

Trends and Issues in Young Adult Literature

Introduction

Over the last half century, experts have struggled to define young adult (YA) literature. *Young adult literature*, *adolescent literature*, *juvenile literature*, *junior books*, *children's literature*, *books for teens*, and *books for tweeners* describe texts that bridge the gap between children's literature and adult literature. Given the negative connotations of the words *adolescents* and *teens*, most experts today agree upon *young adult literature*. Following are characteristics that have historically defined the genre:

1. The protagonist is a teenager.
2. Events revolve around the protagonist and his/her struggle to resolve conflict.
3. The story is told from the viewpoint and in the voice of a young adult.
4. Literature is written by and for young adults.
5. Literature is marketed to the young adult audience.
6. Story doesn't have a "storybook" or "happily-ever-after" ending—a characteristic of children's books.
7. Parents are noticeably absent or at odds with young adults.
8. Themes address coming-of-age issues (e.g., maturity, sexuality, relationships, drugs).
9. Books contain under 300 pages, closer to 200.

Reliance upon a laundry list of characteristics, however, results in a narrow and misleading definition of young adult literature. Consider, for instance, the characteristics *parents are noticeably absent/ or at odds with young adults* and *themes address coming-of-age issues*. These are characteristics of the earliest young adult novels, the problem novels discussed in Chapter 4 that laid the genre's foundation and that gave voice to the realistic struggles and issues of adolescence. While the problem novel holds an



YA books range from thin novellas to books with 800+ pages.

honored position in the young adult canon, young adult writers have branched out into every genre imaginable.

A better approach to defining young adult literature is to consider what teens *choose* to read as opposed to what they are *required* to read (i.e., classical texts). Most teens choose books that publishing companies market as YA literature, as well as books that are marketed for the adult audience. They choose books with teen protagonists and seldom choose to read the traditional canon. While this approach to defining the genre has merit, it's somewhat problematic. In latter years the young adult genre has evolved, become more sophisticated, more inclusive, and has gained more widespread popularity. In classrooms across the country, teachers have replaced classical texts with books marketed primarily for teens. The idea, therefore, that young adult literature is what young adults *choose* to read and not what they are *coerced* to read falls a bit short because sometimes teens are forced to read books traditionally labeled "young adult." That's not an optimistic thought, but you get my point. Perhaps the best definition an expert in the young adult literature field can give is "I know it when I see it."

In writing this book, I've focused on "all of the above." While the bulk of this textbook concentrates on "quality literature" written and marketed for teens, I've also included (in places) some poorly written texts, primarily because teens don't generally choose a book on literary merit, and as teachers we engage our students best when we know and respect what they enjoy. I've also included adult books and some classical works. As I argue in Chapter 11, the classics shouldn't be reserved for advanced readers, nor should young adult literature serve only less proficient readers. Some teens, however, are mature beyond their years and feel better engaged with classical texts. Also, because teens do read adult books, I've embedded a number of adult books throughout chapters.

In developing this chapter, I turned to several young adult experts for assistance. As I studied their work, I realized it made more sense to include their voices than it did to paraphrase or summarize their work. Including pieces written by them, I believe, makes for a more engaging read and also adds a layer of credibility to this chapter. You'll find, then, sections by three young adult experts interspersed throughout this chapter. In the section that follows, young adult expert Connie Zitlow provides brief analyses and descriptions of 20 time-tested young adult books and 20 forgotten titles worth knowing. Later in the chapter Patty Campbell provides an overview of how the genre has changed.¹ I am grateful for Chris Crutcher's thoughts on censorship that rounds out the chapter. Winner of the Intellectual Freedom Award, Crutcher is a prominent voice against censorship. My contributions deal primarily with the value of young adult literature, marketing and accessibility issues, and characteristics of quality literature.

¹Campbell gives an overview of how the young adult genre has evolved. Individual genre chapters contain historical background on the development of that particular genre (e.g., short stories, romance).

Twenty “Classic” Young Adult Novels by Connie Zitlow

Choosing 20 “classic” young adult novels is a subjective but pleasant exercise that makes it clear this relatively new genre of literature includes many works of notable literary merit. To be declared a classic work, it must be deemed an outstanding piece of literature, characterized by its originality, overall literary quality, and recognized worth. It must have a story with lasting significance, a piece of literature that rewards study because of its content and distinctive style, both its uniqueness and universality. The book must have proven itself with different readers who note its acknowledged artistry and use of literary elements: a believable and interesting plot, riveting dialogue, worthwhile theme, rich characterization, vivid setting, appropriate point of view, and carefully chosen language. It is a story that transports readers into the worlds of others and also helps them see their own lives in new ways. Many of the classic novels are award-winning books acknowledged for their emotional impact and lasting influence on subsequent works. In addition, although not originally published as young adult literature, many of the classics have become works that have been embraced by young readers.

***The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger.
New York: Little, Brown, 1951.**

This classic work, published before the young adult category existed, is the prototype of the genre. The story is told in the first-person voice of lonely, funny, cynical, and sometimes vulgar Holden Caulfield who wants to protect the innocent from what he sees as the phony adult world. Salinger’s book, with Holden’s choice of words and rite-of-passage incidents, stands as a vivid contrast to the “junior” books of the era that avoided taboo topics and forbidden language.

***The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier.
New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.**

Not originally written for any particular audience, this seminal and enduring work set the standard for a new level of literary excellence in young adult literature. The story is noted for its exemplary plot structure,



thematic weight, depth of characterization, and striking symbolism. First-year student Jerry Renault “dares to disturb the universe” of Trinity High School by refusing to participate in the chocolate sale, and thereby defying the powerful Archie and his secret society, the Vigils, and the corrupt Brother Leon. With this book, Cormier makes vivid the real presence of evil in young people’s lives and shows what happens when good people stand by and do nothing.

***The Chosen* by Chaim Potok. New York:
Simon & Schuster, 1967.**

Another work, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, first published as an adult title. This classic story of fathers and sons is set in 1940s Brooklyn when news of the Holocaust began to emerge. Friends Danny, a Hasidic Jew, and Reuven, a secular Jew, agonize about abandoning their faith to pursue life in the society outside their ethnic group. This coming-of-age story with its universal themes is an example of the inner conflicts experienced by teens trying to understand themselves amid their crisis of faith.

***The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte. New
York: HarperCollins, 1967.**

Because of his curiosity about boxing, Alfred Brooks, a black teen and school dropout, climbs the stairs

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Twenty “Classic” Young Adult Novels *Continued*

to Donatelli’s gym and learns to be a contender in more than boxing. He refuses to help a gang rob the Jewish-owned grocery where he works. Published in a critical year for realistic YA literature, this landmark book helped break the myth that YA books were only about white middle-class families. More than a sports novel, it shows an adolescent searching for acceptance and reinventing himself.

***Ender’s Game* by Orson Scott Card. New York: Tor, 1985.**

In this crossover and complex novel, considered to be a significant work of science fiction, humans fear that they will again be attacked by aliens. Ender Wiggin, an adolescent and a genius, is trained to be part of an elite militia to protect the human race from further invasions.

***Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers. New York: Scholastic, 1988.**

Set in Vietnam and told by 17-year-old Richie Perry who wants to get out of Harlem, this highly acclaimed book conveys the horror and anguish of war. Perry becomes part of an integrated group of soldiers who bond together to survive. Dedicated to Myers’s brother who died in Vietnam, the story is noted for its complex characters, genuine dialogue, vivid imagery and figurative language, including the extended metaphor that contrasts war’s realities with romanticized portrayals in the media.

***The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.**

In this haunting and thought-provoking futuristic story, 12-year-old Jonas is chosen to become the next Receiver of Memory for his controlled community that is actually a dystopian society without sickness, poverty, or even color. In his sessions with the Giver, Jonas experiences pain and joy, love and sorrow. His decision to save the twin Gabriel inspires discussion about many social and political issues and affirms the power of the human spirit.

***Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. New York: Bradbury Press, 1987.**

Paulsen’s convincing adventure begins when 13-year-old Brian Robeson must crash-land a small airplane into a Canadian lake. Readers are pulled into the story by his interior monologue, along with the third-person narrator and Paulsen’s pacing and vivid descriptions of what it takes to survive alone for 54 days in the wilderness. Brian’s physical and emotional struggle and his growth as a character resonate with teens who welcome the sequels to his story.

***Holes* by Louis Sachar. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.**

In this fanciful adventure, with its exaggerated images, humor, and mystery, there are actually two stories: Stanley Yelnats’s contemporary story and that of his cursed ancestors. Mistakenly accused of theft, Stanley is sent to Camp Green Lake Juvenile Correction Facility, a desert setting with no lake, nothing green, and where he meets Zero. The cruel warden forces the boys to dig holes in the blistering Texas sand, supposedly to build character, but really to help her find a buried treasure.

***The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 1983.**

Young readers have embraced this short, elegant book with its combination of harsh realities and poetic descriptions of Esperanza Cordero’s life in the Latino quarter of Chicago. Originally written for her students, Cisneros’s lyrical work is the story of young Mexican American women striving to create an identity that is more than the low expectations others have for them.

***I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier. New York: Knopf/Random House, 1977.**

Adam Farmer, on a mysterious bicycle journey, searches for the truth about the death of his parents who were

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Twenty “Classic” Young Adult Novels *Continued*

under the witness relocation program. The three levels of this complex psychological plot—Adam’s bike ride in first-person present tense, transcripts of tapes with a sinister interrogator named Brint, and third-person omniscient details about the past—come together at the end. This dark novel is noted for its hidden intrigue, masterful structure, and theme of innocence caught by corruption.

***Ironman* by Chris Crutcher. New York: Greenwillow/HarperCollins, 1995.**

When high school senior Bo Brewster trains for a triathlon, he finds relief from the volatile relationship with his father. After losing his temper with his coach, he is assigned to an anger-management class led by the colorful Asian cowboy, Mr. Nak, and attended by teens caught in a variety of abusive situations. The story consists of Bo’s letters to Larry King, omniscient entries, and the gripping present tense commentary of the triathlon.

***Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson. New York: Crowell, 1980.**

Twin Sara Louise, the firstborn, was soon cast aside when everyone’s attention focused on her weaker sister, Caroline, the favored one. The setting, more than a background to the story, is the Chesapeake Bay island of Rass in the 1940s where Louise (“Wheeze”), the Esau character, loves working with her waterman father. Louise’s strong first-person account is filled with beautiful figurative language, memorable characterization, literary and biblical allusions, and vivid water images.

***Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.**

To earn money for college, determined 14-year-old LaVaughn answers an ad for a babysitter. Her life is changed when she meets teen mother Jolly and her young children, Jeremy and Jilly. This highly acclaimed story in verse, written as 66 episodes of poetic stream-of-consciousness prose, is noted for its

rich character development, striking images of urban poverty, and blend of realism and hope.

***Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.**

This multilayered and cinematic book was recognized for its literary excellence as the first winner of the Michael L. Printz Award. From the powerful first image, readers are immersed with Steve Harmon in the fear and desperation of being in prison. Is he guilty or innocent? Is he a monster? Steve tells his story with a handwritten memoir and typed screenplay. Drawings, photographs, mug shots, and video stills add to the complexity of this gripping story that raises many social and racial questions.

***The Moves Make the Man* by Bruce Brooks. New York: HarperCollins, 1984.**

Jerome Foxworthy, the only black student in an all-white school, sets out to tell what really happened to his friend Bix Rivers, the talented baseball player who sees Jerome’s fake-out basketball moves as a violation of truth. It is a story within a story revealing the quest of intelligent, talented Jerome whose authentic narrative voice is an example of Brooks’s stylistic artistry. This book about friendship, racial prejudice, mental illness, family relationships, perception and truth, light and darkness, leaves readers with the vivid imagery of Jerome’s spin light.

***Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse. New York: Scholastic, 1997.**

Fourteen-year-old Billie Jo lives in the Oklahoma panhandle in the 1930s, where there is dust everywhere, even on her beloved piano. Her strong, first-person voice is conveyed in diary-like entries filled with vivid imagery that fits the time and place, even details about how those who lived in the dust found ways to enjoy life. After a tragic fire that kills her mother and unborn baby brother, Billie Jo must learn to forgive her father, nature, and herself.

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Twenty “Classic” Young Adult Novels *Continued*

***The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1967.**

Hinton editorializes through the voice of 14-year-old Ponyboy Curtis, who lives with his older brothers. Parents are missing in this story about the gang warfare between the Greasers and the “Socs” (Socials), teens in different social classes in 1960s Oklahoma. Written when Hinton was a teenager and a landmark work of young adult literature because of its subject matter, the book is widely read, although it is considered to be less realistic than when originally published.

***The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. New York: HarperCollins, 1968.**

Two alienated adolescents, Lorraine and John, write what they call their “memorial epic” about their adventures with the Pigman, a lonely old man who can’t admit his wife is dead. Their first-person voice is reminiscent of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and like *The*

Contender, the story is set in New York, although it lacks the realism of Lipsyte’s story. Noted for its contrasting points of view and use of flashbacks, Zindel’s book about friendship and caring is also a story about accepting responsibility.

***Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. New York: Dial/Penguin, 1976.**

Taylor, noted for her poetic style and skill as a storyteller, used her own family history as the basis for her award-winning series about the Logans who are landowners in Mississippi in the 1930s. Narrator Cassie Logan, an adolescent in the sequel *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), finds it difficult to accept the racial prejudice, injustice, and fear that threatens her proud, loving family and other blacks in their community.

