YOUNG ADULT (YA) LITERATURE: DETAILS AND TRENDSSETTING

by

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ABSTRACT

by

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Young adult (YA) literature is an evolving genre, with consistent changes occurring in the structure and mode of reading. Along with structural changes, young adult literature pushes controversial boundaries. The research method for this thesis is a literature review that gathers the definition, trends, controversies and benefits of the YA genre. Information retrieved from the literature review resulted in a discovery that young adult genre incorporates the structures of poetry-prose, and graphic novel formatting beyond the typical fiction book structure. Current trends include realistic fiction, romance/sexuality, dystopian fiction, and mixed genre fiction. The boundaries that are pushed within these genres include profane language and explicit sexual content. The benefit of this literature relates to the teen reader and how he/she can experience the realism of the characters’ lives without real life risk.
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WORKS CITED
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This literature review provides data about the Young Adult (YA) literature genre, its definition, and its ever-changing and unique components. YA literature is considered a “powerhouse.” Statistics show that teens are avid readers (Koss and Teale 563).

It is proposed that the young adult literature began in 1951 with J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* and grew from there to include other teen coming-of-age stories like *The Outsiders* and *Go Ask Alice* (Cart 4, “Oh Those Golden Oldies”). The age range for young adult fiction can vary. According to Michael Cart, a previous Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) president, the age for young adult literature extends to age 25, when the human brain reaches maturity. The emotional, intellectual, and developmental components of young adult literature resonate with young readers (Blubaugh 9).

Pinpointing the components for the YA genre is difficult. The structure changes and popular trends emerge. These trends are challenging and controversial, but they bring beneficial elements to the young reader. The language and sexual content of young adult literature are controversial aspects that are not only arguable, but conversely helpful. Teachers and parents can use the literature as a springboard for valuable conversation.
Statement of the Problem

Along with the controversial elements and recognizable benefits to the young adult (YA) literature genre, knowing its history, structure, and evolution is helpful in understanding the genre. Because the YA genre includes many types of formatting, including the typical fiction book structure, poetry-prose, and graphic novels, teachers and teen readers can be confused about how to label the genre. Because it is an integral aspect to reading for enjoyment, as well as integral within an educational setting, it is important to recognize and label key aspects of the YA genre.

Social changes have also influenced the evolution of the YA genre. The realistic fiction topics within YA fiction are gritty and revealing to the reader. YA books include profanity and sexual content in ways that haven’t been introduced before; for example, more sexual types and relationships are being represented. By understanding the changes and controversies within the genre, classroom teachers, librarians, and parents use the literature to open lines of communications with their teen readers (Wolk 3). Even though there are efforts to censor the genre, the benefits of the literature outweigh the negative press. The YA genre allows the teen reader to experience life vicariously through the literature rather than experiencing risky behavior in their own lives.

Purpose of the Study

The examination of the literature within this paper was completed with the purpose of pinpointing the definition and components of young adult literature. Defining the components allows classroom teachers, librarians, and parents to understand and support teens as they read. Furthermore, the intent of this research was to identify the “hot button” topics, as well as the beneficial elements of reading young adult literature.
Reading about the hot button topics allows teens to better understand characters’ actions and make insightful opinions and decisions in their own lives based on those character actions. Acknowledging the beneficial elements of young adult literature allows teachers and parents the opportunity to further support the YA genre. Overall, examining and defining young adult literature requires careful consideration of the literature’s development and its clarifying traits. Current YA authors use classic plots, while also adding twists that are relevant to teens (Bodart 31). These stories are often lessons for readers to absorb, but can bring scrutiny and controversy to the genre.

**Questions Guiding the Study**

The nature of the literature review was to closely examine the main components of young adult literature. Narrowing these questions down was a difficult task because the topic had the capability of becoming expansive. Following the process of narrowing the focus, the below questions are answered within the literature review:

1. How does one define and pinpoint the components of young adult literature?
2. What genre trends are present in today’s YA literature?
3. What controversial elements, as well as beneficial aspects are central in young adult literature?
Definition of Terms

Dystopian novels—novels that display society as apocalyptic, marred, or downtrodden

LGBTQ—an abbreviation representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning

Manga—a Japanese graphic novel/comic book

Mixed-genres—novels that “blur” the genres together (i.e. history with the supernatural)

Multi-platform resources—online or electronic resources that accompany books

Prose-poetry—compositions written in a concentrated form; a format that allows the writer to utilize poetry techniques while simultaneously telling a story.
Limitations of Study

Within the completion of this literature study, there were a few obstacles along the way. The most looming obstacle was the fact that the subject, Young adult, and its trends and controversies are rather new topics. Even though young adult literature began in the 1950s, the research on the topic is rather limiting. Data were difficult to collect in articles covering current statistics of teen readers and nonreaders. Much of the early information found focused on helping reluctant readers rather than on the YA genre itself. This research did not delve into the publication and advertising elements of young adult literature.

Many articles focused on the sexual controversies within the genre, but other areas of conflict were limited. Few articles focused on the realism of YA literature and how the storylines and language could be controversial. Also, the topic of dystopian fiction was limited. In young adult literature, dystopian fiction is relatively new and is still gaining attention. Because of its novelty, research is limited.

