

ISSN 0910-500X

# 英文學思潮

THOUGHT CURRENTS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

VOLUME LXXVII

2004

THE ENGLISH LITERARY SOCIETY  
OF  
AOYAMA GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

青山学院大学英文学会

## An Introduction to Literature for Adolescent and Young Adult Readers

Melvin R. Andrade

### Introduction

This paper presents a brief overview of the field of adolescent and young adult literature and analyzes recent trends. First it looks at the prominent characteristics of this age group and points out how literature for this group differs from literature for children and older adults. Next it examines some of the pedagogical approaches used to teach this literature in middle and high schools. After that, it analyzes trends in recommended and "best choice" books that have been compiled by two major educational organizations to guide both teachers and students in their selection of books in this genre for classroom study or pleasure reading. The recognition of adolescent and young adult literature as a distinct genre worthy of attention is important for two reasons. First, it can foster cross-cultural understanding by providing valuable insights into the increasing complex cultural milieus of the United States and Japan. Second, the themes and content, although often culturally specific, have high-interest and universal appeal that can motivate young foreign-language learners to become lifelong readers of English. In this paper, the expression "young adult" will be used as a shorthand form of "adolescent and young adult."

### What is Young Adult Literature?

Young adult literature refers to a genre of fiction and nonfiction works written primarily to appeal to middle and high school students ages 12-18. As Elliot and Dupuis (2002) put it, "Young adult literature is written for readers whose reading interests and skills are not yet mature but who are themselves maturing" (1). At the same time, however, it can also include books written for a general audience that deal with topics of interest or importance to this age group or works chosen to develop an awareness and appreciation of literature in general. In this case, a distinction can be made between "young adult literature" (the former) and "literature for young adults" (the latter). Examples of the first type would be Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*, which portrays the conflict between conformity and individuality among high school girls, and Carl Deuker's *Night Hoops*, which depicts the struggles and friendships of high school boys. Examples of the second type would be Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both often read in U.S. high schools. This type is also referred to as "traditional literature for young adults."

Although the concept of "children's literature" has existed for over a 100 years, literary interest in young adult literature is relatively short, only a few decades (Elliot and Dupuis 1). Nevertheless, there is "a wealth of fiction created especially for teens that deals with the possibilities and problems of contemporary life as experienced by this age group" that allows young readers to reflect on these troubling times and at the same time "laugh at themselves and their world and to escape that world in flights of fantasy" (Vandergrift 1). What distinguishes this literature from children's literature and literature for an older audience according to Vandergrift and others (e.g., Monseau and Salvner) is greater freedom in content and form, particularly an awareness that "societal changes

and the mass media have, in some ways, pushed young people to an earlier maturity, or at least a façade of maturity" (Vandergrift 1). Thus, themes that were once considered appropriate only for older readers are increasingly found in works for younger ones (i.e., abuse, racism, sexuality, violence). This "maturity" of young adult readers, however, is often superficial, requiring authors to exercise considerable sensitivity and caution in the way they handle their themes, something they might not otherwise do if writing for an older reader. On the other side of the spectrum, this maturing content in addition to an expanding vocabulary and greater sophistication in language, style, and literary content are what distinguish young adult from children's literature.

Because the content and writing style of young adult literature is geared to the aspirations, interests, needs, problems, reading abilities, and special circumstances of young readers, these books can offer richly rewarding experiences, especially when the readers engage in reflecting on, discussing, and writing about what they have read. Vandergrift expresses it this way:

Through story a reader can confirm one's own life experiences, illuminate and insight into those experiences, and vicariously expand and extend them. Although each of us must walk alone, authenticate our experiences, and make our own meanings and sense of truth in the world we know, there is always that tension between the uniqueness of the person and the commonalties of the human condition. This tension is evident in everyday life but revealed most fully in story. Story has always been a very powerful way of venturing beyond the scenes we know to connect with people, places, ideas, and events beyond our normal range.(1)

