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## Seeking Infinity: Exploring the Meaning and Potential of Young Adult Literature

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SEEKING INFINITY: EXPLORING THE MEANING AND POTENTIAL OF YOUNG  
ADULT LITERATURE

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A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Department of English

Indiana State University

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of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The category of Young Adult (YA) Literature has experienced tremendous growth in terms of readership and works produced over the course of the last fifteen years or so. While there has been some scholarly work done on the category, the research pales in comparison to almost any other facet of literature. For whatever reasons, scholars have largely decided to ignore the changes that have occurred in YA. However, that has not stopped readers from continuing to read these books. In fact, this paper not only addresses the background and what I believe to be the defining characteristics of YA, but also it speaks to who is reading YA, who is avoiding YA, and the reasons behind deciding either way. Specifically, I use Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* to not only illustrate particular incentives that lead people to reading YA, but also to simply demonstrate the literary quality that does in fact reside within the YA category. It is my belief that, just like any other category of literature, YA has numerous benefits that are useful to readers and that, despite those benefits, the category gets an unfairly negative reputation simply because it is associated with teenagers. By thoroughly examining these various aspects of YA, I hope to show that the category is deserving of scholarly attention and that if people are willing to give YA a chance, they just might end up finding some truly amazing books.

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my work lacked value. Their acceptance made it clear to me that this work could find a place in academia.

I also have to specifically recognize my fellow graduate students in the Department of English. Over the last two years, we've grown quite close through a mixture of activities, including battling to wrap our minds around complex theories, commiserating over teaching struggles, and celebrating each other's successes. As I move forward into the next chapter of my academic journey, I will miss being able to see these friendly faces on a regular basis, but I'll take with me many great memories and true bonds of friendship that were forged in a shared experience that quite uniquely only belongs to us.

Finally, I'd like to thank Stephen Chbosky. I was probably about fifteen or sixteen years old when I first read *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and up until that point, I didn't know that it was possible to be so deeply moved by a text. As an avid reader, I'd always loved books, but the way that *Perks* spoke to me, my thoughts, my experiences, and the thoughts and experiences of my friends was something that I had never expected. Though the book may not look like much from the outside, what Chbosky's managed to cram into those approximately two hundred pages is something that is so worthwhile. Reading that book set me on the path of finding other similar texts and opened my eyes to the beauty that is YA. I cannot thank Mr. Chbosky enough for giving me that gift.

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## INTRODUCTION

If I were to mention the phrase “Young Adult (YA) literature” to a random stranger on the street, I feel confident that he or she could deduce what it meant even if the stranger were completely unfamiliar with the category. After all, those words do come across as fairly self-explanatory. Granted, there might be some splitting of hairs regarding what actually qualifies as “literature,” especially if the random stranger happened to be a literary scholar, but most people likely have a common understanding of what the words “young” and “adult” signify when placed next to each other. After all, the phrase “young adult” is used to not only describe a type of literature, but also various other types of media and a major transitional point in one’s life. Yet, even with such a common understanding in place, there is a great deal of confusion and disagreement amongst critics, educators, publishers, and the reading public in general with regards to what actually qualifies as YA. Furthermore, the issues with understanding YA extend even further beyond definition difficulties. Although the situation seems to be slowly improving, there is still quite a bit of disdain, particularly amongst scholars and critics, for YA.

Nevertheless, books classified as YA have experienced tremendous success within the last decade or so. The general public has devoured book after book at a rate that certainly could not have been predicted when YA was struggling to stay afloat, just a few short years before the boom. According to D.B. Grady, “3,000 young adult novels were published in 1997. Twelve years later, that figure hit 30,000 titles--an increase of a full order of magnitude. In 2009, total sales exceeded \$3 billion, which is roughly all the money” (“How Young Adult Fiction Came of



Age”). Quite obviously, interest in YA texts has grown exponentially, but there still has been very little scholarly research, compared to other literary categories, devoted to YA. The possible points of inquiry are abundant. Why do people read YA? Who reads YA? Why should more people consider reading YA? Does YA possess actual quality and exhibit literary quality? These questions, along with many others, are begging for attention from scholars.

Presumably, some will still be inclined to disregard YA even if information is presented which indicates that there is actual literary merit, along with other perks, in reading YA texts. After all, it is one thing to speak abstractly about the possible benefits of YA. It is quite another to actually identify them within a specific text or texts. While I do believe that most YA literature does have specific benefits to readers, such as allowing them to become immersed in a mixture of genres that they may have avoided previously, I am aware of the fact that the quality varies widely from text to text. And while most of the minimal focus that YA has received in recent years has focused upon various book series, especially those generally classified as fantasy and/or dystopic, I think that there is even more to be considered in the texts that are more likely to be classified as realistic fiction. These texts don’t necessarily have a great deal of spectacle to capture the audience’s attention, but they still manage to be incredibly captivating and engaging. Additionally, these sorts of texts do the best job, in my opinion, of showing just how powerful YA can be and how universal the experience of reading YA can be for most readers.

One of the best examples of this sort of book is Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Released in 1999, the text was not initially categorized as a YA text, but adolescent readers latched onto it rather quickly, most likely due to the young age of the protagonist, Charlie, and the narrative’s focus on his life as a high school freshman. In addition to tackling

the perils and triumphs of day-to-day high school life, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* also addresses domestic violence, sexual assault, drug and alcohol use, child abuse, and mental instability in a surprisingly honest way. While each issue may not be explored with the same degree of detail, the impact that these difficulties have on the characters is made quite apparent throughout the text.

In fact, the novel's blatant truthfulness has garnered comparisons to at least one revered story starring a young offbeat male protagonist coping with the struggles of adolescent life. According to Angel Daniel Matos, "Along with celebrated novels such as J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*... is approached by many as one of the most honest literary portrayals of teenage life within the last decades" (86). I believe it is that honesty at the core of the text that has allowed it to maintain its popularity amongst not only new swaths of young people every year who are looking for something real to connect with, but also adults who either might want to reflect upon the struggles and desires of adolescence or who might be grappling with some of the same difficulties themselves.

And perhaps in light of the fact that adults do, in fact, deal with many of the same struggles that adolescents face, YA also has to grapple with a new contender on the block known as "New Adult" literature. New Adult purportedly serves as a category that can bridge the supposed gap between YA and "adult" works. In fact, there's been quite a lot of growing interest recently in books that fall into the New Adult category or that have some sort of crossover appeal. It would seem as though, perhaps due to the overwhelming success of texts like the *Harry Potter* series amongst all ages, publishers and writers are trying to find a means through which they can attain mass success. However, if that's the case and the goal really is to make the

works more accessible to everyone, why create another semi-impenetrable category that further seems to section off the works from everybody else?

## CHAPTER 1

### THE HISTORY OF YA

#### The Origins and Rise of YA

Before a truly in-depth exploration of YA can be undertaken, I believe it is necessary to have some understanding of the background of the category. Some might argue that YA literature has always existed to some degree or another. That assumption, of course, depends on how one chooses to define YA, which is a problematic task that I will explore more in the next section. We can look back through the annals of literary history and find texts that have utilized adolescents as protagonists or at least as significant characters. Despite that similarity, it is not entirely likely that those books would be placed on the same shelf as contemporary YA. While those older texts may have involved adolescent characters, the books probably were not marketed toward a specifically adolescent audience and probably did not actually grapple with what would typically be considered adolescent problems. More than likely, the adolescent characters simply functioned as members of some sort of family dynamic, or they were viewed essentially as adults. And while defining YA may be a difficult task, those particular bits of criteria seem to be two of the most recurring components of the various YA literature definitions.

Most people who study and write about YA seem to agree that it began in the mid-twentieth century. Ashley Strickland says, “The roots of young adult go back to when ‘teenagers’ were given their own distinction as a social demographic: World War II. ‘Seventeenth Summer,’

released by Maureen Daly in 1942, is considered to be the first book written and published explicitly for teenagers” (“A Brief History of Young Adult Literature”). Due to the cultural changes taking place in America at the time, new stages of life were carved out and adolescents, who would not have necessarily received much dedicated attention in prior years, were suddenly a specifically recognizable group that required more consideration. It only takes a quick glimpse through the histories of various entertainment media to see how rapidly this new group garnered new and especially tailored material. Yet even with the development of this new group of consumers, there is still resistance toward classifying these early texts as YA due to the fact the concept of YA was not publicly understood when the works were produced. Sue Corbett explains, “there's widespread agreement that Holden Caulfield is the grandfather of today's angst-ridden, wisecracking, often unreliable teenage narrator. That said, ‘Young Adult’ is a classification created by librarians long after Salinger wrote his classic novel” (30).

Undoubtedly, if *The Catcher in the Rye* were written today with its quirky outcast adolescent protagonist, it would immediately be classed with YA texts. Given such an understanding it is perhaps even less surprising that *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is often compared to *The Catcher in the Rye* due to the many similarities in style and concepts that exist between the two texts. Nevertheless, Salinger did not write his novel as a YA text because the moniker did not yet exist, and so, while *The Catcher in the Rye* may have influenced many subsequent YA writings, it does not fall under the YA umbrella.

Many scholars who research YA note the publication of S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* in 1967 as the category’s de facto point of origin. In fact, “The term ‘young adult’ was coined by the Young Adult Library Services Association during the 1960s to represent the 12-18 age range” (Strickland, “A Brief History of Young Adult Literature”). Of course, the fact that these

two events occurred around the same time does not mean that *The Outsiders* was directly responsible for the category's creation. However, it does seem fairly likely that the release and success of such a popular novel written about and widely appealing to adolescents had at least something to do with the development of the category.

Yet, even with an official title in place and a seemingly captive audience in mind, the category of YA literature had difficulty establishing solid footing in the literary world over the course of the next few decades. There was, and continues to be, much debate about whether it is a standalone genre or a category that encompasses several genres, how it should be defined, what qualifies as YA, whether it has literary merit and/or pedagogical value, and so on. These debates may have hindered the category's growth in the past, but recent YA success stories have shown that YA still has a chance to thrive.

Despite any preexisting confusion and instability, writers have continued to put out YA texts with varying degrees of critical acclaim and selling success. Many of these writers probably hoped that their next book might be the one to give YA the breakthrough it needed.

Unfortunately for some writers who have been at work producing YA texts for the last few decades, the most widespread success within the category did not actually occur until fairly recently. Part of this success likely has to do with the continued development of media directed toward young adults, a group that has experienced rapid growth in recent years. According to Melanie Koss and William Teale:

Over the past decade adolescents have been one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population (Magazine Publishers of America, 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). This increased "market" has spawned more products designed for the young adult (YA) population, resulting in a growth spurt in YA literature and

other reading materials targeted to teens, such as teen websites, magazines, and graphic novels. (563)

With such a steady proliferation of materials marketed toward teens, it makes sense that writers would want to capitalize on the newfound successful marketing trends. Yet, it would take much more than the success of *Teen People* and *Beverly Hills, 90210* to really make YA a commercial success.

Thanks at least in part to the successful public reception of several different book series, YA literature has blossomed in various surprising, yet very much welcomed ways. According to Jim McCarthy, Vice President at Dystel & Goderich Literary Management, *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* were “the real game changers in the category. They became monstrous forces because they had rabid teen fan bases, but they also bridged over to adult readers in big ways” (qtd. in Doll, “What Does ‘Young Adult’ Mean?”). This crossover appeal is an important point to keep in mind (and will be addressed in more detail later on) throughout this consideration of YA literature because it would seem that, at least to some degree, the category’s reach has extended far beyond what its name might suggest. And that extension may have been the key to ensuring the category’s permanent place in the hearts and minds of readers. It’s also possible, however, that the emergence and recognition of the inherent crossover value of many of these texts could lead to the casting aside of the YA label all together. Nevertheless, on the heels of the successes of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, several other books have emerged as great YA literature success stories rabidly being consumed by the reading public.

