
AN INTRODUCTION TO TEN OUTSTANDING YOUNG- ADULT AUTHORS IN THE UNITED STATES

KATHY LATROBE AND TRISHA HUTCHERSON

ROBERT CORMIER
PAUL FLEISCHMAN
RUSSELL FREEDMAN
LOIS LOWRY
ROBIN MCKINLEY
WALTER DEAN MYERS
KATHERINE PATERSON
GARY PAULSEN
RICHARD PECK
VIRGINIA EUWER WOLFF

YOUNG-ADULT LITERATURE is literature read by young people in approximately grades 7 through 12. Unlike other publishing movements, young-adult literature in the United States became a phenomenon in almost a single year, 1967, when writers and publishers of materials for teenagers reached beyond the simple plots and white, middle-class protagonists

of the post-World War II era and presented the more culturally diverse and socially complex environment of the 1960s. Three groundbreaking novels published expressly for the young-adult audience in 1967 were S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, Ann Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. Among generalized characteristics of these and subsequent contemporary realistic young-adult novels are their varied subjects and often fast-paced narratives about independent and accomplishing protagonists who are presented from the point of view of a young person addressing emotions shared by young adult readers. These characteristics, emphasizing the needs and interests of young adults, appealed to the readership of the day.

Since 1967, young-adult authors across many genres have created an enduring and respected body of literature that young adults have chosen to read. Any reader, young or old, may enjoy the best of young-adult literature by selecting from the wide range of works by ten outstanding U.S. authors: Robert Cormier, Paul Fleischman, Russell Freedman, Lois Lowry, Robin McKinley, Walter Dean Myers, Katherine Paterson, Gary Paulsen, Richard Peck, and Virginia Euwer Wolff.

These ten have produced works that appeal emotionally to young people at their developmental levels and offer them opportunities to read with understanding and literary appreciation. As a group, their combined works represent the broad scope of young-adult literature, including the genres of poetry, contemporary realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, historical fiction, biography, and information books. More important, however, authorities in the field have recognized these authors. For example, Alleen Pace Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson have included the nine who are fiction writers in their honor list, a standard feature in their classic textbook, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, now in its sixth edition; and the *Middle and Junior High School Library Catalog* (2000), a primary collection-development tool for public and school libraries, lists multiple titles for each of the ten authors. Too, the ten have earned high recognition from the American Library Association's book award committees: Newbery Award committees have honored eight of the authors; Margaret Edwards Award committees have honored four; and Mike Printz Award committees two.¹ Finally, the young-adult titles discussed below are widely accessible in school and public libraries, and all are currently in print, indicating their ongoing success among young adult readers.

ROBERT CORMIER (1925–2000) is best known for his contemporary realistic novels that deal with dark themes. Patricia Campbell writes, "What fascinates Cormier, the eternal question that draws him back again and again, is How can we confront the utterly Implacable and remain human? His emotion centers on the individual powerless, cut off from all recourse. Thus, Cormier's plots often turn the symbolic regaining of power through one supremely irrational, but self-determined gesture. In that gesture is the source of hope" (1986). Among the topics and issues Cormier has explored are hidden or concealed identity in *Fade* (Dell, 1989), *Heroes* (Delacorte 1998) and *The Bumblebee Flies Anyway* (Knopf 1983); the witness relocation program in *I Am the Cheese* (Pantheon 1977); guilt and forgiveness in *In the Middle of the Night* (Delacorte 1995); sins of omission in *The Chocolate War* (Pantheon 1974); and the denial of evil in *Tunes for Bears to Dance To* (Delacorte 1992). His novels lead young adults to the tough questions that promote hard thinking, lively discussion, and the exploration of their emotional needs in relation to society.

Cormier's first novel, *The Chocolate War*, offers young adults a sophisticated tragedy about conformity and manipulation. A literary touchstone among young-adult novels, *The Chocolate War* includes irony and subtle religious symbolism that is used as a foil. The novel's stunning and tragic outcome heightens young adults' emotional experiences of pity and fear. During a brutal beating, in which the main character, Jerry, suffers a fractured jaw and other injuries, "A new sickness invaded Jerry, the sickness of knowing what he had become, another animal, another beast, another violent person

in a violent world." There is no compromise for a happy ending in this or most novels by Cormier. However, typical of Cormier's protagonists, Jerry confronts evil—therein is this author's hopefulness.