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Twenty “Forgotten” Young Adult Novels *by Connie Zitlow*

Young adult novels that are the “forgotten” ones are either out of print or not readily available. Also among the forgotten books are those works that are available but are frequently overlooked. Although these stories made an impact when first published, they are now lost to the attention of many young readers and the adults who read and promote this literature as a worthy and enjoyable genre of literary works. The forgotten novels are not the ones chosen for whole class reading, small-group discussions, or as individual selections, and might even be missing from library shelves. Yet the books are too good to forget and have the potential to appeal to teens today. In these novels, readers can find a variety of compelling stories with relevant topics, interesting characters and settings, and worthwhile

themes. The books on this list are examples of works that will once again become “found” for those readers who discover the value in their lost and forgotten stories.

***Beyond the Divide* by Kathryn Lasky. New York: Macmillan, 1983.**

Fourteen-year-old Meribah Simon tells about the difficult journey she and her father take in 1849, when they head west after he is shunned from their Amish community for attending the funeral of a friend. Meribah, who has an artistic eye and lots of determination, faces many cruel and life-threatening situations, particularly when she must find a way to survive alone in the Nevada desert.

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Twenty "Forgotten" Young Adult Novels *Continued*

***Blinded by the Light* by Robin Brancato.
New York: Knopf, 1978.**

Gail Brower, a sophomore in college, is alarmed that her brother Jim has joined a religious cult. When she attempts to convince him to leave, she experiences the cult's powerful techniques. She realizes how easily young people, desperate to belong to a group and to have others make decisions for them, are drawn in by the cult's allure.

***Celine* by Brock Cole. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989.**

Told by her father to show a little maturity, 16-year-old Celine is actually more adult than her divorced, self-absorbed parents, especially when she assumes responsibility for her young neighbor Jake. Beginning when her painting "Test Patterns" breaks into pieces as she walks home from school, Celine tells the story of her difficulties that continue as she struggles with an essay on Holden Caulfield and tries to figure out who she is.

***Chernowitz* by Fran Arrick. New York: Bradbury Press, 1981.**

When Bob Chernow is 15, he looks back at what happened when he was bullied by the bigot Emmett Sundback, who ridicules Bob's Jewishness. The prejudice and hatred even take the form of a burning cross thrown in the yard and a swastika on the family car. Many of Bob's schoolmates are moved to tears when they see a film about the Holocaust, but Emmett does not change.

***Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene. New York: Bantam, 1991.**

In this fictionalized account of a real incident, the evil treatment of two peaceful gay men is encouraged by a homophobic minister and carried out by churchgoing boys whose hate and

harassment lead to Stephan's death. The power of social conformity is portrayed by 16-year-old Carla as she struggles with her desire to belong and is also facing the truth about her popular boyfriend Andy.

***The Eagle Kite* by Paula Fox.
New York: Orchard, 1995.**

In this striking and sensitively told story, Fox does not soften the suffering and anguish of the whole family when one person is infected with AIDS. Liam is a first-year high school student when he learns about his father's illness. Liam not only grieves but is angry, frustrated, and lonely until he goes to the seaside one Thanksgiving to see his father who has gone there to die.

***Finding My Voice* by Marie G. Lee. New York: HarperTrophy, 1992.**

Ellen Sung feels that she cannot tell her strict immigrant parents about her classmates' racial slurs or about Tomper Sandel who wants to be her boyfriend. They expect her to focus on her studies and follow her older sister to Harvard. Ellen tells her story in first person in this book based on Lee's experiences of growing up Korean American on the Iron Range in Minnesota.

***Friends* by Rosa Guy. New York: Henry Holt, 1973.**

This novel, significant as an early young adult book about immigrants treated as outsiders, deals realistically with issues of class, race, and poverty. Phyllisia Cathy, a black teen from the West Indies and living in Harlem, feels superior to the other blacks who reject her; however when her mother's illness results in death, Phyllisia learns the value of her friendship with poor, indifferent Edith Jackson.

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Twenty "Forgotten" Young Adult Novels *Continued*

***A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* by Alice Childress. New York: Coward McCann, 1973.**

Readers of this realistic problem novel set in Harlem must decide if 13-year-old Benjie Johnson can conquer his addiction to heroin. In this hard-edged story, Butler Craig, Benjie's would-be stepfather, is one who wants to help Benjie. The book's notable literary elements include the authentic black dialect and contrasting viewpoints of 12 different voices.

***Home before Dark* by Sue Ellen Bridgers. New York: Knopf, 1976.**

Stella is 14, headstrong, proud, and tired of living with her family in the battered old station wagon as they travel to work the next crop. When they finally settle in a little tenant house on her father's family farm in the tobacco fields of eastern North Carolina, Stella finds the place where she belongs and says she will never leave. This beautifully written story, with its vivid imagery and well-developed characters, explores complex family relationships.

***In Summer Light* by Zibby Oneal. New York: Viking, 1985.**

Kate Brewer is an introspective 17-year-old who must come to terms with her demanding father, a famous artist who seems to dismiss her artistic talent. While on Martha's Vineyard recovering from mononucleosis and with the support of a graduate student who is cataloging her father's paintings, Kate completes a paper on Shakespeare's *Tempest* and finally sees her father in a different light.

***Keeper of the Isis Light* by Monica Hughes. New York: Atheneum, 1981.**

This book is the first of a science fiction trilogy set in outer space (Isis) where Olwen is born to research scientists from Earth. When Olwen is orphaned, she is cared for by Guardian, a robot that must help her adjust to her physical and mental changes if she is to survive in the planet's

hostile atmosphere. When colonizers from Earth arrive and Olwen meets 17-year-old Mark, she must face questions of identity and decide what it really means to be human.

***Lizard* by Dennis Covington. New York: Delacorte, 1991.**

Told in first person by the boy called Lizard, this novel portrays the struggles that come with disfigurement. Because his face resembles a reptile, Lucius Sims is sent to Leesville Louisiana State School for Retarded Boys. He escapes with a traveling shoe salesman who claims to be his father and is rescued by an alcoholic actor who wants him to play the part of Caliban. This southern picaresque novel has a variety of richly drawn, offbeat characters.

***The Magician* by Sol Stein. New York: Delacorte, 1971.**

Ed Japhet is 16 and an accomplished magician, but his intermission entertainment at a school dance arouses the jealousy of the bully Stanley Urek who tries to kill Ed. The theme, style, and characterization of this novel, which points to the problems of escalating violence and exposes injustices of the judicial system, is an appropriate choice for mature students.

***Remembering the Good Times* by Richard Peck. New York: Delacorte, 1985.**

Travis, Kate, and Buck are friends who live in a suburban community where they enjoy being with Kate's great-grandmother, Polly, whose pear orchard is a symbol of the past and a place of refuge. In this important book, Peck artfully tells a story of change, violence, and friendship and points to the important issue of teen suicide.

***Sex Education* by Jenny Davis. New York: Orchard, 1988.**

The title is somewhat misleading in this book about caring and healing, although the teacher

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Twenty “Forgotten” Young Adult Novels *Continued*

does address the problems of teen pregnancy by adding a sex education unit to her biology curriculum. Livvie, who has had a mental breakdown, tells the story of her relationship with David, their caring for Maggie who is abused, and what led to David’s death.

***Sheila’s Dying* by Alden Carter. New York: Putnam, 1987.**

Jerry Kincaid decides to break up with his girlfriend until he finds out she has terminal cancer and has only her alcoholic grandmother to care for her. The story is really about Jerry and his high school nemesis Bonnie who become partners as Sheila’s caregivers. Carter conveys Jerry’s fear, fatigue, anger, grief, growing respect, friendship, and love in this book that is not so much about death as about living on.

***Summer Rules* by Robert Lipsyte. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.**

The story of Bobby Marks’s 14th summer, when he is determined to change himself by losing 40 pounds, is told in *One Fat Summer* (Harper & Row, 1977). At the end of that summer, Bobby faces a future full of promise and challenge. But the continuation of his coming-of-age adventures is lost to readers who cannot find the out-of-print novels, *Summer Rules* and *The Summerboy*

(Harper & Row, 1982), books in which Lipsyte artfully conveys Bobby’s development of social consciousness and self-transformation.

***The Treasure of Plunderell Manor* by Bruce Clements. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987.**

Set in mid-Victorian England, this spoof of gothic thrillers is an example of the author’s witty novels. Fourteen-year-old Laurel Bybank becomes the maid of Alice Plunderell, a young heiress whose life is in danger because she is to inherit a hidden treasure on her 18th birthday. Laurel must learn who is trustworthy, use her common sense, and keep her sense of humor if she and Alice are to survive.

***Up in Seth’s Room* by Norma Fox Mazer. New York: Delacorte, 1979.**

Finn is 15 and in love with 19-year-old Seth, but the conflict of whether to have intercourse creates tension between the two. Finn is a strong young woman who decides to come up with her own definition of pragmatic abstinence. Mazer portrays a teen who stands up to peer pressures and takes responsibility for making her own decisions.

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Marketing Issues, Accessibility, and the Value of Young Adult Literature

Just as with adult publishing, the young adult market is flooded with both quality and trash. Grounding their criticism in erroneous and misleading media coverage and in limited familiarity with young adult literature, some critics assert young adult literature is worthless and inferior to classical texts and adult literature. Those who study the young adult genre, however, understand multiple factors contribute to this negative pigeonholing. They also know that young adult literature offers some of the best in contemporary literature. It’s almost impossible to read a book like John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2005), for instance, and not develop huge respect for young adult

literature and those who write for this audience. Deeply philosophical and richly textured, *Looking for Alaska* is an intense coming-of-age story about a group of teens, a boarding school, and one boy's search for the "Great Perhaps." First-time novelist Green depicts the intensity of adolescence seldom seen in contemporary literature. Dozens of authors pen equally well-crafted, deeply layered stories. Box 3.1 features a sampling of exceptional young adult novels that serves as a good introduction for skeptics who question young adult literature's literary merit.



3.1 A Few Exceptional Reads in YA Literature

***Apocalypse* by Tim Bowler. New York: McElderry/Simon & Schuster, 2004.**

Written by one of the best young adult thriller writers, this novel takes the reader on a startling journey into a malicious and terrifying world. Kit and his parents end up on a barren island after being shipwrecked in a storm, where they encounter an odd and brutal group of people who seem to hate Kit upon first encounter. Kit wanders off in search of a strange girl he believes can help them but upon returning discovers his parents are missing.

***The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing, Traitor to the Nation: Volume 1. The Pox Party* by M. T. Anderson. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2006.**

Given a classical education and growing up in a household of scholars, a young boy, Octavian, begins questioning the fanatical studies that take place around him. Upon opening a forbidden door, he discovers shocking experiments. A complex multigenre, multithemed tale that takes place in Boston during the American Revolution.

***The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. New York: Random House, 2006.**

A World War II setting is the backdrop for this coming-of-age story about Liesel Meminger, a foster girl living in Munich. Liesel loves books and steals them. Aided by her foster father, she learns

to read and shares her books with her friends and the Jewish man hidden in their house.

***The Center of the World* by Andreas Steinhöfel. Trans. Alisa Jaffa. New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2005.**

Seventeen-year-old Phil, a gay teen, lives with his mother and twin sister in a small German community. Phil's mother is promiscuous, and her sexual behavior causes negative fallout for Phil and his sister. A rich, multilayered story about family relationships and connection.

***City of Bones: Book 1. The Mortal Instruments* by Cassandra Clare. New York: McElderry/Simon & Schuster, 2007.**

15-year-old Clary witnesses a murder. But does she? The body disappears into thin air and no one can see the murderers, three teenagers covered with bizarre tattoos. Clary becomes embroiled in the world of the Shadowhunters, warriors dedicated to ridding the earth of demons. A refreshing urban fantasy.

***Gifts* by Ursula K. Le Guin. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2004.**

The Upland clans possess gifts, both wonderful and terrifying. They have the ability to create fire and move land, but they can also inflict illness and pain. Two young clan members refuse to use their powers. A cleverly crafted story about the cruelty of power.

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3.1 A Few Exceptional Reads in YA Literature *Continued*

***The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002.**

A multiaward-winning sci-fi thriller about a young clone. When Matt, cloned from an elderly drug lord, learns the real reason for his existence, he attempts a treacherous escape into an unknown world. A contemporary science fiction masterpiece, this book is a shocking examination of what might be scientifically possible in the near future. *The Sea of Trolls* (2004) is also an exceptional read.

***Impulse* by Ellen Hopkins. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.**

Taking place within a psychiatric hospital, this massive verse novel traces the lives of three teens who each attempted suicide: one with a knife, another with a gun, and the last with a bottle. Together, can they chart a better course for their lives and battle the demons in their lives? Though this book reads fast, it includes more detail than usual in a young adult novel. *Crank* (2004) and *Burned* (2006) are similar in size and style.

***Inexcusable* by Chris Lynch. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.**

This National Book Award Finalist is sure to provoke heated discussion. Keir is a good guy—a good son and brother, terrific athlete and friend. What happens between Keir and his long-term girlfriend, Gigi? Is it date rape? Or consensual sex? Keir doesn't think so. Masterfully crafted with an amazing voice and unforgettable male protagonist. A rare must read for all males.

