

GRADLIS 9201

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Script

Hello everyone, and welcome back to another episode of Uncovering Libraries. Today, I’m gonna be talking about a topic that is near and dear to my heart. I wanted to explore teens, young adult books, and teen library services, or more specifically book recommendations, and how they’ve evolved over the years, especially with the rise of published “young adult” novels that have been released in the last decade and a half. I wanted to look into this because it feels like all my life the reading world has looked down on “adults” reading YA books when they should be “graduating” to more “sophisticated literature” and is of a “more complex reading level” than mind-numbing YA. From that description alone, it’s clear that I do have a bone to pick with this perspective of reading because I am an adult who still enjoys reading YA more than any other type of book. Thus I will warn that this episode will not be as objective as some people may hope, but instead I plan to share the observations of my research and maybe try to get others to understand where I’m coming from.

I also wanted to spend some time talking about this new wave of books that are starting to be released following the YA boom in publishing: The rise of “new adult” books. Don’t know what that even is? Well stick around and find out!

Before we delve into the thick of it, I want to start off with some definitions of demographic groups: youth, teenager, adolescent, young adult, new adult, emerging adult. These

are words we can throw around and we'll generally understand what the other person means, but as we'll see soon, it's really hard to double down on a single definition of these terms.

If you read any teen services advice book, you'll notice that all of them start with the definition of what is considered a "teen" or "young adult". Then they'll immediately tell you that it's hard to define because it depends on the perspective that you're coming from. If you're like me, when you hear the phrase "young adult", you'll often think of someone in their late teens and early 20s, either in post-secondary school or starting out their life after high school. This is if we're looking at the non-book non-publishing context. But according to the Young Adult Library Services Association (which I'm going to refer to as YALSA from now on), the definition of young adult refers to 12-18 year olds (Historical Adolescence, n.d.).

But if we look back in history, we first have to understand that adolescence is a "relatively new" concept. Before the early 20th century, there were children and then there were adults; children simply transitioned into "young adults" in the time that we would consider them to be teens (Latham & Gross, 2014, p.3). It was only after the 1950s that we kept children in schools for longer, meaning that adolescents were hanging out with each other more than ever before, creating new cultures and trends, and social expectations. Educators and psychologists were starting to realize how distinct and essential this period of development was so instead of dismissing it, we tried to enrich it. (Historical Adolescence, n.d.).

Going back to that YALSA definition, 12 to 18 covers such a large portion of change in a young person's life. In a 1998 advice book, Melanie Rapp adolescence into 3 main phases - early adolescence, which covers ages 12-14, middle adolescence, which covers ages 14-17, and late

adolescence, which covers ages 17-19. Each of these periods are marked by different social, psychological, and physiological changes (p.1-8).

These distinctions have loosely held over the years, we just gave them different names. According to Latham and Gross, Tweens are the ages 9-12, young adults (in the publishing and library sense) are 12-18, and older young adults, aka emerging adults are 18-24, which spans farther than Rapp's definition. Sheila B. Anderson (2004), who has written numerous books on how to provide services for different distinctions of the "teen" population, states that of course we have a technical definition, but they can be as young as ten or they can be a teen for their whole life if they never grow out of that mindset (p.23). The main consensus in all of these resources is that the definition of young adults is a "slippery term", which I think describes it well.

Despite the fact that the copy of this book I have was released in 1974, I think Margaret A. Edwards says it best in this passage (p.16):

Who are young adults? They are people in their teens for whom there is no adequate nomenclature. For years librarians have searched for a term that would best describe them. "Adolescents" is too biological and should be reserved for occasions when adults speak to adults on a professional level. "Teenagers," besides being a bit undignified, may sound patronizing or scornful and does not seem to include the more mature sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds. "Young people" has been used in many libraries, as "youth", but in the minds of the public both terms often mean children rather than people of high-school age and so call[s] for endless clarification. As a result, the Young Adult Services of the American Library Association has officially adopted the term "young adults" to define its clientele.

Since I mentioned the ALA, I wanted to briefly delve into the history of young adult reading and library services in North America. Keep in mind that a lot of this is going to be from the perspective of American organizations, since I couldn't find a lot of information on recent Canadian young adult library service activity.

Just like the concept of adolescence is a somewhat recent development, so are young adult books. We've established that young adults used to literally be considered younger versions of adults, and once they grew past the age when they were considered "children", they went on to read books meant for a "general audience." Some examples include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and so on (Latham & Gross, 2014, p.3-4). Then in the early 20th century mystery novels became quite popular, the 30s and 40s introduced comic books and superheroes, and more books with "teen appeal" were published like J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (p.4).