The last limitation was the format of the study. Young adult fiction is branching out to include online resources, but very little research is available. Because the YA genre is becoming multi-platform, additional information is available online. It would, however, take a keen eye to examine the quality and reliability of such information on multi-platform information research as much of it comes from vendors.
Design of Study

The literature review examined current (2005-2011) peer-reviewed publications. These publications focused on the integral elements of young adult literature. The information retrieved was summarized material from literature review authors and existing published research data. Various articles were examined to develop key questions and solid details about the structure, trends, and benefits of YA literature. Only data and information retrieved from outside resources were used; there was no new research conducted or developed for this literature review.

A variety of databases were used in the review. The main databases included *Education Research Complete; Library, Information Science and Technology Full Text; Education Journals; and Academic OneFile*. Finding successful search terms was imperative. The terms used were the general ones like “young adult literature,” “trends in young adult literature,” and “YA fiction,” and combinations thereof, while other terms were specific like “sex and YA fiction” and “dystopian fiction.”

Multiple public libraries were visited for this review as well. The following is a list of libraries consulted: Henry County Public Library in the Windsor and Clinton locations; Henry R-1 School Library in Windsor, Missouri; Sedalia Public Library in Sedalia, Missouri; Boonslick Library in Sedalia, Missouri, and the J.C. Kirkpatrick Library at the University of Central Missouri Library in Warrensburg, Missouri.
Conclusion

The definition of the young adult literature genre and its evolution are important details to the teen audience and their teachers and parents. Not only are YA authors delving into new topics for teens, but authors are also giving new twists to classic young adult coming-of-age problems and issues. In the following chapters, the information will examine the characteristics of young adult literature. Chapter two focuses on the definition of the genre and the formatting used within the literature. Along with the formatting, this study reviews the evolution of the YA genre, including references to early titles and groundbreaking stories. The trends in the genre are discussed as well.

As YA literature grows and becomes more mainstream, it is reaching out to readers and non-readers. Books are becoming multi-platform, providing different reading options to the public. Authors are pushing the envelope and are providing realistic and nontraditional views and plotlines to their stories. These risks are controversial, but can provide a sense of realism and a learning opportunity for readers. The information in chapter two will also discuss the benefits of young adult literature and where the future of young literature may lead. Chapter three clarifies the main idea of the literature review and focuses on the research questions presented in chapter one.
The young adult (YA) literature genre has been growing in popularity since the 1970s. In fact, the young adult literature genre is a “bright spot” in an otherwise fluctuating literature market (Fitzgerald 22). In 2009 sales had 13% growth, reaching $744 million in book sales. In 2013, sales are expected to hit $861 million, which is a 30.6% increase from 2008 sales (Fitzgerald 22). YA literature is a powerhouse in the publishing community, as well as in schools and homes; teens are reading (Koss and Teale 563). Because of heightened interest in this genre, young adult literature has become an integral part of the lives of many teens. Reaching out to both non-readers and readers alike has been the steadfast goal of many authors, publishers, and librarians in the YA literary world.

The definition of the young adult literature genre and its evolution are important details to the teen audience and their teachers and parents. These are described in the next section. Not only are YA authors delving into new topics for teens, but authors are also giving new twists to classic young adult coming-of-age problems and issues. These changes add controversy to the YA genre and also provide benefits for readers to absorb. This is discussed in the second section of this chapter. The final section explores how the future of the YA genre will be molded by influential authors and continuing trends.
The Definition of Young Adult Literature

When introducing the young adult literature genre, pinpointing its definition can be difficult. Young adult literature is defined in multiple ways. Latrobe defines young adult literature as literature written for students in grades 7-12 (Latrobe and Hutcherson 68). Iyer defines the target age group as ages 14-18 (1). Yet in another point of view, Naomi Bates, a high school librarian, suggests that the age group that YA genre targets shifts and moves with the times (Campbell 363). Bates continues to define young adult literature as literature written for teens, with a teen or teens as the central protagonists. Michael Cart, a previous Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) president, suggests the age for young adult literature be extended to age 25, the age when the human brain reaches maturity (Cart "A New Literature").

Young adult literature refers to the material teenagers choose to read on during their free time. It can also include literature that has been advertised by publishers as young adult fiction or non-fiction (Bates 1). Cart (qtd. in Blubaugh) maintains that YA fiction relates to the “emotional, intellectual and developmental” components of a young adult in the real and literary world (9).

The Evolution of Young Adult Literature

Even though today the young adult genre is popular, this genre began quietly in 1951 with Holden Caulfield, a memorable crossover character in Catcher in the Rye (Cart “Oh Those Golden Oldies” 4). Holden was a true-to-life character, one to whom many teens and adults related. Ten years later, Robert Lipsyte and S.E. Hinton make their own impacts as authors of young adult literature, with The Contender and The Outsiders
respectively. Michael Cart, previous YALSA president reflects on the early years of young adult literature by saying:

The 1950s--when YALSA and I were still young--were years of opportunity for young readers: opportunity to read for pleasure, inspiration, occasional edification, sometime enlightenment, and, yes, even secret titillation. Ah, good times. And good books, that, like YALSA--and maybe even me--have in the years since become Golden Oldies! (“Oh Those Golden Oldies” 4)