***Invisible* by Pete Hautman. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005.**

Doug is a loner and misfit who builds trains in his basement. He does have one best friend: Andy,

a superstar popular athlete. Doug retreats within himself and, as he does, the reader learns about what happened at the Tuttle place a long time ago. An exceptional book that illustrates Hautman's ability to build suspense and hook and surprise the reader.

***Psyche in a Dress* by Francesca Lia Block. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.**

Like much of Block's work, *Psyche in a Dress* draws on Block's love of mythology. Psyche yearns to be transformed by true love. In her quest, she is challenged by demons and gods. Block's work is described as postmodern, magical realism. Her stories are generally otherworldly.

***This Is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn* by Aidan Chambers. New York: Harry Abrams, 2006.**

The sheer size of this volume sends a clear message that young adult literature isn't just for younger adolescents and at-risk readers. Nineteen-year-old Cordelia decides to narrate her life for her unborn child. In doing so, she paints a vivid portrait of a remarkable young woman, one who writes candidly about first love, sex, friendship, literature, faith, and one's place in the world. Amazing depth and complexity. The protagonist's age also attracts older readers.

***Surrender* by Soriya Hartnett. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2006.**

A young man recounts his past as he lays dying in this exquisitely written psychological thriller. Through flashbacks, the reader learns of a horrific mistake and a life filled with frustration and humiliation. A dark, brilliant, and tender story.

A number of issues contribute to a stigmatic view of the genre. First, the location of young adult literature in bookstores is problematic. Some bookstores combine young adult literature with children's literature, and by doing so, send an unwritten message that young adult literature is not sophisticated enough for teens, especially older readers. Other bookstores place young adult

literature in *close proximity* to children's literature, sending a similar message. Many older teens, boys especially, won't be caught "dead" perusing a young adult section for this reason. Also, bookstores seldom stock a wide range of quality young adult books. Formulaic serial books, "chick lit," and mass market here-today-gone-tomorrow reads dominate shelves, many of which have cartoon and "pop culture" covers that degrade the book's integrity. While high school girls may carry around any number of pink- or pastel-colored books with cartoon-like figures and/or designs, few high school boys will take a cartoon cover seriously, much less a pastel-colored one.

Publishing houses have a huge impact on young adult literature. Editorial departments determine what is printed by accepting, rejecting, and editing manuscripts, and while writing quality sells manuscripts, editors have their likes and dislikes. And politics, for better or worse, plays a role (e.g., Jenna Bush's *Ana's Story*, 2007). By focusing on profits, marketing departments drive what sells and what the audience is exposed to by front listing² books they want to promote and developing expensive national marketing campaigns for books of their choice. A publisher, for instance, may develop a massive advertising campaign (e.g., pricey promotional materials, author tours, and colorful floor displays) for a young adult book written by a well-known adult writer³ and push these titles to booksellers. Because the writer is a bestselling adult writer, the company has "faith" in his/her young adult title selling well, regardless of the book's quality. They will also do the same for celebrities. Such advertising campaigns—and there are many—distract from quality literature written by well-established, award-winning young adult authors. These latter authors, many who have been in the trenches for years and have received dozens of awards for their contributions to children's and young adult literature, seldom receive equal promotion. My point is not to devalue adult writers who decide to write a young adult novel, but to point out how name recognition gives some authors a "leg up" in advertising. Simply stated: adult writers and celebrities move easily into the young adult market, and their first novels are "upfront" in bookstores. A young adult author does not cross over as easily.⁴

Don't leave this chapter believing publishers are totally missing the mark with older readers. In fact, in the last several years, an increasing number of books with multiple, complex themes have found their way onto young adult bookshelves. Many are well over the usual 200- to 300-page length. This trend may be the result of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, which has hooked readers of all ages. While young adult literature has traditionally been a smaller sales market compared with children's and adult books, publishers also recognize that more teens today frequent bookstores, and they're making a bigger effort to capture them.

²Several times a year publishers may send a "suggested" purchase list to bookstores and offer special deals on select titles.

³The general adult population chooses books in much the same way as teens—what they find interesting, not what they believe is written well. Thus, an adult writer may be popular but may not necessarily craft stories well.

⁴For example, Chris Crutcher's *King of the Mild Frontier* (2003) is comparable to David Sedaris's works such as *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004) and *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000).

If you're reading this book, you're fortunate. Many colleges and universities do not require a course in young adult literature in teacher education programs. Some programs offer it as an elective, others attempt to integrate the literature into other courses, and still others do not value the genre enough to include it in teacher training. Thus, many teachers enter the teaching field with limited and/or skewed knowledge of the genre. Some teachers, however, learn to stay abreast of the field by subscribing to journals (e.g., *The ALAN Review*, *SIGNAL Journal*, *School Library Journal*) and professional organizations (ALAN/NCTE, SIGNAL/IRA, and ALA) through which they remain informed about new books, upcoming authors, and instructional strategies for teaching the literature.

Young adult literature offers a window through which teens can examine their lives and the world in which they live. Unlike classical texts, young adult literature addresses modern-day issues—peer pressure, family relationships, sexuality, bigotry and racism, and it connects teens with the pop culture world in which they live. This connection with modern-day issues and culture peaks interest and hooks at-risk readers and nonreaders. While classical texts may share similar themes (emotions are timeless), young adult literature is not bound by archaic language; teens can more easily navigate the text and enjoy pop culture references, themes, and so on, resulting in more reading pleasure and ultimately enhancing reading comprehension.

Characteristics of Quality Young Adult Literature

So, what makes a good young adult novel? Much young adult literature prior to the 1970s has been criticized for being didactic, too focused on a message, and lacking character development and strong plot; however, a poorly written adult novel can be didactic too, but for a different reason. The difference lies in the message being hammered home: Older didactic works preach messages about morality and religion. The modern-day novel, however, if not well done, can browbeat the reader with a social issue. In a poorly written novel, the story can go over the top; that is, the writer works so hard to convince the reader of his/her point that the story is melodramatic or not plausible; for instance, the writer may make extreme use of violence and intrigue at the expense of realism. The trouble with evaluating the quality of a novel, however, lies in the fact that what one reader considers extreme, another may not; what one reader may consider real, another may not; what disturbs or offends one reader, may not disturb or offend another; and so on. There are, however, specific points that can aid readers in developing expertise in evaluating a novel's merit.

Multithemed Story

The reader walks away from the book with a lot to talk about. The reader thinks, "This isn't just about divorce. This book has other deep issues." On the surface, David Almond's *Kit's Wilderness* (2000) seems to be a story about a 13-year-old boy who moves to a moldering coal mining community to live with his grandfather and encounters ghosts; on a deeper level, it is a story about redemption.

Tension versus Shock Effect

The story creates tension as opposed to shock. A good way of examining tension is asking whether a book is a “page turner.” Can you not put it down? Are you constantly wanting to know what happens next? Or are you having a good time getting through it? The difficulty here has to do with interest. What engages one person may not engage another. Another good question is, Do all scenes either advance the plot or deepen our understanding of the character? Any scenes that do neither are gratuitous. Sonya Hartnett’s *Surrender* (2006) moves forward seamlessly with even tension.

Memorable Characters

Characters are neither all good nor all bad. A completely good or completely bad character leaves no room for tension. Characters can’t possibly change or do anything that would “surprise” the reader and keep the reader turning pages; hence, a boring, flat, predictable storyline. Richard Peck, Christopher Paul Curtis, and Chris Lynch are known for developing rich, well-rounded, sometimes odd characters.

Accurate Facts and Details

If the story relies on a historical event, the writer has done some homework. If the story has a sports theme, game description, lingo, and game rules are believable and accurate. Kathryn Lasky and Ann Rinaldi are held in high regard for the meticulous research behind their historical fiction novels. No one hits the mark better than Robert Lipsyte and Mike Lupica with realistic depictions of sports.

No Unlikely Coincidences

If the protagonist in Chapter 5 wishes to see her alcoholic father who neglected her two years in the past, he doesn’t show up on her doorstep in Chapter 6. You may find a rare exception to this point, but most good editors will give a book one coincidence, but not two.

Critic Pandering

The best stories are crafted by writers who avoid pandering to critics. That is, they think about the story, not the story’s purpose, message, or the “sensitive” nature of their audience. The story is what it is.

Original Idea

The book wasn’t written to ride a trend. After the Columbine shootings a host of books about school shootings hit the market. While some of these are exceptional (e.g., Walter Dean Myers’s *Shooter*, 2004), others are tedious and predictable. The best writers write what they know, not what’s popular.

Memorable Voice and Authentic Dialogue

Remember the stilted language in the basal readers such as *Dick and Jane*? A good novel captures the language of the characters, which includes dialect, word choice, and cultural expressions. It stands to reason that some characters may use profanity, racist language, or otherwise offensive expressions. A good test for voice is whether you can tell who is talking by the sound of the character's voice. For example, sometimes chapters alternate between narrators or points of view (e.g., Wendelin Van Draanen's *Flipped*, 2001; Angela Woodson's *First Part Last*, 2003; and Betty Hicks's *Out of Order*, 2005). If the reader has to work too hard to figure out who's talking in each chapter, the voices aren't strong or unique enough. Writers who have exceptional control of voice know how to break grammar rules for effect. Examine the following opening passage of Chris Lynch's *Gypsy Davey* (1994):

My sister Joanne has a baby and sometimes after school I go over there and I help her with it and she lets me have a glass of wine and then I start to think of things.

Things like that I'm really good with babies even though I'm only twelve and I can think of no reason why I should be after all good with babies since I don't have any of my own but I sure would like to. Better than my sister is with her own baby that's for sure though I don't actually mean to be mean because she's nice to me some of the time and it's hard for her and I fully understand that. She's only seventeen herself but her old man she calls him is thirty which is why there's always a glass of wine around although from what I can see the old man himself ain't. Around that is. (p. 3)

Effective, Clear Writing Style

Whatever stylistic devices a writer chooses, they are effective, purposeful, consistent, and clear. For instance, Meg Rosoff uses no quotation marks in her Michael L. Printz winner, *How I Live Now* (2004) and uses commas sparingly. While quotation marks help the reader know who's talking, and commas generally help with comprehension, Rosoff crafts her writing so well that readers never get confused. The result is a powerfully sweet, seamless, and memorable voice.

Sense of Humor

Comedian Mel Brooks once said, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." Writers of the best problem novels understand this aphorism and use humor successfully. David Lubar illustrates this craft in many of his novels (e.g., *Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie* [2005]).

Lyrical/Poetic Language

A good novel mirrors a good poem—no wasted words to bore or slow down the reader. Markus Zusak's *Fighting Ruben Wolfe* (2001) reads like poetry, and the imagery in Paul Fleischman's *Whirligig* (1998) and Cynthia Rylant's *Missing May* (1992) are stellar.

No Superfluous Characters or Wasted Scenes

Everything has purpose. Events or minor characters are not left hanging. Any scenes that shock the reader but do not advance the plot or contribute to character development are unwarranted.

Widespread Appeal

The best novels will have universal appeal, much like a good picture book. Adults make personal connections with the text in much the same way as teens. The *Harry Potter* series is an obvious example. Laurie Halse Anderson's Michael L. Printz Honor book *Speak* (1999) is a second example. Melinda Sordino, ostracized by her peers for ratting out an end-of-summer party and raped by a schoolmate, stops talking. This book remains one of the top bestsellers in young adult fiction.

Openings

Young adult authors and publishers know that adolescents can be impatient readers. More so than adult books, good young adult novels will capture the reader's attention with the first few lines and/or first few pages. Robert Cormier's "They murdered him" from *The Chocolate War* (1974) is a classic opening; however, dozens of authors have written equally compelling opening lines. Consider the following:

You wouldn't think we'd have to leave Chicago to see a dead body.
(*A Long Way from Chicago* by Richard Peck. New York: Dial/Penguin, 1998.)

Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with
bird turd and surrounded by water.
(*Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko. New York: Putnam, 2004.)

Around 5:00 a.m. on a warm Sunday morning in October 1953, my Aunt
Belle left her bed and vanished from the face of the earth.
(*Belle Prater's Boy* by Ruth White. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996.)

Maggot said we should go up to Times Square to watch the ball drop and
pick some pockets, but we never got around to it.
(*Can't Get There from Here* by Todd Strasser. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.)

If you're planning on going out with a girl, take my advice: don't start over
the summer holidays. Do it in term time, when there's loads of other
distractions. Over the long summer holiday, keeping a girl happy on a
day-to-day basis can really drain you. It's nonstop phone calls. Boring
shopping trips into town. Coke and cappuccino consumption levels
shooting sky high.

(*Gotta Get Some Bish Bash Bosh* by M. E. Allen. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.)

I've been thinking about the undead.

(*Restless: A Ghost's Story* by Rich Wallace. New York: Viking/Penguin, 2003.)

Simon Glass was easy to hate. I never knew exactly why, there was too much to pick from. I guess, really, we each hated him for a different reason, but we didn't realize it until the day we killed him.

(*Shattering Glass* by Gail Giles. New Milford, CT: Roaring Brook Press, 2002.)

I grew up with my left hand tied behind my back.

(*Choosing Up Sides* by John H. Ritter. New York: Penguin, 1998.)

I grew up riding a rocket.

(*King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* by Chris Crutcher. New York: Greenwillow/HarperCollins, 2003.)

He did not want to be a wringer.

(*Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.)