### Who are Young Adult Readers?

The adolescent years are a distinctive stage of life during which an individual must come to grips with many complex social, emotional, psychological, and physical changes. While the thinking

process becomes more abstract, logical, and idealistic, the individual at the same time begins to experience emotional autonomy — a breaking away from the parents and the development of stronger relationships with others. These changes are usually accompanied by *identity confusion* ("Who am I?") as the individual begins experimenting with life's many choices or a premature *identity foreclosure* ("This is who I am!") if the individual unquestioningly accepts the identity chosen by his/her parents or peers (Mikulecky, "Core Unit 2: Adolescent Development" 1-4).

What can make young adult literature an appealing source of reading material is that it frequently deals directly with the many changes and events in the young readers' lives. For example, in Chris Crutcher's *Ironman* a high school boy who is vigorous training for a triathlon is placed in an anger management therapy group at school as he tries to cope with a dysfunctional relationship with his father and still maintain his friendships with other boys.

### Approaches to Teaching Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature can be used to teach traditional elements of literary analysis such as setting, plot, conflict, character, symbolism, and irony, but in recent years many new approaches have been advocated as ways to make the reading of literature more appealing and more meaningful for learners of this age group. A great deal has been written about young adult literacy and its relationship to the teaching of literature (e.g., Alliance for Excellence in Education; Kamil; Moore et al.). Two of the major journals in this area are the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* and *The ALAN Review*. Another major source of information is the International Reading Association (IRA). Their Fall 2004 *Catalog of Professional Development Resources* lists 15 specialty publications providing guidelines and practical ideas for classroom activities. Some common themes running through this array of publications are (1) the importance of

helping students see a larger purpose for their education by integrating out-of-school experiences into the curriculum; (2) the value of critical, inquiry-based learning; (3) the need for having multiple teaching strategies and a variety of activities to motivate and engage the learners; (4) the integration of literature with the study of history, science, and the arts; and (5) the grouping of readings into thematic units for comparison and development of deep knowledge of the topics.

Application of these themes in the classroom has taken many different forms. For instance, in Joan B. Elliot and Mary M. Dupuis's *Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It, Teaching It, Loving It* there are 15 case studies and reports of how teachers have taught this literature in their classrooms. One teacher, Elizabeth A. Poe, describes how she integrated reader response and process writing approaches with a book review project involving humor in young adult literature. The student-written reviews went beyond being a classroom assignment and were published in a professional journal. Studies like these show how actively involving young learners in meaningful tasks can lead to real-world successes. In another report, Barbara Moss shows how nonfiction trade books (paperback books) can be used to motivate young readers who show little initial interest in reading literature. She explains the similarities and differences of discussing fiction and nonfiction books and illustrates how a two-column journey entry technique can be used to deepen the students' engagement with the text and extend their thinking.

There are many resources available online for teachers of young adult literature. For example, Vandergrift's *Young Adult Literature Page* offers detailed advice in 10 categories for building expertise in teaching young adult literature and applying it in the classroom. This advice ranges from building knowledge of the historical development, current trends, and characteristics of young adult literature to devising and publicizing booklists, displays, and materials collec-

tions. Other valuable features of this site are short essays on the application of reader response and feminist literary theories to the teaching of young adult literature. Of particular value are the guides to male and female coming-of-age stories, multicultural heroines, biographical works, and full-length novels based on traditional folk and fairy tales.

### **Trends in Recommended and "Best Choice" Books**

There are many guides available to readers, teachers, and librarians who are looking for the most appropriate fiction and nonfiction books for young adults. Two sources will be discussed here. They have been chosen based on the credibility of their selection process and their ease of access via the Internet, although print versions are available as well.