In the early 1970s with the emergence of *Go Ask Alice*, bookstores began to realize the potential market for young adult literature and stocked the shelves with more young adult books. *Go Ask Alice*, a sexually explicit novel by an “anonymous” author, was a controversial glimpse into a young teen’s tumultuous life (American Library Association). Following the 1970s, the focus on realistic fiction changed. By the 1980s and 1990s fantasy, horror, and mystery books evolved in the young adult genre. In addition, in the last ten years of the twentieth century, a considerable shift occurred as authors begin to write more books for older teens; this may be because of the development of the Michael L. Printz Award, an award created by the YALSA group that celebrates experimental and trendsetting writing (Gallo et al. 2; Cart “A New Literature” 28). Furthermore, the evolution of the YA genre is important to the understanding of where it is today. The article titled “Ice Cream/I Scream for YA Books” (Gallo et al) points out that

Along with the greater attention to the reading interests of more mature teens came more sophisticated writing, edgier
storylines, more explicit sexual content, and adult language (dominated by the f-word). Whether you view those developments as good or bad, they are real. And they are not going away. (Gallo et al.2)

**Formats in YA literature**

In addition to the definition of a young adult novel, the formatting of the young adult novel is important. Beyond a typical fiction novel, there are also other types of formatting namely, prose-poetry structure and the graphic novel structure. Prose-poetry became popular in the 1980s and 1990s (Gallo et al. 2). Prose-poetry is a collection of compositions written in a concentrated form; it is a format that allows the writer to utilize poetry techniques while simultaneously telling a story. Readers are drawn to the succinct style and the strong voice of the narrative. This style of writing entices many reluctant readers because of its manageable but visually striking structure. A prose-poetry book, *Poetry Speaks Who I am*, compiled by Elise Paschen, includes over 100 poems and over 40 poetry readings on the accompanying CD. The voices are engaging and appeal to the coming-of-age audience (“Booklist”). Most importantly, prose-poetry allows the author and reader to delve into the depths of a character.

Reluctant readers are responding to the quick verse prose-poetry novels and, thus, becoming fans of reading (Vanneman 23-24). The following are a few prose-poetry titles to consider: *One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies* by Sonya Sones, *Identical* by Ellen Hopkins (and others by Hopkins) and *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Vanneman 23-24). Hopkins’s novels, including *Identical, Crank, and Glass* are based on Hopkin’s daughter and her addiction to
methamphetamines. These stories show teenagers dealing with emotional and physical abuse, and reliance on and addiction to drugs and alcohol. The concentrated imagery and “raw” language are too intense for younger audiences; however, the topics resonate with teenagers (“Poetry and Verse Novels” 2). Sonya Sones’s series of prose-poetry books use humor and conflict. Both teen boys and girls gravitate toward Sones’s books because of her use of brief lines (shorter poem structures) and symbiotic plotlines (“Poetry and Verse Novels” 2).

A graphic novel is another example of a type of formatting within young adult literature. The Library of Congress gave the graphic novel its own subject category in 1994 (Williams and Peterson 166). By 2005 the graphic novel format was recognized by the educational community and used in classrooms. Educational journals also began to discuss and review graphic novels on a consistent basis, supporting their use throughout the curriculum. By 2007, YALSA had created an up-to-date list of “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” (Williams and Peterson 166). Although many librarians have touted an interest in including graphic novels in their library, researchers found that many school libraries are not collecting the popular and enriching graphic novels that could be helping the school’s curriculum, especially in the core area of language arts and social studies (166). Given the emergent confirmation that graphic novels entice young adult readers, Williams and Peterson suggest that librarians evaluate their graphic novel materials and continue to support the growing structure (166).

Another popular type of literature that is a close relative to the graphic novel is manga. Manga is a Japanese graphic novel or comic book. The interest factor and sales quotient of the manga genre continues to grow at a fast rate. Manga requires a multimodal set of
skills from the reader and offers cultural variety within a curriculum because of plotlines that teens identify with, such as self and sexual identity. The gender-neutral images of the males and female characters demonstrate an acceptance of one’s appearance, no matter the flaws (Goldstein and Phelan 36). These are the reasons why librarians and teachers are stocking their shelves with this diverse and visually stimulating format within young adult literature (Schwarts and Rubinstein-Avila 40).

Multi-platform books are becoming a trend in YA literature (Hill 111). Publishers and readers will look for books that offer more than just a printed page, such as ebooks, a link to the Internet, a message board, or a videogame that corresponds to the book’s characters and plotline. The 21st century continues to bring multiple types of entertainment that might accompany a YA novel. Today’s teen readers are considered highly active and digitally minded rather than passive participants. Multi-media platforms allow for more avenues of creative involvement in a story.

The Internet has become a source of multi-platform titles, such as in 39 Clues and The Amanda Project. In these novels, the books invite the reader online to search for helpful hints and talk on message boards about the plotlines. There are even links that ask for reader input on deciding where the plot should lead next. Take for example, The Amanda Project; in this storyline, Amanda has disappeared and her friends are desperately trying to find her. With the clues the characters find, readers log in online to answer questions about Amanda that might lead to her discovery (Groenke and Maples 2). Online platforms, such as The Amanda Project, help readers feel connected to others and will authenticate the reading process further (Groenke and Maples 5).
Because of the digital form of present and future books, a common misconception is that books will be cheaper in the future. This is not necessarily true, and as economic challenges continue to rise, teens may have difficulty purchasing books, regardless of digital or print availability. Currently, authors see 5% to 10% of their books selling in e-form (Springen 21). Fifty-seven percent of high school juniors and seniors said they are interested in trying an e-book, according to a survey completed by the Scholastic and Harrison Group. Yet, only 16% planned on purchasing an e-book in the coming year (Springen 22).