Closings

While young adult literature offers some of the best openings in literature, exceptional endings are fewer. Many novels are criticized for endings that wrap up too quickly or neatly. This problem exists for a couple of reasons. First, the societal belief that stories should have hope impacts the way some writers end their stories. While good writers shy away from the happily-ever-after endings, many still tend to "lighten" events by story's end. Second, the length of the story and story time frame (typically a few weeks in a character's life, a summer, or a school year) is not conducive to deep character development and, most importantly, it is not long enough realistically for characters to work through personal and family issues. The span of an academic school year, for example, is not an adequate amount of time to heal wounds between an abused child and a parent or for an adolescent to complete the grief cycle. Ron Koertge's *Arizona Kid* (2005) has an exceptional ending, as does Terry Trueman's *Stuck in Neutral* (2000).

Young Adult Literature and Censorship

Censorship, the willful removal or withholding of information, is done by individuals, religious groups, governments, businesses, and the media. In later years, censors have become better organized and, though small in number, they have a collective voice that sometimes overrides the majority. When studying censorship or when caught in its throes, we should understand why censors want to control, remove, and/or withhold information: they operate out of fear, so they oppose any reading, viewing, or discussion that deviates from their world perceptions. A difficulty in dealing with censors is that they sincerely believe the material is so damaging and offensive that no one should believe it holds value, and when someone does, that

Trends in Young Adult Literature by Party Campbell

The river of young adult literature is overflowing its banks just now. From the trickle of a few books in the beginning almost 40 years ago, it has grown to a mighty flood of fine writing. Fed by tributaries of new forms, new subjects, and passing trends, it has survived the drought of the nineties to become a major part of the watercourse of world literature. What are the trends the genre has grown through, and how does it differ now from its early years?

From the start, the mainstream of young adult literature has been perceived as realism. (However, to belabor the metaphor to a ridiculous degree, the genre can also be seen as two parallel streams—realism and fantasy. More about this later.) Although the prototype for style and voice was J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), it was not until 16 years later that that book's promise began to be fulfilled. In the magic years of 1967–1968, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*, and Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* broke away from the saccharine formula of the junior novel to confront bold new subjects that soon earned such novels the name of "the new realism." Other new writers like Richard Peck, Norma Klein, M. E. Kerr, Norma Fox Mazer, and Harry Mazer took up the challenge of writing novels about serious adolescent realities without succumbing to didacticism.

Then in 1974 the publication of Robert Cormier's first YA novel, *The Chocolate War*, initiated a new level of literary excellence in the fledgling genre and also unleashed a storm of controversy about the darkness and hard truth-saying of his work, a type of controversy that became characteristic of the field in general in following years. For the first time, a YA novel had confronted the broader human condition beyond the problems of adolescence. Cormier had disturbed the universe of young adult literature with his dark vision and complex ambiguities, and the stunned critical reception of the book led to the realization that fiction for teens could be great literature. With the publication of *I Am the Cheese* in 1977 and *After the First Death* in 1979, it became apparent that *The Chocolate War* had been not a single anomaly, but the beginning of a body of work, and other writers were freed to follow their own vision, wherever it led. Cormier continued to up the ante throughout the



26 years and 14 novels of his career, and other writers were freed to rise to the challenge of honesty and excellence in their own ways.

However, changing trends in YA literature always come and usually go, both in the center and around the edges. In the early seventies a form arose that took books for teens in a less excellent direction. Emboldened by the new possibilities for writing about formerly taboo subjects, less skilled writers began to shape novels around social concerns, the more trendy the better. "The problem novel," as this variant came to be called, focused on the latest headlines for books about drugs, suicide, sexual molestation, prostitution, parents missing from death or divorce or desertion, runaways, anorexia. "The subject matter too often became the tail that wagged the dog of the novel," says Michael Cart in his history of the genre, *From Romance to Realism* (1996). The problem (or several problems), became the center, with all its statistics and possible outcomes, rather than a character or the writer's personal vision, and writers drew heavily on the possibilities for preachy moral instruction. These books were enormously popular with teens, but they grew sillier and sillier, until they were finally kidded to death by critics. The death knell was Daniel Pinkwater's delightful parody, *Young Adult Novel* (1982). The influence of the problem novel is often exaggerated. It lasted only a decade and was a mere digression, as the main body of the literature continued to grow in scope, relevance, and sophistication.

However, one type of problem novel preceded its heyday and continues with us to the present

Continued

Trends in Young Adult Literature *Continued*

time. Stories of teenage pregnancy and parenting, affectionately called “preggers novels,” began in 1966 with *A Girl Like Me* by Jeannette Eyerly. Other early such books were *My Darling, My Hamburger* by Paul Zindel (1969), and *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head (1967). The pattern followed a formula: worry, discovery, revelation to boyfriend and parents, choice of three alternatives—abortion, keeping the baby, and adoption—with authorial approval of the last option. This pattern gradually loosened and was addressed with more literary skill in the nineties, to grow beyond its problem novel origins. Sometimes the point of view is even that of the young father, as in Angela Johnson’s award-winning novel, *The First Part Last* (2003).

But what about that second river of YA fiction, fantasy? Today it seems as if it has become the predominant form in the genre, at least for this decade. However, fantasy (and science fiction) has always drawn enthusiastic young readers. Tolkien’s trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, was the beginning, with the American edition published in 1966. However, it took several years until that mighty work trickled down to teen awareness from its first readership on the college level. Then it was an overwhelming phenomenon, bringing young people to the joy of reading as Harry Potter would 30 years later. Another seminal work that began publication in 1968 was Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* trilogy. In the next decade, a few writers like H. M. Hoover wrote science fiction aimed at YA readers, and most notably William Sleator with his behaviorist novel, *House of Stairs* (1974). But not until the publication of *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks in 1977 did American writers take up the more-or-less-medieval world in three volumes, the model set by Tolkien. The number of YA books based on this pattern, with its variant of the Arthurian novel, has grown steadily ever since, until legions of huge fantasy trilogies and series have come to dominate the YA market since 1993.

YA realism, meanwhile, has been enriched by a number of separate subject emphases that can, each in its own right, almost be thought of as subgenres. Most relevant to teens is sexuality, a subject that has been a major part of YA fiction since its beginning, and has often garnered YA literature the wrath of censors. The iconic book of sexual discovery is Judy

Blume’s *Forever*, appearing in 1975, just one year after *The Chocolate War* broke open the field to new challenges. Its frank celebration of human coupling has earned it a very long life and many readers. Although it is often said that *Forever* was unique in the reality of its portrayal of sexual activity, the truth is that during the sexual revolution of the seventies, there were many YA novels by Norma Klein and others that equaled its daring, if not its quality. Later, as AIDS made sexual intercourse a life-threatening practice, writers became leery of scenes of love-making. The sexual novel morphed into the AIDS novel, with M. E. Kerr’s *Night Kites* (1986) and other books that showed us young people trying to make sense of the age of AIDS. Only recently, as the disease fades from the forefront of public consciousness in America, have YA authors begun to explore sexuality again in gritty novels like *Doing It* by Melvin Burgess (2004).

A related form is the novel of gay and lesbian awareness and identity. In his groundbreaking study of this literary type, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2004), Michael Cart traces the changes in the form. This theme has been a constant in YA fiction since John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* appeared in 1969. However, in the seventies the plot led inexorably to the death by automobile (or “death by gayness,” as it jokingly came to be called) of the lead character or dog, presumably as a punishment. This trend came to be a running gag, and the form eventually grew beyond such naïveté. The first YA novel to deal with lesbian identity was *Ruby* by Rosa Guy (1976), but the icon has become *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (1982). Marion Dane Bauer’s *Am I Blue: Coming Out from the Silence* (1994) was the first young adult anthology dealing with gay and lesbian issues. In later years, gay and lesbian characters have become a natural part of many YA novels without being seen as *the problem*, and in 2003 David Levithan’s *Boy Meets Boy* showed us a beautiful world where nobody is upset that the homecoming queen is also the star quarterback.

For a long while YA fiction depicted an all-white mostly middle-class world. When multicultural awareness began to develop, the requirement was seen at first as a matter of making the history and presence of African Americans visible. A very early landmark

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Trends in Young Adult Literature *Continued*

book in this development was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969). In the seventies, publishers actively encouraged black writers, and new voices emerged like Alice Childress, Rosa Guy, Virginia Hamilton, Mildred Taylor, and the great Walter Dean Myers, whose first YA novel was *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975). As with gay characters, in later years African American characters have come to be seen as people with lives and issues beyond their racial identity. With the surge of immigration from Asia and Central America in the nineties, a need for books exploring those realities has arisen. YA novels reflecting the lives of contemporary American Asian teens have been especially scarce, despite the many Chinese historical or mythological novels of Laurence Yep. The Michael L. Printz winner, *American Born Chinese* (2006), by Gene Luen Yang is a step in this direction, but there is still a long way to go. Hispanic YA fiction of all kinds, however, is growing well, adding to the longtime examples of Gary Soto, Sandra Cisneros, and several others. YA fiction showing the lives of contemporary Muslim teens is still to come, regrettably. As the tide of immigration continues, more and more books focus on the problems of immigrants as outsiders, and the complex self-definition of teens who have more than one ethnic or racial identity.

For many years historical novels were said to be anathema to teens, and very few were written or published. Not until the unprecedented success of the *American Girls* series did publishers begin to change their minds. Ann Rinaldi and Kathryn Laskey have been the workhorses in this subgenre, turning out novel after novel of historical fiction. In the 21st century the form has grown to new heights of creativity and originality, culminating in the two books of *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* by M. T. Anderson (2006) series.

Some current subjects in realistic YA fiction hark back to the problem novel, but without succumbing to the single-mindedness of that form. However, the repetition of these themes is beginning to be tiresome. Novels built around incidents of physical or sexual abuse have been around for two decades, and there have been excellent books, like Cynthia Voigt's *When She Hollers* (1994), Norma Fox Mazer's *When She Was Good* (1997), and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999). After the shootings at Columbine High School

there were a number of books about a shootist who plans to bring a gun to school, but this theme, while important, is beginning to feel overdone. And surely it is time to give plots a rest that turn on alienation and overcoming bullies, either male or female.

Forms other than the novel have also become part of young adult fiction. The short story anthology, now a staple, began with the first collection by the now well-known anthologist Don Gallo, *Sixteen* (1984). The pattern, as set by Gallo, is to amass a group of original stories by familiar YA authors centering on a theme. These themes can range from quite specific, such as Gallo's recent *What Are You Afraid Of? Stories about Phobias* (2006), to quite amorphous, such as *All Sleek and Skimming* (2006), edited by Lisa Heggum. Sex, gay, and lesbian identity, and the supernatural have been popular themes. Sometimes these collections can be by one author, like Margo Lanagan's remarkable *Black Juice* (2005). An interesting experiment growing from this form was Michael Cart's *Rush Hour*, (2004), a quarterly literary journal encompassing not only short stories but poetry and art. Teachers are fond of these collections for their ability to snare short-attention-span readers and to fit neatly in a day's teaching plan.

The verse novel is a form peculiar to young adult literature, although narrative in verse is a very much older pattern, going back to the earliest literature. The young adult verse novel was inadvertently invented by Mel Glenn, in his collection titled *Class Dismissed! High School Poems* (1982). Characteristically the verse novel is a novel-length story told in a series of free verse poems written in first person. In the best of these books each separate poem is its own little jewel. Sometimes there is a single narrator, but there can also be multiple voices. The verse sometimes has a formal rhyme scheme, and sometimes just reflects the rhythms of natural speech, arranged in breath groups. There was a blossoming of this form in the late nineties and the first five years of the current century, but now they seem to have receded somewhat. A number of excellent books have been shaped as verse novels, some of the best being *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse (1997), *Make Lemonade* (1993) by Virginia Euwer Wolff, and its National Book Award-winning sequel *True Believer* (2001).

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Trends in Young Adult Literature *Continued*

Graphic novels were popular in Europe for many years before they were accepted in America, and I wrote about the appeal of this form in my "YA Perplex" column for *Wilson Library Bulletin* in the early eighties. But not until the last five years has this comics-inspired genre been enthusiastically embraced by teens and librarians. Now there are many guidebooks and Web sites to educate teachers and librarians who are latecomers to the form, and several mainstream YA publishers have moved into the field with graphic novel imprints, such as Roaring Brook's *First Second*. With the awarding of the Michael L. Printz Award to *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang in 2007, the graphic novel finally came to be respected as a valid literary form in America, even though Art Spiegelman's great Holocaust memoir *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Manga is the Japanese form of the graphic novel, and is enormously popular currently with teens.

Audiobooks and other electronic forms look to the future, although they will probably continue to be supplements, rather than replacements for the print book. Many YA books are now published simultaneously as print and audiobooks, and the popularity of the electronic version with teens is high, especially with those who do not read well or who are new English learners.

Up to now, we have been looking only at hardcover YA fiction, but some of the most volatile YA publishing trends have been acted out in paperbacks. The tendency of librarians, teachers, and critics to deplore this popular subliterate is a very old one, going back to the example of the Stratemeyer Syndicate, a writing factory that churned out the *Nancy Drew* and *Hardy Boys* series, among others, in the first half of the 20th century. In the beginnings of young adult literature paperbacks were limited to reprints of previously published hardcover books. But in 1971, with the astounding success of *Go Ask Alice* by Beatrice Sparks, it began to dawn on publishers that teens would buy their own books, if they were the *right* books. Previous purchasers of YA books had been teachers, parents, and librarians, but now, with this new market, more hardcover YA titles were translated into paperback.

