THE POP CULTURE EFFECT:
TRENDS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by

Erin C. McCurdy

An Abstract
of a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
University of Central Missouri

December, 2013
ABSTRACT

by

Erin C. McCurdy

Young adult literature is growing exponentially and the trends are constantly changing. There are distinct characteristics which set young adult literature apart from the rest and make it appealing to adolescent readers. This review of research focuses on the definition of young adult literature, the trends in genres and formatting, and the controversies that surround the genre, including teenage sex and themes of darkness. The literature reviewed discusses a sampling of trending genres; dystopian; teen chick literature; supernatural; Christian young adult; and crossover fiction, which blurs the age boundaries of readers. The research concluded that adolescent readers find non-traditional formatting appealing, such as graphic novels, novels in verse, and multi-platform novels enhanced with technology.
THE POP CULTURE EFFECT:
TRENDS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE
by
Erin C. McCurdy

A Research Paper
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Library Science and Information Services
in the Department of Educational Leadership and Human Development
University of Central Missouri

December, 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for supporting me on this journey. I could not have done it without the continued support from my husband and the patience of my daughters, Macy and Blair. A big thank you to my parents and in-laws for countless hours of baby-sitting, which allowed me to focus. I would also like to thank Dr. Robins and Mr. Pentlin for devoting time and effort to this paper.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of Study</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trends in Young Adult Literature</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YA Genres</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular YA Genres</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dystopian Fiction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Chick Literature</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Supernatural</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Young Adult</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossover Fiction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YA Formats</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Novels</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novels in Verse</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-platform</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversies in YA Literature</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1:  
INTRODUCTION

This literature review explores the topic of trends in young adult literature (YA lit). The literature reviewed covers aspects of the topic such as the definition of young adult literature, its defining characteristics, popular genres, formatting preferences, and controversies surrounding young adult literature. Young adult literature has been around for decades, however YA lit is growing rapidly and the trends are constantly changing. The audience is no longer strictly young adults, but also children and adults (Cart “What is Young Adult Literature?” 734). Fiction is the most popular form of YA literature (Koss and Teale 565). Narrowing the popular fiction genres is difficult, but this study focuses on genres that are highly popular currently, as well as genres that are quickly gaining momentum.

Statement of the Problem

The young adult genre is gaining momentum and rapidly expanding to an audience consisting of readers of all ages. YA literature is defined by Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) as literature for readers ages 12-18; however, past YALSA president, Michael Cart, believes the typical age range to be anywhere from 10-35 (Cart “What is Young Adult Literature?” 734). In addition to the audience, YA literature has become expansive with the content, as well as formatting. Content that could formerly be found primarily in adult fiction is now common in young adult fiction and is subject to controversy. Authors and publishers are taking the format of YA literature further with multi-platform literature that includes an interactive piece for the reader. In addition, graphic novels and novels in verse are currently common in young adult literature.

Literature is sometimes categorized as young adult without fitting the mold. Librarians and teachers should understand the defining characteristics of young adult literature and be informed on the trending genres, formats, and the explanations for popularity in order to help students make reading selections.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review the literature to identify the popular characteristics of young adult literature. In order to do so, a definition of the term young adult literature, as well as the defining characteristics are identified. In addition, the purpose was to pinpoint the popular genres within young adult literature, as well as the formatting preferences of adolescent readers. Once an understanding of young adult literature is gained; teachers, librarians, and parents will be better suited to aid in the selection of reading material for adolescent readers.

Additionally, the purpose of the study is to identify the controversial topics in young adult literature and determine the reasons for the controversy. Gaining an understanding of the topics and its place in young adult literature will encourage acceptance and support of the evolving genre.

Research Questions

Young adult literature is an expansive topic and can be difficult to narrow. Many questions arose throughout the research process. To narrow the research for this study, the following questions served as a guide:

1. What sets young adult literature apart from the rest?
2. What genres are popular amongst young adult readers and what is the appeal?
3. How does formatting affect the young adult reader?
4. Which topics draw controversy to young adult literature?