Along with a multi-platform trend for the future in which the young adult book becomes more of a “product” than just a novel, movies, television shows, merchandise, and franchises may follow a book’s success. This is in part because of efforts of the major book companies, such as Barnes and Noble. It is likely this trend will continue as long as teens are willing to buy these products along with the book (Blubaugh 9).

**YA Genres**

Because young adult issues surround teachers and parents, it is important to recognize young adult literature and its genres. A diverse set of genres is available in young adult literature. Examples include realistic fiction, teen romance, dystopian society, and mixed genres novels. Each type of YA fiction has multiple and recognizable titles, as well as familiar issues within the texts and story ideas.
Realistic fiction.

The realistic fiction genre relates to the issues of modern teens. This genre began in the 1970s and remains strong (Koss 563). Realistic fiction novels tell matter-of-fact stories about real and flawed teenaged characters. In a study completed by the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, researchers found that 85% of the award winning and well-liked books were fiction, and of those books, the most popular style was realistic fiction. The most frequent theme found in realistic fiction was that of teens “fitting-in” with the adolescent crowds (Koss 563). Realistic fiction is edgy and revolves around the sometimes dark nature of becoming an adult. Situations in these novels are not comfortable for the reader, and the language is reflective of teen peer interaction. Teens today have no patience with staged conversations or fake situations in realistic fiction (Bodart 32).

The aforementioned Ellen Hopkins’s and Sonya Sones’s prose-poetry novels are examples of realistic fiction. Both authors pushed boundaries with language, sex, and consequences of decision making within their novels. “The characters can be so trapped by their situations that they convey a helpless, gloomy message. It is when the characters are responsible for solving their problems that adolescent readers are most likely to be empowered to develop confidence in overcoming similar problems of their own” (Louie and Louie 3). The combination of structure within the poetry-prose format and realistic fiction genre is a powerful mix. Because realistic fiction novels do not “sugarcoat” situations, they tend to present intense, authentic situations. Teens are fully aware of violence, conflict, rejection, and sorrow. Realistic fiction is a mirror for those intense moments (Bodart 31).
Romance and sexuality in teen fiction.

Another genre present in YA fiction that often infuses realistic fiction is teen romance and sexuality. Romance and sexuality are permanent fixtures within the YA genre (Perez 20). One pioneering novel that embraced teen romance and sexuality was Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975). In *Forever*, the main characters, Katherine and Michael, displayed the realistic storyline of two young people passionately embarking into a sometimes awkward and naïve romantic and sexual relationship. Years later, Blume released a nonfiction publication called *Letters to Judy: What Your Kids Wish They Could Tell You*. In Blume’s nonfiction book, teen readers described how *Forever* changed their view on relationships. *Forever* challenged the idea that their teen romances may last “forever” and that their decisions, including those about sex, should be examined closely (Pattee 33).

As mentioned previously, sexuality in YA fiction is a realistic topic, one that pertains to teen in the present day (Perez 20). Almost fifty percent of high school females and males, ages fifteen to nineteen, have participated in sexual intercourse, according to the Center for Disease and Control and Prevention (McKinley 38). Even though almost half of the teen population is participating in sexual relationships, there is a “dichotomy” between the books the public believes the teen audience should be reading and what the same teen audience is living out in their own lives (Perez 20). Traditionally, teen fiction may have been used as a deterrent to “scare” teens about sex or to curb teens’ sexual desires. The authors who support sexual content in the genre argue that novels with teen sexuality should provide details of not only the act itself, but also the emotional and psychological elements of sex as well. By doing so, authors provide a more rounded
image of sex, one that can be a learning experience for teens (Pattee 34). Regardless of authors’ attempts to carefully construct a sexual scene within a young adult novel, critiques and controversy about the mere mention of sex and romantic relationships are likely to follow the book’s title.

**Dystopian teen fiction.**

Similar to the other genres mentioned previously, dystopian fiction (otherwise called speculative fiction) extends the young adult literature genre; however, the focus on dystopian societies is not new. Authors, such as H.G. Wells (*War of the Worlds*) and Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*), built grim worlds focused on society’s turmoil and eventual downfall. Today, the central focus for YA dystopian novels is still marred and downtrodden societies (Reeve 35). The style of writing for dystopian narratives intends to show a society worse than in which the reader resides in real life (Cain-Gray 35). *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins takes place in a dark society that “speculates” on the evil obsession with television and fame in society. In *The Hunger Games* children are pitted against one another in a televised “battle” of wit and brawn where the loser dies and the winner survives (Reeve 35). Other books such as *The City of Ember* series by Jeanne DuPrau and *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow contain the similar theme of a dystopian society and the teens and families within who struggle for survival (“Booklist”). Dystopian novels exaggerate contemporary society and its problems by magnifying social problems and putting teens into a fictional “what-if” scenario. Citizens in dystopian novels experience encroachment of their civil rights and attacks on their creature comforts, like the ease of using a grocery store or having air conditioning in the home (Wilkinson 1). Consumerism and thinking as a “herd” rather than as individuals are
also topics presented in dystopian novels (Wilkinson 2). It is likely that teens find an interest in the dystopian genre because of the challenge to the authority, rules, and social structures. Many of the characters within these novels find themselves to be the “rebel” leader or savior (Reeve 35). Recent protagonists are highly intelligent and resourceful, and are often full of moxie. The mood of the dystopian YA genre can be grim, but the general idea is the triumph over the direst circumstances (Reeve 36). Phillip Reeve, author of multiple children’s novels, suggests there is an even darker side to the dystopian novel. Reeve identifies a lack of humor and lightness in these novels. Akin to the media’s developing “culture of fear,” dystopian novels portray man as dumb and profligate (Reeve 36). Furthermore, the violence within these novels is stunning. The idea of the “happy ending” in the dystopian novel is skewed or subjective. However, these novels offer a fresh teen protagonist perspective and promote the idea of survival at any cost (Harris 74).