Of course, it should not be assumed that mass public approval on its own is indicative of the permanency and growing respectability of YA. As mentioned previously, many publishers and academics have notoriously derided YA in the past. However, that reality may be shifting in

the very near future. In fact, some of these YA texts are beginning to be recognized as great works worth celebrating. Koss and Teale say, “Another indicator of the rise in YA literature is the introduction of two YA book awards, the Michael L. Printz award (through American Library Association) for the best YA book of the year, and YARA, the Young Australian Readers’ Award, a readers’ choice award” (563). These awards indicate professional acknowledgement of the quality of YA to a degree that hadn’t existed before. Now it seems that many more people are willing to support and work with this category. Yet, in spite of this newfound willingness to read and work with YA texts, additional roadblocks still must be faced.



## CHAPTER 2

### WHAT IS YA?

#### The Many Definitions

The only undertaking that might be more difficult than getting scholars to see the literary merit in YA is getting those who discuss the category to agree to a common definition of how to discern YA from Children's Literature and literature written for "adults." McCarthy says, "I don't know that there's a real technical definition of what Y.A. is. Essentially, it's just literature for and about teens, there to bridge the gap between children's and adult's books. It can be subdivided into the same genres as adult books—romance, paranormal, mystery, horror, literary fiction" (qtd. in Doll, "What Does 'Young Adult' Mean?"). This definition likely comes across as fairly accurate to most people. After all, the inherent presumption is that, just as Children's Literature is supposed to be for children, YA is supposed to be for young adults, particularly those young adults of the adolescent variety.

Additionally, McCarthy's definition highlights a key point in that YA, in and of itself, is not a genre. Instead, it is a category comprised of texts that belong to a variety of genres, just like all other books. The only real difference here is that while it would be unsurprising to see a teen reading something that is definitively not a YA text but is believed to be accessible to

adolescents, such as William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, it may be simultaneously surprising or off-putting to some people to see an adult reading Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, a text that specifically falls under the YA heading.

The idea that YA serves as a bridge that allows adolescents to evolve in their reading from childhood to adulthood is an idea that is echoed in many different places. However, others who describe the category often tweak even that understanding. Brodie says:

The distinctions in audience are important but not always clear-cut. I would define middle grade as being for ages eight to twelve, occasionally nine to twelve. The bridge to YA spans ages ten to fourteen-what we used to call "older readers"-a neglected and much needed category. True YA is for ages twelve and up. (42)

In this case, the writer has not only provided a description of YA, but she has also included additional categories to be considered. The idea of an additional classification fitting in between Children's Literature and YA is not entirely new, though it doesn't seem to be given much attention outside of education-oriented circles. The idea seems to be that books for small children are different from books for middle school students, which are different from books for high school students, which are different from books for adults. Yet, it seems somewhat curious that, outside of elementary school, rarely are particular age groups taught the books that would be classified under specific headings for those particular age groups. Of course, this standard has been changing to some degree in recent years, but it is still far more common to find a high school student reading an "adult" book for school than a YA book. The fact that there is not a *Norton Anthology*, or any other canonical compendium, for YA may have something to do with that. If teachers wish to familiarize themselves with these works, then they most likely have to acquire several individual texts, instead of relying on one particular master source. Granted, the

effort output is probably not that drastically different, but I believe there's something to be said for convenience and prestige associated with having a canon of works and the derision that YA endures as a result of not having such a resource to pull from.

Instead of simply seeing YA as a bridge between two well-recognized age groups, some choose to define the category based on ages of the characters within the stories and the stereotypically adolescent situations, such as first loves, those characters experience in the stories. According to Carlsen:

Young-adult literature is literature wherein the protagonist is either a teenager or one who approaches problems from a teenage perspective. Such novels are generally of moderate length and told from the first person. Typically, they describe initiation into the adult world, or the surmounting of a contemporary problem forced upon the protagonist(s) by the adult world. Though generally written for a teenage reader, such novels—like all fine literature—address the entire spectrum of life. (qtd. in VanderStaay 48)

This definition brings to light a few of the common trademarks of YA. The protagonists are almost always, without exception, teenagers or soon-to-be teenagers. Admittedly, there have been some book series, such as the *Gossip Girl* novels, where the characters aged into adulthood over the course of the series, but the fact remains that the characters began their literary journeys as teenagers.

Additionally, Carlsen's definition mentions that YA is generally written from first-person point of view. Presumably, the usage of first-person makes it easier for the assumed young audience to identify with the youthful protagonist(s). That's not to say that audiences couldn't connect with a work written in the third person. However, it is much easier in most regards to

understand what a character is thinking or feeling when that information is coming directly from the character. And of course, this definition references the fact that most YA texts are coming-of-age stories to some degree or another. Some might argue that this is the case by default since young adults are, by definition, growing into adulthood. However, the focus on what it means to come of age seems to be a purposeful choice made by most writers, not something that just occurs by happenstance. There is often some major defining moment, or perhaps even several moments, in a YA text and/or series that changes the young protagonist, for better or for worse.

At the very end of the undeniably comprehensive definition, Carlsen refers to a particular sticking point within YA that has caused a lot of division in terms of how people view the category and for whom it has been created. The assumption amongst many is that writers create YA texts with adolescent readers in mind as the audience. Hence the situations these texts typically address are inextricably tied to youth, even if the narratives deal with other facets of life. Crowe explains:

I define literature for young adults as all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults. Of course, everyone who works with teenagers knows that many young adults read books marketed above (William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, John Grisham) and below (Dr. Seuss, Jon Scieszka, Shel Silverstein), but YAL restricts itself to literature intended for teenagers. (“What is Young Adult Literature?” 121)

Even though Crowe acknowledges that adolescents can and will read a variety of texts, he restricts the definition of YA to texts specifically created for young adults and marketed specifically to young adults. This is an undeniable component of the YA category today.

Publishers are aggressively attempting to capture the attention of young adult readers as they

jump from one popular YA book series to the next. Though it does seem worth noting that sometimes publishing desires and writing desires do not always match up. In fact, several writers have noted occasions when they wrote books without any YA interest in mind, but the books were ultimately published as YA because they had adolescent characters or because the publishers thought the book would not appeal to adults. Ultimately, one might wonder if the authorial intent for audience is truly significant in the long run. After all, even if a book is not published as YA initially, that does not mean it won't become YA later. As mentioned previously, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* was not initially marketed as a YA text, but adolescents became enamored with the book and it eventually became classified as YA.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the idea that YA is specifically and only intended for teenagers and comprehensively descriptive of the teenage experience is not an idea that is embraced by all. In fact, some believe that such a connection can be detrimental. Isabelle Holland says, "One of the reasons why I resist the increasing tendency to categorize according to age is that it becomes a form of pressure from the outside, telling a young person what he or she is supposed to be, or what stage he or she is supposed to be at" (37). Indeed, what happens if an adolescent picks up a YA text after being repeatedly told that those books are for him or her and finds little to no shared experience? Obviously, he or she will not likely feel put out by not being a werewolf or a wizard, but what if the adolescent has neither experienced a parental breakup nor been to a party or involved in a love triangle? What does that say about who they are as young adults if they have some degree of difficulty connecting with these works? Does it mean that they need to change something about themselves? Presumably, we do not necessarily want young people to look to media to determine who they should be, but if we are saying that this media describes

who young people are and what they do, then how should the young person feel when he or she cannot find a place in these stories?

Furthermore, assuming that YA texts are strictly for adolescents, the very act of characterizing both the books and the readers as “young adult” is likely to be inherently repellant to some teenagers. Crutcher notes that “Most teens I know don't believe we see them as adults, young or otherwise. So calling literature about them 'young adult literature' just doesn't ring true to them” (qtd. in Crowe, “The Problem With YA Literature” 146). Young people often want to be seen as actual adults, not some related “junior” category. They might even skip over the YA texts entirely and reach for the “adult” novels as a means of disassociating themselves with anything that keeps them away from actual adulthood.

Of course, some wonder if it is at all necessary to even have a well-defined and separated YA classification. Some have noted that less and less today separates YA texts from those written for “adults.” All the same genres are represented, and while in the past YA books may have been lighter fare, YA works now depict a wide range of problems faced by teenagers and adults alike. Perhaps because of this breadth of subject matter, along with other reasons that will be addressed later, the actual audience of YA is more expansive than ever. And yet, there is still a marked desire to separate certain texts out as YA. Grady asks, “But if everyone is reading this subset of fiction where seemingly no subject is taboo, why is it corralled as young adult, anyway?” (“How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age”). It is a question worth considering. What is it about these texts that compels a desire to isolate them?

Furthermore, what if, as mentioned previously, adolescents read books that are not traditionally classified as YA? Do those texts become YA books because young adults are reading them? Some would say yes. Holland explains, “In discussing what is adolescent

literature, I am coming more and more to the conclusion that adolescent literature is whatever any adolescent happens to be reading at any time” (33). This, of course, would mean that essentially everything could be YA and similarly that anything that is classified as YA would also qualify as “adult” literature. Perhaps we need to rethink how we think about categories of literature. After all, could a book not be categorized as both Children’s Literature and YA, even when abiding by particular definitions? Or YA and “adult”? There has to be some space for books that appeal to multiple groups of people. Stories like *The Stinky Cheese Man* wouldn’t be nearly as popular if this were not the case. And if it is accepted that books can fall into multiple genres simultaneously such fantasy and romance, then why would books also not be able to fall into multiple categories?

Ultimately, it does not seem that we are anywhere closer to having a true definition of YA than we were before we considered all of these definitions. And perhaps that is the way it should be. Maybe there really is not any one way to understand YA, at least not for the purposes of readers and academics who may be interested in YA texts. It would certainly seem that some have always taken this idea to be the truth. Sylvia Engdahl says:

Just what is a teenage novel? The simplistic answer is obvious; a teenage novel is one intended for adolescent readers. To many people, however, the very words of this statement have connotations that exclude the better teenage novels of today. No truly adequate definition can be given except in terms of factors distinguishing teenage novels from adults ones. And when considering these, it is important to recognize that only one factor has bearing on the designation "teenage" (or "junior" or "young adult") as applied to a novel by the book trade and review media. That designation is determined solely by the structure of the publishing

business. A novel suitable for adolescents is "teenage" if it is issued by the children's book department of a publishing house, and adult if it is issued by the adult department. (41)

Publishers may have certain ideas in mind when they release one book as YA and another book as not, but ultimately it is up to those who buy and read books to decide the fates of the books. And regardless of all official classifications, a book that comes across as YA to one person may not be YA to someone else.

Of course, the recognition that a term is essentially indefinable benefits us very little in a discussion that hinges upon an understanding of the term. And while I certainly do not believe YA can ever actually have one fixed definition, I do think there are bits and pieces from each of the previously explored definitions that adequately address what YA is and/or could be. One of the best definitions that I have seen that most fully represents these ideas is the following: "As I see it, the label 'Young Adult' refers to a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent's journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its 'Grownup' peers" (Stephens 40-41). This definition not only recognizes some of the specific characteristics that often serve as markers for YA, but also leaves room for a broader audience and gives YA the recognition it deserves for being just as valuable as literature written for "adult" audiences. It may not be a perfect definition, but I do think that it provides a solid foundation from which we can move forward with the discussion.



## CHAPTER 3

## AVOIDING YA

## The Problems

Despite the notable growth that YA has experienced in terms of audience and sales, many people still will scoff at the notion of anybody willingly reading a YA text. That skepticism only seems to intensify when the reader happens to be an adult. The prevailing idea is that while young people may be “duped” by the misleading lure of the books, adults should obviously know better. Even if certain texts, such as the *Harry Potter* series, are accepted as “quality” works, they are still likely to be seen as exceptions rather than indicative of the potential widespread worth that lies within the entire category. Such a negative perspective ultimately results in a variety of repercussions experienced by not only the audience, but also by writers and publishers who may become timid about presenting and attempting to profit from YA work. Ultimately, I believe this underlying desire to see YA as less valid than everything else is likely a major contributing factor to the reason why it has taken so long to flourish.