PAUL FLEISCHMAN is one of the most versatile and innovative young-adult authors. His first young-adult book was an excellent collection of poetry, *I Am Phoenix* (Harper & Row 1985). It was imaginatively designed as a script in two columns to be read aloud by two different voices that vary in speaking alone, together, or as an echo. Using the same approach, he wrote *Joyful Noise* (Harper & Row 1988) and won the Newbery Award for a collection marked by extraordinary imagery. These first creative endeavors involved young adults imaginatively as they read the poems aloud in pairs or pairs of groups.

Writing in other genres, he has continued to challenge young adults to read and think creatively and to form a partnership with him in the interpretation and completion of a work. For example, in *Dateline* (Candlewick 1996), he retold the legendary story of the Trojan War with each page of text facing twentieth-century newspaper clippings and graphics that imply the relevancy of ancient themes to contemporary times. Young adult readers, however, must discover the thematic connections. Fleischman has also used the technique of multiple or alternating narrators to engage creative reading. In *Bull Run* (HarperCollins 1993), fifteen narrators present sixty accounts of their experiences in the Civil War. Some narrators know each other, some never meet, and some meet in passing. What they all share is the Battle of Bull Run, and their collective stories present a multifaceted account of the Civil War. In *Seedfolks* (HarperCollins 1997), he created thirteen different narrators, one for each chapter, to communicate the building of a diverse but close urban community around a common garden. In *Whirligig* (Holt 1998), Fleischman used the structure of four accounts or short stories and a single narrator, Brent. Young adult readers are thus involved with the main character, who is sentenced to travel to the four corners of the forty-eight states and build four small monuments for a girl he killed in a driving accident. Young adult readers may again be active in creating the story: determining the nature and breadth of Brent's emotional experience, they may choose not to read each account of a monument built, they may read the accounts in a different order, or they may focus on one more than another. Fleischman's creative uses of multiple voices and narrators, integrated illustrations and graphics, and flexible structures engage young readers in creative reading and story construction.

RUSSELL FREEDMAN, an author of young-adult nonfiction, is best known for his photo-illustrated biographies of famous individuals. He won the Newbery Award for *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (Clarion 1987), a *Boston Globe-Honor Book Award* for *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (Clarion 1990), and Newbery honors

for *The Wright Brothers* (Holiday 1991) and *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery* (Clarion 1993).² In 1998 he received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for his lifetime contribution to literature for young people.³ The Wilder Committee cited his works honored by the Newbery Award and also *Indian Chiefs* (Holiday 1987), *Buffalo Hunt* (Holiday 1996), and *The Life and Death of Crazy Horse* (Holiday 1996).

Careful research enables Freedman to write convincingly and to intrigue readers with details. Freedman's search for and use of primary resources (e.g., handwritten notes, diaries, and personal statements) allows him to capture Lincoln's compassion—about a Union deserter, Lincoln noted, "Well, I think this boy can do us more good above ground than under ground!" Freedman developed the unifying theme of *Eleanor Roosevelt* from her personal statement, "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face." And Freedman's search for accurate quotes adds entertaining detail, such as Teddy Roosevelt's comment upon Eleanor and Franklin's wedding: "At least they're keeping the name in the family." However, Freedman often conveys the most intricate details through the careful selection of archival photographs that are coordinated with the text. About the use of photographs, Freedman has noted that photos make the past come alive because expressions are timeless. In *Eleanor Roosevelt*, photographs take the reader from Eleanor as a small child called "Granny" by her beautiful mother to a self-assured elder stateswoman addressing the United Nations. In *The Wright Brothers*, archival photographs illustrate the successes and failures of early flight and the intricacies of airplane design. Russell Freedman's creative use of carefully researched details makes his photobiographies appealing not only to award committees but also to young adult readers.