**Mixed genres and multiple voices.**

In yet another trend, readers are seeing the conglomeration of genres within books (Rabey 38). Now more than ever YA books are crossing boundaries, and genres are becoming blurry. Books like Walter Mosley’s 47, are appealing to both boys and girls and incorporate history with fantasy (Lesesne “Something for Every Reader” 17). Other books, like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *A Great and Terrible Beauty* about a secret realm in a Victorian time period, are pushing genre boundaries. Although realistic fiction remains popular, teens are also reaching out to books that allow them to separate from reality (Rabey 38). Vampires and werewolves are fusing with time periods and historical events. Detective mysteries are blurring with fantasy.
Steampunk, a sub-genre of fantasy, uses technology in time periods that do not historically support that kind of technology (Rabey 40). *Leviathan*, by Scott Westerfield, gives an alternate view of World War I under the hypothesis of events that include highly developed weaponry for each “side” during the war. Steampunk is just at its beginnings in the young adult literature genre. It is likely it will continue to garner attention, especially if authors continue to use the combination of historical fiction and fantasy (Rabey 40). Critics of mixed genres argue that respectable historical figures and events are defiled by the addition of fantasy or science fiction for entertainment value. (Rabey 40).

Trends show that YA novels are heading toward incorporating numerous “voices” or perspectives in one novel. Readers may expect to see a consistent shift of voice to explain a point of view of an event within a book (Koss 73). This shift allows readers to experience the event from several points of view and can give teens perspective of how to act in unfamiliar situations. Multiple points of view also allow teens to test their ability to fact-check or check for narrator reliability, much like they would in real life (Koss 77).

**Benefits and Issues Related Young Adult Literature**

The evolution of a more honest and real YA genre demonstrates its allure (Blubaugh 9). The allure of young adult literature has been and is the stories’ attempts to capture serious issues from the growing years of adolescents. Avid and reluctant readers alike have found themselves interested in the YA genre. People, especially adolescents, have responded to this fiction because it is an assurance that they have the same problems as others, that they are not alone. A sense of real life connectivity allows the stories to maintain popularity.
Benefits

The benefit of teen literature, beyond promoting reading for life, is to provide a fictional landscape in which teens can relate (Bodart 31). This landscape includes real problems with solutions and possibly cathartic moments for the reader. Teens want to vicariously experience problems before living them out in real life (Bodart 31). The challenges of puberty, bullying, young love, self-esteem, and coming-of-age are displayed in the young characters of such literature, and most teens relate to these issues. “Experience in the world helps to shape and mold these characters and to make them, in most cases, better human beings and more able to cope with the adult world they are about to enter” (Otfinoski, 8). According to Salvner, YA literature is not necessarily a mirror to the world, but rather it is an experience, a form of living. The literature also becomes a way of sharing lives together, to communicate sorrows and joys. Young adult literature also provides a voice for the youth, sometimes cynical while at other times upbeat. In reading the text, teen readers may find answers to life-changing truths and worries (Salvner). A value of the young adult literature genre is its ability to expose the damaging or challenging truth.

An example of a novel that displays a gritty truth is Alex Flinn’s 2005 novel, *Nothing to Lose* (Flinn). In *Nothing to Lose* the main character, Michael, deals with domestic violence and must run away following the accusation that his mother killed his step-father in a heated argument. Michael must come to terms with his own involvement in the violent episode and finding his identity during his turbulent.

Another example of a real-to-life teen book is *King of Screwups* by K.L. Going (published in 2010). According to Going, in this coming-of-age story, Liam (also known
as Mr. Popularity) screws up on a regular basis, especially in his father’s eyes. Liam is
kicked out and must move in with his uncle “Aunt” Pete; following the move, Liam
attempts to re-make himself into the perfect person he believes his father wants him to be.
Liam is like many teens wanting to please their parents, while also attempting to be true
to their own plans for the future (Going, K.L). In this novel, Liam attempts to find
happiness and acceptance, traits that teens strive for in their own lives.

In a social context, adolescents are part of today’s society. “[Teens] are in the
news, on TV, the subjects of movies, and on trial in our courts. Young adult issues
surround us” (Cappella 1). Because teens are a demographic group in society, parents and
teachers need to examine reading material as a way to connect to the age group (Cappella
1). In addition, the YA genre “equips” readers for assessing their lives for future
adulthood problems and issues (Cart “Value”).

