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**“Why I love Y A.”**  
**Joel Schoon Tanis**

## **INTRODUCTION**

It all began for me, like it did for so many others, with a school called Hogwarts and a young wizard named Harry. As a children’s book illustrator I would regularly poke my head into what was then called Booksellers on Main Street. The head of their kids’ section was very knowledgeable and I was always interested in her latest recommendation in the area of picture books. Soon after it came out, and before the craze had really caught fire, she directed me away from the picture books and said something to the affect of, “Joel, you really ought to read *Harry Potter*.” So, while I was an adult, I ventured into the YA section, bought the first Harry Potter book and never looked back. It turns out I was not alone. Thanks in large part to *Harry Potter*, Young Adult Literature, known as YA, has become a huge trend. *Harry Potter* both inspired young kids to read novels that ran into the hundreds of pages, while pulling in adults like me who devour the genre.

The reality is that dollar signs in the eyes of publishers fueled the trend (The *Harry Potter* series has generated close to 25 billion dollars to date). And of course, because of the financial interest there has been a dramatic increase in volume of YA books - the number of books published last year was up 30% since 2008 to roughly 10,000 titles.

The increase in volume is paralleled by an uptick in awful literature. I’ll sight the bizarre

mega-success of the *Twilight* series. These books (of which I've not admittedly read because I can't get past the first pages) are essentially teen angst romance books – but with vampires. They are successful because they set romance into an untouchable place (the world of the undead) where it feels oddly safe. As a result, you can go to the local Barnes and Noble and find an entire section of books with a placard that reads (get ready for this) “New Teen Paranormal Romance”. No joke.

That said, I'll argue that there has also been a huge rise in quality literature in the YA genre - quality that deserves our attention – and that is what is keeping the trend alive (at least among we adult readers).

I'd like to suggest that the next time you need a book to read that you consider joining the trend. To help you do so, I'll guide you through a brief history of YA lit, share a few ideas about what I think makes YA lit worthwhile, and finally spend a bit of time helping you sift through categories of books and styles within YA that are worth notice.

## **BRIEF HISTORY**

Young Adult literature has arguably been around for a couple of centuries. Classics like *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) or *Oliver Twist* (1838) from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and of course, the wonderful work of Mark Twain late 1800's would be considered YA today (even if the term didn't exist then).

Most people, however, believe the genre was birthed in the early 1950's with *The Catcher and the Rye*, and followed soon after by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and then soon after that by *Lord of the Flies*.

Because it became widely recognized that engaging youth with relatable literature was a successful model, YA books continued to grow both in academic circles and in the publishing marketplace. As the category was more formalized, the people in the business honed the demographic target to the 12 to 18 year old age range (with a push in both directions to younger and older). Wikipedia summed up the general YA approach here: "YA literature shares the following fundamental elements of the fiction genre: character, plot, setting, theme, and style. However, theme and style are often subordinated to the more tangible elements of plot, setting, and character, which appeal more readily to younger readers. The vast majority of YA stories portray an adolescent, rather than an adult or child, as the protagonist."

Their definition points out two of the reasons I think adults are drawn to YA. First, just like kids, many of us want a less complicated book that is more plot and character driven. Second, I think a lot of great books get lumped into YA because they have young protagonists. While I understand the convenience of this for labeling the novels, I find it rather silly to be honest. Most of us were kids once too, and a kid protagonist isn't more out of reach for me to relate to than most other protagonists.

At the end of the day, however, I will credit JK Rowling and her character Harry Potter as the reason many adults are even talking about this – and why you should too. Let's consider why you may want to dive in.

## **WHY READ YA**

I'll throw out just three reasons to read YA. The first is something I have already hinted at – they are entertaining. Lev Grossman, a literary critic for the New York Times has a reading group – for adults only – that only reads YA books. The group has been so popular that it has spawned two more groups. Here is what he says about YA books:

So what do regular adults see in young adult fiction? It's a different experience from reading, for example, literary fiction. Not better or worse, just different. The writing is different: young adult novels tend to emphasize strong voices and clear, clean descriptive prose, whereas a lot of literary fiction is very focused on style: dense, lyrical, descriptive prose, larded with tons of carefully observed detail, which calls attention to its own virtuosity rather than ushering the reader to the next paragraph with a minimum of fuss. That kind of writing can be marvelous, but sometimes you're just not in the mood for it.

There is something wonderfully clean about the approach of YA novelists that draw one in very quickly. Because the stories are so plot and character driven you generally connect more to the characters by the end of the first chapter, by which point something big has likely already occurred in the plot. This isn't to say that YA characters are thin or one dimensional (at least in the well written books), it's just that the approach allows easier access. This helps make the books entertaining.