Among the most well known guides is the annual "Young Adults' Choices" list produced by the International Reading Association. Each year 30 paperback books are selected based on the result of voting by students in grades 7-12 in five different regions of the United States. To be included in the survey, each book had to have at least two positive reviews in established professional journals. In recent years, more than 50 publishers have submitted books for consideration, and in 2003 over 11,000 students rated their selections on a three-point scale ("I liked the book." "It was okay." "I didn't like the book.") This system allows the books to be evaluated both on quality (the professional journal reviews) and reader appeal (the students' votes). Over a recent three-year period, 2001-2003, several trends can be observed in the "Young Adults' Choices" lists (Table 1).

Table 1

Trends in IRA's "Young Adults' Choices" lists (number of books in each category)

	<u>2003</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Biography:	2	2	2	6
Drama:	12	14	10	36
Fantasy:	1	2	7	10
Folk tales:	0	0	1	1
History:	6	8	8	22
Horror:	2	2	1	5
Humor:	0	1	0	1
Mystery:	1	0	0	1
Poetry:	1	0	0	1
Romance:	2	0	0	2
Suspense:	3	1	1	5
TOTALS:	30	30	30	90

Note: Original analysis based on data from <[http://www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices\\_young\\_adult.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices_young_adult.html)>.

Before interpreting this data, it is important to note that nearly all of the books belong to overlapping categories. Many of the dramatic stories, for instance, contain elements of romance and suspense. Other points to note are that the "History" category includes both factual and historical fiction and that the "Fantasy" category includes works such as *Harry Potter*. "Adventure" is often a part of the historical and suspense novels.

By far the most popular genre is dramatic storytelling ("Drama"). These typically portray conflicts, hardships, and problems associated with relationships between friends and family members. Common themes are abuse, anger, fear, heartbreak, illness, love, pregnancy, racism, rape, self-doubt, sexuality, and suicide. Characters struggle in difficult situations and eventually through insight and the help of

others overcome their problems or learn to cope positively with them. Humor, mystery, suspense, tragedy, and victory are frequently intertwined in these stories. The history and historical fiction genres overlap to some degree with the dramatic novel in thematic content and add elements of adventure and regional color as well. Considering the characteristics of adolescent readers discussed above, it is not surprising that there would be high interest in these types of books.

The second source of recommended books is the Young Adult Library Association (YALSA), which is part of the American Library Association (ALA). YALSA produces several different lists of award-winning books, and the one discussed here is called "Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults." The selection process is complex, but briefly stated it involves a fifteen-member committee selected from the association's membership. The committee prepares one to five annotated list(s) of a least ten and no more than twenty-five recommended books organized into popular genres, topics, or themes. Although traditional categories of books are included (e.g., adventure, drama, fantasy, history, mystery, romance, poetry, science fiction), the committee can be very imaginative in their theme-based grouping of books. In recent years, for example, the following themes have appeared: "Lock It, Lick It, Click It: Diaries, Letters and Email" (2003); "I've Got a Secret" (2003); "Different Drummers" (1999); and "Feel Good Books" (1998). According to YALSA's "Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults: Policies and Procedures" (2), the focus of the selection process is on finding books that are "timely topics, currently fashionable subjects, and fads" and "perennially popular genres, topics, or themes" (e.g., adventure, biography, thrillers). Both fiction and nonfiction works are included. Consequently, we might conclude that YALSA's aim, as librarians, is primarily to attract young readers to books and get them in the habit of reading on their own with books of high appeal, although that is

not to say that these books lack literary value.