Admittedly, most people probably know and understand that the life of a dedicated writer is not necessarily the easiest path to traverse. Most writers, regardless of skill or background, will not become the next Stephen King or J.R.R. Tolkien. Having a book become a commercial or critical darling is a near miracle. Repeating such massive success is almost impossible. Yet,

several authors still engage in the task of writing each and every day, presumably because they feel compelled to do so. While it may not always be the most profitable life choice, being a writer is a choice that can generally garner some degree of respect from people.

However, that respect is often curtailed when it is discovered that a writer produces YA works. Often, this disrespect comes from society at large. Engdahl says, "I am sometimes confronted with the opinion that my profession fills no need--that the writing of fiction for today's teenagers is unessential, or even unwise" (41). To some degree, it could be argued that a good deal of writing, especially fiction, is not necessarily crucial for human existence to continue. Of course, there are significant benefits to reading a variety of texts, but it is not as though the world would suddenly collapse if there was never another Nicholas Sparks novel. This understanding is something that most people appear to possess and accept without much fuss. And while some people are certainly critical of certain popular writers and genres, there still seems to be a general acceptance that there is a place in the world for most of these works. Yet, the same courtesy is not always extended to the writers of YA. Certainly, one could argue that if these books actually get people to read and comprehend, then they always have some degree of value. But if that is true, then why is writing YA still regarded as a shameful act?

Perhaps the answer to that question can be found by looking within the literary community. Oftentimes, the main criticisms that YA writers receive come from those who make their livings as writers, scholars and literary critics. It matters little to some of these people whether the person writing has proven himself or herself to be skilled. They still see writing YA as a lower level skill when compared to the writing that is done for more "mature" audiences.

Author Sherman Alexie has written quite extensively over the course of the last few decades in a variety of formats including novels, poetry and screenplays. He is well-known and

recognized for several of his works, but perhaps one of his most highly regarded texts in recent years is 2007's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*. The oft-challenged YA novel has become a perennial favorite of YA readers in recent years and has won several awards, including the prestigious National Book Award. Yet even with all the fame and esteem, Alexie still found that this noteworthy accomplishment was looked down on by peers. He says, "Some acquaintances felt I was dumbing down...One person asked me, 'Wouldn't you have rather won the National Book Award for an adult, serious work?' I thought I'd been condescended to as an Indian — that was nothing compared to the condescension for writing Y.A" (qtd. in Rabb, "I'm YA and I'm Ok"). It did not matter to this associate that Alexie had written something that had won a prestigious award. Instead, that achievement could be easily negated simply because the text happened to fall within the boundaries of YA. Yet again, YA is seen as lower quality and nowhere near as worthy of recognition as books written for "adults." Of course, knowing what we do about how much effort and time it takes most writers to develop novels, it should seem utterly ludicrous that some would deem any of these works to be "not serious" simply by virtue of being YA. Yet, the notion still persists.

Of course, it would not be entirely fair to lampoon the seemingly nonsensical viewpoint from which some regard YA without some attempt to determine how this viewpoint has been shaped. To begin with, there is an assumption that YA texts are simply too basic and unrefined to qualify as great literature by virtue of the supposed target audience. Matos says, "Unfortunately, many assume that young adult literature lacks an aesthetically pleasing style or layers of complexity simply because they are targeted primarily at teenagers" (88). Given the fact that, scientifically speaking, adolescent minds are not as fully developed as adult minds, a possible lack of complexity in YA texts does make some sense. Assuming that a writer does have an

adolescent audience in mind, it would be reasonable for the writer to simplify a text in order to reach that target audience. After all, that is certainly the norm with Children's Literature.

However, I find it curious that the underlying assumption here is that less overall complexity equals less value as though adding extra twists and turns in a story automatically makes it better. If that were true, then far fewer people would have been disappointed with the trajectory of the television show *Lost*.

The idea that general stylistics of popular YA texts is something that turns people away is certainly worth considering. According to Hazlett, Johnson, and Hayn:

Marketing may be one culprit in the widespread perception of young adult literature as "less than" other literature. Bookstores and online booksellers prominently feature displays or advertisements of lower quality titles--gruesome horror titles with lurid, titillating covers, light romances with cloying covers that target younger females. Any browser, in-store or online, could easily be dissuaded or manipulated by flashy displays and miss the many quality works located elsewhere. (48)

Most people who actually devote time to reading and/or studying YA can probably describe the most popular current style choices that are cropping up in the texts. Fantasy texts, especially those that include vampires and/or werewolves are still fairly popular. And if they are on their way out, it is only because the many assorted dystopian novels have taken over. Many of the texts share similar looking covers and titles. And, of course, there is almost always a love triangle at some point in the story, especially if it is a series. When this is primarily what people see in the forefront of most stores, it is not entirely surprising to find that this is all that they believe there is to YA.

However, I find that there are at least a couple of inherent problems with judging YA negatively based on the prevalence of certain stylistics. To begin with, this is a situation in which YA shares similarities with “adult” books. Certain genres, such as romance, are criticized far more intensely than other genres. And a close enough examination will show that there are often “adult” books with the same sorts of covers and titles, and even the same pictures on many occasions. Furthermore, different genres become wildly popular at times in that category as well. For example, there’s been no shortage of smalltown-esque romantic dramas ever since Nicholas Sparks made his splash onto the literary scene.

It would seem then that the hyper focus on supposed “bad” qualities of YA has led some people to miss or choose to ignore when those same qualities are present elsewhere. Additionally, there is a problem with the assumption that these texts with popular themes and/or appearances are worthless and distract readers from pursuing “higher quality” texts. While I do believe that there are certain YA texts that may never get as much attention as they deserve, I do not think that they are all necessarily better than the popular YA texts. Furthermore, a book does not become bad by virtue of being popular. *The Hunger Games* series is extremely popular both in terms of sales and in terms of presence and influence in stores, but that does not mean it should be avoided by way of some sort of hipster-esque, faux-subversive need to devalue whatever is being enjoyed by the masses.

Naturally, it is worth noting that the masses do not necessarily simply pick up their favorite books at the local bookstore or public library. While some people do frequent those establishments to fulfill their passion for reading, many others first stumble across their most beloved books in the confines of the classroom. If a person claims that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is his or her favorite book, it is probably a safe bet to assume that he or she was introduced to that

book in school and didn't just picked up off a shelf somewhere because it sounded interesting. Admittedly, that particular novel, with its socially conscious subject matter and young protagonist, often appeals quite universally to readers of varying backgrounds and ages. It is the sort of book that would actually likely be a popular YA book if it were originally released today. But in reality, it is often brought to the attention of students at school and only after much reading and discussion, sticks with students, further perpetrating its canonical and classic status. Presumably, some contemporary YA texts could potentially receive similar treatment and become highly regarded by students as well. So why doesn't that happen?

Given the aforementioned perspective that YA texts are low quality works, it may come as no surprise that they are not, by and large, being utilized in the classroom. To some, these books, no matter how well written they might be, will never measure up to the classics of years past. Crowe explains:

So, while there are some classic YA stories, there really are no books that fit into the generally accepted classification of literary classics and for many critics of the field, this is a serious problem. There are adults who believe that young people should read the classics and nothing else. They feel that the reading and study of anything less than canonized literature handicaps readers' cultural literacy, weakens students' minds, and wastes valuable educational time and resources.

("The Problem With YA Literature" 147)

This bias in favor of classics over new YA materials not only robs students of the opportunity to interact with new works that they may very well find it easier to relate to than *The Scarlet Letter* or *Moby Dick*, but it also further propagates the notion that canonical works are better simply by virtue of being part of the canon. This notion ignores the many mitigating factors that have been

a part of the shaping of the canon, including the prejudices and preferences of those in positions of power. This is not to say that there are not valuable books in the accepted canon. Despite any personal issues that most avid readers have with some canonical works, most can probably recognize that there is value in many of those texts. Within their pages, there is much that can be learned and understood the literary artistry and the world around us. However, the classics are not the only valuable texts. Furthermore, if it is a simple matter of there not being canonical YA texts, then wouldn't it be worthwhile for someone or some group to consider developing a canon of YA texts? After all, what is really preventing someone from doing so?

Some might suggest that the roadblock on this matter partially stems from the apparent scholarly disinterest in YA. That is to say, academics are not researching, critiquing, or writing about YA to nearly the same degree that they explore "adult" books or even Children's Literature. The presumption seems to be that people are simply not interested in looking at YA in that way. For my own part, I have found it extremely difficult to find as much scholarly work on YA as I have found on nearly any other literary subject. However, this experience has not led me to the assumption that people are not interested in YA. If anything, I believe that there are more people interested in studying YA now than ever before. A quick perusal over various conference presentation schedules is enough to show that some people are working in this area. However, I believe people might be having a harder time finding sources that they can refer to that would be appropriately applicable to YA research as opposed to what they would be able to find for other literary topics.

In particular, there is an apparent lack of theoretical criticism applied to YA. Given the very essence of theory, it is probable that any number of theories can fairly easily be used to analyze various YA texts. Yet it has not been done as much as one might think and it is plausible

that some young scholars might feel trepidation with regards to being the first to engage in such work. But what else can be done when the wide world of academia has already proven to be so resistant? Elysia Liang says:

Young adult fiction rarely has an erudite authority willing to contemplate its tropes and themes. If the public's tone toward the potential excellence of the young adult novel is lukewarm, the world of academia disdains that possibility with a frigid silence. In what Cindy Lou Daniels calls the "theory barrier problem," a serious appraisal of young adult fiction, with the exception of a handful of papers about is virtually non-existent...But when even soap operas and pulp novels have spawned a dizzying array of papers examining everything from gender politics and audience dynamics, the lack of comparable inquiry into young adult fiction becomes a heavier blow to its claim to literary merit. (8)

As Liang states, criticism can be found of almost everything, even topics that are derided even more severely than YA. So why then can't we say the same for YA? It would seem that academia's disinterest in YA makes people nervous about engaging in YA-related study and furthers the negative perception of YA's worth. And when scholars do work with YA, they often do so in a way that disregards YA's most unique characteristics. Caroline Hunt says, "Theorists in the wider field of children's literature often discuss young adult titles without distinguishing them as a separate group and without, therefore, indicating how theoretical issues in young adult literature might differ from those in literature for younger children" (4). Unlike the very blurred lines that exist between YA and "adult" literature, there are more marked differences between Children's Literature and what is typically categorized as YA. Trying to fit YA literature into the



Children's Literature mold would likely not only be fairly unsuccessful but would also probably engender resentment with respect to YA.

Ultimately, while there are numerous specific reasons why people may have avoided interacting with YA, almost all of them seem to boil down to a matter of perception. YA has attained a bad reputation, deserved or not, which seems to have put the category neck deep into some sort of hole that would require a Herculean effort to get out of. Perhaps, it is true what they say: a few bad apples really do spoil the bunch. Though it is rather curious that while YA is not the only category to have had its fair share of questionable texts, it does seem to be the one most negatively characterized because of those clunkers. Crowe explains:

Experienced readers know that the adult book market has produced plenty of flops, but in most cases, those flops haven't triggered a rash of book burnings; the nuggets still coming rolling down the stream of adult books, and it takes only a little panning to uncover them. YAL also has its fair share of golden nuggets, and if they're willing to give it a try, readers of all kinds--teachers and students, adults and teenagers--will discover a plentiful treasure of terrific books. ("What is Young Adult Literature?" 122)

Yes, one might have to experience the unfortunate occurrence of reading a book that does not live up to expectations, but that does not make the whole category bad. If people are willing to continue searching for gems in "adult" literature, then surely they can do the same with YA.

Some still might see this as much too arduous of a task, but perhaps more clarity with regards to the potential greatness of YA might sway them.