LOIS LOWRY has written more than twenty-five novels for children and young adults and has won Newbery Medals for *Number the Stars* (Houghton Mifflin 1989) and *The Giver* (Houghton Mifflin 1993). She has written novels in a variety of genres. Among her works of historical fiction are *Autumn Street*, told by the main character, Elizabeth, who feels threatened by danger when her father leaves to fight in World War II, and *Number the Stars*, which relates Annemarie's family's effort to smuggle her best friend's family away from a Nazi roundup in Copenhagen during World War II. Her humorous stories include *The One Hundredth Thing about Caroline* (Houghton Mifflin 1983), a novel about a girl named Caroline who imagines that her mother's friend is plotting her demise; *Stay! Keeper's Story* (Houghton Mifflin 1997), a fantasy about a dog who lives three identities and speaks in rhymed couplets; and two novels about Caroline's younger brother, *Your Move, J.P.!* (Houghton Mifflin 1990) and *Switcharound* (Houghton Mifflin 1985). Among her contemporary realistic novels are *Rabble Starkey* (Houghton Mifflin 1987), a mother and daughter story,

and *A Summer to Die* (Houghton Mifflin 1977), a novel Lowry based on the summer that her sister died.

The Giver is Lowry's most widely read and studied young-adult novel. Set in a dystopian future, it presents an impersonal but seemingly ideal society until the main character, Jonas, participates in the Ceremony of Twelve, the event at which the community's twelve-year-olds are assigned their lifelong careers. Jonas is identified to be the next receiver of memory, and, as such, he begins the process of learning from the Giver all the colors, music, emotions, and feelings that his society has given up for the common good. He learns about love, families, hunger, disease, war, and death. The process is painful, and Jonas is forced to reinterpret his community's everyday activities. He realizes that there is no hunger because the population is tightly controlled, that there is no disease because the ill and imperfect are murdered or "released." When his father, a "Nurturer," observes that an underdeveloped baby, named Gabriel, will be "released," Jonas is horrified. He kidnaps Gabriel and flees to "Elsewhere." Their allegorical journey has a puzzling conclusion that results in an open-ended plot that gives readers questions, not answers. Lowry has carefully shaped an imaginative premise, a complex setting, and significant Christian symbolism within a novel that sets a perfect and secure world, unchallenged and tightly controlled, against one diverse, free, and unpredictable.

ROBIN MCKINLEY is an award-winning young-adult author of fantasy novels. Her high fantasy, *The Hero and the Crown* (Greenwillow 1984), winner of the Newbery Award, incorporates folklore elements of northern Europe into a seriously told story about a princess who slays a dragon and eventually saves the kingdom. Although published later, it is the prequel to *The Blue Sword* (Greenwillow 1982), a romantic-quest fantasy that earned a Newbery Honor. The Children's Literature Association presented the Phoenix Award to McKinley in 1998 for the novel *Beauty* (Harper 1985), a retelling of the French tale "Beauty and the Beast."⁴ Several years later she retold the same story in the fantasy *Rose Daughter* (Greenwillow 1997), which, compared to *Beauty*, has a more mystical style and richer characterization. Her most recent retelling of a folktale is *Spindle's End* (Putnam 2000).

McKinley's fantasies share similar characteristics. They are mythical quests that typically include an archetypal rite of passage that resonates with young adult readers, especially girls who discover competent, brave, and daring heroines and their adventures. Her fantasies command the reader's suspension of disbelief through their serious tone, complex characterizations, detailed settings, and elaborate style with complex sentences and slow cadences. An excellent introduction to Robin McKinley's fantasies is her short novel *The Stone Fey* (Harcourt 1998), published as a fifty-two-page book illustrated by John Clapp.

WALTER DEAN MYERS is a prolific African American author of more than fifty books for children and young adults. Among

his award-winning books for young adults are *Scorpions* (HarperCollins 1988), a Newbery Honor book; *Now Is Your Time* (HarperCollins 1991), a nonfiction work that received the Coretta Scott King Award; and *Monster* (HarperCollins 1999), which was a Coretta Scott King Honor book, winner of the Printz Award, and a National Book Award finalist.⁵ Many of Myers's books reflect his happy but turbulent childhood and young adulthood in Harlem, where he grew up with foster parents. In his Margaret Edwards Award acceptance speech, he said: "It is [the] language of values which I hope to bring to my books. . . . I want . . . to etch those values in terms of the ideal. Young people need ideals . . . as central . . . guideposts which tell them what they can be, should be, and indeed are."