Below is a list of YALSA's genre selections over a recent three-year period. As mentioned above, each category contains ten to twenty-five books:

- 2003: (1) Diaries, Letters, and Email  
 (2) Flights of Fantasy  
 (3) This Small World: A Glimpse at Many Cultures  
 (4) I've Got a Secret

- 2002: (1) Relationships: Friends and Family  
 (2) War: Conflict and Consequences,  
 (3) Tales of the Cities  
 (4) Graphic Novels: Superheroes and Beyond

- 2001: (1) Humor  
 (2) Paranormal  
 (3) Poetry  
 (4) Western

What should be immediately clear is that the different selection processes of YALSA and IRA lead to different results that make it difficult to compare the two lists. Whereas the students in IRA's survey had to make their selections from the books presented to them based on what publishers were offering that year, the committee members at YALSA began first with categories and then searched for the most popular books in each category regardless of copyright date. The YALSA list has the advantage of providing a quick guide to a thematic collection of works. Thus, perhaps one cannot speak of "trends" when using this list. In contrast, IRA's has the advantage of providing a wider-ranging list of currently popular new books, and we can see more clearly how reading tastes change or remain the same. Each method has its place.

### Summary

This paper has aimed to provide an overview of the field of

young adult literature. It has pointed out what distinguishes this genre from children's literature and literature for older readers. Further, it has explained how the popularity of many works in the genre can be attributed to the degree to which their content is geared to the life-stage characteristics and events of its young readers. From the teacher's perspective, there are a variety of approaches to the teaching of this genre, some text-based and some reader-based, and there is a growing number of resource guides to aid selecting materials for personal reading, a course, or a library collection. Reading young adult literature can be personally rewarding to the individual and provide valuable insights into the lives of young people and the worlds they live in.

#### Works Cited

- The ALAN Review*. Published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Available online from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University at <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/>.
- Alliance for Excellence in Education. "Adolescent Literacy." Website. Accessed 21 June 2004. <[http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent\\_literacy/index.html](http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent_literacy/index.html)>.
- "Adolescent Literacy." National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). 27 August 2004. Website. <<http://www.ncte.org/collections/adolescentliteracy>>.
- Elliot, Joan B., and Mary M. Dupuis, eds. *Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It, Teaching It, Loving It*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002.
- Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Published by the International Reading Association. Online information at <<http://www.reading.org/publications/jaal/>>.
- International Reading Association. *Catalog of Professional Development Resources, Fall 2004*. International Reading Association. 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, Delaware, 19714-8139. Also available online at <[www.reading.org](http://www.reading.org)>
- Kamil, Michael L. *Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century*. Alliance for Excellence in Education. 2003. Available online at <<http://www.all4ed.org/publications/AdolescentsAndLiteracy.pdf>>.
- Mikulecky, Larry. "Lecture Notes, Units 1-6" in *Teaching Adolescent Literature: An Online Course*. Website. Accessed on 27 August 2004 at <<http://www.indiana.edu/~1535/lectures.html>>. 2004.
- Monseau, Virginia, and Gary Salvner, eds. *Reading Their World: The Young Adult Novel in the Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992.
- Moore, David W., Thomas W. Bean, Deanna Birdyshaw, and James A. Rycik. *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1999. Available online at <<http://www.reading.org/pdf/1036.pdf>>.

- Vandergrift, Kay E. *Vandergrift's Young Adult Literature Page*. Personal Website. Accessed 16 June 2004. <<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/YoungAdult/index.html>>
- Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). "Best Books for Young Adults." American Library Association. Website. Accessed 16 June 2004. <<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/bestbooksya/bestbooksyoung.htm>>
- Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). "Booklists & Book Awards." American Library Association. Website. <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists>. Accessed 16 June 2004.
- Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). "Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults." American Library Association. Website. <<http://www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/popularpaperback/popularpaperbacks.htm>>. Accessed 16 June 2004.

#### Literature Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Crutcher, Chris. *Ironman*. Greenwillow Books, 1995.
- Deuker, Carl. *Night Hoops*. New York: Harper Trophy, 2001.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1960.
- Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. NY: Scholastic, 2002.
- Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. New York: Knopf, 2000.

sh (NCTE).  
http://scholar.

June 2004.

August 2004.

m: Reading

association.

Fall 2004.

ark, Dela-

for Excel-  
ls/Adoles-

n Online  
/lectures.

Novel in

cent Lit-  
national  
ble on-