## CHAPTER 4

## FINDING THE GOOD IN YA

## The Support

In researching topics related to young adult literature, by way of the limited resources that are available, it is relatively easy to come across information regarding why people have avoided YA in the past. However, despite the growth in the market, it is not always as easy to find books or essays that address why the audience has grown and why it may be much more demographically diverse than what the average person might imagine if tasked with the job of considering who buys YA books. Understanding why these various groups of people are interested in YA is inarguably useful information. It has value for scholars, educators, publishers, writers, and even the fans themselves. After all, knowing why someone is interested in a particular type of book makes it easier to help the person to identify other books that might be of interest. I believe there are several reasons why the fans of YA become invested in the material, and much like anything else, these reasons of interest are often not without detractors or counterarguments that are worth being considered.

Perhaps one the principal reasons why anybody ever becomes engrossed in a YA text has to do with the fact that YA is, by and large, easy for everyone to relate to in some shape, form, or fashion. That is not to say, of course, that every single person has had the experience of being

dropped in a remote location and having to fight for survival as conveyed in *The Hunger Games*, but every adult has gone through adolescence and teens are, of course, making their way through adolescence. The overall plot and specific details of the stories may not be familiar to them, but the connection runs much deeper than that.

All of the growth and changes that occur during adolescence directly influence who we become down the line, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. The heavy choices that teens are faced with on a daily basis are abundant and sometimes, despite how often they are told that they should be open with their parents or teachers, they still may not find the sort of understanding that they are really searching for. But when they look at YA, they can see reflections of their own lives. For example, in *Divergent*, readers find some adolescents who are struggling to please their parents and other adolescents who have been emotionally damaged because of treatment they have endured at the hands of their parents. Nearly every actual teenager in the world can probably relate to at least one of those scenarios to some degree or another. Knowing that others share in that experience may not only bolster the adolescent's sense of resolve, but also serves as a natural draw to pull more young people to similar works that validate their life experiences.

Of course, it is not just the teenagers who relate to the themes and concepts in these texts. The growing adult audience for YA would likely list the ability to relate to the material as a reason why they read the texts as well. That may come across as a bit of an awkward admission given the largely accepted premise that adulthood is so very different from childhood and adolescence. In truth, that statement carries a lot of weight in most regards. However, there is still space in the lives of adults for many experiences and feelings that are quite similar to the ones faced by teenagers. As David Levithan says, "Our emotions don't really change. Issues of

identity and belonging and finding your way in the world are new when you're a teen, but they never actually go away" (qtd. in Benedetti 40).

It may seem fairly natural to presume that relatively young twenty-year-olds are still finding their way in the world and thus could identify with much of the adolescent experience while simultaneously believing that forty-year-olds are much more established in the world and further removed from such experiences. However, further analysis would show that might not be the case. Whether it be a new job, a new relationship, a broken friendship or some other unexpected loss, many of the most notable adolescent experiences remain a consistent part of most adult lives. It would make sense then that adult readers would see connections between their own lives and these texts as well.

Though one might wonder why, if these feelings and experiences are such constants in life, adults are so drawn to YA works instead of more "age appropriate" works. There surely would have to be "adult" texts that address the same sorts of issues. In fact, many of such texts can often be found on high school reading lists. Teachers are tasked with not only helping students to see the critical quality of these works but also showing students how the subject matter is relevant to their lives. After all, there is a reason why, despite the many criticisms that some have for the play, many schools still introduce Shakespeare to students with *Romeo and Juliet*, a work that surely was not written with a teen audience in mind. In fact, the characters of Romeo and Juliet being described so young likely had more to do with relationship conventions of the time than an actual interest in the romantic impulses of adolescents. Nevertheless, despite the grim and arguably excessive ending, students can still often relate to the story's portrayals of familial strife and the difficulties of first love.

Perhaps this overabundance of such texts in schools has something to do with why many adults are gravitating to YA. They may simply be looking for something that has a different approach than most of the classics they worked with in school. And while there are certainly swaths of contemporary “adult” novels, they may not provide the necessary emotional catharsis that some adult readers are looking for. In terms of definitive qualities of YA, Grady says, “Every decision feels life-changing, and every choice in these books can seem life-or-death. The emotions are no more or less valid than what one might experience at 30, but it's the first time, and thus very powerful” (“How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age”). Every experience is infinitely more intense when seen through the eyes of a young adult, and that intensity can more easily allow a reader to become enamored and enraptured with the text. Going on the rollercoaster ride that is these texts is a heavy emotional investment that readers enter into willingly because the journey and the possible end result appear to be worth the risk. It would seem to be much like the sort of impulse that allows viewers to become devoted to shows like *Grey's Anatomy* where the audience knows that anything that can go wrong will go wrong and a beloved character could die at any moment. That powerful emotional response, regardless of how unrealistic the scenario might be, keeps people coming back for more. It would make sense then that people would feel drawn to texts that allow them to delve into such formidable feelings over and over again. Furthermore, engaging with such visceral adolescent experiences may give readers the opportunity to at least mentally accept or correct some of their past experiences.

It may come as no surprise to say that nostalgia is a major component of contemporary society. Every time VH1 does another round of *I Love the 80s* or another remake is developed in Hollywood or BuzzFeed posts another list reflecting on the best toys of the early 2000s, it becomes quite clear that we are a society obsessed with nostalgia and the glory days of years

past, regardless of how truly glorious those days may or may not have been. Theorists have been aware of this preoccupation for decades, but it only just now seems that more people in the general populace are becoming aware of the obsession. According to Stacy Otto, “Nostalgia began in the late 17th century as a pathology, ‘the disease of an afflicted Imagination’ (Boym, 2001, p. 4) characterized by an acute longing for one’s homeland that could be cured by various means (including, but not limited to, leeching)” (462). Obviously, the longing in modern-day society is not always necessarily for a physical location, but rather for a location in time. Since we can’t hop into our own personal Tardises to take a stroll down memory lane, we instead try to find some means to recreate or revisit the feelings associated with those memories.

Naturally, nearly everyone enjoys looking back at some point in their past with fondness, and while it can be problematic at times such as when some certain politicians wax poetically about the “glory days” of the early 1900s while ignoring how many groups of people were disenfranchised in those days, nostalgia is not necessarily always a bad thing. Certainly, an extremely valid argument could be made that the focus on what has been good and worked well in the past has prohibited people from breaking out in new and creative ways in a variety of areas in the present. Yet, while there may be many reasons why people should not become overly embroiled in nostalgia, it is not necessarily all bad.

Nostalgia can and does serve other functions. Harper refers to nostalgia as “a sign ... of [the human] need for a true present” that “reminds a person, by way of giving [one] the experience, of the good what [one] has known and lost”(qtd. in Otto 461). At a time when someone is completely downtrodden in life, looking back at a more fulfilling past experience can ultimately make getting through present struggles an easier burden to bear. To that end, it makes sense that readers, especially adult readers, feel drawn to YA texts, given the inherently

reflective nature of most of these texts and the particular bits of subject matter that often seem to be worth revisiting. Amy Johnson explains:

Adolescence is a time of questions, confusion, and strong emotions. It is a time when young people lose the naiveté of childhood, and take a glimpse at the adult world with a sense of innocence. As busy adults, we often find it hard to remember what was important to use before we became busy grown-ups with lots of responsibilities. Young Adult literature helps me connect with the person I used to be, which, in turn, makes me reflect upon the person I have become. And that's the best kind of nostalgia of all. (15)

I could be nostalgic about the burrito that I ate yesterday if I really felt so inclined, but that would not necessarily be a particularly worthwhile experience. However, if I were to think about to my teen years, I could almost immediately call to mind various significant points in my life that had an impact on the person I have become. The experience of reflecting on adolescence is somewhat like a family height chart that has been carved into a wall over the course of many years in the sense that both allow you to look at both incremental and extreme moments of growths to ultimately see how a person grew and developed over time.

Of course, some might argue that it should simply be enough to mentally reflect on memories to fulfill nostalgic impulses. After all, memories are internal and unless there's some sort of ailment at play, should be able to recall them at any time. However, having additional stimuli from outside sources likely makes the process much easier. This is, in fact, how much of sense memory operates. A person might be walking through a mall and get a whiff of perfume that reminds him or her of spending summers with grandma and all of the feelings associated

with that experience can come rushing back. Surely, the person could have recalled the memory without incentive, but it likely would have been much more difficult to bring about.

Consider the fact, for example, that the audiences for obviously adolescent-driven shows like *Skins* and *Degrassi: The Next Generation* are largely comprised of adult viewers, and not just those adults who were teens when they started watching the shows. In fact, many of the viewers were well into adulthood when they began watching these shows. Much like YA, seeing the portrayals of adolescence on these shows can help adult viewers to revisit their own adolescent experiences. Naturally, these viewers have many of their own memories and stories from high school that can be recalled at a moment's notice, but there is something about actually seeing real teens, or at least adult actors pretending to be teens, working through the same experiences that enhance the feelings associated with those memories.

Furthermore, the way that an adult looks back on his or her own adolescent experiences is likely to be somewhat different from how those experiences were perceived at the actual time of adolescence. Kincaid explains, "Memory is constructed from observation; the powers of observation are never so strong as when we are young...thus we can remember childhood only by asking the child to do the remembering for us" (qtd. in Otto 465). The best way to really view the young adult experience is through the ideas of a young adult, and thus, it makes sense that adult readers would want to relive those experiences while reading texts that purportedly showcase the young adult perspective. Of course, some might argue that such perspectives are inauthentic given the fact that YA is typically written by adults trying to capture the teenage mindset instead of by actual teenagers. However, I would suggest that even though the attempts may not be perfect, they are still, by and large, fairly realistic and capable of truly giving adult audiences the opportunity to remember how they felt at a given time in the past.



Also, it is worth noting that wanting to think about the good old days is not, on its own, the sole reason why nostalgia remains a driving force in moving adult readers toward YA. Not only does nostalgia allow us to further solidify our present nature as Harper asserted, but it also provides the opportunity to use the past to help determine what can and will happen in the future. SD Chrostowska says:

...the past is re-imagined along with that past's uncertainty about the future, as well as the thrill arising from that precariousness and from the relative remoteness of death (then relative to now, or now relative to then). A past exerts a pull on us because it is an open door to (real and imagined) possibilities—or, in the case of a past we either were not alive or have not lived to see, to historical reality that to us nonetheless signify the unexplored, and that have since become defunct. (55)

Every time a reader picks up a YA text, he or she gets to experience those firsts of teenage life with the characters all over again. Simultaneously, the reader can reflect on the decisions that he or she made when faced with similar situations in the past and how it felt at the time. These texts also allow adult readers to consider how the choices made and experiences endured in adolescent years contributed to their present stations in life. The encounters with nostalgia in YA might even spur some of these adult readers to look toward developing a different path in the future. After all, who could read a text like John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, a book about teenagers who are battling cancer, without at least momentarily considering the potential brevity of life and the necessity of living each day to the fullest?

Of course, it is important to remember not to get too lost in some of the pleasant past experiences that YA might present to readers. For one thing, as Lambert says, "We are nostalgic for our idyllic school days, but we forget that some days, we hated school" (qtd. in Otto 461). As

readers engage with YA texts that describe the high points of adolescence, it is important to remember that there were some truly abhorrent experiences in most teenagers' lives. These terrible experiences were not fantastical elements that could be vanquished as is the case in several YA texts. Instead, they were realistic occurrences that could have very well made it possible, or even probable, for someone to truly hate life. In many regards, texts like *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* excel at not only showcasing the high points but also including most of the negative aspects of adolescent life in a way that probably makes adult readers of the texts far more grateful to be far removed from adolescence than they might feel when reading other YA texts.

Additionally, if someone were lucky enough to have a truly idyllic adolescent experience, it is necessary to truly understand that those feelings and moments in time cannot fully be recaptured. As Chrostowska says, "The logic of nostalgia dictates that nothing can really be recovered, only re-collected, re-imagined" (54). As readers of YA, we can reflect on our experiences and feel as much as possible for those moments in time. However, barring some great future advances in science or the attainment of something akin to Hermione's time turner, those experiences must, by and large, remain in the past. However, that is not to say that there is nothing to be gained. Chrostowska adds that "Nostalgia collaborating with capitalism has this message to convey: with a little ingenuity and investment, we, as a society of individualists, can regain desired aspects of the past" (54). We absolutely cannot fully go back to the past, nor should we waste our time trying to do so, but we can get bits and pieces back. And those bits and pieces of the past may not only help us in the present, but they may also help us to carve out a better, more self-aware future.

