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# Young-Adult Literature: A Writer Strikes the Genre

Steven VanderStaay

What is young-adult literature? I faced that question on the first day of my first course in the genre, a seminar in which YA novels served as the texts and our responses as the lectures. As a class, we expanded on the descriptions posited by G. Robert Carlsen (1980) to answer the question with the following definition:

Young-adult literature is literature wherein the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective. Such novels are generally of moderate length and told from the first person. Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels—like all fine literature—address the entire spectrum of life.

The description served me well as a reader. In particular, the emphasis upon initiation and problem solving helped me to anticipate the actions of characters and to compare the distinctions among novelists and their paperback progeny. This was especially true for young-adult realism, which characterizes the greater part of the larger genre.

Then I turned to the genre as a writer, and it all fell apart. Sorting, writing, and reading my way through the wreckage, I have come to a more restrictive understanding of what YA literature will and will not contain. Distinct from the description that served me as a reader, this understanding emphasizes structural conventions of the narrative, and the emerging role of young-adult literature in our culture, rather than length, subject matter, or point of view.

Strangely enough, all of this began with nonfiction, not YA literature. Apart from teaching, I have spent much of the last five years compiling an

oral history of homeless Americans. In the course of this work, I interviewed a wide variety of street youth and runaways, teenagers whose tales of tragedy and destitution deeply impressed and moved me.

As a respite to the long hours of transcribing and editing the oral history, I began to experiment in fiction with the stories these teenagers had told me. Having interviewed homeless teens in cities across the country, I began to compare their situations and to wonder about the possibilities of mixing them around a bit. What would happen, say, if street youth from New York City were transplanted to Seattle?

Building on this idea and my memories of the teenagers I had met, I created two characters and a story to find out. In this way what began as a spin-off from my oral history work turned itself into a novel, an attempt to portray in fiction the harsh realities of street life as I had heard it described by homeless teens.

Only it wasn't. The novel resisted verisimilitude forcefully, pulling it and its characters away from the stories I had heard and toward something else—something which looked for all the world like YA literature.

These changes did not concern subject matter. Indeed, my descriptions of the facts and settings of teenage homelessness are directly based on those I have either personally witnessed or been told about. But I could not tell "my" story as my interviewees told theirs. As fiction, the story moved itself in another direction, as if pulled there by the magnet of the genre.

Puzzled, I reread the testimonies, transcribed as I had recorded them: YA literature they were not. In fact, the thought of attempting to somehow

publish them as YA literature made the teacher side of me uncomfortable. I readily shared these testimonies with my students as oral history, but I would not have given them the same material in the form of a YA novel.

“But why?” the writer in me asked. “Why aren’t my testimonies YA literature?” After all, they are “real” stories of teenagers growing up. “Why should my notion of their genre make so much difference regarding my feelings about how teenagers use them? And why doesn’t my YA novel look like the ‘real’ thing?”

To find out I began poring through YA novels, looking for what they have that my testimonies lacked. Conversely, I also turned to nonfiction accounts of teenage street life, comparing such stories to the YA literature I was reading. In each case my original instincts were confirmed: nonfiction accounts of teenage street life are not YA literature. Both genres describe initiation and coming-of-age stories, but YA novels assume a particular kind of coming-of-age story and a particular kind of narrator who must live within strict ethical and narrative boundaries.

### Coming-of-age in YA Literature

In traditional anthropology, rites of passage are described in the three phases formulated by Arnold van Gennep: separation, margin, and aggregation (qtd. in Kotlack 1974, 346). In the first stage young men—alone or in a group of their peers—become separated from their community. In the “margin” stage they remain separated while the rite is performed. Finally, they are reaccepted into society with recognition of their new status.

As is frequently noted, this scenario is played out in a wide variety of YA novels—though we’ve expanded the archetype to include young women. In Chris Crutcher’s *Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987), Willie Weaver goes to Oakland, grows up, and goes home. In Judy Blume’s *Tiger Eyes* (1981), Davy Wexler moves to Los Alamos, finds “herself,” and returns home confident that she can survive without her father. In Norma Fox Mazer’s still controversial *Up in Seth’s Room* (1979), Finn Rousseau goes up to that room a sexual object and returns to her own room a sexual subject. The novels of Gary Paulsen are perhaps the most paradigmatic examples of this notion of separation because, like the prototypical rite of passage, their protagonists are frequently removed into nature upon the death of an archetypal father figure.