Limitations of the Study

The research process involved in this study did not come without hindrances. Due to the limited amount of existing literature and research available, locating current data about the preferences of adolescent readers was the main hindrance. Much of the research discovered was dated more than ten
years ago, making it obsolete to this particular study. Additionally, more data focused on the reluctance of teens to read, which would lead to another question that was not explored in the study.

Another limitation of the study was the availability of literature that focuses on the formatting of young adult literature, particularly the use of novels in verse. Novels in verse are not new; Virginia Euwer Wolff’s novel, *Make Lemonade: A Novel*, was published in 1993; however, the popularity of the format is just recently growing, and therefore the research is limited (Chance 34). The amount of literature regarding graphic novels, and even the newer format, multi-platform, far exceeds the amount available on novels in verse.

**Definition of Terms**

Chick literature: Literature that is targeted to the female audience and focuses on real-life issues

Crossover fiction: The result of the blurred lines that differentiate books for different age levels (Lesesne 17)

Dystopian novels: Novels that feature an apocalyptic storyline

Manga: Manga originated in Japan and has a Japanese artistic style that distinguishes it from other comics (Mori 29)

Multi-platform media: Technology used to supplement the novel by allowing the reader to interact with the story

Novel in verse: Novels which tell a story in a prose-poetry format

**Design of Study**

The information used for this study consisted only of pre-existing information found in peer-reviewed journals pertaining to young adult literature, its defining characteristics, trending genres, formatting, and controversies. Articles were examined and chosen based on the guiding questions. No research was conducted for this review.
Articles were retrieved from the following databases, Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, and Library Literature & Information Science Full Text. Search terms included, “young adult literature,” “ya lit,” “trends and young adult literature,” “young adult fiction,” as well as terms specific to the guiding questions, such as “young adult dystopian,” “teen chick lit,” and “crossover fiction.”

Multiple libraries were visited throughout the course of the research. The following libraries were visited: Scenic Regional Library in Union, Missouri; James Memorial Public Library in St. James, Missouri; Rolla Public Library in Rolla, Missouri.

Conclusion

Young adult literature is evolving and the trends are ever-changing. The next chapter is a review of the literature exploring the topic of young adult literature, its defining characteristics, the popular genres, formatting, and controversy. Dystopian fiction, a genre that focuses on overcoming in a doom and gloom situation, such as the apocalypse, is currently surging in popularity, in addition to genres, such as teen chick lit and Christian YA, that feature real-life problems. Chapter two focuses on the popular genres and some explanations to the popularity.

Technology can be found at the fingertips of most adolescents today. Authors and publishers are using that to their advantage with multi-platform formatting and supplementing novels with technology to further engage readers. The formatting of young adult literature will also be discussed in chapter two. Graphic novels and novels in verse are marketed to appeal to reluctant teen readers to grab them with a storyline, but few words.

To keep up with the demand of the expanding audience, authors are exploring new territory and covering topics that have been labeled as adult topics in the past. The use of sexuality and darkness will
also be explored in chapter two. Chapter three includes the answers to the questions guiding the study and concludes the study on the trends in young adult literature.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Young adult literature is a genre that was once not given much attention because it was viewed as a genre that dealt with real teen issues and romances. In the past two decades, young adult literature has risen in popularity and is seen as real literature that welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking. (Cart “The Value of Young Adult Literature” 1). The definition of young adult literature is broad and continuing to become broader over time. Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) defines a young adult as someone between the ages of 12 and 18. According to Michael Cart, “over the course of the last several years, the term has grown so restlessly expansive that it now seems to embrace titles for readers as young as 10 and (arguably) as old as 35,” (Cart “What is Young Adult Literature?” 734). YALSA has recognized the broadness in its definition of young adult literature (Sutton “Problems, Paperbacks, and the Printz: Forty Years of YA Books” 239).

Along with the evolving definition of young adult literature, are the genres included. Traditionally, young adult literature contains the same genres as adult literature; including, drama, adventure, humor, historical fiction, mystery, and fantasy, among others. This paper will discuss genres in young adult fiction and the popularity trends of certain genres; including dystopian, supernatural, teen chick lit, and Christian YA. In the second section of the paper, forms of YA literature such as graphic novels, novels in verse, and e-books will be discussed. The third section will explore the controversial topics in young adult literature, such as the dark themes that accompany certain genres, as well as sexuality that is prevalent across the genres.