Ultimately, despite any evidence presented, some will still not see the value in writing about and reflecting upon the adolescent experience. For whatever reasons, both adulthood and childhood seem to have more critical value than adolescence. Fortunately, there is still quite the captive audience as well as a host of writers who do find value in these stories. Spinelli explains, “Like an old Brenda Lee 45, we spin on our backs for five seconds--looking back, that's all it seems, doesn't it--and then--poof! We've grown up. But it was a glorious five seconds while it lasted--glorious and funny and excruciating and fascinating and significant. Worth remembering. Worth paying attention to. Worth writing about. Worth reading about” (qtd. in Johnson 15). It may not always be obvious or scholarly, but there is an ability to connect in this work that makes it seem to be fairly certain that YA is here to stay.

That being said, the staying power of YA extends far beyond the category's relatability. For example, educators often look for books that will capture students' attention and be accessible enough for students to comprehend. Unfortunately, most of the canonical works that are typically taught in secondary school do not fall into both, or either, of those categories. This is not to say, of course, that students won't still gain something from reading those texts, but rather that it might be less than what they might acquire from a book that fulfilled the roles of being both highly interesting and highly accessible. As a result, a cursory glance through various education sites will often bring up posts where teachers are asking for or have identified books that meet those requirements. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the texts that show up in such posts tend to fall into the YA category.

It is important to note that saying something is more accessible does not mean it does not have any literary value. Instead, it is more likely that the language being used and the situations being described are more understandable for contemporary audiences. This ease of

understanding does not just apply to adolescent readers. In fact, the prevalence of YA on more bookshelves and e-readers may be responsible for getting more and more people in general to read on a regular basis. Johnson explains, “Let's face it — the classics can be so difficult. In the weeks it took me to struggle through the intricacies of just one classic, I could read almost a dozen Young Adult novels. Reading is now a part of my everyday life, and I'm reading more books per week than in the past” (14). While there are certainly classic works that are quite easy to read and often well-liked across the board, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, most people probably cannot whip through reading several of them as a part of everyday life.

It may seem that readers should have more difficulty grappling with the fantastical natures of many YA texts than with texts that are ensconced in the world of Victorian England, but that tends to not be the case. And because many classic texts focus on eras many years past with structures and terminology that may as well be a foreign language to some modern-day readers, it isn't nearly as easy for the average person to work with the classic material. That is not to say that he or she could not be interested in the subject matter. Rather, deciphering the texts to get at the possibly interesting subject matter just isn't appealing enough for most casual readers. Instead, more people are picking up today's YA texts, which are easy enough to understand in language and structure, even if they feature complex dystopian or otherwise fantastical worlds. Thus, people are able to accomplish more reading, which theoretically should improve both their reading and writing skills and would foster their desire to continue reading more in the future. If nothing else, it would seem that the education community should be embracing YA the most because the category just might be changing the common student perspective on reading for the better.

Of course, there often seems to be a sort of perception that if the general populace is actually enjoying reading something, then it must not have any literary merit. This mindset can likely be found in at least one review or critique of any particularly well-liked mainstream book. Sometimes such seemingly blind hatred of that which is popular comes across as completely unwarranted as is generally the case when someone says there is not literary merit to the *Harry Potter* series. On the other hand, there are works of arguably lower quality such as the *Twilight* series where the critique would have more ground. However, I would still suggest that there is merit to reading and understanding the themes being conveyed in *Twilight* as well as assessing why audiences have been drawn to the work. There is something to be learned there and instead of outright condemning the text, it should be the desire of academics to delve deeper.

After all, most of these works are begging for analysis. Why are there so many dystopias? Why are there so many love triangles? Furthermore, why are the triangles almost always two guys and a girl? Why are there so many vampires? Why not more witches? Or zombies? And even beyond these overarching category questions, there are even more specific areas that could be explored for each individual text. Gallo explains, “Like classics, contemporary books for teenagers have plots that can be charted, settings that play significant roles, and characters whose personalities, actions, and interactions can be analyzed. There are figurative language, foreshadowing, irony, and other literary elements in the best of the newer works” (qtd. in Johnson 16). Every adult who has been through the American school system has probably learned about the importance of things like plot and setting to a story. It is not as though that importance is restricted to classics. While the language may be more accessible for contemporary readers, it does not mean that it is not nuanced or beautifully conveyed. These works are ripe for the picking and just waiting for further exploration.

So why then is there such an academic resistance to analyzing YA texts beyond *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*? Certainly, these texts are some of the most popular YA works of recent years and include a great deal of material to be explored. However, they are not the only YA texts worthy of study. Perhaps, scholars assume it would be too difficult to apply the same analytical and theoretical tools used to study “adult” works to more than a select few YA texts. However, it seems that just by virtue of existing, YA texts should be able to be explored in the same ways.

While some may still view these texts as simplistic, that does not mean that the analysis cannot be complex. Monseau says, “Reading the works of any of these authors from a feminist, cultural, or historical perspective can be an exercise in the most sophisticated kind of thinking” (Johnson 16). Much like most other texts, a number of theoretical perspectives would provide very valid, yet extremely different, readings of the works. And like all other texts, understanding the various possible readings has the ability to not only tell us more about the text itself but also to develop some understanding of our society in general. And truthfully speaking, if we want to know more about the world around as most academics are prone to desire, wouldn’t it make sense to not only analyze works from our pasts, but also works that are being written in the present-day?

Beyond reading YA because it has the potential to unlock knowledge, it may also be worthwhile to support the category because it provides space to foster authorial freedom in ways that not only benefit the writers, but also the audiences. We live in a mash-up society where increasingly there are more shows being developed that would not be classified as either comedy or drama because they are both. This same society enthusiastically embraced the pairing of

rapper Kendrick Lamar when he performed with alternative rock group Imagine Dragons in a surprisingly perfect blend. YA, by design, allows for just this sort of genre-mixing.

While it may not be the case at every location that sells books, YA is often displayed en masse as a category instead of being broken down into various genres. Readers may not be able to go to one specific urban fiction section, for example, of YA and thus, may be required to peruse through a variety of other texts before they have find something of interest. This, of course, increases the reader's exposure to a number of texts that they may ultimately decide are worth reading and it also gives authors space to incorporate more interests without seemingly betraying a specific genre. According to Doll:

Because Y.A. isn't as subdivided on bookshelves, authors don't need to worry about blending elements of different genres. If someone writes a fantasy romance, they don't have to be concerned about whether they're filed under fantasy or romance and whether the readers of the other genre will seek them out. There's great power in that, and authors have an easier time of working outside of genre constraints this way. ("What Does 'Young Adult' Mean?")

Of course, there is nothing wrong with writing or reading works from one particular genre, but there is something to be said for an exposure to variety. After all, readers may think that they hate a particular genre and attempt to avoid it outright, but perhaps they just haven't found the right book that utilizes that genre. Exploring various YA titles that blend genres decreases the chance that readers will miss out on a book that they might actually enjoy.

Perhaps one of the final, and possibly most important today, reasons why people read YA has to do with the sense of community that has developed not only amongst readers of and individual book or series, but also amongst people who enjoy the category as a whole. While

there may not be a wealth of scholarly work available that explores YA, there are certainly quite a lot of blogs and social media sites devoted to reporting on and discussing a variety of aspects related to YA. Within these communities, one can often find both creators and readers of YA who are looking for others who share their interests. According to Robin Brenner, these interested parties share “A love of compelling stories, finding community, gaining courage to create as well as becoming a better creator, finding a safe space for expression, and becoming more critical consumers” (35). Even if the highest realms of the literary world aren’t validating the work, there are many others who do find value in YA. And these communities are allowing these groups to join together to not only support each other but to also reinforce the status of YA as a legitimate and lasting category.

Furthermore, modern society has seen a tremendous growth in the concept known as fandom in recent years. While it may be true that there have always been fans in the world to some degree or another, the fever pitch that has been cultivated and reached over the course of the last few decades has gone beyond what people probably could have expected a century ago. Today’s fans are more than just the stereotype of the teenage girls screaming en masse while waiting to catch a glimpse of their hunky idols. Instead, fans come in all shapes and sizes, and they fall into any number of demographics. They don’t just express their undying adoration of something or someone. Instead, they actively participate in the discussion surrounding their favorite thing and sometimes even in its overall development. This is particularly relevant in YA where stories tend to be series more often than not, and the fans can have some degree of influence over how the series will change over time and how it will be represented in other mediums. Brenner explains what it means to be a YA fan saying:



Fans join forums and electronic discussion groups, and follow fan creators via social networking sites. Many create, but just as many participate by reading, commenting, editing, critiquing, and debating everything from character development and plot points to media tropes and minority representation. Everyone is involved in the creations, and everyone is involved in the conversation. All you need to join in is enthusiasm. (33)

Being a YA fan is a multifaceted endeavor that allows people to sharpen their own creative skills and that further cultivates the commitment to YA that readers already have. It's not necessary to be the world's best writer or a scholar to have a seat at the table. Fans just have to be a willing participants, and by doing so, open themselves to a group of likeminded individuals who are willing to share, create and discuss. YA fandom, and its many sub-fandoms, provides a space where almost anybody can fit in. As such, it seems to make quite a bit of sense that so many people would feel compelled to join in the movement.

Of course, given the obvious widespread existence of YA and its potential for bringing new readers into the fold, it is probably worth considering whether people are joining the community and reading the books because there is actually something that appeals to them or if they are simply reading the books because it seems like everybody else is reading the books. The latter option is something that every book lover has probably done at some point or another. We find many of the books that we end up reading by word-of-mouth, and sometimes we slog through books that we hate or that simply are uninteresting because we know that they are the hot ticket items in the literary world. Naturally, such popularity does not necessarily mean that the books are good. Grady explains:

Is the crushing popularity of YA the result of a kind of induced phenomenon as described by literary critic Jack Zipes (i.e. adults buy YA because they perceive everyone else as buying YA)? Popularity is, of course, not a metric for quality, yet--jumping art forms for a moment--not a Monday passes without a full accounting of the movie theater box office. This is part of the inducement of phenomena in popular culture. (“How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age”)

It is fairly typical for someone to make an argument against “bandwagon” fans every time a new musician, sports team, or entertainment piece experiences a dramatic spike in popularity and support. The underlying premise seems to be that those new fans don’t really care about whatever the source of their devotion is and that they are simply joining in with the crowd because it seems to be the cool thing to do. This is, by and large, perceived as a negative action. However, rarely does anybody really go in depth about why it’s supposedly problematic. After all, there is no real deadline on appreciation. If there was, today’s most ardent Shakespeare fan would likely be far too late to join in. Perhaps many of the adults who are buying YA are, in fact, doing so because they have noticed that many others are doing the same. However, that does not negate the possible quality of the works. Just as a critic’s approval does not make something good, mass popularity does not make something bad.

Ultimately, there may be any number of other reasons why someone, especially an adult, might find himself or herself drawn to YA. However, I believe that these reasons are many of the most significant. They may not all be present in every YA text, but they are likely to all be identifiable in the most successful YA texts. Still, discussing the appeal of YA so abstractly may not be the most useful method for those who really want to understand how it actually functions

in texts. Luckily, I know of at least one YA text that does a rather good job of encapsulating nearly all of the best parts of YA without falling into some of the most common pitfalls.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

## The Case Study

When Stephen Chbosky released *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, he likely had no idea just how well his book would be received by readers, especially adolescents. He also probably would not have imagined how controversial his book would be in the realm of education. Admittedly, the book was not initially released as a YA title, and while the protagonist of the story is a teenager, Chbosky likely couldn't foresee the way in which adolescent audiences would latch on to the divisive text. After all, the setting of the text is the early 1990s, and it is essentially nostalgic and reflective by design. Additionally, the epistolary structure of the text often allows it to come across as being told by someone looking back instead of as someone living in the present.