What is not noted is that the separation described in YA novels is essentially intellectual, not physical. This can be seen in most YA novels, particularly those with female protagonists.

In Mazer’s *Taking Terri Mueller* (1981), for example, the identity of the protagonist is inseparable from that of her father until she begins to think independently of him. This thinking leads to the discovery of her mother and her own sense of herself. Ultimately, she is reunited with her father, who welcomes her with respect for her new status. Some physical separation is made—such as to school or a friend’s house—, but the significance of the separation remains intellectual. It happens through thought, not relocation.

This is true even of Paulsen’s novels where nature becomes the context and catalyst for intellectual insight and not an end in itself. Consider *The Voyage of the Frog* (1988). The story of teenager David Alperth sailing alone through a storm at sea is an adventure story. But in this case the physical isolation is also an expression of the boy’s interior struggle to achieve independence and carry on without his uncle. These characteristics make the story YA literature. Hence while the immediate task is to survive the storm, the more significant result is that David learns through the adventure to think for and rely on himself. That’s why the novel ends with David’s encounter with the captain of the research vessel. The captain offers his adult assistance, but David decides to sail *The Frog* on home alone, thereby asserting his own independence. In admitting that he would do the same, the captain acknowledges David as a peer, welcoming him “back” with recognition for his new status.

This development of autonomous thought is the principal “rite” at the heart of YA fiction. Generally, it is followed by autonomous action, based on that thought, that enables the protagonist(s) to solve a problem thrust upon them by the adult world and achieve self-reliance. But this, like the physical isolation, is of secondary importance. Indeed, on occasion it does not happen at all.

In novels like *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *The Chocolate War* (1974) such problem-solving autonomous action never occurs. Holden and Jerry Renault do not triumph over their physical circumstances. However, they do achieve autonomous thought. Indeed, such independence of thinking is itself the goal of their quest, the essen-

tial conflict of both books being the battle of independent, moral thought to survive peer pressure and the now adult imperative to conform. As David Peck (1989) notes, these characters are removed from society where, like Huck Finn before them, they decided to remain, refusing to complete the initiation that would grant them readmittance.

But our world is no longer Huck's. In all three novels autonomous thinking becomes its own justification, but for Jerry and Holden the consequences of this thinking herald their very destruction—a price much greater than Huck faced.

Finally, then, both Holden and Jerry do triumph over their circumstances and achieve independence of mind. That achievement—not the fact that they solve problems thrust upon them by the adult world—makes their stories YA literature. Autonomous action, problem solving, and self-reliance, while common to much of YA literature, remain subsidiary to this more essential notion of autonomous thought.

Like the stories of homeless teens I recorded, nonfiction accounts of teenage street life have no investment in this notion of autonomous thought. Consider, for example Piri Thomas' *Down These*

*Mean Streets* (1967), perhaps the most "classic" portrayal of teenage street life.

In *Running Loose* (1983) Crutcher's Louie Banks may mature through thinking (and subsequently acting) independently of his coach and teammates, but the teenage Piri Thomas worries little about such things. His notion of adulthood does not refer to thinking for oneself but to taking care of oneself. Standing alone, and surviving—not thinking—are the rules of his game. And no one sacrifices himself for an idea.

Thomas first learns this as a boy when, moving to new neighborhoods with his family, he finds he must do whatever he is challenged to do by the reigning street gangs. Only this proof of "manhood" brings acceptance and respect, and only this acceptance and respect can ensure his survival. The weaker, the unlucky—the self-assertive and autonomous thinkers—fall by the wayside. They get shot, arrested, beaten to death, or as happens in one case, die from the street sludge they are forced to eat.