Trends in Young Adult Literature

Fiction is the most popular form of YA literature. An analysis of YA literature by Melanie Koss and William H. Teale showed, “award winning and popular books were predominantly fiction (85% overall)” (Koss and Teale 565). While the genres in young adult literature are the same as in adult fiction, the popularity trends in YA are distinct. In recent years, certain genres have been rising in popularity.
This section will present an overview of genres in YA fiction, then examine the popularity of dystopian fiction, teen chick lit, supernatural fiction, Christian young adult, and crossover fiction.

**YA Genres**

Young adult literature includes the same genres as adult literature. The main factor that differentiates young adult literature from adult literature is the perspective of the narrator. Young adult books must feature a teenage narrator, regardless of the point of view (Campbell, “Our Side of the Fence” 361). Pamela Cole points out some of the characteristics that have historically distinguished young adult literature from the rest, which include a teenage protagonist, coming of age issues, parental issues, and they are more likely to be short in length (Cole 49). Real-life fiction is a genre that focuses on these coming of age issues and is still the most common and most controversial (Cole 99).

Popular culture influences the lives of today’s youth, so it makes sense that it also influences the trends in young adult literature. According to Cole, “While what’s ‘in’ may change with teenagers, the influential power and attraction of popular culture remain constant” (Cole 555). Due to ever-changing popular culture, genres fall in and out of popularity. In the next section, a sample of current popular young adult genres will be presented.

**Popular YA Genres**

Trends in young adult literature are ever-evolving. This section will discuss a few of the genres that are currently popular amongst teens. The genres that will be addressed are dystopian fiction, supernatural, teen chick literature, and Christian young adult fiction. In addition, crossover fiction, fiction that appeals to multiple ages, will be discussed. The reason for the popularity of each of the genres will also be discussed.

**Dystopian Fiction.**

One popular trend in young adult fiction is dystopian fiction. According to April Spisak, reviewer for *Horn Book*, “Dystopias are characterized as a society that is a counter-utopia, a repressed, controlled,
restricted system with multiple social controls put into place via government, military, or a powerful authority figure” (Spisak 55). Dystopian fiction has been around for years before its rise in popularity. Classic dystopian novels, such as George Orwell’s *1984*, published in 1949, and Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel, *Fahrenheit 451* paved the way for novels today (Reeve 35). In 1994, Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* was an award-winning dystopian novel (Spisak 55). Today, any mention of dystopia to teen readers points to Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games Trilogy* (Spisak 55). *Hunger Games* set the stage for publishers to further promote the dystopian trend with Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series and Lauren Oliver’s book *Delirium* (Grossman 100).

The trend of darkness will be explored further, but the dystopian trend is an example of the appeal of dark storylines to the youth of today. Author Philip Reeve believes that the surge in dystopian popularity comes from that idea that one can show courage and triumph in even the gloomiest situations (Reeve 36). Or it could be because simple things, such as problems with homework, parents, siblings, and friends seem like the end of the world to a teenager because teenagers often have trouble seeing that bigger problems do exist outside of their everyday life, so a book with an apocalyptic storyline is something they can relate to (Grossman 100). Either way, the success of dystopian novels for young adults has been phenomenal.

**Teen Chick Literature.**

Another popular trend in young adult fiction is teen chick literature (chick lit). Teen chick lit novels are books about real-life issues; such as boys, friendship, family, fitting in, and growing up (Meloni, “Teen Chick Lit” 16). Middle-aged women have been enjoying chick lit for years and it is spreading to a younger crowd. The typical audience for teen chick lit is girls aged 12-14 years old with the typical setting being high school (Alderdice 24). Some credit classic authors, such as Judy Blume, for introducing the teen chick lit phenomenon to younger readers (Bakkum 8), while others credit novels,
such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, for pulling in the older crowd of women, who then passed down the love of chick lit to the younger generation (Meloni, “Teen Chick Lit” 16).