YA Genre Issues and Controversies

The popularity of young adult literature is not without its controversy. Young
adult literature has always been questioned and critiqued (Bodart 31). The topical issues
of puberty, sex, drugs, and bad decision making are challenged in bookstores and in
school board meetings. From Judy Blume’s Forever to Chris Crutcher’s Athletic Shorts,
characters, topics, and plotlines have been challenged. Profanity in the dialogue and
prose pushes boundaries as well; however, authors know they can hook readers by
providing a realistic sampling of dialogue in their stories. Teens have no patience for
“sugar-coating” or downplaying conversations, let alone downplaying storylines (Bodart
32). According to Leslie Burger, 2006 American Library Association president, the main
reason why young adult fiction is not challenged more often is because teachers and
librarians support the freedom of patrons to choose and read what please them (Otfinoski, 7).

The inclusion of sexual relationships for today’s characters in YA novels brings speculation to the genre. Brent Hartinger, author of The Order of the Poison Oak, states that “[t]oday’s teenagers, gay and straight, are sexual beings, surrounded by sexuality in their lives, for better or for worse. But any author who acknowledges this reality is going to be ‘controversial,’ no matter what your take is” (Perez 20). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 54% of female teens have participated in oral sex. The high percentage suggests a need for realistic, sexual moments to occur teen novels. Teens have great fear about asking questions about sex or sex acts. Fiction provides a dialogue within the storyline, a place to see the consequences of sex without actually participating and a way to begin a conversation with a parent or a trusted adult (McKinley 44). Furthermore, studies show that teens want information about sex whether or not they are participating (Pattee 31).

The controversy of sex in teen literature extends in other ways as well. In a study completed by the Organization for Research on Women and Communication, researchers found that advertising and marketing departments of teen literature that touted sex or sexual references were financially rewarded by book sales (Johnson 55). Some critics argue that publishing companies are the only ones to benefit from such texts. Some argue that the sole focus on the female teen in these books is to find her great love, and the only way to find “the one” is through clothing or appearance, social status, and sexual favors (Johnson 54). Following a thorough examination into such popular titles as Gossip Girl and the Clique Series, researchers concluded that the focus should not be on
disestablishing such “chick lit” but rather on demonstrating to young girls the need to engage in healthy and consequential thinking and behaving (Johnson 54). Young adult novels with relatable female characters show teen readers a way out, or even a way around becoming involved in red-flagged, dangerous relationships. In *Dreamland*, by Sarah Dessen, the main character, Caitlin, finds herself in an abusive relationship with her boyfriend (as described by Dessen). Caitlin revels in the attention her boyfriend gives her and feels her self-worth is based off of his attention to her body. Caitlin finds herself attached to her boyfriend in an intense way, despite his violent tendencies toward her (McKinley 40). Ultimately, the book demonstrates Caitlin as a young woman struggling with self-esteem and trying to find her own way without someone telling her how to proceed in life. One controversial story that combines romance and sexuality is the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer. With 85 million books sold around the world, the series garnered positive and negative attention. The argument or negative buzz surrounding the storyline is about the overbearing and possessive behavior of the male main character, Edward (Merskin 158). The female main character, Bella, appears to have low self-esteem and is weak; but Edward swoops in to “save the day.” Critics argue that this plot-line formula is outdated and pushes back progress and equality for the female gender. In the last novel in the series, *Breaking Dawn*, Bella becomes pregnant and Edward wants to immediately eliminate the “thing” (it was theorized that she would have a difficult or life-threatening delivery). Anna Silver, author of “*Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens: Gender Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series” argues that Meyer used this plot event heavy-handedly as an anti-abortion
statement. Furthermore, Bella’s refusal to terminate the baby, despite the harm to herself, makes it appear as though the only role Bella has is one of self-sacrifice (Silver 130).

Whether it is a skewed romantic or sexual relationship or “non-normative sexualities,” opposition to sex within a YA novel is common. Homosexual or bisexual plotlines added to today’s young adult literature have received attention as well (“Off the Shelves” 123). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) novels have doubled since the 1990s (“Off the Shelves” 123). Today’s LGBTQ novels push to show different types of teens and their interactions with family as they undergo self-discovery about sex and the world in general. LGBTQ books vary in their messages. Some show the hardships of characters as they share with their friends and families their sexual identity. Others simply show the character in a positive light as he or she navigates through adolescence and figuring out who he or she is. The following LGBTQ stories are reviewed by English Journal in the article “Off the Shelves” and point out the variations within the YA LGBTQ genre. Hero, by Perry Moore (2007) combines fantasy with self-identity issues (“Off the Shelves” 123). The main character is the son of a superhero; he eventually finds that he has superpowers of his own, but he must continue to search for his own sexual identity. The fantasy of the novel is riveting, but the message behind the character’s identity search is an important glimpse into the LGBTQ genre. Another novel, Boy Meets Boy, by David Leviathan (2003) fictionalizes a setting where the main character reveals to his family that he is gay, without feeling unsafe or facing persecution (“Off the Shelves” 5). Boy Meets Boy gives a glimpse into a world without judgment or anger over sexuality.
The reality is that the LGBTQ genre still needs more attention as time passes. A 2004 poll by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network reported 5% of high school students in the United States recognize themselves as gay or lesbian. Not all YA books that contain LGBTQ topics are positive. In Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*, a character named Dan drunkenly kisses a male colleague. The kiss shocks his friends and family, including his ex-girlfriend, Vanessa. Vanessa chalks his behavior up to a simple phase that he will pass through soon. Dan is thoroughly confused and dejectedly concludes that he is gay without further speculation or resolution. Critics argue that Ziegesar missed the opportunity to show Dan searching more thoroughly through his sexual identity; instead, Ziegesar used Dan’s “gay” perspective as a way to amp the dramatic pressure in the story (Manfredi 27).