Presumably, Chbosky may have assumed that adult audiences would enjoy the text as a means through which they could look back at their own adolescent experiences. However, the provocative text that addresses sensitive subject matters such as sexual assault and abuse instead became a staple in the "canon" of teen reading over the last fifteen years. Despite the many challenges the text has faced in schools, it has endured quite well. And, in fact, its popularity and success ultimately led to a critically acclaimed, fan approved successful movie adaptation that was released in 2012. Not only did the film provide visual realizations for fans of the book, but it

also brought the book to an entirely new audience of YA readers who now had a “new” text to explore.

Perhaps the chief reason why *Perks* is so well-liked by readers has to do with the fact that it is, by far, one of the easiest books to relate to for anyone who has any degree of experience with the trials and tribulations of adolescence. Even if the reader doesn’t have the same struggles as Charlie, the main character, it is entirely possible that the reader can relate to one of the many other teen characters in Charlie’s circle of friends or the family dynamic that Charlie describes. And though today’s adolescents are likely quite unfamiliar with the cassette tapes that Charlie often mentions in the text, as well as some other dated cultural artifacts from the story, they can still relate to the power of the music that Charlie emphasizes when he refers to those cassettes.

However, the ease with which readers can connect to *Perks* goes far beyond simple similarities in personality types or media. Instead, there are a few particular overarching themes and concepts in the novel that take its relatability to the next level beyond what most YA texts achieve. That is not to say that other YA texts don’t address the same concepts at all, but rather they tend to not do so in a way that is as universal as what *Perks* manages to achieve. More than halfway through the text, after a harsh series of events and realizations, Charlie’s best friend Patrick says, “You ever think, Charlie, that our group is the same as any other group like the football team? And the only real difference between us is what we wear and why we wear it?” (Chbosky 155). After spending much of the story carving out their group of friends and speaking of the supposed differences between them and other people, Patrick has realized that everyone is much more alike than he ever knew. The novel itself operates in much the same way. It does not matter if the readers was nerdy or athletic or popular or an outcast in school. Similar to how *The Breakfast Club* manages to resonate with most people from a variety of backgrounds, the way

that Charlie explains his perspective and the feelings he experiences is likely to resonate with almost anybody.

Perhaps the most basic example of this widespread connectivity comes in relation to the title itself. Early on in the novel, when Charlie attends one of his first high school parties, Patrick describes him as a “wallflower.” Now it is worth noting that Charlie was probably the youngest student in attendance at that party and was coming into the situation about as socially awkward as anybody could possibly be. He initially would not have known what Patrick meant and even though other attendees nodded at Patrick’s description of Charlie, Charlie wasn’t sure if the description was meant to be positive. However, Patrick went on to explain what he meant. He said, “You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand” (Chbosky 37).

In this description, Patrick manages to describe a position that most people can identify with. Even if readers weren’t offbeat like Charlie and his friends were in the novel, they can still relate to the power of observation that Patrick highlights. As previously mentioned by Kincaid, the power of observation is never quite as strong in someone as it is in his or her youth. Adolescents take in copious amounts of information on a regular basis just by looking at the world around them, and they often know and understand far more than what adults might give them credit for. Furthermore, the typical social structure of high school does not allow most teenagers to be as open and honest as they might want to be, but that does not mean that they don’t see people and situations for what they really are. For adolescents reading Patrick’s words, there’s the possibility for confirmation of the positivity of a mindset that may have previously made the young person feel lonely. As an adult reading Patrick’s words, a reader may be reminded of how much he or she’s grown over time in his or her sense of self confidence and assuredness. Either way, it is a notion that can hold significance for a variety of people.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the book is known now as YA text, much of the plot in *Perks* has quite a lot to do with love, affection and interpersonal relationships. Several relationships begin and end over the course of the novel, and readers are able to experience via Charlie just how confusing and amazing such experiences can be. His confusion isn't related to the same sort of vaguely realistic epic love saga craziness that we've come to know and appreciate in many other YA texts. Instead, the types of issues Charlie has, such as trying to maintain his role in his family, having his first girlfriend and being in love with one of his best friends, are very much mirror images of the typical adolescent life. The epistolary format of the text allows readers to delve deeply into Charlie's mind, and as he shares his questions and realizations about love and relationships, readers are able to reflect on their own experiences, both in the past and present. Furthermore, the emotional difficulties that Charlie describes are the same sort that often carry on into adulthood. After all, even though it is a fairly safe assumption that most adults are at least somewhat surer of what it really means to love someone than teenagers are, that doesn't mean that adults have all the answers or that their adult relationships are all struggle-free. In fact, *Perks* raises two particular points about love and relationships that are specifically likely to be of relevance to everyone.

Early on in the text, when describing spending the holidays with his extended family, Charlie says, "I am very interested and fascinated by how everyone loves each other, but no one really likes each other" (Chbosky 56). Charlie's wonder speaks to an issue that is commonly understood, but rarely actually verbalized outside of the occasional seasonal sitcom episode. Generally speaking, many people really do not enjoy spending extending periods of time with distant relatives. Yet, even if the experience ends in tears and screams every year, you can bet that in most families, the same thing will happen again the next year. While young children may

not have the necessary words or understanding to verbalize how strange such behavior is, adolescents like Charlie probably do. And though there may be very little they can do to escape their own terrible family drama, they can at least take some comfort in knowing that their family isn't abnormal. Additionally, given the fact that even though adults have the agency to avoid such scenarios but often still find themselves at such events, Charlie's query would be relevant to adult readers as well.

If the complexities of familial relationships weren't already unwieldy enough, the novel also takes on the concept of love in general. Throughout the story, Charlie builds a close connection to his English teacher, Bill. When Bill asks Charlie about his home life, Charlie reveals the abuse that his sister is suffering at the hands of her boyfriend whom she's decided to stay with, much to Charlie's confusion. Bill responds with something that ultimately has a profound impact on Charlie and his outlook on life. Bill says, "Charlie, we accept the love we think we deserve" (Chbosky 24). As simple as it may sound, such a belief can be somewhat surprising when heard for the first time. It may even be met with disbelief given the often put forth belief that love is an uncontrollable and inescapable emotion.

However, upon further reflection, Bill's statement makes a good deal of sense. It's not uncommon to see someone with low self-confidence with someone who seems unsavory because that may be the only relationship the less confident person feels worthy of. Similarly, it's not uncommon to see a more self-assured person turn away possible affections because the person feels as though he or she is more deserving. And, of course, this doesn't just apply to romantic love. People exhibit the same sorts of behaviors with family and friends on a regular basis without ever consciously knowing that they're doing so. What *Perks* does so well here is it simply shines a light on a common human experience and gives people a chance to reevaluate



their own relationships. Much like Charlie's sister, there are several people in real life who would probably be better off by cutting some of the ties in their lives.

The second theme of the novel that audiences can probably relate to the most has to do with the core essence of being a teenager. It's often been remarked that teenagers see themselves as invincible and immortal. This is often considered to be a negative trait in adolescents, but in *Perks* the idea takes on a more positive connotation. And it is this very connotation that has remained as one of the single most memorable concepts from the text. I am, of course, referring to the idea of being "infinite." When viewing any listing of notable lines, themes or ideas from *Perks*, I can almost guarantee that at least one of the many references that Charlie makes about feeling infinite will be found. It's essentially the tagline of the text.

The first time Charlie refers to being infinite is early in the text when he's riding around in a truck with his best friends and listening to music that affects him profoundly. He simply utters the words, "I feel infinite" (Chbosky 33). Now if Charlie had not gone on to describe his feelings to the readers more specifically, then this would probably essentially amount to nothing more than a throwaway line. However, Charlie does his due diligence as the narrator and explains what he means:

And Sam and Patrick looked at me like I said the greatest thing they ever heard.

Because the song was that great and because we all really paid attention to it. Five minutes of a lifetime were truly spent, and we felt young in a good way. I have since bought the record, and I would tell you what it was, but truthfully, it's not the same unless you're driving to your first real party, and you're sitting in the middle seat of a pickup with two nice people when it starts to rain. (Chbosky 33)

In a few short sentences, Charlie manages to describe what is almost an indescribable moment. It is one of those experiences where it seems obvious that what's happening is significant right in that moment and you just want to savor it for as long as you can. For whatever reason, these moments seem to occur most often in adolescence, when it seems like there is so much more life left to live and yet there is so much beauty in basic simplicity.

Charlie and his friends have a similar experience as they ride home in the truck and Sam, the true object of his affection, stands upright in the truck while the song "Landslide" plays on the radio. Charlie says, "And in that moment, I swear we were infinite" (Chbosky 39). This time, it is not just Charlie who is having a profound experience. His friends are fully in that moment with him. Charlie is hyperaware of the importance of such moments and how they make him feel. He refers to these specific occurrences multiple times throughout the novel as he deals with the ups and downs of adolescent life. As some of his relationships crumble, he yearns for those moments when everything was easier and he could just be infinite with his friends. Charlie's yearning for easier, more idyllic times is something that many people experience as they grow through adolescence and into adulthood. It makes sense then that so many people have latched on to those particular lines because the utter universality of experiencing and losing such moments is almost inescapable.

However, Charlie ultimately comes to an important realization by the end of the text. After rebuilding his relationships, suffering a psychological breakdown and remembering childhood trauma, he recognizes the importance of his own existence. While riding in the truck with his friends yet again, he says, "But mostly, I was crying because I was suddenly very aware of the fact that it was me standing up in that tunnel with the wind over my face. Not caring if I saw downtown. Not even thinking about it. Because I was standing in the tunnel. And I was

really there. And that was enough to make me feel infinite” (Chbosky 213). Charlie realized that the emotions he experienced were not really about trying to hang onto feelings and events that happened in the past. Nor was it necessary to spend too much time dwelling on what would happen in the future. Instead, it was important to appreciate that he was alive and living in a moment. The aesthetics weren’t as crucial as he previously thought. Rather, the importance lay in Charlie being an active participant in his own life, which is something that he struggled with throughout the text. As readers come to understand Charlie’s realization, it forces us to consider whether we are doing the same in our own lives. Are we actively going about our daily lives, or are we passively letting life happen around us? Are we so concerned about what has happened or what will happen that we cannot appreciate being in this moment? It may come at the end of the story, but Charlie ultimately does begin to really see the world in a new way, and in doing so, he appropriately lives up to his wallflower label.

Nearly everything about *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is guaranteed to induce nostalgia. Charlie refers to numerous musicians, movies and books throughout the novel, and nearly all of them were popular in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. When he does refer to more current media in terms of the time of the text, it still leaves spaces for the audience to be nostalgic because the story is set in the early 1990s. For adolescent readers who found the book just after it came out or adults who found it in the years thereafter, the novel provides an opportunity to look back at the high school experience in general with some degree of fondness, just as any story set during the high school years would do. However, *Perks* specifically sets a unique stage that can be incredibly welcoming for people who came of age in the 1990s in much the same way that the television show *Freaks and Geeks* served as a cozy walk down memory lane for people who grew up in the 1980s.

It is worth noting that today's adolescent readers of *Perks*, and even some of the adult readers might not understand or appreciate the specific cultural references that Charlie makes in the novel. In that case, they can still identify with the adolescent experience being described in the text and the feelings that Charlie and his friends share. For example, even though Charlie is a freshman at the time of the novel, most of his friends are seniors. Patrick, during a conversation where he is talking about his plans for college, says, "Things'll be different there. They have to be" (Chbosky 157). This particular statement isn't especially profound in terms of literary statements, particularly for a novel known for profound character realizations and understandings.