The second reason to read YA lit is if you have kids in your lives. Certainly the early YA books like *Lord of the Flies* had themes that you would want to read along with your kids, but YA books today explore every possible theme you can imagine – many that I believe may require some adult guidance. Some popular books of the last decade – many of which I have read – include themes of child sex slavery, rape, sexual abuse, addiction, genocide and kid on kid murder. You need to read these if the kids in your life are reading them.

A frequent reaction to books like this is to fire up the book-burning posse. I discovered a number of articles and essays that suggested that kids need more rainbows and unicorns in their lives, and not all of this dark, serious stuff. Linda Holmes wrote for NPR on this topic and refuted it this way:

Do you remember being 15?

For some people, it was *a breeze*. There are absolutely, positively people who had a very easy time as adolescents, who feel a little guilty about the fact that they didn't actually find youth all that difficult, and it's unfair to declare their experiences invalid or uninteresting or inauthentic.

But there are plenty — *plenty* — of people for whom, if they are honest, it was a time of isolation and bafflement and plain old gutting it out until they got older. And even when it wasn't miserable, it was often *complicated*, and a lot of kids who don't experience abusive dating relationships or self-harm or eating disorders? They already know somebody who does. Surrounding them with books full of joy and beauty is fine, but confining their reading to those things *because we are afraid that they cannot tolerate being exposed to the things they are already so often exposed to* does them a terrible disservice. It's difficult to say to a teenager, "We don't even let you *read* about anyone who cuts herself; it's that much of a taboo. But by all means, if you're cutting yourself, feel free to tell a trusted adult."

Kids have access to so much darkness in many forms of media (and in their own experience). In the past few months I have read a number of YA novels that address the darkness with amazing candor, yet very carefully and, in my opinion, helpfully. In the book *Speak*, for instance, we are guided through a year in the life of a girl who is struggling in her transition to high school. As the story develops we slowly piece together the fact that she was date raped over the summer, but isn't entirely able to name it as such. Books like this are useful tools to we adults to help navigate a complicated world with the kids in our lives.

Finally, I believe it is worth reading YA lit because it is good literature – often pressing the boundaries of writing in unique ways. Consider the books of Brian Selznick – best known for *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* - who writes sparingly and lets illustrations do much of the storytelling, or *Monster* – a teen murder mystery with very real overtones that is written in the form of a screenplay by the accused teen. What I really appreciate however is that the good YA books communicate so well. For example, one of the better books of the last decade is *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. We all have heard the statistics and know the sad history of Native American reservations. This story makes those issues real while being thoroughly engrossing and entertaining. There is something about seeing the problems of reservation living through the eyes of an adolescent, who is still uncorrupted (but not unaffected) that makes that world more accessible. Alexie is an interesting example (and not entirely unique) in that he is an author who does not exclusively write in the YA

genre. He's a strong voice in American literature drawing on his Native American heritage for novels, poems and films.

All of this said, there are piles and piles of junk in the YA isles at Barnes and Noble. If *Twilight* was poorly written, I can't imagine what the rest of the New Teen Paranormal Romance books must be like.

### **THREE GENRES**

So for the rest of this paper I will look at three sub-genres within the larger YA genre that I find appealing, and why I find them appealing. Paranormal Teen Romance will not be one of the categories discussed in this section.

The first genre I'll suggest are historic novels – or maybe a better way to say it, novels set in the past but anchored in an historic or cultural moment. There is something about considering a time and place through the eyes of an adolescent that somehow makes that time and place accessible to me, and lets me consider the larger themes that may still be relevant today.

I'd place *To Kill a Mockingbird* in this category. The historic moment highlights a reality of America then, but certainly presses the issues of race and equality today. Gary Schmidt, one of my favorite YA authors (even though he works at Calvin College) often sets his books in the past. *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy* is based on the real life

destruction of Malaga Island off the coast of Maine in the early 1900's. The island was the home of displaced slaves and the people of the neighboring coastal town work to remove its inhabitants because they feel their presence intrudes on the tourist trade. Its themes make me wonder about the cycle of white flight and gentrification. His books *The Wednesday Wars* and *Okay for Now* are set in the not so distant past era of the Viet Nam war. These books could also fall into another category I will explore in a moment, but I'll just say that I appreciated and learned from the historic context (and add that *Okay for Now* was one of my favorite books last year).