In conclusion, the controversies of this genre overwhelm some parents, teachers, and readers. Sometimes it is a matter of matching the right novel with the right student at the most effective time (Manfredi 28). It is beneficial, although controversial, for students of all types to have literature that may help them understand sexuality (“Off the Shelves” 6). The benefits of controversial literature have been studied and argued about since the beginning of the YA genre. Dr. Joni Bodart has studied and authored two books about the controversial and “radical” books that teens are reading. Bodart examined books that are edgy and considered dangerous (Bodart 31). Bodart discusses books that reach out to students who had never found a book, until now, that spoke to their lifestyle. Furthermore, Bodart states that young readers crave characters that are real, both flawed and inspiring (Bodart 32). Josh Westbrook, a branch librarian in Walla Walla, Washington, made the observation that teens actually *live* the stories that society
struggles to let them read (as qtd. in Honnold). Furthermore, teen literature supporters agree that YA literature offers a world that allows its reader to delve in and escape the doldrums and challenges of everyday living, or to at least identify with (Silver 121).

**Authors of Young Adult Literature**

The evolution, format, and trends of young adult literature are spurred by the pen of the young adult authors. These authors are usually multi-book writers who write about issues important to teens, issues that often are controversial or complex (Bates). Walter Dean Myers, author of over 50 books, tends to write about the “gray areas” of life (Myers, Walter Dean). Myers remembers his own adolescence filled with doubt and insecurity. His stories often challenge the right and wrong decisions that a teen may face, and how sometimes the right decision may not actually be the best decision. Myers has stated that he often writes literature about teen angst and doubt. In his unique and newest story, *Amiri and Odette: a Dance for Two*, the two main characters fight for survival on the city streets. Soon they realize Odette is pregnant, and the fight for survival becomes even more imperative. The story is written in poetry-rap format, with collage-on-cinder-block paintings from the artist Javaka Steptoe. In this excerpt, Amiri calls for Odette as he realizes he has betrayed her love:

> From a corner it comes. A Shriek! A Wail! A cry that sails against the paint-cracked walls. A pitiful scream. A Citiful scream. A pane-shattering scream. A scream-scattering pain that echoes down the halls of the Swan Lake Projects. Amiri turns back to his girl he thinks is his sweet love, who landed in the Swan Lake Projects from the heavens far above.
In a moment sharpened with regret, he knows he has betrayed Odette! O muffle the drum and mute the horn, from love’s demise, despair is born! (10)

The story itself delves into the harsh realities that a young couple faces in a dangerous and unhelpful environment (Myers). Myers continues to write books today that deal with tough topics—and continues to be a best-selling young adult novelist.

Another well-known and influential YA literature author is Laurie Halse Anderson. Her newest novel, *Forge* (the sequel to *Chains*), follows the trials of two runaway slaves as they “forge” ahead in search of freedom and independence. These two novels, examples of best-selling historical fiction, exemplify adventure and heroism (Anderson). Although Anderson admits that she doesn’t typically write happy books, the feedback she receives from readers of all ages tells her that by choosing the more complex and challenging issues, she allows an opportunity for readers to see and experience a world different from their own, but with the same human challenges. Anderson has stated that although the growth of young adult fiction is impressive, she would like to see growth for multicultural stories, stories about people of color, immigrants, and teens of the working class (Prince 70).

Like Walter Dean Myers and Laurie Halse Anderson, Gail Giles’s books often do not contain the storybook ending readers expect. She likes to write books that encourage teens to step out of their reading comfort zones. Giles (as qtd. in Lesesne “A Dark and Dangerous World”) also discusses the emotional element that a book can bring to the classroom, to the teacher, and to the student. She recounts a time while reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* when she cried in front of the class. Soon after, the library received 18 requests for the novel in one day. Giles advises teachers to cry or express emotion when
they read to the class; Giles states that showing such emotion encourages teens to read
and to express connectivity to books (57).

P.C. and Kristen Cast, co-authors of the *House of Night* series (among others),
discuss their creation and interaction in the mixed genre and supernatural field of young
adult literature ("An Interview with P.C and Kristen Cast"). Coming from a family with a
science background, the authors were able to extend their vampiric reality to include a
reference to “junk DNA” in their explanation of how their vampires came into existence.
P.C. Cast also discussed how their stories revolve around strong female characters and
the practice of making good decisions. Both authors contend that the YA genre is more
than just the story at its surface level, but rather, the story can present lessons for the
reader to absorb (83).

The way book characters interact with the world will always be paramount in
young adult literature. One aspect of young adult literature that will never change is the
aspect of good story-telling (Bates). Ultimately, “we are living in the enlightenment of
young adult literature. Never before have teachers had so many remarkable books to
bring to life…and use to teach social responsibility” (Wolk 3). Authors are delving into
new formats and genres, while also adding twists to the classics. These changes add
controversy to the YA genre, but give the reading audience a glimpse into the future of
how the young adult literature genre will grow and evolve.
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

Examining and defining young adult literature requires careful consideration of the literature’s development and its clarifying traits. Current YA authors use classic plots, while also adding twists that are relevant to teens. These stories often contain lessons for readers to absorb, but bring scrutiny and controversy to the genre. When examining young adult literature, one must consider the following questions: How does one define and pinpoint the components of young adult literature? What genre trends are present in today’s YA literature? What controversial elements, as well as beneficial aspects are central in young adult literature?

