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O.K., If YA Lit Is So Good, Why Can't I Sell It in My School?

Mike Angelotti

In the early seventies when a small and passionate group of believers formed what eventually came to be the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents—NCTE (ALAN), most proponents of adolescent novels (the label in vogue before “YA”) believed the value of their literature hinged on relevant content, readable language and form, and improving literary quality. As evidence, they pointed to the surge of young people voluntarily reading such works as S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, Paul Zindel’s *The Pigman*, Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender*, and William Armstrong’s *Sounder*. These books were not only inherently motivating and lasting as YA paperbacks go (they are still on bookstore racks), but they also had literary quality, particularly when compared to the “junior novels” of previous years. The shift was one, as Dwight Burton put it, from “pap to protein.”

What could have been more ideal for sagging literature programs and declining student interest in school reading in general? Here was a readable literature of reasonable literary quality and content that could move kids from children’s literature to the classics, a sure answer to the critics of adolescent literature in the schools who had cited its literary quality and content as major defects. No matter. The bulk of the English teaching community virtually ignored adolescent literature as serious curriculum material.

Since then, my sense is that professional acceptability of YA novels has improved steadily, though not dramatically. ALAN membership numbers in the thousands and its annual two-day workshop is typically the best attended at NCTE. Other YA events seem to draw well at other conferences. At least two new books on teaching

YA literature by Robert Probst and Arthea “Charlie” Reed have been released in 1984, and a third, by Alleen Nilsen and Ken Donelson is being revised. Such choice has been rare in this business and publishers would not gamble unless there was enough market to share. The April 1984 ASCD “Curriculum Update” focused totally on an informal survey directed to “What Literature Should Adolescents Be Reading?”

With the emergence of American writers such as Robert Cormier and the growing recognition of British, Canadian, and Australian authors, quality YA fiction available to teachers, librarians, and young people seems boundless, unignorable. Most students still willingly read it, enjoy it, talk about it. Yet, resistance to it by many English teachers and curriculum makers remains strong. Why is that? Are they right? Is YA literature all that it is cracked up to be? If it is, does it better serve kids in the curriculum or out?

These are neither new nor easy questions. But I have asked them of teachers, students, librarians, administrators, and university colleagues in various parts of the country during the past eight years and have come to some conclusions based on their responses that may serve as points of departure for teaching YA literature in the next few years.

Why the Resistance?

The basics and censorship movements have had strong effects though not nearly so much on secondary elementary teachers. Still, some secondary principals and teachers purely do not want to tempt fate. Most English teachers report significant control of content that they teach, particularly at the high school level, but the trend seems

to be towards more centralized control. They self-censor books they feel uncomfortable with (i.e., Blume, Cormier) but mainly teach classic and anthologized literature because they feel it has more substance than YA literature, because they love it, because it is there, and because it is safe. Classic literature has a certain mystique. It exemplifies literary quality, teaches universals, and is morally good.

Those who have and want to teach YA literature often do not know what to do with it. Others who do read it do not choose to use it as regular classroom material because they feel it best serves their students as independent reading, untouched by conventional literary analyses. Some who want to use YA books don't because of peer pressure, lack of books, lack of administrative support. Some use it regularly. Most frequent school uses are as outside reading, in remedial programs, and in libraries. Many librarians see most English teachers as too rigid in assignments and the main reason secondary students develop avoidance behaviors in reading literature. There is at least one exception in every school. Higher education colleagues are typically unread in the field but, nevertheless, suspect that YA literature has "very little to appreciate."

Why is there significant resistance to mainstreaming YA literature into secondary literature curricula? The reasons haven't changed much over the years: ignorance, fear, snobbery, rigidity, considered choice. Somewhere in those terms also must be embedded a lack of sensitivity to the developmental nature of literary growth and to the value of interest and readability to comprehension and literary response.

In all fairness, I perceive each of those terms in the kindest sense: ignorance means lack of knowledge by chance or design; fear is of self, administrators, peers, parents, students, the unknown; snobbery is a passionate love and rejection born of narrowness of vision; rigidity is hard, sometimes unperceived, habit that rejects change out of hand; considered choice is intelligent decision-making based on knowledgeable evaluation of alternatives.

Are They Right?

Sometimes. YA literature is not always the right choice for individuals or classes for developmental and other pedagogical reasons. Given a choice, many students choose not to read YA literature

but prefer a classic or a technical manual. When a job is on the line, or even peer acceptance, how necessary is any particular literature? Snobbery even has its virtue: Shakespeare in the hands of a passionate teacher can be as relevant and as comprehensible as Cormier. Rigidity is a tough one, but if it is habit that benefits kids and teaches literature, it can be right. Considered choice is usually right.

But most of the time, they are not right. There is a place for good YA literature in most literature programs because it has value for most kids and teachers. Almost anything teachable related to reading and responding to most literature can be taught with YAL. Because it is so provocative, it can naturally be integrated with composition. To ignore it, in the end, hurts kids who might have learned to read, write, and think a little better because a literature was there that they could understand.

Is YAL All That It Is Cracked Up To Be?

Reasonably taken, yes. It works no magic. It will not teach all the goals of a literature program by itself. It is a literature that has good books and bad, interesting content for many kids, average readability of fifth through eighth grade, much variety in content and literary complexity. It apparently can sustain interest in reading literature during adolescence and can provide a developmental bridge between children's literature and adult literature for many young people.

Can It Serve Kids Better In the Curriculum Or Out?

This is a provocative question. The independent readership is high. Kids pay money to read these books. Why tamper with a good thing. Institutionalizing YA books to the extent that they are "taught" in the same way other school literature is often taught could severely damage their popularity. Perhaps, the most effective use of YAL is as free-choice, outside reading, with, possibly, some sort of response and discussion mechanism tied to it. It's been said that the quickest way to cure kids of TV is to bring it into the school curriculum and teach kids how to watch it. Could the same thing be true of young adult literature? On the other hand, the interest and readability factors cannot be ignored. Surely these positive qualities can be parlayed into some instructional advantage in literature, reading, and writing classes.

The key, here, must relate to the education of classroom teachers. How well will they know YA books, developmental reading, composing strategies, and literature teaching techniques appropriate to experiencing YA literature?

Why Can't I Sell YA Literature In My School?

A good salesperson needs to know at least three things: product, audience, and how to sell. In regard to YAL, understanding the first two elements is self-evident. As to how to sell, very softly. Good books sell themselves; good teachers sell themselves. Good teachers teaching YA literature well will sell YA literature. It would not hurt at all, either, to slip an occasional copy of

The ALAN Review, clandestinely, into the mailboxes of certain ignorant, fearful, snobbish, rigid, and even painfully intelligent elements of the resistance. The *ALAN Review*, a 30-page "slick" appearing three times a year and being edited by Arthea "Charlie" Reed from the University of North Carolina, can be ordered for \$10.00 through Bill Subick, NCTE Headquarters, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801.

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The Chase

I can list
the longitudes and latitudes
of your moods—
trace on a timeline
the dates in your life—
and, on command,
cite the sculptors
who've shaped your dreams.

Then I can
choose to challenge you—
What cards need I cast
to make my house full?
What formula need I find
to convert desire to decision?
And finally, in what act of *The Here and Now*
does solo become duet—
fulfillment the stand-in for regret?

Make your move—
select your space—
Is it the questions to your answers
that you've misplaced?
Then I'll take a turn—
it's a game for two—
my not-so-trivial
pursuit of you.

Linda Opyr
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