It is debated as to whether the first young adult novel should be considered Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* or S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Regardless, *The Outsiders* is cited to be the first "problem novel". They're called this because they tend to focus on one or a few "social issues" aka the problems. These books became very controversial not only because they discussed issues adults viewed as "inappropriate" for such a young audience, but because they were considered badly written since they favoured melodrama over writing well-developed characters and plots. Time passes, and we see romance and horror novels rise in popularity, as well as the introduction of "diverse" writers of different races and sexualities(p.5). More graphic novels were published, the Internet came around, but there was actually a drop in YA publications in the 90s due to budget cuts. During this time, publishers, and subsequently libraries, focused on content for tweens. Coming into the 21st century, we see the explosion of

success with Harry Potter, Twilight, and the Hunger Games, all of which are often cited to be the instigator for this new wave of YA books that takes us to today.

In regard to library services for young adults, they traditionally followed the trends of young adult collections. The ALA established the Young Adult Services Division (the precursor to YALSA) in 1957, separating them from children's services. Their responsibility was to turn out book recommendations, guidelines for librarians, displays, exhibits, sponsored conference programs and workshops, and worked with other divisions. Young adult resources to help librarians also began to emerge around that time too. E. Leyland's *Public Libraries and the Adolescent*, released in 1937, was considered the first published resource, but Margaret A. Edwards's book *The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts*, released in 1969, was considered the most influential of its time. It was from this book that I got that long but lovely quote about how we came to the term "young adult".

While reading the revised and expanded edition of Edwards' book (1974), she wrote a lot about how her colleagues flocked to her constantly because they did not know how to approach or talk with these "mysterious teenagers," which is what led her to write the book in the first place. But even now, I can see similar attitudes being reflected in books written in the early 2000s. Just like how it's slightly offensive that teenager's are referred to as the "beasts in the fair garden" by Edwards, it's almost comical when I read a chapter subheading that starts with "Who are these strange creatures?" In a book published in 2008 (Miller, 2008, p.1). It seems that even though we understand how a teen's brain develops better than ever before, there is still that sense of mystery and confusion.

I mean, I totally get it. I also find it difficult to relate to teens now, even though I'm in my mid-20s now. It wasn't too long ago that I was one of them (but to be fair, I was always a little afraid of some teens, even when I was one).

Now that we're caught up to the near past, I want to go back to that idea that young adult novels are controversial because they are written "badly". And not only that - I want to explore the sentiment some people share who think that you should stop reading young adult books once you yourself become an adult. In the online book communities, it's one of those opinions that can instantly divide the reading community. Of course, the more popular bookish creators are ones that do enjoy reading YA books, thus they are much louder within the community. But what it really comes down to is perspective and what kind of reader you are. When I learned about Catherine Ross' (2018) work on the myth of the equivalency of reading experiences, it was partially a "duh" moment, but also the moment that the lightbulb flicked on in my brain. The basis of her revelation is: Just because you might like something, doesn't mean that others will too. It seems so simple, and yet we are all prone to forgetting it because, as Ross says, "Because we can't know from observation what readers are actually experiencing and thinking as they read, we are apt to generalize from our own experience" (p.16). She goes on to reveal that her and her students discovered that there are two general categories of avid readers: Selective readers who only try to read "important books" and omnivores who read "indiscriminately" (Ross, 2014, p. 83-91). They have different understandings of *what* materials to read and *how* to read them.

Selective readers would most likely describe those who turn their nose up against YA books and the adults who choose to read past the recommended age range. These are people who

might never read “unimportant books” - they read to gain knowledge and gain insight on what literature has to offer. Some enjoy reading out of their comfort zone to challenge themselves. And they have to be selective in order to distinguish what to read amongst the wave of books constantly being published. Some have difficulty with not finishing books because they need to finish what they started. They only read the best. (Ross, 2018, p.17-19).

I would say that people who read YA are more likely to be indiscriminate readers - those who are less concerned with what they “should” read and more concerned with whether they enjoy it. They don’t feel guilty putting books down but are willing to at least try almost anything. They may be “voracious readers,” who may describe the things they read as “trash” but are unapologetic about it (Ross, 2018, p.19-20).

Both function on the idea that “life’s too short” but they approach it in different ways. And of course, there is always the possibility of the intermixing of values. These aren’t clean and cut distinctions but rather general patterns we can use to explain the mindset behind both the love and hatred towards YA books.

If you view reading as though you are constantly climbing some kind of scaffold or ladder, of course you’d be confused by someone who chooses to “stagnate” on one kind of book. On the flipside, if you’re an indiscriminate reader, of course you’d be confused by someone who seems extremely “picky” and looks down on the kind of books you read. It all depends on perspective and understanding that other people are not like you. But again, this is easier said than done.