With the advent of the indoor shopping mall as a teen hangout, the stage was set for a wider marketing plan. Gambling that teens were tired of the gritty reality of the problem novel, and perhaps frightened by AIDS, publishers in the eighties began to bring out

sweet, clean, and conventional paperback romance series, like *Wildfire*, *Sweet Dreams*, *Young Love*, *First Love*, *Wishing Star*, *Caprice*, and *Sweet Valley High*. They were an instant sensation with young girls, who bought them by the armload. The enormous significance of this move was that these were *original* paperbacks, not reprints. Librarians deplored; feminists wrung their hands. I wrote, "The books that are found in the chain bookstores are of far lower quality and aimed at much younger readers than those that are found on the similarly labeled shelves in public libraries. The whole field has become strangely bifurcated and we seem to be moving in the direction of two separate literatures."

The separatist trend continued as romance phased into horror paperbacks, beginning with Christopher Pike's *Slumber Party* in 1985, and continued on into the nineties. As the teen population declined to a new low in numbers, publishers desperate to keep this new market turned to ever more sensational and poor quality paperbacks, finally descending into the abyss with R. L. Stine's execrable *Goosebumps* and *Fear Street* series. At library conferences publishers and librarians moaned to each other that YA was dead.

Not hardly. Today, as we have said, the roaring mainstream of young adult literature is overflowing its banks. There are an all-time high of over 30 million teens in the United States, and that growth is not expected to peak until 2010. Teens account for a major part of bookstore sales, and they're not buying just popular paperbacks. Trends continue, yes, like the currently ubiquitous chick lit, but the best of YA literature now appears right alongside it on bookstore shelves. There are more literary and challenging books for older teens being written, often with strikingly original stylistic innovations and sophisticated themes. More formerly adult writers are moving into this fertile field of young adult literature, like Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Hoffman, James Patterson, Carl Hiassen, while the writers of the YA canon like Chris Lynch and M. T. Anderson get better with every book. The Printz Award, the National Book Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize have recognized the quality of young adult literature, and the day is not far off when YA masterworks will be seen not as "kids' books," but simply as great works of literature.

person is corrupt or misled; censors are incapable of recognizing or valuing that person's rights. Would-be censors genuinely believe they have a definitive take on "morality" and the world can benefit from their belief system. Others should believe as they do. Would-be censors criticize young adult authors for "corrupting the young," being evil," or "writing shocking, violent, and obscene stories to make a buck." What they fail to comprehend is if they succeed in suppressing information, they set a dangerous precedent. Sooner or later someone will use the same tactics and suppress what they like and value.

Censorship infringes upon freedom of speech and freedom of expression. It violates *intellectual freedom*, the individual right to access information from all viewpoints free of restriction, a defining characteristic of our democratic system. It violates the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, which protects our rights to read, view, listen to, and disseminate information, even if others are offended. Would-be censors argue, however, they are exercising their rights to free speech, but in doing so they suppress the rights of others. Ironically, they seek to deny rights to others by exercising "their rights." The problem with their stance, however, is that their rights to voice their opinion and to persuade others can only be protected if the rights of those being challenged are protected as well. As the American Library Association points out, unless the rights of both sides are protected, neither's rights will survive (ALA, 2007).

One way of understanding the dangers of censorship is to examine countries that have used it to control and suppress their populations (e.g., Afghanistan and Korea). We can turn to our own country, too, and reflect on the treatment of slaves and the efforts by slave owners to keep them illiterate—if they couldn't read, they couldn't "get ideas." Censors of young adult literature fail to see the parallels between their own desires to suppress information about such topics as sexuality, religion, violence, vulgarity, and the successful attempts by dictators, governments, and military groups to control and even brainwash their countries' population. They see their actions as "helpful" and "decent." They want adolescents to believe what they believe, see the world as they do. Thus, they should read and view what censors deem appropriate. Censors, or would-be censors, object to material with little regard or respect to others because it fails to fit into their own belief systems.

Censorship, of course, is as old as time. Throughout history people have been punished for standing up for their beliefs and/or writings. History tells us that people were forced to drink poison (Socrates), burned at the stake (John Hus), crucified (Jesus), exiled (the Dalai Lama), and forced into hiding (Salmon Rushdi) for what they believed or wrote. Literature for children and teens hasn't been an exception. Following is a list of challenged classical titles taken from "The Students' Right to Read" (NCTE, 1981), along with censors' objections.

- *Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank ("Obscene and blasphemous.")
- *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville ("Contains homosexuality.")

- *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger (“A dreadful, dreary, recital of sickness, sordidness, and sadism.”)
- *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (“The book is biased on the black question.”)
- *The Republic* by Plato (“This book is un-Christian.”)
- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (“A filthy book.”)
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (“The word ‘rape’ is used several times. Children should not see this in any literature book.”)
- *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (“Its repetitious obscenity and immorality merely degrade and defile, teaching nothing.”)

While the classical canon continues to come under attack, contemporary young adult literature receives the most hits. Critics, uncomfortable with popular culture and changing societal trends, are more wary of new titles. They also tend to believe if *Macbeth* or *The Miller’s Tale* didn’t damage their own moral fiber, then they’re not likely to damage young minds today.

Young adult literature became an easy target for censors because it emanated from the problem novel, realistic literature that focuses on teen coming-of-age issues such as sexuality, divorce, drugs, abuse. Judy Blume was among the first young adult authors to tackle controversial issues in her writing, and her novels were among the first to be challenged. *Are You There God, It’s Me, Margaret* (1970) was attacked early on for menstruation, *Then Again, Maybe I Won’t* (1971) for masturbation, and *Forever* (1975) for teen sex. More than three decades after its initial publication, *Forever* remains one of the most challenged young adult novels and is a young adult classic.

Dozens of young adult novels by some of the best writers in the field have been challenged (e.g., Lois Duncan’s *Killing Mr. Griffin*, 1978; Katherine Paterson’s *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, 1978; Caroline Cooney’s *The Face on the Milk Carton*, 1990; and Jane Conly’s *Crazy Lady!*, 1993). Over the years, challenges have grown exponentially. Following is a list of the 10 most challenged books of 2006 and a list of the most frequently challenged authors compiled by the American Library Association.

- *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell for homosexuality, “anti-family,” and unsuited to age group.
- *Gossip Girls* series by Cecily von Ziegesar for homosexuality, sexual content, drugs, unsuited to age group, and offensive language.
- *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor for sexual content and offensive language.
- *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler for sexual content, anti-family, offensive language, and unsuited to age group.
- *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison for sexual content, offensive language, and unsuited to age group.
- *Scary Stories* series by Alvin Schwartz for occult/Satanism, unsuited to age group, violence, and insensitivity.

Table 3.1
2003–2005 Most Challenged Authors
(Reported by ALA and listed in alphabetical order)

Judy Blume	Toni Morrison	Louise Rennison
Robert Cormier	Walter Dean Myers	Marilyn Reynolds
Chris Crutcher	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	J. K. Rowling
Robie Harris	Barbara Park	J. D. Salinger
Stephen King	Katherine Paterson	Maurice Sendak
Lois Lowry	Gary Paulsen	Sonya Sones
Chris Lynch	Dav Pilkey	John Steinbeck

- *Athletic Shorts* by Chris Crutcher for homosexuality and offensive language.
- *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky for homosexuality, sexually explicit, offensive language, and unsuited to age group.
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison for offensive language, sexual content, and unsuited to age group.
- *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier for sexual content, offensive language, and violence.

The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) maintains a database of recorded challenges and related statistics (see www.ala.org). The overwhelming majority of challenges are initiated by parents. School libraries are attacked the most, followed by the school in general and the public library. OIF categorized 3,019 challenges between 2000 and 2005 within 20 categories. The categories and number of challenges are listed in Table 3.2.

“Offensive language” continues to top the list; however, complaints about books with sexual content, particularly those that “promote” sexuality, have increased. While support for books about homosexuality in libraries has risen from 55 percent to 73 percent over the last 30 years,⁵ increased complaints against young adult literature with sexual and/or homosexual themes is due in part to an increase in young adult books that feature gay and lesbian characters, in part by the edgier nature of today’s young adult literature, and in part by recent movies (e.g., *Brokeback Mountain*, 2005) and political platforms regarding marriage, civil unions, and gay rights.

It’s not surprising that “offensive language” is the number one complaint. Many would-be censors don’t read what they oppose; many boast they don’t need to. Ludicrous? Most writers, teachers, and literary experts think so. When you encounter objectors who complain about “bad language,” who generally read little or none of the story, they usually don’t understand, or value, story craft and know little about characterization. One

⁵Office of Intellectual Freedom, ALA.

Table 3.2**OIF Challenges 2000–2005**

Category	Challenges
Offensive Language	811
Sexually Explicit	714
Other	583
Unsuited to Age Group	504
Violence	405
Occult/Satanism	229
Homosexuality	164
Religious Viewpoint	155
Political Viewpoint	144
Drugs	122
Racism	108
Nudity	101
Sex Education	78
Anti-Family	57
Insensitivity	51
Inaccurate	36
Suicide	27
Anti-Ethnic	24
Abortion	19
Sexism	16

objector claimed to have found “128 curses” in Chris Crutcher’s *Whale Talk*,⁶ but couldn’t connect with the real-world characters or the story’s messages about bigotry and racism. Winner of numerous awards for fighting censorship, Crutcher is hands down the leading spokesperson against censorship in young adult literature. He is a recipient of NCTE’s prestigious Intellectual Freedom Award and has been honored by the National Coalition Against Censorship. His work is excellent for talking about the importance of allowing characters to use their “native language.” In *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989) Dillon’s brother, Preston, becomes involved with a motorcycle gang and loses his legs in a biking accident. Dillon witnesses his suicide. To get even, Dillon takes his brother’s ashes to the gang hangout and sprinkles them on the pool table, floor, and bar. Dillon flees the hangout unharmed, but the bikers show up at his school to get even:

“I’m sorry,” Caldwell [the principal] said, “We don’t have a student here by that name.”

“Then how did you know he was a student?” Wolf [biker] asked with a sneer, “Maybe he’s a teacher or a janitor.”

Caldwell stood his ground. “We don’t have anyone here by that name.”

One of the other bikers yelled, “He *told* us he goes to school here, asshole. Now get him out here before someone gets hurt.”

⁶Chris Crutcher e-mail correspondence. April 29, 2007.

In a lapse of judgment even for him, John Caldwell flared. “You watch your mouth in front of these kids!”

The biker laughed. “Yes, *sir*. Try this: he told us he goes to school here, shithead. Now get him out here.” (p. 111)

Not only are the bikers angry in this scene, but Crutcher portrays them early on as rough, uneducated, and mean. The language here is real, as it should be. The intent is to show their rage and disrespect. Their responses to the principal do just that, especially the come-back when the principal chides them for their “bad language.”

Robert Cormier’s *We All Fall Down* (1991) opens with the following passage:

They entered the house at 9:02 p.m. on the evening of April Fool’s Day. In the next forty-nine minutes, they shit on the floors and pissed on the walls and trashed their way through the seven-room Cape Cod cottage. They overturned furniture, smashed the picture tubes in three television sets, tore two VCRs from their sockets and crashed them to the floor. They spray-painted the walls orange. They flooded the bathrooms, both upstairs, and down, and flushed face towels down the toilet bowls. They broke every mirror in the place and toppled a magnificent hutch to the floor, sending china cups and saucers and plates and assorted crystal through the air. In the second-floor bedrooms, they pulled out dresser drawers, spilled their contents on the floor, yanked clothing from the closets and slashed mattresses. In the downstairs den, the performed a special job on the spinet, smashing the keys with a hammer, the noise like a crazy soundtrack to the scenes of plunder.

There were four of them and although their vandalism was scattered and spontaneous, they managed to invade every room in the house damaging everything they touched. (pp. 3–4)

Critics of this book find it “disgusting” and “repulsive.” The late Robert Cormier countered complaints by arguing that those emotional responses were exactly what he wanted to evoke. He wanted readers to “feel” the disgust and be sickened by the boys’ destructive acts in the opening scene.

Further examples could illustrate the role “bad language” plays in young adult fiction; however, these two suffice. In the following essay, Chris Crutcher describes his censorship experiences. Because Crutcher writes honestly and candidly about adolescent development, his books appear regularly on the “100 Most Banned Books List” published by ALA. At the end of the chapter is an interview concerning his book *The Sledding Hill*. Frequently censored and banned for “bad language,” Crutcher purposefully avoided “bad language” in this book in an effort to force critics to talk about real issues. Following the interview is a letter Crutcher wrote to students in the Limestone School District, an Alabama school system that banned *Whale Talk*.



Chris Crutcher receives the Intellectual Freedom Award from the National Coalition Against Censorship in 2005 in New York City. Pictured with Crutcher is Judy Blume.

Crutcher on Censorship

The most frequently debated issue regarding censorship revolves around the founding fathers' intent in writing the First Amendment. One side claims placing books with "bad" language or "offensive" issues in public schools is tantamount to yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater. The other side says free expression is protected by the Constitution and if you want to keep your own children from reading those books, have at it, but don't try stopping *our* children from reading them. One side drags out kiddie porn and the other side drags out the *Bible*. When it's all said and done, there's a lot more said than done, as they say, and neither side brings in converts.