The term “chick lit” is offensive to some authors (Dessen and Sutton 247). Teen chick lit is broken down into sub-genres, one of the most popular being privileged chick lit (Alderdice 24). Leading the way in privileged chick lit is the *Gossip Girl* series by Cecily von Ziegesar, Lisi Harrison’s *The Clique*, and Zoey Dean’s *The A-List* (Alderdice 25). Privileged chick lit provides an escape and opportunity for teen girls to fantasize about the glamorous lifestyle seen only on television (Meloni, “Teen Chick Lit” 16). With so many options to choose from, one would think the market was saturated; however, publishers agree that there is never too much of a good thing when it comes to teen chick lit, and the competition will raise the bar for the genre (Alderdice 26).

**The Supernatural.**

Fantasy has long been popular with young readers, but supernatural themes have reinvigorated the genre (Freitas 23). Since the success of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*, teen readers are turning to vampire novels (Freitas 23). The supernatural trend was made popular by adult fiction authors such as Anne Rice, Stephen King, and Dean Koontz (Meloni “The Rise of Vampire Literature” 30). The supernatural genre includes stories that deal with ghosts, zombies, angels, demons, werewolves, and vampires (Levitin 40). Author Sonia Levitin accredits the popularity of the supernatural genre to the fascination that humans have for danger and excitement (40).

Vampire novels line the shelves in libraries and bookstores. Although many types of vampire novels exist, such as scary, wimpy, and privileged vampires, the vampire romance stories are among the most popular (Adams 55). Librarian Christine Meloni accredits the popularity of vampire literature to the belief that teens are at a point in their life when they begin to question reality (Meloni “The Rise of Vampire Literature” 30). Vampire romance novels, *Twilight* included, combine sex and danger to make
for an appealing YA story (Adams 64). The use of sex appeal will be explored further in another section of this paper.

Also included in the supernatural trend are novels about zombies. The publishing house, Melville, has re-released the out of print *The Castle in Transylvania*, which is claimed to be the first zombie novel (Deahl 9). Zombies are hitting the big screen and the bookshelves alike (Wilson). Zombies are taking such a presence in today’s popular culture that *Time* magazine referred to zombies as the new vampire (Dziemianowicz 20). *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, as well as *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, are leading the way in the zombie movement (Wilson). There are currently over one million copies of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* in print (Deahl 9). Jonathan Maberry, author of the zombie YA hit *Rot & Ruin*, claims:

Zombies make perfect metaphors. George Romero used his horror films to make significant points about racism, consumerism, and the Reagan military build-up. Max Brooks' novel *World War Z* speaks to our fear of a global pandemic and its mishandling by world governments. [The] novel *Patient Zero* is an allegory for the potential mishandling of bio technologies. (1)

The supernatural trend is not going away for the foreseeable future. Vampires and zombies are opening the door to many other supernatural creatures and publishers are counting on the success of the supernatural YA books (Freitas 23).

**Christian Young Adult.**

The next genre that is slowly making its way into the YA market is Christian Young Adult. Christian book publishers NavPress and Zondervan have created lines that focus on the young adult population (Riess “YA Fiction Gains Ground in the Christian Market” 12). According to Daisy Hutton, vice president of Christian publishing house Thomas Nelson, “With the YA boom in the general market, we have definitely seen a surge of interest in the Christian market...” (Byle 7). The content that teens look
for in Christian YA literature is similar in some ways to the content that is popular in the mainstream market. Action, fantasy, and real-life problems prevail in the Christian YA market (Byle 7).

Even with some recent success, the market for YA Christian fiction is tough. The genre faces challenges that the mainstream YA genres do not generally face, such as where the books belong on the shelves. Book sellers do not want to place the books with the adult inspirational books, however they are reluctant to put them next to some of the controversial YA books (Riess “YA Fiction Gains Ground in the Christian Market” 12). Alternatively, some bookstores place the genre with the children's books. A section that teens are not likely to visit (Byle 9). Richard Paul Evans, author of the teen hit *Michael Vey: Prisoner of Cell 25*, is one of the success stories. His book is not marketed as a Christian book in all markets, so it is placed in the general YA section in many bookstores. A small percentage of the copies are sold in the Christian market (Byle 8).