However, Patrick's belief is a thought that most people can probably recall having at some point in their lives, whether it be going from high school to college or going from college to a dream job. People like having some degree of hope to hold onto, but sometimes it gets lost in the problems of life. However, adolescents are known for being especially idealistic. For adult readers in particular, this statement may be especially moving because it has the power to take them back to a time when they were less jaded, which has the potential to make them reconsider their whole outlook on life.

In terms of high accessibility and high interest, *Perks* hits the mark head on. While the novel is just over two hundred pages long, it reads much quicker than one might expect. Much of this likely has to do with the fact that Chbosky's writing style is extremely direct. Though the novel isn't lacking in figurative language and description, it never feels bogged down or overly wordy. Charlie doesn't spend a lot of time talking about seemingly unimportant information. Instead, he focuses his attention on the important details surrounding whatever event he is describing, which results in fairly succinct sentences. Additionally, as an epistolary novel, the

reading experience is much different from reading most other stories. Instead of having big chunks of material in lengthy chapters, Charlie's letters are never really more than a handful of pages. This allows for more pauses in the reading process without losing track of too much information. Furthermore, since Charlie is writing his letters to an undisclosed person who never responds, it is almost as though he is communicating directly with the audience when he addresses the receiver in his letters. This allows readers to become a part of the story and get even more invested than they may have been otherwise.

In addition to the novel's easy readability, readers are often highly attracted to the story's content. As previously mentioned, the problems that the characters face in the novel are remarkably realistic and often the sort that are rarely touched on in depth by media that's targeted toward teens. These issues are not marked by time like the cassette tapes that Charlie mentions. Just as Charlie remembers the abuse he suffered at the hands of his aunt, which ultimately contributes to his breakdown, there is someone else today having a similarly heartbreaking experience. Just as Patrick faces discrimination at school for being open about his sexuality, there is some kid in a school today facing the same roadblocks. These sorts of horrendous experiences have not been eradicated from the world, and the honesty with which *Perks* approaches them is incredibly refreshing and engaging to readers. And, of course, reading the text has the possible bonus effect of giving people who are facing these sorts of struggles some sort of comfort in knowing that they can overcome problems in the long run.

Beyond just being interested in the novel's realistic depictions of traumatic life experiences, people are also drawn to the simple, yet true-to-life moments and thoughts that are shared in the novel. All sorts of things that have very little to do with the actual plot, such as Charlie's love of Twinkies, his ruminations on *It's a Wonderful Life* and his blissful discovery of

masturbation, are shared in the novel. And while these tidbits don't necessarily advance the story, they do help to fully develop the characters, especially Charlie, into realistic humans. Even if the moments are seemingly mundane, readers are drawn in because there's something so very honest about Charlie's words. Even though, given his psychological profile, Charlie could be considered an unreliable narrator, his story never seems to fall into a fantasy world. And while there is certainly nothing wrong with stories that do involve fantasy, if readers are looking for something more genuine in their interests, then *Perks* certainly does a great job of providing such material.

Given the fact that *Perks* is a fairly short YA text that's pretty easy to read and that doesn't have any deep mythology or extensive world building, some might assume that it's lacking in critical quality. Some might expect that it's nothing more than an easy book for teens to relate to and for adults to feel warm and fuzzy about. They might be surprised to find that there's actually quite a lot within the story to be analyzed and pondered. Even in all its simplicity, *Perks* manages to be quite challenging at times.

For example, many readers do, in fact, identify with Charlie as the protagonist, but others also find it necessary to critique Charlie and his constantly passive nature, as it is that nature that often puts him in undesirable positions. Initially, it is easy enough to dislike Charlie's older unnamed sister for shunning and being mean to him, but as the text goes on and she deals with being abused by her boyfriend and facing an unplanned pregnancy, the reader's perception of the character can change. Even the character of the closeted quarterback Brad, who'd rather be openly homophobic than publicly recognize his secret relationship with Patrick, requires some unpacking.

According to Janet Alsup, “A critical text is a text that confronts difficult issues in society--a text that does not break down into meaningless clichés and predictable plot patterns. A critical text could also be called a resistant text, because it not only resists some of the ‘rules’ of its genre but also encourages its readers to resist the ‘rules’ for mindless, complacent reading” (165). *Perks* very much fits those qualifications and regardless of whether those in academia deem it worthy of further analysis, it does require the audience to do more than just take the words at face value. Matos says, “More than anything, the book as a whole offers a vivid and illustrative written record of the protagonist’s mind, leaving the readers, as the recipients of his letters, to assess the value and meaning of his words” (87). Yet again, it is clear that the novel’s epistolary format demands some degree of audience participation. And it is that demand that allows readers, both young and old, to analyze and critique the text.

Some may believe that the content in the novel is too heavy to be analyzed by adolescent minds. However, it is worth noting that some of the same sorts of problems in *Perks*, such as substance abuse and mental illness, are also depicted in canonical works. The only significant difference is that those characters in the canonical works are often adults. However, it is not as though teens are immune to those issues, and attempting to obfuscate their existence could very well leave a young person susceptible to harm. Furthermore, it is no secret that some of the most challenged works are often the ones that resonate with adolescents the most. As Alsup explains, “Such books have found their way into classrooms before (e.g. J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*), but not without controversy. However, these books are almost universally loved by students and often become cult classics, read under the sheets at night or stuck inside a math book propped on a desk” (165). Some adults may not think young people can handle challenging material that requires them to develop their own interpretations of what’s right and what’s

wrong, but adolescents have consistently shown that such works are exactly what they're looking for. It should be no surprise then that even more adults have latched on to the text considering the probability that many of them probably never were given access to a book like *Perks* in school.

Unlike some other YA titles, *Perks* does not take the opportunity to blend genres. However, that does not mean that it's without authorial experimentation. The epistolary format of the novel is certainly not the norm for YA novels. Even when some of the texts include a letter, that's often only a portion of the story. On the other hand, the entire story of *Perks* is told via Charlie's letter. And while some subsequent YA novels have produced similar work stylistically with characters communicating to each other in texts or emails, they still don't approach the format in the same way that Chbosky did in *Perks*. There is never any return correspondence to Charlie's letters, which as previously mentioned, forces the audience to assume the role of receiver. Structuring the novel in this way could have very easily backfired for Chbosky if readers did not take to the idea of never knowing to whom Charlie was writing or if they simply didn't enjoy the brevity that allowed Charlie to be able to communicate his thoughts in fairly succinct letters. However, it turns out, that the experiment was ultimately successful. For Chbosky and other writers, such success is likely the necessary fuel that may be needed to continue trying different structures. For the audience, finding and enjoying a text like *Perks* can encourage them to think outside the box in their book choices. This may be especially useful for adult readers of the novel who may have only read books written in the standard novel format previously. It could show them that there's a much wider world of literature in existence than they ever knew.



While *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* may not be teeming with merchandising or fans vocally expressing membership to teams for any of the novel's characters, it does still have quite the fanbase and community foundation. It has been a decade and a half since the book was released, and in that time, the word-of-mouth regarding the text has been tremendous, especially amongst adolescents and today's twenty year olds. Though some might think that a text like *Perks* might not hold up well in today's fantasy-driven YA market, that has not actually been the case. According to Elysia Liang, "Over a decade has passed since the publication of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, yet the candor and strength of Charlie's narration and his feeling of infinity continue to resonate with readers despite the occasional dated pop culture references" (9). It does not matter how much time has passed or how understandable some of the particular details are in the novel, readers continue to be drawn to the text.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this popularity ultimately led to a film adaptation of the novel. For book fans especially, there are always concerns when books are adapted into movies. More often than not, significant portions of the books have to be left out in order to have a movie that is a decent running time. There are also occasions where the makers of the film versions of books decide to greatly change certain aspects of the stories to make what they believe will ultimately be better movies. Such omissions are often disheartening for avid readers, and though many do enjoy the idea of seeing their favorite story told on the big screen, they also carry many reservations regarding what the end product will be. In the case of *Perks*, those same concerns were all present when the news of its movie adaptation came out. There were, however, additional concerns. Some believed that the book had reached its peak several years before the movie was to be released and that it would not be as popular with Millennial adolescents as it was with those who devoured the book at the turn of the century. Essentially, there was a notion

that the necessary devoted fanbase wouldn't show up at the theaters, especially in a post-*Harry Potter* and *Twilight* world.

Of course, such concerns ended up being unwarranted. Though the film did not break any huge box office records, it did perform very well for a relatively low budget movie that began as a limited release, bringing in over thirty million dollars at the box office (“The Perks of Being a Wallflower,” *Box Office*). Furthermore, the movie was very well liked critically and both the film and the various actors involved were nominated for several awards. Additionally, according to *The Numbers*, the movie has garnered over thirteen million dollars in bluray and dvd sales (“The Perks of Being a Wallflower,” *The Numbers*). What this all indicates, of course, is that fans came out and supported this work. And the story meant so much to them that they believed it was worthwhile to add it to their collection.

Additionally, there were likely several people who saw and/or purchased the movie who were not familiar with the story beforehand. According to a James Wallace interview with Chbosky, prior to the film's release, the novel had a readership of approximately five to seven million people (“The Perks of Being a Wallflower Writer/Director Stephen Chbosky”). As word of the movie's existence began to spread, more and more people began to read the book. People were eager to find out what was so special about Charlie's story. Coinciding almost exactly with the movie's release, the novel reached the number one spot on the New York Times Bestseller list (Lamoureux, “‘The Perks of Being a Wallflower’ Lands on Top of NYT Bestseller List Ahead of Movie Release”). While the book did eventually lose its top spot, it remained on the Bestseller list for over a year. According to Matos, “..Perks is commonly found within the top ten books in the ‘Classic Literature and Fiction’ section in Amazon.com, often surpassing eminent texts such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954/ 2003) and even Steinbeck's *The Grapes*

*of Wrath* (1939/2002) (86). The consistent presence of the book at the top of lists that chart book sales indicates that it still garners dedicated readers who want to be part of the community that knows and loves *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Furthermore, the Internet is rife with fan creations, such as art and fiction that demonstrate just how invested readers are in being a part of this text in whatever way they can be.

Though it is easy enough to assume that those most eager to be a part of the *Perks* community are adolescents like Charlie, it is important to keep in mind that this book's reach goes far beyond the ages of its characters. Matos explains:

Despite the fact that the book's protagonist is a teenager, and despite the fact that the text is primarily approached by readers in a high school context, the quality of the writing, the novel's realistic tone, and the depth of the issues discussed in its pages have assured its position as a contemporary young adult and literary classic. (86).

That is to say that while the novel meets all the necessary qualifications for YA and it is certainly a hallmark of that category, it goes beyond the constraints that some might wish to place upon it. The book has definitive crossover appeal and should be given the same sort of respect and recognition that any "adult" novel might be given.

## CHAPTER 6

## ONE (OR TWO) MORE THING(S) ABOUT CATEGORIZATION

## The Space Between

YA books like *Perks* have the potential to not only be great reads for adolescent audiences but also for adult readers as well. Though the specific details may differ for everyone, there is almost always some point of connection for everyone within these texts. If anything, *Perks* itself should show that there is no shortage of reasons why people should be reading YA. There is just as much to work with in YA works as there is in any “adult” text. That being said, it is important to remember that amongst some adult readers, despite the popularity of and the growing support for YA, the idea of perusing YA works is still fairly deplorable.

However, it does seem as though this negativity might be fading in the future, especially as the boundaries between YA and “adult” fiction continue to blend, and perhaps, fade away. After all, there are many works today that are now being specifically deemed as crossover books, meaning that they straddle a line between YA and “adult” fiction. These particular books may be written with one audience in mind, but they manage to appeal to a much broader group. Candace Walton explains, “Since 1997, there has been a rise of a new and popular segment of book publishing labeled ‘crossover fiction.’ One need only read bestseller lists, journal reviews, and award lists to see the growth of crossover titles being published, marketed, and sold to audiences of varying ages and interests” (388). While it seems that there have always been books to fulfill

such a role, it is really only within the last decade or so that such books have been given more recognition. It seems important to acknowledge that this idea of “crossover fiction” has much more to do with how the book will be sold than with what the writer may have intended in terms of audience. That is not to say that the writer cannot have a large swath of readers in mind when writing books. Certainly, J.K. Rowling would have been trying to appeal to the broad spectrum of readers that she had when writing the *Harry Potter* series. But in most cases, these crossover titles simply begin in one category and are later sent to another. In fact, *Perks* falls into this category because it was not initially intended to be a YA text. Sometimes, these books may even be rereleased as separate editions specifically marketed toward different groups.