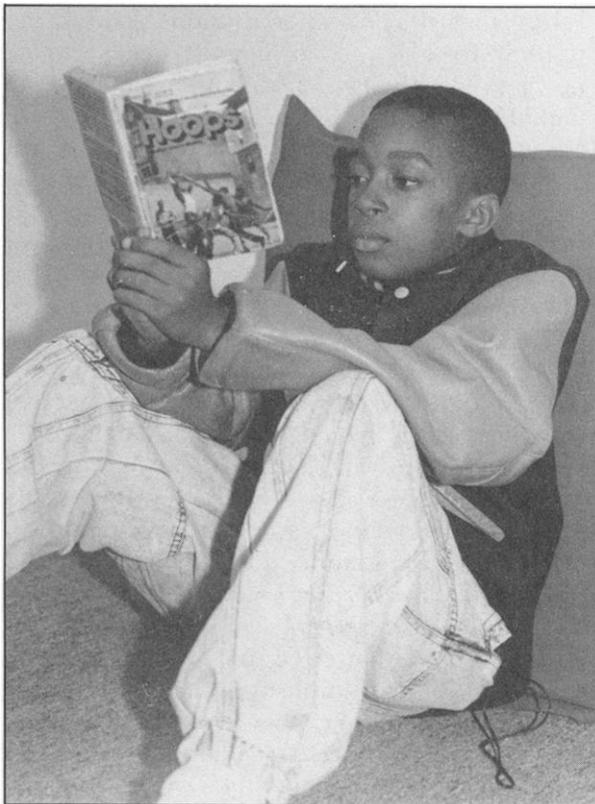
Thomas' task is to show he is a "man," not to become one. To do so he takes drugs, fights, robs, and twice nearly murders a man. These acts, stark violations of middle-class norms, are not experiences through which he comes to a sense of self and character. Rather—and I'm talking from age seven on—they are desperate assertions of his "heart" and manhood. This point is echoed in the title of Alex Kotlowitz's nonfiction account of coming of age in a Detroit tenement, *There are No Children Here* (1991).

Of course children do live in tenements. But they have no "childhood" as the middle class typically understands it. Similarly, their tasks of adolescence have little relation to those entailed in the liberal, middle-class notions of becoming an adult—notions circumscribed by the YA genre.

### **Narrating in YA Literature**

Similarly, neither the teenage Piri Thomas nor my homeless interviewees could serve as YA narrators. Look, for example, at the following self-description from the testimony of Billie, a teenage mother, drug addict, and runaway who suffered the most common of runaway pasts: a childhood of abuse and neglect.

I've been in temporary homes, foster homes, shelters, everywhere. They can't control me. This one foster lady, she didn't want me to leave, was trying to talk me out of going. Man I spit in her face and just left. . . .



The only good times are when you're on drugs, trippin' on acid and drinkin' at a keg. It's fun then 'cause we're free of all our problems: free of our parents and all our pressures. Just to forget about it all, kick back stoned in a red room and feel like you can just flip out for the rest of your life.

Certainly, few of us would blame Billie for her actions and thoughts. In fact, given the abuse and neglect she has suffered, both on the street and at home, it's understandable that she thinks and acts as she does. But that's determinism, and determinism has no place in YA literature. Instead, YA literature is romantic and existential: romantic, because it maintains that one can triumph over circumstance; existential, because that triumph is most essentially a triumph of thought and attitude, of choice—choice that may herald pain as well as comfort.

Billie can't narrate a YA novel because we don't want our teenagers to be like Billie. She's not "safe." She's not a model teen readers can learn from, identify with *and* emulate—virtual requirements for YA literature narrators.

Billie could appear as a secondary character (as, in fact, many "Billies" do), and she could narrate *if* she becomes repentive, as happens in *Go Ask Alice* (1971). But as is, no. Hence particularly startling nonfiction works, like Jim Carroll's *Basketball Diaries* (1987), or their fictional counterparts, Stephen Beachy's *Whistling Song* (1991), for example, have never been considered YA literature.