Another issue facing the genre is marketing. Christian YA publishers must market the books to not only the teenage population, but also the parents (Riess “Christian YA Fiction Still Finding Its Footing” 30). Some real-life issues are seen as too dark by some of the parents who want to shield their children from the content (Byle 7). Christian YA authors have to decide how far they can take the content to stay inside the realm of Christian literature (Byle 10).

**Crossover Fiction.**

The final popular genre to explore in YA literature is crossover fiction. Crossover fiction is the result of the blurred lines that differentiate books for different age levels (Lesesne 17). Candace Walton defines the genre, “A modern definition of crossover books would be those that appeal to children, young adults, and adults alike even though they are seen as falling appropriately into only one of those categories...” (Walton 389). *New York* magazine named the trend “new adult” and credits authors such as Suzanne Collins, Stephenie Meyer, and J.K. Rowling for blurring the lines (Cart “The Latest... Or Is it?” 40). Michael Cart acknowledges that the crossover is nothing new and began in 1989 with Francesca Lia
Block’s *Weetzie Bat*. However, one study showed that 55% of YA titles are being purchased and read by adults (Cart “The Latest... Or Is It?” 40). *Time* magazine’s 1999 cover featuring *Harry Potter*, claiming that it was not strictly for kids, contributed to the surge in the popularity of crossover fiction (Walton 388). The themes included in the young adult literature that are currently being marketed attribute to the expansion in the audience. Themes such as sex, drug abuse, depression, mental illness, death, genocide, and torture were considered adult themes in the past, but are now being found in YA literature (Walton 359).

One question that is raised is what separates a YA title from an adult title when the audience is the same? Book reviewer Sue Corbett compared *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld and John Green’s *Looking For Alaska*. Both titles have similar themes and content, however the narrator’s perspective differs. The narrator in Green’s book is a teenager, while Sittenfeld’s narrator is an adult looking back on teenage years. YA titles are from a teen perspective. Titles with an adult narrator’s perspective get published in the adult market (Corbett 30).

**YA Formats**

In a world where young adults are used to short phrases, such as they would read in a text message, Facebook status update, or Tweet, authors are turning to different types of formats for YA literature in order to entice teens. This section will explore the use of graphic novels in young adult literature. It will also explore novels in verse, known as poetry prose. The digital age provides many technological opportunities for readers. Writers are using multiple digital platforms to reach their entire audience. This will also be discussed in this section.

**Graphic Novels**

Comic books have been enjoyed by young people for many years. Graphic novels are a modern take on comics. The term *graphic novel* was coined by Will Eisner in 1978 and refers to the lengthier version of the comic book (Gorman 42; Mori 29). Graphic novels highlight the images in the storyline
with little writing. This is appealing to teens that are sometimes reluctant to read (Mori 30). Graphic novels lure the non-readers in and engage them in reading (Gorman 42).

To assist librarians with the selection of graphic novels, YALSA has a committee dedicated to selecting graphic novels for teens. The committee creates a list called the Great Graphic Novels for Teens (GGNT) (Kim and Myers 39). The GGNT list includes graphic novels that appeal to all ages of readers and include multiple genres. Graphic novels are classified in many of the same categories as general fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, historical, action and adventure, realistic, and humor. Also included are the categories of superhero and manga (Gorman 43). Manga originated in Japan and has a Japanese artistic style that distinguishes it from other comics (Mori 29). Superhero graphic novels stand out as the most popular amongst teens (Gorman 43).

**Novels in Verse**

Novels in verse have soared in the young adult literature market in recent years. Much like the graphic novels, novels in verse appeal to reluctant readers. The appeal comes from the poetry format containing limited text on each page (Giorgis 6). The poetry used by the authors is unlike the poetry studied in a classroom, thus, making it more appealing to teens (Sullivan 44). Author Virginia Euwer Wolff explains in an interview with *Horn Book*’s Roger Sutton that she wanted busy young readers to be able to finish the book with the little time they had. She also explains that the vast white area on the page makes the novel seem less intimidating to the reader (Sutton, “An Interview with Virginia Euwer Wolff” 282). Free verse is most commonly used by authors (Chance 34). The formatting causes librarians to wonder where the novels in verse belong on the bookshelves. Some say they belong with the poetry whereas other believe they belong with the fiction (Chance 35).