The new interest in such books is a definite departure from past perspectives on adults reading YA. According to Michael Cart:

The crossover book has become such an engrained publishing phenomenon that it is hard to believe that, as recently as 1992, Sally Lodge (1992, 38) wrote, 'They [adults] seem to shun the idea of reading a novel published as a young adult book. One of the key barriers appears to be adults' lack of interest in reading about a young protagonist.' (*Young Adult Literature* 114)

Where adults in the past may have had a bias against youthful protagonists, it now seems as though that is not as much of an issue as long as the text manages to appeal to the adult mind. Additionally, the aforementioned preoccupation with nostalgia may have quite a bit to do with the increased willingness from adults to read works with adolescent narrators.

Our obsession with reliving the past is not the only way in which societal norms and behaviors seem to be interacting with and influencing the literary world. It is possible that the

existence of crossover fiction as a norm has more to do with the ways in which the differences between age groups have changed more than anything else. Walton says:

Aside from the influence of marketing and advertising, some believe that the crossover phenomenon represents a change in that the process of coming-of-age means something new and different in a time when children and young adults grow up faster...Recent years have seen more access for youth to reading materials dealing with what used to be adult-only themes: sex, drug abuse, depression, mental illness, death, genocide, and torture. (389)

Where in the past there may have been so many more things that were just for adults, today's youths are exposed to just about everything, even when parents try to censor what they can see. For better or for worse, being a kid does not necessarily mean the same thing or include the same experiences that it did fifty or even twenty years ago. From an adult perspective, it may seem odd or off-putting to see children and adolescents accessing materials that should technically should only appeal to adults. But from the perspective of the children and adolescents, they are likely only looking for things that are real to them and their experiences, even if those things are framed in a fantastical lens.

There is yet another way in which changes in societal structures may be impacting how books that would traditionally be considered either YA or "adult" books are perceived. Recent years have seen a good deal of focus devoted toward analyzing the nature and situations of today's twenty year olds. Everything from the possibility of a quarter life crisis to a perceived unwillingness to leave the nest to queries regarding why young professionals aren't buying houses and cars has been discussed ad nauseum. Yet, the discussion persists and shows no signs

of backing down or of developing any relevant solutions. Instead, this new millennial generation continues to be observed and discussed, and of course, carved out as a separate part of society.

It is perhaps unsurprising then to recognize that various forms of media and advertisements have been developed as a means of targeting and capturing the attention of this group that is seemingly trapped in some type of not-a-child, not-yet-an-adult sort of existence. In fact, NBC even ran a short-lived show called *Quarterlife* a few years ago that was supposed to showcase the lives and struggles of emerging adults. Not one to be left out the party, the literary world has developed its own seemingly relevant category to speak to this particular group of people. This category is known as New Adult (NA), and according to Deahl and Rosen, "...these are books geared at readers 18 to 23, tackling issues of, well, new adulthood" (4). That definition on its own seems simple enough to understand, and perhaps much more direct than some of the definitions used to describe YA.

However, it is important to understand that the target audience is not the only component that seems to be in play when attempting to differentiate NA from YA. Brookover, Burns and Jensen observe how close NA and YA can seem and explain that books under the NA header "Traverse these issues with more drama and explicit sexuality than even the most daring YA" (41). Essentially, NA books are supposed to be more mature in content while still appealing to relatively young audience. Though it is here that I begin to wonder about the necessity of such a categorization. On one hand, it does make sense that certain books would appeal to twenty year olds engaged in certain similar life experiences, but does that appeal really warrant its own category? Furthermore, it would seem to be that the struggles that a person engages in during the early adulthood years are simply another stage in the coming-of-age process, which is a hallmark of YA literature. After all, at what point is a person officially "of age?" Does it have to

do with reaching a particular age, or is it related to attaining a certain level of understanding? And if YA stands for “young adult,” wouldn’t NA already be encapsulated in that category? Aren’t young adults also new adults and vice versa?

Some might argue that the drama and purported explicit nature is enough to warrant categorizing NA texts separately from the YA texts. But then, one has to wonder why it is acceptable for adolescents to read books written for adults, which by and large are most of the books that are taught in high schools, but not books written for an age bracket that is just above them. It is not as though those “adult” books don’t also deal with mature, and sometimes explicit, subject matters. Being canonical does not mean that the books are lighthearted and easy to handle. Instead, teachers challenge students to grapple with the problems and issues that arise in such texts, and though some parents and public groups have challenged the role of such mature texts in the classrooms, for the most part, adolescents are still granted access to “adult” texts.

It might be argued that the NA texts are different because their depictions of situations such as sexual encounters and drug abuse may be more explicit than what might be alluded to in classic works. After all, we live in world that is, by and large, much more graphic and explicit than Victorian England. As such, it may be assumed that students either won’t understand or won’t be as viscerally affected by the subtle references to mature material that may be within the pages of classic works. However, it would seem as though such a mindset underestimates the generally observant nature of adolescents. The world we live in is not subtle in any regard. Anything of a particularly mature nature that they might stumble across in an NA book can also be found in a song or a movie or a TV show or on some corner of social media. Most adolescents will already be at least somewhat familiar with most, if not all, of the difficult subjects that might be broached in NA, so why try and keep those books separate from YA?



Of course, it has to be known that just like adolescents will find and read “adult” books that interest them, they will also find and read books that are tagged as NA if those particular books draw their attention. After all, though the books may be more explicit, they do address many of the same core issues as YA. Weiss says, “On some level, New Adult speaks to the large crowd of folks experiencing a lot of the same issues of adolescence at an older age. In other words: issues of separation and attachment; individuation; and romantic, sexual, and economic independence” (qtd. in Grady, “How Young Adult Fiction Came of Age”). Yet again, the only significant difference between the NA books and the YA books seems to be the age barrier that lies between the two groups. Both groups are concerned with many of the same problems, and it makes sense that twenty year olds, just like their older adult counterparts, would gravitate to YA and that adolescents would gravitate to NA and “adult” works. The interest in the texts seems to have less to do with the ages of the protagonists or the supposed target audience and far more to do with universal themes and concepts that can appeal to almost everyone.

Despite the obvious similarities, there are still some who simply regard YA as lower on the scale of quality than “adult,” and even NA or crossover, texts. Cart says:

What factors distinguish a traditional YA novel from a crossover/new adult novel? ...I would argue, for example, that the latter--the new adult novel--is more often character-rather than simply plot-driven; the setting is often more fully realized; adulter characters (i.e. post-28) may play significant parts; and the subject matter, if not more sophisticated, at least receives a more subtle treatment, except, perhaps, for sex, which can be more prevalent--and, uh, more specific in some new adult books than in YA. Finally, the chances of ambiguity in new adult are greater than in YA. (“The New Adult” 36)

What this essentially boils down to is a promotion of the literary merit of NA and crossover texts over texts that are primarily YA. Though it does not specifically say that YA is bad, it does indicate that YA is less good and more underdeveloped than the other works. Yet again, it would seem that certain preconceived notions about what quality literature is supposed to look like are at play here.

## CONCLUSION

In a famous speech presented in 1942, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill is quoted as having said, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning” (Churchill, “The End of the Beginning”). While Churchill certainly did not have YA in mind while he was making his speech, his words feel very appropriate in terms of assessing the status of the conversation about Young Adult literature. Quite clearly, far more research can and should be done pertaining to the category and the many works that inhabit it. As more university English departments continue to add on Young Adult literature courses and specializations that are more than simple methods courses for education majors or cast offs of Children’s Literature sections, it seems likely that the wealth of research will grow. Additionally, the YA market is showing very few signs of decline as it pertains to be popularity with the masses. And while the popularity does not on its own make YA worth studying, it is a safe bet that somebody will want to investigate the phenomenon, if for no other reason than to assess how to best market books in the future.

Though with all of the difficulty of defining YA and the obvious ways it overlaps with other categories, I remain perplexed regarding whether the category really needs to be on an island by itself. Obviously, there are certain simple language benefits to being able to tag a book as YA. Doing so makes it easier to discuss books that share similar characteristics and to distinguish those texts from books in other categories that may have other qualities. However, I

think it is important to continually remember that YA is simply a descriptor, rather than a boundary. It does not mean the books are only for adolescents nor does it mean adolescents won't enjoy "adult" literature. The category simply gives us an overall idea of what kind of book we're dealing with.

Of course, with all the various definitions with YA, that knowledge may not seem especially useful or accurate in some regards. However, I do think it still has value to consumers, educators and anybody else who at least has some understanding of what YA can be, even if they don't abide any particular definition that has been set forth by scholars or publishers. However, I do believe that the further development of this "New Adult" category may do more to obfuscate the issue than to provide clarity. The last thing that these books need is another seemingly impenetrable barrier to try to get around. And while the tag of crossover can seem useful to some degree, it also seems somewhat redundant. After all, most books have been and continue to be crossovers, even if they are not described that way. Granted, there is an exception in the sense that most elementary school kids are not at the appropriate cognitive level to understand much of "adult" literature. However, that incapability begins to recede once adolescence is reached, a time at which teens are expected to be able to read and comprehend "adult" texts. And of course, we now also know that adults read YA as well. Therefore, the books shared between these two age groups are essentially inherently crossovers.

Though it may be fairly certain that scholarship on YA will increase, that does not mean that the negative perceptions that some, especially in academia, hold about YA will simply fade away. History has shown that things largely enjoyed by teens are often heavily criticized, even when they have possible benefits, simply because they're associated with teens. Despite the wide range in background and status of the audience for YA, it remains a category that is largely

associated with teens. However, the increased adult interest in YA may be key to swinging the balance of the negative perception. Critics of YA won't necessarily suddenly endorse the category simply because more of their peers are reading the texts. However, if the doubters see more and more adults reading YA works, perhaps their interests will be piqued and they will spend more time investigating the qualities of the texts. After all, it only takes one quality text, such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, to really kick open the door, stoke the interest and set someone on a quest to find more.

Speaking of *Perks*, it also seems worth noting that realistic fictional stories like *Perks* are also experiencing an upswing right alongside all of the dystopian literature. Books like John Green's *Looking for Alaska* and Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* provide genuine portrayals of the successes and struggles associated with adolescence in ways that most readers can probably connect to on some level. In many ways, they are carrying on the honest and eye-opening model set forth by Stephen Chbosky in 1999, way back before he even knew how much YA would eventually change his life and how much his text would change the lives of his many readers who saw their own realities, whether past or present, reflected in the words he wrote.

In addition to noting the scorn that he received from some colleagues after writing a YA text, author Sherman Alexie also stated that "A lot of people have no idea that right now Y.A. is the Garden of Eden of literature" (qtd. in Rabb, "I'm Y.A. and I'm O.K."). Alexie does not elaborate on what he means by that particular description, but I interpret that as him recognizing the world of possibility that lies within the admittedly loose confines of YA. These possibilities extend to both writers, who get the opportunity to approach writing in a multitude of ways that they may not have experienced previously, and readers, who get to explore works that are almost certainly different from the majority of what they've studied in school. YA writers are

continually experimenting with formats and world building, which means that the YA narratives as a whole are an open-ended playground for curious minds. There may be writers doing the same sort of work in “adult” literature, but it does not seem to be occurring to the same degree as the testing of boundaries and preconceived notions that is occurring in YA. For that reason alone, YA deserves a seat at the table and will likely leave an unmistakable mark on the literary world.

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