This being said, who is YA fiction really for? I’ve always found it intriguing whenever anyone calls YA a “genre.” Genres are categories like romance, horror, sci-fi/fantasy. There can

be young adult romance, young adult horror, young adult fantasy, etc. etc. Thus, I would generally say that it's recommended for readers who are around the age of the protagonist. More than anything, fiction novels in general can help young adults process their developmental needs and aids in their identity formation (Latham & Gross, 2014, p. 76). As Paulette Rothbauer says, reading stories helps young adults to "both imagine new possibilities and to establish recognized boundaries for identity. The nature of this kind of reading affords a certain pleasure in finding oneself in the text while also functioning as a way to gather and organize information about the larger world and one's place in it." (as cited in Latham and Gross, 2014, p.76)

I think this kind of reading is valuable no matter what stage of life you're in, which is why I personally am drawn to fiction so much. It allows me to imagine what I would do in the scenarios presented, while also getting to explore how other people might react, all from the comfort of my own room. This is why I think people are drawn to YA fiction and genre reading in general. It's also just the trend that continues to develop as a culture evolves. I briefly mentioned it before, but in the 90s and early 2000s, middle grade novels started being published to cater towards tweens. This almost acts as bridging content between children's novels and young adult novels. Young adult books can be seen as an extension of middle grade novels. And now that readers of young adult novels are growing up, they are craving the same content, but preferably with protagonists closer to their age. Enter, the new adult demographic.

New adult is a publishing term coined in 2009 by St. Martin's Press to describe types of submissions "similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult - a sort of 'older YA' or 'new adult' (McAlister, 2021).

But who really are these "new adults?" According to Michael Cart (2014), "mainstream media call them "adulescents," kidults," 'twixters,' or 'boomerangers, (I have never heard these

words in my life) but whatever you call them, they're a new generation that is redefining the traditional meaning of young adult [in the non-book sense]" (p.78). He goes on to explain that because of our current economy and a shortage of jobs, and the fact that our life span is increasing, young people are not as pressed to take on the "burden of adulthood." It's the Peter Pan syndrome - we refuse to grow up.

Once upon a time, adolescence was the new life stage of interest. Now it's this time period Dr. Jeffery Jensen Arnett calls "emerging adulthood" that is all the rage. This covers the age group of 18-35 year olds, but there is particular interest in 18-25 year olds. In Dr. Arnett's book, he states that "what is happening now is analogous to what happened a century ago when social and economic changes helped create adolescence. (Henig, 2010, as cited in Cart, 2018, p. 79). Which, it makes sense to start dividing up these life stages like we did for tweens, teens, and older young adults. Adulthood technically spans from 18-65/70 depending on the general age of retirement. That's 40 years of someone's life! Of course there are general distinctions like someone's 20s, their 30s, etc., being middle aged (which is a contentious definition in and of itself), but in general, the category of adult spans so long, it is even more impossible to reduce the needs of this group to a few services and collections.

So, what does this mean for libraries? Maybe we'll need a few "new adult" or "emerging adult" service librarians who are responsible for creating book lists, programs and services for this demographic. However, here is where the challenge begins. Unlike in high school, there so many paths we can take beyond the age of 17-18. Some of us go to university/college, others go straight to work, others get married and have children, and so on. It becomes harder to develop collections because people will be drawn to different types of stories and experiences that the characters go through. The publishing of new adult books can help ease this process because

librarians know who the intended demographic is for. And it's not like new adults, or even teens can't read "adult" books (not spicy books, but literally just books that are meant for an adult demographic), but this makes it easier to sift through these books first to get some semblance of a collection started. And to think more on a role of a "new adult librarian", Rapp brings up the point that around the time of emerging adulthood, no matter if you're 18 or 35, you are most likely going to move out at some and you'll need apartment and legal advice, roommate advice, information on nutrition, budgeting, laundry, chores, etc., which are skills that are being phased out of schools now (at least we definitely didn't have anything like that in my high school). They had them at my university, and I was grateful for them, but what happens if you don't go to university? Will libraries be expected to create programs to teach these skills? There is also the question of whether emerging adults even visit the public library.

I don't have answers here, just questions that we can maybe consider in future episodes. The main things I hope that you took away from this episode is that definitions are loose and constantly changing, there are many factors that can affect the evolution of books and library services, and that maybe it's time to examine a new demographic to cater to in libraries.

That is all I have today for you guys, thank you so much for taking the time to listen to this episode! All of my resources and show notes will be available on my website, and I'll see you in the next one! Bye <3

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