

The Sand in the Oyster

Our Side of the Fence

BY PATTY CAMPBELL

Where is the border between young adult literature and adult literature? What are the characteristics that define the books that belong on our side of the fence, and why does that border seem permeable only in one direction? Who are the guards who stand at the gates and exchange the currency of one readership and critical standard for the coinage of the other? What about the tourists who try to cross over without learning the language and customs of the other side? Should this wall exist at all, or do its boundaries classify literary identity in an aesthetically useful way?

As we set out to identify the location of that border by defining how young adult literature differs in essence from adult, we are not talking about readership. The question of what young adults read is an entirely separate matter, and one that is perhaps of more practical importance, at least to practitioners of the great art of bringing kids and books together. Teens read some adult novels and nonfiction and children's picture books, graphic novels and magazines and the backs of cereal boxes, and none of that print matter is necessarily categorized as young adult literature. In this column I am trying to isolate some definitive characteristics of the genre, playing the critic's game of literary form, of shape and standards and what is and isn't a young adult novel. Nor am I even talking about YA appeal. A book can be a dusty shelf-sitter and still undeniably be a young adult novel. Both teen appeal and literary excellence (which may or may not be synonymous) are desirable in the form, but not definitive.

A literary genre defines itself by the books that gradually accumulate under its banner, usually initially led by one or two great prototypes, like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which established the pattern of modern heroic fantasy, or C. S. Forester's *Horatio Hornblower* series, which set the model for the naval adventure. Or J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, the prototype for the YA novel, although it was sixteen years ahead of its time.

As the books in an individual genre grow to a body of literature, definitive characteristics of form, voice, and structure begin to emerge, the essential pattern that makes a heroic fantasy, or a naval adventure, or a young adult novel. Scholastic editor Arthur Levine, in a useful statement I have quoted before, says, "You have to look at the literature itself if you want to create rules and patterns." Actually, the critic does not "create" the rules and patterns but points them out in the genre as they already exist.

We might differentiate YA literature from adult by asking these questions: What is a young adult novel? What characteristics are indispensable to its identity, essential for its definition as a YA book? In my thirty-four years of advocacy for young adult literature, I have probably read two or three thousand YA novels, and out of that background it seems to me that certain patterns emerge as definitive.

The central theme of YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question "Who am I, and what am I going to do about it?" No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization by the protagonist that moves him or her toward shaping an adult identity. For example, Graham Salisbury's *Lord of the Deep* is superficially about deep-sea fishing in Hawaiian waters. But the boy's conflicted feelings about his stepfather's morally questionable action can't be resolved until the boy comes to the difficult realization that sometimes a lie is the only mature choice. There is a lot of exciting action centered on catching a big fish, but that isn't what the story is really about. The "rule" illustrated here is that the narration moves swiftly to a point where the protagonist has an epiphany that matures him or her in some vital way and, as a manifestation of that inner change, solves a problem that has been central to the plot. Very occasionally the protagonist may reject the epiphany, which leads to an ending that is ironic and unhappy but still within the definition of the form. There is no requirement for hope, or even cheerfulness, in the YA novel.

The central action in YA fiction is essentially internal, in the turbulent psyche of the adolescent (which is why, incidentally, YA novels rarely make good movies), although this internal action must not be a contemplative monologue but be embedded in straightforward external action. Voice is all-important here and is the quality that most clearly distinguishes YA from adult fiction. In *The Catcher in the Rye* we first hear that self-absorbed, angry, and touchingly vulnerable voice of the One True Outsider and see the adult world through Holden Caulfield's limited but judgmental

perception, a viewpoint that seems to me to be seminal to the form. Whether it is told in first or third (or even second) person, to be a YA novel a book must have a teen protagonist speaking from an adolescent point of view, with all the limitations of understanding this implies. An adult novel may have a teenage protagonist, but the action is seen from the vantage point of adult memory looking back, a perspective the reader is presumed to share. As Richard Peck once said about Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding*, "It wasn't written for the young, of course. It was for readers who'd made a safe passage to adulthood and dared to look back." By contrast, a YA novel is told from within the confines of a lack of maturity that is inherent in being a teenager, particularized to a character.

To be a YA novel, then, a book must have a climactic epiphany of new maturity as the subtext and be told in the YA voice from the limited adolescent viewpoint. In addition, it must be relevant to the lives of young readers in some way. Disqualifiers, it seems to me, would be settings or subjects outside the scope or interest of contemporary teens, and long passages in the voice of an adult or a child character. Within these parameters a freedom to experiment has led to an enormous range of tone and style.

Why is it necessary to get so complicated about what is and isn't YA? Don't publishers designate their books by age level, and isn't that enough? No, it's not. Any book that comes out of the juvenile division of a publishing house and is marked "12 up" or "14 up" can usually be assumed to be YA rather than adult, although these publisher-guardians of the borders are sometimes dead wrong in their labeling. The Printz award committee takes this publisher age designation as its criteria, and, in my opinion, this has led to some misjudgments. Laying aside considerations of literary quality, at least two of the recent winners seem to me to be adult novels masquerading under the publishers' YA label. *A Step from Heaven* by An Na opens with a long section from the perspective of a child and to my mind lacks a clear epiphany at the end. *Postcards from No Man's Land* by Aidan Chambers has many passages told by adults where adult concerns fuel the action and the teenage protagonist is offstage. Neither can teens be assumed to bring empathy and historical understanding to the many adult World War II narratives that bog down the center of the book.

The reverse situation occurs more often—young adult novels that for some obscure marketing reason have been issued from the adult side of the house, thus being in danger of missing their natural readership. A striking example is *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, surely a YA novel by anybody's defi-

nition, but published by Simon & Schuster's adult division. In the past, this strategy sometimes indicated a YA novel that the publishers deemed too hot to handle on the young adult market, usually because of sexual content. Judy Blume's *Forever...* is a prime example. Or it could also be that the publisher feels that the book will sell more copies, even to teens, as an adult title. A third possibility for blurring the borders is the "crossover" promotion extended to both adult and teen audiences for a few exceptional books edited on the juvenile side of the house, with the intention of extending their readership beyond the tight limits of the young adult market. Sometimes this works and sometimes it doesn't. *Fade* was an early crossover attempt to broaden Robert Cormier's recognition, but it had very little effect on the public's perception of him as a children's author, despite the fact that the book was reviewed as an adult title in several national newspapers. In recent years, however, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy was a successful crossover, and the trend seems to be growing.

A related phenomenon was the much-publicized attempt in 2002 by a number of well-known adult authors—among them Clive Barker, Joyce Carol Oates, Michael Chabon, and Isabel Allende—to traverse the boundary to the young adult world. Not all of them grasped the requirements of the form, and although they are all acclaimed as fine writers in their own territory, not all their young adult novels were equal to the level of excellence already established by the YA canon.

And the fact remains that it is infinitely more difficult for authors (and books) to cross the border in the other direction. The literary establishment has not been willing to give even the best young adult writers the recognition and respect they would need to cross over into the wider audience and more lucrative world of adult literature, assuming any of them might want to make the shift.

There are many larger questions about the implications of these labels and boundaries, but simply to pin down the shape of the YA genre will have to be enough for now. As a critic, an important part of my job is to define literary structure, because a pure appreciation of form points the way, provides the standards, and is one of the great pleasures of literature.

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