Certainly I'm a believer in the free expression/intellectual freedom side of this argument, but the second danger is a more personal one, in my opinion, and deserves a closer look. A few of my books sit near the top of challenged and banned books lists each year, and I have on a number of occasions, traveled to the places where they're challenged to get a more intimate look at the process and to stand with the librarians or teachers who are under fire. The challenger is most often someone from the Christian Right. Typically a member of a fundamental church will encounter one of my books on a reading list or as part of the curriculum and take his or her complaint to the school, then to the newspaper, then to a television station, not necessarily in that order. In Iowa a minister read the "offending" passages brought to him by a parent, called for a public apology by the teacher who had assigned the book, and for the book to be taken out of the curriculum. In his "Letter to the Editor," he quoted (using asterisks to block out certain letters of certain words) 19 lines of "proof" that the story was *filth*, as in "Do You Know What Filth Our Children Are Reading?" Like many censors he did not read the story and quoted the lines out of context. Because he was so public with his complaints, the school district halted students' reading of the book until the school board could come to a decision. That process took at least a week because an internal committee had to pass judgment before the school board could see it. The kids were two chapters from the end of the book when the challenge took place; the interruption lasted two weeks.

Of course the kids were disturbed. They signed petitions to retrieve their rights, sent letters to the editor on their own as well as scores of emails to me in support of the book. No sweat off my brow on that one, right? The book sold many more copies than it would have had the fuss not been made and my name became far more familiar than it had been. But look what happened in that school. When the administration stopped the class from reading the book while waiting for a resolution, the flow of the story, and indeed the flow of the class halted. An instant chasm between students and administration developed, with the teacher caught in the middle. By halting the reading, the administration put itself in the position of appearing ignorant of what was going on in its own classrooms, and of not trusting and backing its teachers. That's the educational equivalent of guilty until proven innocent, and it *invites* the censors. Even if they don't meet their ultimate objective, they wreak havoc.

A similar thing happened with the same book in a Michigan school a few years back. The school had an all-school read of *Whale Talk*, and taught it across disciplines; math teachers figured a math angle, science teachers a science angle and so on. I received some of the most remarkable mail and email during that time, that I have *ever* received. Teachers talked of a new connection with their students, students of new perspectives. Then a few *loud* fundamentalists (and make no mistake, they

Continued

Crutcher on Censorship *Continued*

are *always* greater in decibels than they are in numbers) complained and the school interrupted the entire process until they could get it resolved. By the time they resumed teaching the book most of the momentum was lost, some teachers halted classrooms discussions out of intimidation and simply had the kids finish, and it was taken out of the curriculum the following year. On my Web site I began seeing student backlash against the daughter of the woman who lodged the complaint (which I asked immediately to be stopped) and what seemed a unique educational experience was thwarted. I was in the area the following spring, and took a day to visit the school. The principal welcomed me but wanted assurance that I wasn't there to cause any more commotion. The teachers who had originally spearheaded the project, seemed snake bit. Again, an educational opportunity spoiled and a generational connection broken. And that's when it gets scary because as they say, the terrifying call comes from inside the house. Teachers and librarians become, unwittingly sometimes, conduits for the censors' intentions. They grow to be intimidated by adult sensibilities rather than remaining strong in their resolution to deal with tough issues and ideas, and the loud minority gathers power (see my response to teacher's listserve posting at the end of this chapter).

Forget that it was my book. Many authors "enjoy" this same experience, and we're not the ones who really suffer. The edict, "Any exposure is good exposure" is probably true. When one of my books is challenged and it hits the media, I can go right to amazon.com and see the spike in sales. People who would *never* know my name, know my name. It's teachers and librarians who suffer, having their expertise called into question by folks with nothing but an ax to grind, and very little sense of what education is really about; people who believe passing on a philosophy is more important than learning truths. It's the best argument I can find for the separation of church and state.

In my work as a therapist, I can't think of a situation when I didn't believe it was more advantageous to talk about an issue than to hide it or fail to address it out of fear, and it's no different in a therapist's office than it is in the so-called real world. In fact there's a great case to be made that if we talked about tough issues there would be need for fewer therapists. I always told kids *and* adults that the inside of my office was like the inside of their brains and their hearts. They could say anything they wanted in any language they wanted and there would be no judgment. It's amazing how much work got done when they came to believe that. While schools can't give kids quite that much leeway, they can operate on that same continuum. Life is tough. School is tough. We need all the help we can get.

There's another censorship issue that probably deserves discussion in this "post-Imus" era. You may remember Don Imus's notorious sexual/racial slur aimed at the Rutgers girl's basketball team which got him booted off both radio and television. His comments were hugely insensitive and brought outrage from the general population, though there's a pretty good case to be made that both networks outrage came on the heels of lost sponsors. Such is the nature of greed over civility, but the issue deserves a close look because many observers called for the eradication of that kind of language from our public vocabulary.

Good luck.

Continued

Crutcher on Censorship *Continued*

A few years ago a teacher in Michigan required a young African American girl to read aloud a passage from one of my short stories—"Telephone Man"—in class. It is a story about how racism and bigotry are passed down through innocence. Telephone Man's father is a racist at home, but quite civil in public. Telephone Man (so named because of his single-minded fascination with telephones) is an adolescent, borderline autistic boy with no internal editing function. If he thinks it, he says it. His father's racial slurs come out of his mouth fast and furious when he is angry, or sometimes when he is simply talking about any people of color. By the end of the story, with the help of a black classmate, he comes to some small recognition of his father's errant thinking. Because of the incendiary nature of that language, I wrote a preface to the story stating among other things that "racial slurs mean nothing about the people at whom they are directed, everything about the person using them."

The teacher made a big mistake; she required the young African American girl to read the first few pages of the story aloud, in which Telephone Man unleashes almost every racial slur he knows. She was uncomfortable reading those words aloud and went home and told her mother. By the end of the day the first couple pages of the story were all over the local news, the local head of the NAACP was calling for the ouster of the book, the teacher was relocated, my Web site was getting hits from David Duke followers and my e-mail in-box was overloaded. Most of the community believed the school was using an openly racist book. Over a period of days with the help of an African American talk-show host in the area and voices of people like Christopher Paul Curtis, we made clear the intent of the story, but the remaining question was whether or not there should be stories which included those slurs, in our schools. As much as it would be nice to get those words out of our language, it's clear that's impossible. Realistic fiction writers of any ethnicity use that language to show the true colors of racists and of racism. It can't be done without the language. That isn't to say we shouldn't be careful when we go about working with those stories, but to deal with any problem, that problem has to be defined. Unfortunately that language is part of our shameful history. Take it out of the schools and *The Color Purple*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, to name a very few, go with it.

Arguably a certain number of books are "censored" in our schools simply through selection. A school library doesn't have the capacity of a public library, and its purpose is to aid teachers in educating students, so books written to do that are rightly given priority. But there is no education without truth, and truth is sometimes harsh. A *truth* about "Telephone Man" is that it reflects one way bigotry flows down the generational turnpike through innocence. A *truth* about some rap music is that it reflects how some artists see the struggle between the sexes. A *truth* about *The Color Purple* is it speaks to the conquest of powerlessness. In each case I say "*a*" truth because there are so many. Those are truths as seen through *my* eyes. There are as many truths as there are eyes. It makes so much more sense to talk about these things than to pretend they don't exist.

Very often the censors come at teachers and librarians and writers with inflammatory language. We are *corrupting* children; exposing them to *filth*. We are either *evil* or are exposing kids to evil. We are insidious. Use of that language is a political

Continued

Crutcher on Censorship *Continued*

trick. Get the listener to agree (or simply not disagree) to the terminology and you have secured the basic premise, forcing the other side onto the defense if they don't stop you in your tracks. The best counterstrategy is to refuse to accept that language, refuse to argue on those terms; refuse to accept that it's even *possible* for a word, or a real-world issue to be *evil*, or to *corrupt*. And you have to meet the censors with the same intensity with which they come at you. Call a spade a spade; call foolishness, foolishness with the same indignation the argument is thrown at you. Otherwise you give them credence. Often the *politics* of education outstrips true education—expressive education—forcing those of us who believe in intellectual freedom as behavior as well as philosophy, to get aggressive.

A little guy attending one of my school presentations recently highlighted my thoughts about whether or not words do the damage the censors claim. One of the books his class had read in preparation for my coming was my memoir, *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography*. There's a scene in the book where, as a frustrated 11-year-old, I call someone a "big fat shitburger." My father confines me to my room until I can produce a sheet of notebook paper with all the words I can find in that phrase. Before I began my presentation, in front of several hundred students in the school auditorium, this young man, who may have been borderline autistic, presented me with several pages of words, all under the heading BIG FAT SHITBURGER. He had found about five times more words than I could find *now*. The audience cheered him, and he walked away, seemingly satisfied, though because of his condition, he showed little emotion. His teacher told me that he had just presented the paper to her after reading the story. Imagine the damage she could have done scolding him, or humiliating him for his effort.

Those of us who stand against censorship are sometimes characterized as believing that anything in print is good for kids; that we think there should be no restraint in the making and selling of video games or that movies shouldn't be rated. The late (sigh) Kurt Vonnegut once said something close to, "One problem about standing against censorship is some of the shit we have to stand up *for*." None of us believe that everything in print has merit. None of us doubts that media has influence. What we believe is that we live in a free country and as we have been told over and over, freedom comes at a price. Open-minded people know we can't shield our children from harm or tough ideas or tough language for very long. What we can do is deal with those things in a safe environment. Only we can create that environment.

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Upfront with Censorship

Most new teachers enter the field giving little thought to censorship and when confronted, sometimes feel desperate. Staying informed and being an advocate of intellectual freedom will give you additional confidence and information to confront censors. As a new teacher, you might spend time researching the history of censorship and procedures for dealing with complaints in your school system. Find out what books have been challenged in your system, what books are on the approved reading list,

what, if any, have been removed. Learn the school and system's procedures for book selection. For example, many schools have an established committee that considers book selection procedures. Some committees include community members—a good idea because you have a support system if you are challenged. Whatever procedures are used to select books, they should clearly tie to course objectives, meet student needs, and you should be able to make a strong case for the book's overall curriculum value. Research, too, the procedures for dealing with a complaint. Many systems require would-be censors to submit a written complaint against a text before any discussion can occur (see Table 3.3). This procedure is advantageous, for it requires objectors to think through their complaints and encourages them to pay attention to other readers' viewpoints.

Table 3.3**Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work**

Author_____

Paperback_____Hardback_____

Title_____

Publisher (if known)_____

Request initiated by_____

Telephone_____

Address_____

City_____

Zip Code_____

Complainant represents:

_____Himself/Herself

_____ (Name of organization) _____

_____ (Identity of other group) _____

1. Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered or used it? _____ Yes _____ No
2. What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?
 - a. Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?
_____ Yes _____ No
 - b. Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature?
_____ Yes _____ No
 - c. Other _____
3. Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?
_____ Yes _____ No

If no, please explain.

4. What do you think is the general purpose of the author in this book?

Continued

Table 3.3 *Continued*

5. In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out?

6. Have you been able to learn what is the students’ response to this work?
_____Yes_____No
7. What response did the students make?

8. Have you been able to learn from your school library what book reviewers or other students of literature have written about this work?
_____Yes_____No
9. Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?
_____Yes_____No
10. Do you have negative reviews of this book?
_____Yes_____No
11. Where were they published?

12. Would you be willing to provide summaries of the reviews you have collected?
_____Yes_____No
13. What would you like your library /school to do about this work?
_____Do not assign/lend it to my child.
_____Return it to the staff selection committee/department for reevaluation.
_____Other—Please explain.

14. In its place, what work would you recommend that would convey as valuable a picture and perspective of the subject treated?

15. Have you read the book?
_____Yes, I’ve read all of it.
_____No.
_____I read the following parts:

Signature_____

Date_____

Source: Modified from “The Students’ Right to Read,” NCTE (1981).

Being familiar with organizations that support intellectual freedom is helpful (see Professional Resources). The American Library Association (ALA), for instance, has established an Intellectual Freedom homepage where it posts documents and resources such as “The Freedom to Read,” “The Library Bill of Rights,” and specific information on dealing with censorship issues. The National Council of Teachers of English makes available resources such as “The Students’ Right to Read” and sample rationales for using specific titles in the classroom. Each fall the ALA encourages teens and adults to read challenged or banned books during Banned Book Week. Participate and encourage colleagues, friends, and the community to take part. Box 3.2 includes brief descriptions of high-quality, exceptional books that are good reads for Banned Book Week, and Box 3.3 features young adult novels with censorship themes. Below are additional suggestions (some are my ideas; others belong to the ALA) for taking a proactive stand against censorship:

- Study the issues.
- Network with others who support intellectual freedom.
- Establish yourself as a professional—parents listen to teachers whom they respect.
- Build a trusting, collegial, and respectful relationship with your school and system administration.
- Counter censorship in your community.
- Learn about the Freedom of Information Act.
- Learn how kids can help oppose censorship.
- Celebrate your freedom to read.
- Subscribe to various news and discussion e-lists.
- Contact elected officials about issues/legislation related to intellectual freedom.
- Stay abreast of both local and national censorship issues and offer your support.