*Make Lemonade: A Novel* by Virginia Euwer Wolff, published in 1993, is one of the novels credited with starting the trend. Mel Glenn is another novel in verse pioneer with his 1996 story, *Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Poems* (Chance 34). Authors such as Ellen Hopkins (Crank) and
Sonya Sones (What My Mother Doesn’t Know) are popular amongst the teenage fans of novels written in verse (Giorgis 6).

**Multi-platform**

By combining a book and a movie with website materials, gadgets, social networks, and other technology elements, young people are drawn into an alternative reading experience. These transmedia worlds are not intended to replace the book. Instead, they expand the reader’s experience beyond the printed page. (Lamb and Johnson 1)

With the technology offered to today’s youth, multi-platform, transmedia is becoming increasingly popular. Using multi-media platforms, readers are able to delve beyond reading the book by clicking links from the e-book format, for example, or visiting a Web site. Transmedia storytelling allows participants to become engaged in many different media types. Users may even become part of the narrative. The technologies are blended to make a virtual reading experience for the participant (Lamb and Johnson 76). For example, in Patrick Carman’s pre-teen series Skeleton Creek, a boy recovering from an accident keeps a written journal which a friend posts to her website, which readers can access online (Lamb and Johnson 78).

Smartphone and tablet applications offer other platforms for readers. Even classic young adult literature is being formatted to attract a more technologically advanced audience. An example of a classic that has been adapted for different formats is Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451. The classic is available as a graphic novel that can also be downloaded iPhone application (Lamb and Johnson 78).

**Controversies in YA Literature**

Teenage years are full of tough topics. Teenagers are faced with hard decisions on a daily basis. Teens want to read about real-life, whether it be good or bad. Some of the issues that are subjects in young adult literature may traditionally be seen as adult issues. Authors of YA books use their writing to
help teens cope (Bodart 31). YA authors use the emotions of their readers to engage them. (Bodart 32).

This section will explore two topics that draw controversy: darkness and sexuality.

**Darkness**

As stated prior, teens want to read about issues that are real and affect them. Author M.E. Kerr attributes this to changing times and a whole new landscape for teens, where they are faced with tougher issues and live more transparent lives (Brown and Di Marzo 120). S.E. Hinton’s 1967 novel, *The Outsiders*, is credited to opening the door to dark, real topics in young adult novels. *The Outsiders* is a novel about two rival gangs divided by their socioeconomic status. This darkness is now controversial because of the number of dark-themed books that are being published (Brown and Di Marzo 120). In recent years the number of books dealing with death or containing a deceased narrator has multiplied (Campbell “YA Lit and the Deathly Fellows” 357). Patty Campbell claims, “… I think the more central answer is that this trend simply reflects writers’ discovery of a new area, a new direction, a new twist on good old adolescent angst” (Campbell “YA Lit and the Deathly Fellows” 361).

Critics of the dark novels claim that the topics are damaging to today’s youth because of the controversial topics that are included (Gurdon). On the other side of the coin, supporters claim the novels help the teens. YA author, Maureen Johnson, went so far as to start a YA Saves campaign on the social media network, Twitter, claiming that literature can literally save lives by helping readers deal with difficult issues (Springen). Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, believes that by reading about tough topics, such as cutting, which is a form of self-mutilation, teens are able to see the happy endings and are given hope (Springen). The readers are immersed into the situations in the books where the characters make hard decisions on issues that the reader may not have thought about prior to reading (Brown and Di Marzo 121).
Teen Sex

As previously mentioned, teens are drawn to stories that mirror real life experiences and help them cope with the teenage years. Sex is something that is prevalent in the lives of many teens. A survey given by the Center for Disease Control in 2007 concluded that 45.7% of high school females and 47.9% of high school males are sexually active (McKinley 38). Author Judy Blume is recognized as one of the pioneers in the area of bringing sex to the forefront in YA literature with her 1975 novel, *Forever* (McKinley 39).