Obviously, this restriction is very much an adult imposition. Consider music: many of the same teachers, parents, and publishers who like the way Bruce Springsteen sings from various personas object when a rapper does so for a teenage audience. Consider the following from the album *Power* by Ice-T, who was once a member of a Los Angeles street gang:

Copped an alias, bailed out in an hour or less—  
I keep a bank for that I don't know about the rest.  
Copped another piece, hit the dark streets—  
Rollin' once again, f--- the damn police. . . . (1987)

While Ice-T claims such music "is a realistic portrait of a violent world desperately in need of change" (Teachout 1990), many adults fear that "I" literally means Ice-T or, in the case that it doesn't, that his audience won't be able to distinguish the rapper from the rap. Hence the efforts of many adults to censor such music or to otherwise discourage teenagers from listening to it.

The same concerns apply to YA literature. Indeed, it might be argued that the only reason Billie can't narrate a YA novel is because I, an adult, won't let her.

Yet I do let Billie narrate. I freely give her testimony to students and have discussed it in class. And I hope teenagers will read my oral history. Billie belongs in a book. She deserves to narrate, to tell her story. But she can't tell it in YA literature.

### Societal Lore and YA Literature

In marked contrast to the indigenous societies van Gennep studied, we no longer have a defined "rite of passage." Or, rather, we have any number of rites. In either case, we seem to have such individualized initiation into adulthood as to make its very achievement a matter of personal design and definition (hence, its "intellectual" nature). Choice, diversity, and individuality are derivatives of this phenomenon, as are confusion, aimlessness, and misdirection.

However, while we may not have a specific rite of passage, we have preserved an element of that tradition: stories of passage.

Stories of passage are of particular importance in many of the indigenous societies. While often steeped in legend and mythology, such stories serve a practical purpose: to prepare teenagers for their particular rite and to guide them in coming to understand and participate in the adult world. This is the role served by YA literature in our society.

Indeed, because we have no defined rite of passage and because our nation is so rich in its diversity, our stories of passage fill a cultural role that may exceed that of any other society. And, of course, our tradition of passage stories must be great and varied. We can't have "a story," or "a tradition," because no single story or tradition could speak to the wide variety of our teenagers and their situations.

But in our case it would be misleading to suggest that this tradition of passage stories is merely pedagogic, an imposition of the adult world on its children. We may impose our "classics" on our teenagers, but they choose YA literature for themselves. Indeed, due to the marketing constraints that now rule paperback publishing, it can be safely said that, while the YA genre is influenced by what we want to say to our teenagers, it is influenced equally by what they want to hear.

And if sales of YA literature are any indication,

our teenagers want to hear about the adult world in all its misery, joys, and temptations. They want the facts straight up. But they also want to learn how to enter into that world without being soiled by it, to swim amidst its degradation without degrading themselves. Fortunately this, too, is what we want for them. And we write, publish, teach, and distribute YA literature for that purpose. While I was not always aware of this as a reader, I know it now as a writer. And I know it as a teacher.

As a writer, I share my testimonies with students to say, "Here, these are the stories of teenagers I have met. They will teach you about homeless teenagers, poverty, and the horrible conditions of our cities." But when I share drafts of my YA novel I am saying, "This will teach you about homeless teenagers, and it *may* teach you about growing up, about how to be good and whole in a bad world."

As a teacher I want my students to know that there are kids who are forced to grow up like Piri Thomas. But I don't want them to think they have to. I want them to be compassionate *and* to learn to think for themselves, to enter the adult world with their integrity intact.

I am not so idealistic as to believe that all young people can choose their destiny. Some will grow up much more like Piri Thomas than the characters I've sketched. But if they are to err, I want them to err on the side of faith and possibility. Life will teach them what "is." The fiction they read should flinch from none of this "reality." But it should also point to the possible, which is the purpose of YA literature.

And so now I have two books: an oral history to portray the realities of street-life (*Street Lives: From Destitution to Community, An Oral History of Homeless Americans*, forthcoming from New Society Publishers) and a YA novel (in revision) to show teenage hope, faith, and ingenuity in the face of such realities. The novel is not what I set out to write, but I am no less fond of it for its changes. Such is the beauty of YA literature: a genre of limits, yes, but

one that creates new possibilities for telling stories, and new stories to tell.

West Liberty Community Schools  
West Liberty, Iowa 52776

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