The historic book that needs to be on your must read list however is *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. This World War II story, set in Germany embodies so much of what I like in the YA world. First, it pushes the creative bounds through an especially unique narrator (I can't tell you who the narrator is without spoiling part of the book). Second, it helps me consider that historic moment in a fresh way. The main characters of this book are Germans who are just regular Germans trying to survive WW II. This novel provides a fresh lens for me to think about an historic time, as well as consider the way we like to lump people into "good guys" and "bad guys" still today.

The next genre I find engaging is dystopian literature. Dystopian stories, in case the term is new to you, are stories set in an imagined future where society has crumbled, or is oppressive – the opposite of utopian. Examples of books you may have read growing



up are *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury or *1984*. A book that many 9<sup>th</sup> graders read today is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry.

But the book that made dystopian novels the rage is *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. This book meets all my criteria stated above – it is entertaining and well written, but it is also full of themes that you should know about if your kid is reading it. The story (stories actually) is set in a post-war North America called Panem which is composed of an extravagant capital and twelve poverty stricken districts who each specialize in making a certain type of products for the capitol (agriculture, coal, luxury items). They have a totalitarian government that forces each district to send one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen each year to fight to the death in the Hunger Games. These games are telecast throughout the country. My church takes a retreat every winter and as part of that retreat we have a book discussion. This year we read *The Hunger Games* and the otherwise book discussion populated by older people was fully intergenerational. It was incredible to listen to middle school and high school kids articulate their understanding of the themes of the book – to recognize that the voyeurism of watching kids hunt each other is related to so much of our media today. The book even made them grapple with the idea of the rich being supplied by an oppressed poor, and see that the USA in fact looks a lot like the rich capital being supplied by the rest of the developing and poor world.

The final genre with the larger YA literature world I will call “identity” books. Some

people would call them “coming of age”, but I think my term is more accurate to what I like about them as an adult. The classic example is *Cather in the Rye*. Today, what I appreciate about many of the identity books being written is that they give a voice, and thus a window for people like us, into places and cultures that are not like our own. I already mentioned Sherman Alexie and what we can learn about the Native American world. One of the popular books of the moment is *Mexican White Boy* by Matt De la Pena. Here he is in his own words:

Like many working-class kids, I grew up under an umbrella of machismo. If you were a boy, you weren't supposed to show emotion. Or feel anything. And if you cried . . . well, let's just say you didn't cry. Things were only magnified if your working-class father was Mexican, like mine.

I'll never forget the first time I read a book that awoke my emotions. I was alone in a hotel room, on a college basketball road trip. As I turned the last page of the novel, I found myself on the verge of tears. The feeling was so foreign, I felt guilty. Soft.

But then an interesting thing happened. I found myself searching for other books that might evoke that same reaction in me. The most successful of them tended to be contemporary coming-of-age (or young adult) novels. Reading became my secret. Whenever I was alone I'd sneak a book, hoping it would make me feel something.

Writing coming-of-age novels of my own has led to a profound discovery. There are thousands of kids out there who are just like me. Secret readers. Tough-shelled, “mediocre students” who find themselves in books.

I was at a school in Los Angeles last week, and a kid in a hoodie waited until everyone else had left before approaching me. “I read your book ‘We Were Here’ like three times,” he said. His eyes were glassy and he kept fidgeting with his backpack straps. “Yo, that's my life in that book,” he said. Then he took off.

I think De la Pena speaks here to why these books are important for kids, but also why I like them. I like to discover the hearts and experiences of different people and the accessibility of YA books often allows me to do that.

I'll end with a book that truthfully messed me up a bit. It's a book that in one moment meets all of my criteria, but in the next I am not sure it meets any of them. It's called *the perks of being a wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. Here's what throws me off about it – it is printed by MTV books - which the snob in me says could never make great literature. It is written as a series of letters, which feels too easy at times. Finally, it is full of difficult themes - difficult for me as a father especially as I read about drug experimentation, abuse, and sex among teens and become dizzy thinking about my daughters as teenagers. That said, I was captivated by the characters and thus found the story very entertaining. I found the voice very real and a number of twists and turns so carefully and artfully woven in that by the end I found the writing to be really solid. And finally, I think themes like these (none of which were glamorized) are important to consider – as much as they scare the father in me.

## **CONCLUSION**

Other than *The Book Thief*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Okay for Now*, I won't make any across the board recommendations here, because we all have different tastes. That said, anyone who has regular contact with "young adults" ought to pay attention to what they are reading and read those books too. And for all of you,

I'll confidently rest my case that if you want to discover a new treasure trove of entertainment and learning, the YA section at Barnes and Noble is a great place to start – just walk past the New Teen Paranormal Romance section.