The controversy with teen sex in young adult books stems from the way sex is portrayed. Critics suggest that sex is portrayed in a negative light, thus young adults receive the wrong message (MacGregor 464). Some of the negative messages received include the need for boys to pressure girls and punishment for sexual activity. Punishment ranges from pregnancy as a result or death, and in some cases, both. This was seen in Sarah Dessen’s *Someone Like You*. The main character has sex, gets pregnant, and then the boy dies (MacGregor 465). Even in Blume’s *Forever* the consequences of being sexually active results in pregnancy for Sybil, a supporting character in the story (McKinley 39). On the positive side, books can be used to increase the knowledge of teens on tough subjects, such as sex (McKinley 44). The controversial titles should be available in libraries, as they may comfort struggling teens. Realistic fiction books that deal with the everyday problems of teens have therapeutic abilities, but only if teens have access to them on the shelves in libraries (Bodart 33).

Conclusion

Young adult literature is broad and can be hard to define, even given its characteristics. The choices teens make while selecting their reading material helps define the genre (Cole 50). Like popular culture, teen literature and the trends are constantly changing. The influences come from all directions. While sometimes controversial, young adult authors continue to push the boundaries and to produce material that teens want to read. Authors are constantly adding new life to the genre by staying current...
and adding variety in the form of topics and formatting. This paper has touched upon some of the most popular genres, including dystopian, teen chick literature, supernatural, Christian young adult, and crossover fiction. Controversies surrounding YA literature, such as the theme of darkness and sexuality, have also been addressed.
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

Young adult literature has grown exponentially in the past decades. The definition has broadened and the audience has expanded. Once aimed at teens and pre-teens, YA lit now encompasses readers of all ages. Following popular culture, the trends in young adult literature have evolved. When looking at young adult literature, one must consider the following questions: What sets young adult literature apart from the rest? What genres are popular amongst young adult readers and what is the appeal? How does formatting affect the young adult reader? Which topics draw controversy to young adult literature?

Characteristics of Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature presents many of the same features as adult literature. There are certain characteristics that set it apart. While some may be obvious to readers, others are often overlooked. The target audience is one example. Although the ages of YA readers go beyond the parameters, the definition of a young adult is someone ages 12 through 18 (YALSA). The age of a reader of YA lit could be as young as 10 and as old as 35 or older (Cart, “What is Young Adult Literature” 734).

Many young adult novels are real-life fiction. The books are about topics that are important to adolescents. The issues that are popular writing topics are issues such as problems with parents, friends, and growing up. Real-life fiction features coming of age problems that teenagers can relate to (Cole 49). The topics that make young adult literature popular are often topics that make it controversial.

One of the most important characteristics that distinguishes young adult literature is the presence of adolescents. To be considered a young adult book, it must include a teenage narrator (Campbell, “Our Side of the Fence” 361). The presence of a teenage narrator helps the teen readers relate to the novel and the issues presented.
Popular Genres in Young Adult Literature

Like all trends, genres fall in and out of popular culture. In 2013 dystopian novels are trending in young adult literature. The dystopian genre dates back to 1949 with George Orwell’s *1984* and 1953 with Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, but has gained momentum in recent times (Reeve 35). Popular titles, such as Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*, have made the genre well known in recent times (Spisak 55; Grossman 100). Teenagers have a tendency to view everyday occurrences as if they are the end of the world. This misconception of life makes it so they can easily relate to the teenager in the apocalyptic storyline (Grossman 100).

The teen chick literature genre is popular amongst teenagers. The genre includes real-life issues, such as dealing with boys, friends, family, and growing up (Meloni, “Teen Chick Lit” 16). One of the most popular sub-genres of teen chick literature is privileged chick lit, which includes the *Gossip Girl* series by Cecily von Ziegesar. Privileged chick lit is appealing to teenage girls because they are able to dream about living a glamorous lifestyle (Meloni, “Teen Chick Lit” 16).

Another genre that has taken off is the supernatural genre. Supernatural books have been around for decades and have long been a favorite for many adult readers. Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series is credited for making vampires popular in young adult literature (Freitas 23). Vampire novels are appealing to teens because of the combination of sex and danger that is present in most storylines (Adams 64). In addition to vampires, zombies are becoming more prominent within the supernatural genre. Publishers do not see an end in sight for the supernatural phenomena in young adult literature (Freitas 23).