What to Do When Censors Arrive

Predicting when a censor may arrive is like guessing when you’ll be in a car wreck. If you know it’s going to happen, you can prevent it. While as professionals we have some sense of what is acceptable in school culture, we cannot always predict or read parents, students, and the community. We can teach a piece of literature for years without confrontation; then someone lodges a complaint. The best piece of advice for the initial shock is *don’t panic*. Don’t allow yourself to be “cornered” (e.g., an unexpected meeting or phone call with the principal or other school officials and a parent) before you’ve had time to take a deep breath and gather your thoughts and the support you need. The objector has prepared for you; you deserve prep time, too. Let the objector know you respect his or her unease and work with school administrators to arrange a sensible meeting time for the objector to air concerns.



3.2 Banned Book Reads

***The Buffalo Tree* by Adam Rapp. Arden, NC: Front Street, 1997.**

Thirteen-year-old Sura is pulling time in a harsh juvenile detention center. He and Coly Jo look out for each other. A realistic and dark story banned for sexual content.

***Daughters of Eve* by Lois Duncan. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979.**

A high school teacher, with evil intent, uses feminism to manipulate a group of girls into doing horrific deeds. Reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies*. Banned for profanity and sexual content.

***Doing It* by Melvin Burgess. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.**

A hilarious tale about boys and sexual maturation. Three British teens—Ben, Dino, and Jonathan—stumble through dating and sexual encounters. On-target portrayals of adolescence. Banned for profanity and sexual content, the book's cover is a sure magnet for censors.

***Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* by Margaret Peterson Haddix. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.**

An abused and neglected 16-year-old girl chronicles her life in a class-assigned journal. Banned for language and sexuality.

***The Drowning of Stephan Jones* by Bette Greene. New York: Bantam, 1991.**

Carla's mother wants to band all "anti-Christian" material from the library. When Carla's boyfriend participates in hate crimes against gays Carla has to decide where she stands: with her mother and boyfriend or on the side of justice. Banned for promoting homosexuality.

***Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.**

A group of gay and lesbian teens bond and create their own club at their high school. A funny and poignant read about love and friendship, but banned for promoting homosexuality.

***My Heartbeat* by Garret Freymann-Weyr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.**

Fourteen-year-old Ellen is puzzled by the unusually close relationship between her brother and his best friend. She loves them both and enjoys their company. Banned for promoting homosexuality.

***Rainbow Boys* by Alex Sanchez. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.**

A group of high school boys, all seniors, with diverse backgrounds and experiences, struggle with family relationships, bullies, sexual encounters, and their own confused feelings about each other. Banned for profanity and promoting homosexuality.

***We All Fall Down* by Robert Cormier. New York: Delacorte/Random House, 1991.**

A group of boys vandalize a house and attack a young girl who arrives home early. Cormier's language is forceful and the story, told from alternating points of view, is richly layered. As with much of Cormier's work, the book explores humanity's darker side. Banned for language, violence, and its overall "disturbing" nature.

***Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher. New York: Greenwillow/HarperCollins, 2001.**

A multiracial teens shuns high school athletics until he is challenged to organize a swimming team. Turned off by athletic elitism, he brings together a group of misfits to swim for Cutter High. Banned for profanity. Other banned books by Crutcher include *Stotan!* (1986), *Athletic Shorts* (1991), *Ironman* (1995), and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993).

***When Jeff Comes Home* by Catherine Atkins. New York: Penguin/Putnam, 1999.**

Sixteen-year-old Jeff returns home after being kidnapped. What should be a happy reunion turns cold, for he must confront the issue of whether he had sex with his kidnapper.



3.3 YA Novels Featuring Censorship Themes

- Curse of a Winter Moon* by Mary Casanova. New York: Hyperion, 2000.
- Dancing in Red Shoes Will Kill You* by Dorian Cirrone. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* by Nat Hentoff. New York: Dell, 1982.
- Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. New York: Ballantine, 1953.
- A Hand Full of Stars* by Rafik Schami. Trans. Rika Lesser. New York: Dutton/Penguin, 1990.
- Heir Apparent* by Vivian Vande Velde. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2002.
- Hello, Groin* by Beth Goobie. Custer, WA: Orca, 2006.
- How to Get Suspended and Influence People* by Adam Selzer. New York: Delacorte/Random House, 2007.
- The Landry News* by Andrew Clements. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.
- The Last Book in the Universe* by Rodman Philbrick. New York: Blue Sky/Scholastic, 2000.
- The Last Safe Place on Earth* by Richard Peck. New York: Delacorte/Random House, 1995.
- Maudie and Me and the Dirty Book* by Betty Miles. New York: Knopf/Random House, 1980.
- Memoirs of a Bookbat* by Kathryn Lasky. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1994.
- Nothing but the Truth* by Avi. New York: Orchard/Scholastic, 1991.
- The Phantom Isles* by Stephen Alter. New York: Bloomsbury, 2007.
- Phoebe: A Novel* by Marilyn Kaye. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1987.
- The Siege* by Kathryn Lasky. New York: Scholastic, 2004.
- The Sledding Hill* by Chris Crutcher. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.
- A Small Civil War* by John Neufeld. New York: Atheneum/Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Talk* by Kathe Koja. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005.
- The Trials of Molly Sheldon* by Julian F. Thompson. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.
- The Trouble with Mothers* by Margery Facklam. New York: Clarion, 1989.
- Water Shaper* by Laura Williams McCaffrey. New York: Clarion, 2006.
- Wizards of the Game* by David Lubar. New York: Philomel/Penguin, 2003.
- The Year They Burned the Books* by Nancy Garden. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

When you do meet with the would-be censor, be friendly, remain calm, and listen more than you talk. Above all, you will be tempted to talk about the issue with other teachers and community members. Be judicious with whom you discuss the issue and in what you say and be extra thoughtful when talking with students and the media.

If after the initial meeting, the objector continues to oppose the book, he/she should be required to file a formal complaint, one that begins with completing a citizen's complaint form (see Table 3.3).

This procedure, as mentioned earlier, will encourage objectors to think through their complaints and will discourage "idle censors" (NCTE, 1981). Once the formal complaint has been filed, the complaint should move to a committee level, where it is reviewed and evaluated by a team of teachers/librarians, administrators, and possible community members and students.

The teacher and school should also file a report with professional organizations such as NCTE and ALA. These organizations can provide additional support.

While there's no way of preventing a challenge, you can position yourself better by being proactive and remaining informed about local and national censorship issues. When you are confronted, remember to offer options for the objector's child (better yet, ask the objector to suggest titles that meet your course objectives); insist on the rights of other students and parents to choose for their own children. Stand strong and remember that censorship isn't about one book. It's about precedent. More importantly, Judy Blume reminds us it's about quelling thought⁷:

It's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, young readers will be the real losers.

Final Thoughts

Young adult literature is no longer restricted to realistic fiction; it has transformed considerably since the birth of the problem novel. In the following chapters you will examine a wide range of genres; you will also notice a trend toward genre blending: realistic fiction may contain fantasy elements; fantasy may have historical settings; science fiction may take the form of a short story; and a poem may be classified as a novel, novella, or short story. Even though much of today's young adult literature crosses genres, it's necessary to organize the literature in some way in order to examine it. The categories I use are arbitrary, and some, such as "sports," are more thematic than genre-specific. Each chapter includes historical overviews, key characteristics, issues and themes, landmark texts, and text-boxes written by some of the best authors and experts in the field. Most chapters conclude with an instructional section that illustrates methods for teaching reading.

An Interview with Chris Crutcher: Censorship and *The Sledding Hill*⁸

Cole: I enjoyed your new book, *The Sledding Hill*. I was surprised with all the turns. Just what was the catalyst for this book?

Crutcher: Actually there were two catalysts I remember. One was remembering the power of an irrational fear of dying that comes in early adolescence (more powerful to wusses like me than to some others) and the other was my increasing exposure to inflexible censors trying to get my books out of

⁷Retrieved from www.judyblume.com, April 27, 2007.

⁸First published in *Voices from the Middle*, 2005.

classrooms and off school library shelves. The more I dealt with those censors, the more I became familiar with other writers' censorship problems. Censors, aka the Christian right, have been wearing down teachers and librarians who stand up for intellectual freedom, and they've bullied a lot of school administrators.

Cole: This book comes out on the heels of a number of challenges to your other books. You're saying that's not a coincidence?

Crutcher: Actually, the bulk of this book was finished almost a year before publication, so I hadn't yet had my recent experiences in Michigan, Iowa, and South Carolina and Alabama and Kansas. Yet the language used by those censors is eerily similar to the language I gave to my fictional censors; and the sentiments also seem the same. I think we are, and have been for some time, in an atmosphere that is dangerous to our intellectual freedom in this country, so this book couldn't have come out at a better time for me. I'm feeling combative these days because I believe that good stories can lead to great discussions between adults and teenagers and because I believe that stories about hard times can make people in hard times feel less alone. It chafes me pretty good when people want to take those stories away, whether they're mine or some other author's.

Cole: The antagonists in the book, those who promote censorship, are members of the Red Brick Church, which can only be described as a "right-wing Christian" church. Much of what your protagonists say about censorship is that it promotes bigotry. Do you make a connection between the conservative right, the Christian right, and bigotry?

Crutcher: Sometimes I do, and believe me I know what an inflammatory word that is. I don't call people bigots for being offended by rough language or being squeamish about certain issues, but if your beliefs and policies cause you to diminish or denigrate some specific portion of our society, you are a bigot. You may build houses for the homeless in Mexico, send money to Habitat, take food to the food bank, and give a tenth of your income to the church for good works. But if you treat a part of the population as if it is inferior, and I'm speaking specifically of the ten percent or so who are gay, you are a bigot. Much of my work—*Ironman* and *Athletic Shorts*, for example—gets challenged and/or censored because I place "gay characters in a positive light." The censors allow themselves that bigotry by declaring, without any credible evidence, that homosexuality is a "choice."

Cole: So you believe it's not a choice?

Crutcher: What right do bigots have to even ask that question? What answer would we give if asked when we made the "choice" to be heterosexual? Do you think 10 percent of the population would *choose* homosexuality, knowing it will make them reviled by their peers and treated as second-class citizens? Do you think the kids making up the three-times-the-normal-suicide-rate group would choose a lifestyle that makes them feel so desperate? I'm constantly accused of "promoting homosexuality" for simply writing about it. Forget that those characters are portrayed only in the light of humanity, and the Christian right wants them censored simply because of their sexual persuasion. There will come a time when we are as ashamed of how our culture now treats the gay population as we are about how we treated blacks during and before the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. When we have this censorship discussion we should all leave our gurus at home—you leave Jesus and Mohammed and I'll leave Buddha and the Tao—and we'll talk about morality issues as they apply to humans. I miss the Christians I knew growing up; the Christians who preached inclusion and understanding, and understood that separation of church and state was as good for them as it was for the state. I know they still exist. I just wish they'd stand up and give Jesus His name back.

Cole: A lot of people would say you can't leave God out of a morality discussion.

Crutcher: And I would say you can't put Him in. With God in the mix—anybody's God—morality becomes a list of things to do or not to do instead of a way to be. It then comes out of a fear rather than respect and is reduced to behaviors, at which time it has no meaning. I think your relationship with your God is entirely personal and you don't need it to be decent to other people.

Cole: You could have easily used one of your published books as the novel being attacked in *The Sledding Hill*. Why did you make up a book?

Crutcher: Because it let me separate the real Chris Crutcher from the fictional Chris Crutcher and it didn't hold me to the issues in *Whale Talk* or *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* or any other single book. It also let me play with that line between fact and fiction. Chris Crutcher is a real guy, but his book in the story is fictional and to that degree he is fictional.

- Cole:** When I got to the end of the story I couldn't wait to hear Crutcher speak, yet he doesn't. Why doesn't he?
- Crutcher:** Because it wasn't his story. The fictional Chris Crutcher's presence in the book is to some degree a "bit" or a gag. I did it because I'm most familiar with the complaints people have about my work as opposed to other writers. This story is about the characters, about Billy and Eddie. The censorship issue in the story needs to be resolved by them. In many cases when my books have been challenged, it's the kids and the passionate teachers and librarians who fight the censors. It's too easy for the censors to write the author off as having a vested interest, which I suppose we do.
- Cole:** I've heard you say, "Censorship leaves kids behind." Can you explain how that's true?
- Crutcher:** The stories I write are inspired by real kids going through real hardships. That is true of many authors of adolescent fiction. Many of us write about kids who have come up through extremely difficult situations, and their behavior and language reflect those situations. When those kids' stories are censored, the kids are also censored. We leave them behind. They become an afterthought, or nothing. And they are the kids who have always been left behind. I'm waiting for the first politician with the guts to do what is needed to *really* leave no child behind.
- Cole:** *The Sledding Hill* isn't just about censorship. It's a story about loss as well. What were your thoughts about adolescence as you were writing the story?
- Crutcher:** My thoughts were that almost all humans suffer what seem like senseless and unfair losses. How we respond to those losses often influences our core mental health as we grow older. Most of us are told how we *should* feel and how we *should* believe as we're growing up, rather than being helped through the process of grief. What goes on with Eddie is pure grief.
- Cole:** You generally write about older kids; however, this book includes younger adolescents. Can you talk about that?
- Crutcher:** The protagonist is about three years younger than most of my main characters, and it's a shorter story. Part of that was in response to so many teachers and librarians over the years asking me to write something they could use in middle or upper elementary schools. I had written *King of the Mild Frontier* and come up with material I liked from my early adolescence, and that sparked ideas.

I did something else in this story I'd never done before. I purposely kept all the "bad" language out; because typically the censors attack the language because that's an easy target, when I think they're really offended by issues. So if they go after this one, they'll have to show their true colors.

