretofore unimaginable success of all of Rowling’s Potter books has, of course, brought unprecedented attention to books for children and teenagers, but Goblet of Fire will certainly change the view publishers and writers have had of the appropriate length—around 200 pages—for a successful YA novel.

There have been other boundary breakers and makers. Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972) brought a powerful, literary Hispanic voice to young adult readers. With M. C. Higgins the Great (1974), Virginia Hamilton won the 1975 Newbery Medal, becoming the first African American to do so. Asian American literature had frequently been neglected, but Laurence Yep’s 1976 Newbery Honor Book, Dragonwings (1975) created opportunities for Asian American authors in YA literature. Michael Dorris’s Morning Girl (1992) is an important YA novel because it is written by a Native American about Native Americans and because it was so widely read by American teenagers.

John R. Tunis set an early standard for literary quality in books for juveniles; the standard was raised by Robert Cormier in 1974 with The Chocolate War. Cormier’s deft prose, complex plot, and dark realism elevated his book to something more than the standard problem novel. Bruce Brooks’s 1985 Newbery Honor Book, The Moves Make the
Man (1984) reinforced Cormier's literary standard with a story that both rewards and challenges good YA readers. And Francesca Lia Block's Weetzie Bat (1989) introduced a compressed lyric quality to YA prose. These aren't the only fine writers in the YA business, but their first novels in the field showed readers and other writers the positive effects that careful, polished, sophisticated writing have on a good story.

Like adult literature, YA literature will continue to evolve and improve, but regardless of how the field develops in the future, it will always owe a debt of gratitude to the influence provided by the early boundary makers and boundary breakers of literature for teenagers.

Discoveries: New or Overlooked YA Books Worth Reading

Becoming Joe DiMaggio, Maria Testa (Candlewick 2002). In twenty-four linked poems, this verse novel tells the story of a young Italian American boy, Joe Paul, growing up in the years immediately before and after World War II. Joe DiMaggio and Joe Paul's grandfather provide steady role models for him.

Before Wings, Beth Goobie (Orca Books 2001). Fifteen-year-old Adrian has survived a brain aneurysm but is now emotionally burdened by the keen awareness of her own, perhaps imminent, mortality. In an effort to break her free from her depression, her parents send Adrian to work at her aunt's summer camp, where she discovers love and some secrets about her aunt. This is a poignant coming-of-age novel with a touch of fantasy.

The Books of Fell, M. E. Kerr (HarperCollins 2001). Here are Kerr's three wonderful Fell mystery novels in a single volume. John Fell is a teenage prep school student turned amateur detective in these lively and thoroughly entertaining YA mysteries.

The Dollmage, Martine Leavitt (Red Deer Press 2001). In this fantasy novel, the wise person of the community is called the Dollmage, a woman who is able to influence and protect the lives of villagers through her dolls. Young Annakey wants to be the next Dollmage, but someone else has been chosen. When their village is threatened by outsiders, it's crucial that the correct decision be made.

Fifth Quarter: The Scrimmage of a Football Coach's Daughter, Jennifer Allen (Random House 2000). Allen's engaging memoir about her life as the only daughter of famous football coach George Allen wasn't written for a teenage audience, but YA males and females will relate to the tensions and longings that grew out of her difficult relationship with her father.

The Gift of Reading, David Bouchard (Orca Books 2001). This book is one that teachers of young adults should read. Bouchard, a former teacher and now full-time writer, had been a nonreader as a child, but, thanks to his eighth grade students, he became an avid reader and an active promoter of reading. This book presents Bouchard's personal journey from nonreader to reader and provides plenty of suggestions on how to promote reading.

Martyn Pig, Kevin Brooks (The Chicken House/Scholastic 2002). When fifteen-year-old Martyn Pig's abusive, alcoholic father dies accidentally, Martyn decides, with the help of a good-looking neighbor girl, to conceal his father's death rather than be sent to live with a dreadful aunt. The twisting, surprising plot is a delight.

Saving Jasey, Diane Tullson (Orca Books 2002). Because of his rotten home life, Gavin spends most of his time with the family of his best friend, Trist. Several members of Trist's family suffer from Huntington's disease, with tragic results. When Jasey, Trist's older sister and the object of Gavin's affection, begins to fear that she might have inherited the disease, she begins to act out in destructive ways.

Streets of Gold, Marie Raphael (Persea Books 2001). In 1901, the Bolinski family leaves Poland for what they expect will be a better life in America. When they arrive at Ellis Island, the family's youngest daughter is denied entrance to the United States, so she and her parents return to Europe, leaving Marisie and her older brother, Stefan, to start their lives in New York alone.

This Side of Paradise, Steven L. Layne (North Star Books 2001). In this YA version of The Stepford Wives, Jack Barrett is moved from his real-world junior high life to a "perfect" corporate community owned by Eden Corporation, his father's employer. Once Jack lands in Paradise, he discovers that evil lies beneath Eden's perfect surface.