Another genre rising in popularity amongst young adults is Christian young adult fiction. Much like the other genres in young adult literature, Christian YA novels about real-life problems, fantasy, and action are favored (Byle 7). One difference in Christian YA is the question of where to place it on the shelves in libraries and bookstores. Book sellers are hesitant to sell Christian YA titles alongside books
that may contain controversial topics because the placement may deter some potential readers (Riess “YA Fiction Gains Ground in the Christian Market” 12).

Crossover fiction is a genre within YA lit that exists because of the broadening definition of young adult literature (Lesesne 17). Books such as Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series have contributed to the crossover fiction genre (Cart “The Latest... Or Is It? 40; Walton 388). The desire for controversial themes, including sex, drugs, mental illness, and genocide that have historically been more predominate in adult books has also contributed to the trending YA genres (Walton 389).

**Formatting in Young Adult Literature**

Formatting plays a substantial role in young adult literature. Authors are looking for ways to change how things are traditionally done in order to be more appealing to young adults. Minimizing the amount of text on a page helps draw in the reluctant teen readers. In recent times, graphic novels, novels in verse, and multi-platform books have become a staple in young adult literature.

Fans of comic books are able to find interest in young adult literature through graphic novels. Graphic novels, which are longer than typical comic books, have been around since 1978 (Gorman 42; Mori 29). Teens are drawn to the images and drawings that capture the story. Reluctant readers appreciate the lack of reading required in graphic novels. Included in the graphic novel trend is manga, a Japanese artistic style that is appealing to teen graphic novel readers.

Because of the limited amount of text on the page, reluctant young adult readers are also drawn to novels in verse (Giorgis 6). Novels in verse are written, most commonly, in free verse format (Chance 34). The text does not take up much room on the page, making it so readers can get through an entire book quickly. Authors want the make reading appealing to young adults by making it a manageable task and not scare them away. (Sutton, “An Interview with Virginia Euwer Wolff 282).
Multi-platform storytelling is becoming increasingly popular in young adult literature. Technology is engaging for the youth of today, so incorporating technology into reading is another way to attract young adults. Multi-platform storytelling allows the reader to have a virtual reading experience by becoming part of the story (Lamb and Johnson 76). Patrick Carman’s Skeleton Creek series is an example of how technology can be incorporated into literature. Readers are able to access the main character’s video journal online (Lamb and Johnson 78). Adolescents have access to technology through the use of smartphones and tablets, so publishers are taking advantage of the technology at their fingertips and making applications to supplement literature.

**Controversial Topics in Young Adult Literature**

As the audience for young adult literature broadens, so does the range of topics and themes found in YA novels. Issues that were once found only on the pages of an adult book are now common occurrences in young adult fiction. Real-life, tough issues appeal to teen readers. Authors view the want for controversial topics as a way to reach out to the readers and help them cope by making it so they can easily relate to the characters who may be dealing with some of the same issues (Bodart 31). Books can be therapy for readers (Bodart 33).

Although controversial topics are more commonly found in today’s literature, dark themes are new to YA lit. Dark themes have been found in YA literature dating back to S.E. Hinton’s 1967 novel, *The Outsiders*. The theme is becoming increasingly controversial because of the number of dark books that have been published in recent times (Brown and Di Marzo 120). Some critics believe that darkness in young adult literature is damaging to the readers; however, supporters argue that the topics can help teens cope and may give them hope in situations that may seem hopeless (Gurdon; Springen).

Sex is another topic in young adult literature that is becoming more familiar. It is a topic that adolescents deal with in everyday life. In 1975 author Judy Blume brought teen sex to the forefront with the publication of *Forever* (McKinley 39). The controversy in 2013 with the sexual theme is not with the
inclusion, but the portrayal (MacGregor 464). In many novels, there are negative implications from
teenage sexual activity, such as pregnancy or death.

With its distinct characteristics and formatting, young adult literature has made it possible for
adolescents to turn to reading and create a relatable experience. Whether one prefers realistic fiction or
supernatural, the options are available and continually growing. Controversy aside, authors continue to
provide young adult readers with engaging material.
WORKS CITED