Definition, Evolution, and Format of Young Adult Literature

One of the first questions one might ask about young adult literature is about its definition and format. The target age group for YA fiction ranges from ages 14-18 (Iyer). Typically the YA author writes for the teen audience specifically and includes teen protagonists (Bates 1). Furthermore, young adult fiction speaks to the “emotional, intellectual [and] developmental” aspects of the modern teen reader (Blubaugh 9).

Today, young adult literature has evolved to include older teens. This is due in part to the Michael L. Printz Award, an award created by the YALSA group, which celebrates experimental and trendsetting writing (Gallo et al. 2; Cart “A New Literature” 28). YA literature was once a quiet form of literature geared toward younger readers; the literature is now a sampling of edgy and controversial writing geared toward teens with real problems (Gallo et al. 2).

The formatting of young adult literature varies. Besides classic fiction formatting, prose-poetry is a classic composition form found in the YA genre. Written in a
concentrated form, prose-poetry allows the writer to use poetry techniques, while also
telling a story. Prose-poetry stories are tightly woven and provide a strong sense of
imagery for the reader (Vanneman 23). Another format found in the young adult
literature genre is the graphic novel structure. In 2005 the graphic novel became
mainstream in public school libraries and classrooms. Educational journals began
reviewing and making recommendations of noteworthy graphic novels for librarians and
teens. Furthermore, studies show that graphic novels are helpful in core curriculums, such
as language arts or social studies (Williams and Peterson 166). Beyond the graphic novel,
some books are published with Internet, movie, or audio resources. These resources give
the reader sensory involvement beyond just reading, and as long as teens are willing to
purchase such multi-platform resources, publishers will continue to offer them to a
buying audience (Blubaugh 9). A type of graphic novel, Manga, is a notable format in
the graphic novel structure. Manga offers cultural variety within plots hat allow self and
sexual identity for the reader. The gender-neutral images of the males and female
characters demonstrate an acceptance of one’s appearance, no matter the flaws (Goldstein
and Phelan 36). Also within the genre is the multi-platform option of a book.
Popular Genres in Young Adult Literature

The genres most popular in YA literature today include realistic fiction, teen romance, dystopian society, and mixed genre novels. According to a study completed by the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 85% of award winning books are realistic fiction. Teens appreciate real-to-life stories about fitting in and coming to terms with adolescent issues (Koss and Teale 563).

Romance and sexuality are also topics that appeal to teen readers. The pioneering Judy Blume, author of *Forever*, challenged the idea that teen romances may last “forever” and that decisions, including those about sex, should be examined closely (Pattee 33). Because statistics show 50% of teens are participating in sexual activity, authors who support sexual content in the genre are providing not only details of the act itself, but also the emotional and psychological ramifications of having sex. By doing so, authors provide a more rounded image of sex, one that can be a learning experience for teens (Pattee 34).

Another popular genre of young adult literature is the dystopian novel. Today, the central focus for YA dystopian novels is a troubled or disfigured society (Reeve 35). *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins, is a recent example of a dystopian society. In this story, teens are pitted against each other in a fierce battle of survival purely for the entertainment of a television audience. Because dystopian novels typically include a rebel leader or a savior, teens find this genre appealing (Reeve 35).

Although realistic fiction remains popular, teens are also reaching out to books that allow them to separate from reality (Rabey 38). Vampires and werewolves are fusing with time periods and historical events, and detective mysteries are blurring with fantasy.
Steampunk brings out-of-period technology into history. These mixed-genre novels might offend purists, but they are appealing to both boys and girls because they imaginatively incorporate fantasy with history.

**Controversial Elements and Learning Moments in YA Literature**

Not only are the popular topics in young adult literature noteworthy, but these topics and genres are controversial. Furthermore, according to Leslie Burger, 2006 American Library Association president, the main reason why young adult fiction is not challenged more is in large part because teachers and librarians support the freedom to read for enjoyment (Otfinoski, 7). Because realistic fiction novels do not “sugarcoat” situations, authors present information in intense, authentic situations. Teens are fully aware of violence, conflict, rejection, and sorrow. Realistic fiction is a mirror for those intense moments (Bodart 31). Romance and teen sexuality topics, like realistic fiction, push the envelope as well. Although sexual content is controversial, some critics argue that the publishing companies are the only ones to benefit from such texts. In addition, some argue that the sole focus on the female teen in these books is for the heroine to find her great love, and the only way to find “the one” is through clothing and appearance, social status, and sexual favors (Johnson 54).
However, the learning moments within these novels are notable as well. Young adult literature provides a landscape in which teens relate to the characters and situations. Teens want to vicariously experience problems before living them out in real life (Bodart 31). The challenges of puberty, bullying, young love, self-esteem, and coming-of-age are displayed in the young characters of such literature, and most teens can relate to and learn from these stories. Furthermore, young adult literature also provides a voice for the youth, sometimes cynical while at other times upbeat. In reading the text, teen readers may find answers to life-changing truths and worries (Salvner).
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