Cole: It's true your books are often censored for "bad" language. Can you elaborate on that?

Crutcher: Censors love to take language out of context, purposely. On three different occasions, would-be censors have gone through *Whale Talk* and listed what they considered to be offensive words. One counted 128. I hope they were counting each usage. I don't know 128 offensive words. The point is, language out of context can be made to look pretty disgusting, when in fact, most kids don't even notice, or when they do, say it makes the story more authentic.

Cole: I've read reviews in which critics say you load your books up with issues. What do you say to that kind of criticism?

Crutcher: It's always interesting to me when my books are criticized for being "loaded" with issues. Beginning back with *Chinese Handcuffs*, I heard that "Crutcher threw everything into this one but the kitchen sink." I remember thinking "I couldn't get the kitchen sink loose, or I'd have thrown that in too." I understand that as a therapist I've been privy to a lot of stories others don't often see or hear about. But that's the point. When a person is free to tell all, "all" is usually more than most of us expect. Certain kinds of critics seem to believe very differently from what I believe about young adult fiction. They think a "problem novel" should isolate a problem and address it all the way through; come to some conclusion, if you will. But in my view the "problem" in adolescence is adolescence. Very little occurs in a vacuum. Hard time kids are magnetic to hard time kids, and very few have one problem. For instance if there is sexual molestation in a family it often exists alongside intimidation, physical violence, complex and convoluted secrecy. Kids in trouble can find other kids in trouble with their eyes closed, and usually do.

It is no exaggeration to say it's hard to count the number of people I have known in other parts of my life who have written or emailed me to say my books mirror their lives. The surprising part of that to me is that so many of them were not clients, but people I grew up with or worked with in the fields of education and therapy. What I know is this, I have never written anything for shock value, and I have never written anything that didn't reflect something I knew

about in real life. And I haven't even come close to writing all I know or have seen. When critics and/or censors come after my stories because they believe they are so much harsher than life, I can only laugh.

Cole: What parts of writing *The Sledding Hill* posed the greatest problem for you as a writer?

Crutcher: The voice of the deceased narrator. Once he was dead he became very smart because he automatically knew things living people don't, and I tended to give him an adult voice. He is funnier and cleverer with his young voice. I also struggled with the issue of censorship because it was close to home and I had to move away to do it justice. That's another reason for the "fictional" Crutcher book.

Cole: Why did you use a deceased narrator?

Crutcher: To take advantage of the vision of a third-person narrator along with the voice of a first-person narrator. You get "all seeing" along with intimacy with the narrator.

Cole: The reader doesn't learn much about the character in Warren Peece—a great name by the way. Are you thinking about using him as a character in a future book?

Crutcher: It's a pretty good pun, if I do say so myself, and the possibilities are inviting.

Cole: What do you want adolescents to take from this book?

Crutcher: I want them to read a good story, and I want them to have fun discussing censorship. I also want them to take a good look at who the censors are, their motives, and their world view.

Cole: What do you hope adults will take from it?

Crutcher: The same thing.

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Letter to the Students of the Limestone School District: By Chris Crutcher

Recently my book, *Whale Talk*, was banned in your school district, and I thought I might address that. First, let it be known that I don't take it personally. None of the four school board members who voted to take the book out of your reach knows me and I have no reason to believe any of them bear me ill will. From all I have read, I believe the stated reason the book was banned was for "curses," which, where I come from are called "cuss words."

Arguably the two most offensive passages in the story occur when a four and a half year old bi-racial girl screams out the names she is called on a regular basis by her racist stepfather and later when that same racist stepfather is drunkenly threatening the foster family that is keeping her safe.

In the 1980s and early 1990s when I was working as a child abuse and neglect therapist in the Spokane (Washington) Community Mental Health

Center, I worked with a young bi-racial girl living in circumstances much like those depicted in the book. Her biological father didn't even know of her existence and her mother didn't have the emotional strength to keep her out of the eye of the hurricane of her stepfather's hatred. She couldn't eat at the table until her younger, white stepbrothers had finished, wasn't allowed to play with toys until they were broken and handed over to her. The first time I saw her she was standing over a sink, trying to wash the brown off her skin so her (step) daddy would love her. Time and time again in therapy she expressed the self contempt she had gained believing there was something fundamentally wrong with her because there was no way to find acceptance in his world. In play therapy she was allowed to work through her life trauma to ultimately better understand that it was not her fault she was treated as she was, and to come to a better understanding (in a four-year-old's way of understanding) of the world she lived in. The language that little girl used was even tougher than what my character used in *Whale Talk*.

When *Whale Talk* gets challenged or banned, it's often because a parent who hasn't read the book runs across that passage or one like it, sees the words (which in this case are in large font because the little girl is screaming) and decides they are a danger to you. They describe the story, more often than not without reading it, as obscene or insidious or evil or all three.

But what's truly obscene is that I know a real girl in the real world who has gone through this. What's obscene is that so do you, even if you're not aware of the specifics. What's obscene is that you know kids who have gone through, and are going through, worse. What's obscene is that kids who are mal-treated often grow up angry and depressed and anxious and desperate. They experience crippling difficulties in school, in social relations and in all matters of self-esteem. They use the language I use in the story and worse because it is all they have to try to match what is inside with the outside world. They need to be recognized, and brought into your fold. Often we adults can't help them, but you can. I write the stories I write to bring things like this to your attention because I believe if kids who are treated badly are to survive, they will survive through the acceptance of their peers, and that acceptance will come from understanding. It's true; I'm asking a lot from you.

Let me tell you something else I think is obscene. I think it obscene that your school board doesn't trust you enough to know you can read harsh stories, told in their native tongue, and make decisions for yourself what you think of the issues or the language. It is astonishing to me that grown men, in this case, don't believe you can think for yourselves. Some of you could have voted in the last election. Many more of you will be eligible in the next.

It is not a big deal that *Whale Talk* was removed from your school library shelves. There are plenty of good books out there that your school board hasn't had a chance to ban yet. But consider this. About a decade ago, a stellar author named Walter Dean Myers wrote *Fallen Angels*, a story about a young African American man fighting in Vietnam. Walter told his story, using the language of soldiers at war. It was pretty much the language I used to talk about this four-year-old girl, who was also at war. *Fallen Angels*, a critically acclaimed book is constantly under the same attack that *Whale Talk*

is under from your school board. Think about this a minute. In the not too distant future many of you will be soldiers also, asked to fight in the name of your country. Statistics say a few of your number will also be writers. Imagine risking your life in war, coming back to tell your story in as real a fashion as you can, only to have *your* children told they can't read your story in your school because the school board won't tolerate the realistic language in which you tell it. They not only tell *their* children it can't be part of their education, they tell *your* children it can't be part of their education.

I have no problem at all if any or all of you pick up *Whale Talk*, read a couple of chapters, or even a couple of pages, don't like it, slam it shut and never open it again. I don't even have a problem if you do that because you are offended by the situations or the language. I don't have a problem with that because it's *your* choice. I trust you to know what you like and what you don't, and what's good for you in terms of literature.

I can't change the minds of people who believe that the best way to keep kids safe is to keep you ignorant. What I can, and will do is this: Donate copies of *Whale Talk* to your public library, which is a lot less likely to try to think for you. I can urge you to take a look at it and decide for yourselves. I can encourage you to stand up for your own intellectual freedom; to choose what you want to read about and talk about and explore. I can encourage you to let those members of your school board who don't trust you with tough material, know you are a lot more savvy than they think you are, and that there is no way they can capture your intellectual freedom with the silliness of banning a book from the library shelves. There are plenty of places to get books.

I have to be honest. I don't think the only reason those four school board members wanted *Whale Talk* out of your schools was language. I could be wrong—it's certainly happened before—but I think there are other issues in the book that make them uncomfortable. But even on language alone, if you accept the banning of this book, you should demand that they also remove other books in which that language exists. Start with Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Color Purple*, then go to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. You certainly can't allow any of my other ten books there, nor any of Robert Cormier's, many of Walter Dean Myers's or Tim O'Brien's (*The Things They Carried* may well be one of the ten best written books of the twentieth century). Sherman Alexi, the great Native American writer is out, hands down and there is *no* way you can be allowed to cast your eyes upon Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. If you accept this "protection" from your school board, demand that they step up and truly protect you.

I may seem somewhat *flip* here but I believe that adolescence is an extremely important time in any human's development. There are hundreds of questions about relationship and career and identity, and you are handcuffed to look at them when a group of men who believe that the depiction of true, rough language is a top-priority moral issue. I trust you to read my book, or any of the other, far more familiar books mentioned above, and decide for yourselves what you think of them. It wouldn't be completely over the top for you to expect your school board to do the same. Remember

this: your school board is there to make decisions to further your education, not keep themselves in their own comfort zones.

I do want to compliment those members and the superintendent who voted against the banning. It does my heart good to know there are many educators out there who understand that good education requires the opening rather than the closing of minds. Again, this isn't about *Whale Talk*, it really isn't. It's about you.

Sincerely,

Chris Crutcher

A Response to Teachers' Concerns about Sexually Explicit Material: By Chris Crutcher

I ran into a posting on a listserv talking about Sherman Alexie's *THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN*. The author of that posting said she taught gifted kids in a Catholic middle school and had also been a YA librarian. Citing a scene in the story depicting the main character talking about masturbation, she said, "There is no way I can have that book in my room. The language, the passage about masturbation—I cannot have that book in my room. What age do you think that book would be for and who would you recommend it to? As librarians, can you recommend books with that kind of content in good conscience?" She went on to say she knows kids read on their own and that she had no problem with that, but, "My question is, why do authors do that when they know that kind of content eliminates a portion of their audience?" She talked about another book with sexual content, saying she knows her kids enjoyed reading it, but that, as an adult, she could not recommend it.

I felt an obligation to respond, to let her know why at least *some* of us "do that."

This comment on your listserv was sent to me by a number of folks and I'm afraid I have to respond. It will give me something to do while procrastinating before deciding how to write my next masturbation scene.

Look, kids masturbate. They think about it. They talk about it. In graphic terms. When I started working as a child abuse and neglect family therapist back in the early eighties, one quick conclusion I came to was that until we are willing and able to talk openly about sex in this culture—healthy sex and sexual thought—we will never be capable of talking about sex abuse. I swear sometimes I'm embarrassed to live in a culture that can't talk about true things because someone might be offended. When that perspective comes from within our educational culture, I'm even more embarrassed. A story like Sherman's mirrors a life; a whole life, not just the whitewashed parts of a life. A young reader doesn't come away from that story thinking about masturbation. He or she comes away thinking about loneliness and friendship and meanness; how to avoid meanness and how to be less mean. In that story a young man finds his way against all odds. And he whacks off while doing it. Big deal. Come on, people.

Alex Flinn says she considers long and hard before putting a scene in a book that might be offensive. I love Alex's books. I think highly of her as a writer. But let it be known, if it isn't already, that I don't consider for a second whether someone will be offended by a given passage. I consider whether it's real, or if it seems real to me. This pandering to adult "sensibilities" is part of what keeps YA fiction from being considered real fiction. Someone gasps and grasps his or her chest at the mention of MASTURBATION and folks seem to think the rest of us need to recoil too.

For years kids—teenagers—came into my office to say how unheard they felt by the adults in their lives; parents and teachers. We're either able to hear about their lives in their native tongue, or we're not. When we're not, they stop talking to us. Who can blame them? There isn't a teacher out there who couldn't say, "There are scenes in this book that make me uneasy. They might make you uneasy too. Maybe we should talk about why we feel uneasy. Then we can talk about the book."

I wouldn't give Sherman's book to just any fifth grader, because it would be beyond many of them, but I'd sure as hell give it to any eighth grader. And I'd let any kid who wanted to read it, read it. If it's beyond them, they'll say so. Or they'll put it down.

And I have to tell you, I don't buy the Catholic argument. I've had some of the best discussions in my long string of school presentations in Catholic middle and high schools. There are a whole bunch of Catholic teachers and Jesuits who aren't one bit afraid of talking about real things in kids' lives. I was given the St. Katharine Drexel Award by the Catholic Library Association after writing about abortion and masturbation and sex abuse. There's no Catholic shroud to hide behind here.

This censorship thing has gotten out of hand because people who understand intellectual freedom are less willing to stand up for it, and because people who truly understand the nature of adolescence and pre-adolescence have become unwilling to speak up. The dis-ease we feel dealing with kids is exactly the reason to deal with the real stuff.

Professional Resources

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- As If! Authors Support Intellectual Freedom: www.asifnews.blogspot.com
- Center for First Amendment Rights, Inc.: www.cfarfreedom.org/index.shtml
- Center for First Amendment Studies: www.csulb.edu/crsmith/1amendment.html
- Electronic Frontier Foundation: www.eff.org/br
- First Amendment Center: www.firstamendmentcenter.org/topicsummary.aspx
- The First Amendment First Aid Kit by Random House: www.randomhouse.com/teens/firstamendment
- First Amendment Schools: www.firstamendment-schools.org
- The Free Expression Policy Project: <http://fepproject.org>
- Freedom of Information & First Amendment Center: www.ire.org/foi
- Freedom to Read: <http://freedomtoread.ca>
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- International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions: www.ifla.org/faife/ifstat/ifstat.htm
- Kidspeak: <http://kidspeakonline.org>
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- NCTE's Anti-Censorship Center: www.ncte.org/about/issues/censorship
- PEN American Center: <http://pen.org>
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