Myers explores the issue of values—especially the role of personal responsibility—in *Monster*, the story of sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon, who is on trial for murder. He has been charged with murder for his indirect role as a lookout during a robbery. Steve tells his own story through three modes: a script he is developing, his descriptions of the courtroom events, and his personal journal. Myers uses the courtroom drama to move the story forward, the script to give Steve psychological distance, and the journal to give voice to Steve's emotional reflections, including those about horrifying prison brutality. Myers skillfully weaves these strands together to create a multifaceted but flawed protagonist who, not accepting his responsibility, raises tough moral questions. Steve's relationship with his family is forever altered as he searches for an identity as a script character, asking himself, "Am I a monster?"

KATHERINE PATERSON won the 1998 Hans Christian Andersen Medal, the International Board on Books for Young People's international award that recognizes the body of an author's work.⁶ She received her first Newbery Award for the contemporary realistic novel *Bridge to Terabithia* (Crowell 1977), a realistic novel about a brilliantly characterized family that copes with the untimely death of a young neighbor and friend, and she received her second Newbery Award for *Jacob Have I Loved* (Crowell 1980), a historical novel about twin sisters Caroline and Louisa. Her other major awards include a Newbery Honor Award for *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Crowell 1978), a contemporary realistic novel about the title character, Gilly, a magnificently developed foster child; the Scott O'Dell Award for *Jip, His Story* (Penguin 1996), a novel set in Vermont during 1855 and 1856 in which Jip's father arrives to reclaim his son, who is also his slave property; the Edgar Allan Poe Award for *The Master Puppeteer* (Crowell 1976), historical fiction set in eighteenth-century Osaka, Japan; and the Children's Literature Association's Phoenix Award for *Of Nightingales That Weep* (Crowell 1974), a historical novel set in Japan during the days of the Heike-supported court.⁷

One of her most enduring young-adult works is *Jacob Have I Loved*, a historical novel that explores the relationships revolving around twin sisters, Louisa (Wheeze) and Caroline, as they

come of age on a small island in the Chesapeake Bay during World War II. Wheeze is the complex protagonist who, as the self-perceived unloved twin ("Jacob have I loved more"), interprets her world and the people in it through first-person narration. The integrated setting isolates the characters on an island that erodes with every storm and thus symbolizes the small fishing community that cannot sustain its way of life. Until she and her sister leave the island, Wheeze relates the conflicts within herself; among her family, beset by a mean-spirited grandmother; and of a world at war. The final chapter, set years later in an isolated region of Appalachia, brings Wheeze full circle as a wife and midwife who, though appearing to provide unequal care for the babies near her, carefully gives to each what is needed.

GARY PAULSEN writes fiction that is popular with young adults, especially middle-school boys who like adventure and survival stories set in the outdoors. Having been a hunter and trapper as well as a competitor in the Iditarod dogsled race, Paulsen incorporates his knowledge as an outdoorsman into the details and action of his novels, including three that have won a Newbery Honor: *Dogsong* (Simon & Schuster 1985), *Hatchet* (Macmillan 1986), and *The Winter Room* (Scholastic 1989). The child of abusive and alcoholic parents, Paulsen also incorporates his personal boyhood experiences into his novels. For example, one of his most entertaining novels is *Harris and Me: A Summer Remembered* (Harcourt 1993), a hilarious episodic account of the eleven-year-old narrator (Me) who is removed from his alcoholic parents to spend a summer on a farm with Harris, his imaginative but risk-taking nine-year-old second cousin. The two barely survive one daring antic after another. However, after the narrator has had an unforgettable summer with a loving family, he returns to his parents' home in the city.

Paulsen's most popular novel is *Hatchet*, which has hardcover sales exceeding 750,000, paperback sales exceeding 3,000,000, and young-readers' choice awards from numerous states, including Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, Virginia, and Oklahoma. *Hatchet* is an adventure novel about thirteen-year-old Brian's fifty-four-day survival in the Canadian wilderness. Brian's strengths are his patience, thoughtfulness, and a single tool—his hatchet. As he has done with other protagonists, Paulsen isolates Brian and places him in a natural environment where he can grow and learn. Paulsen has developed three sequels to *Hatchet*: *The River* (Doubleday 1991), set a year later when Brian returns to the wilderness to repeat what he did in *Hatchet* but this time as the subject of a government psychologist's study that takes an unexpected turn; *Brian's Winter* (Doubleday 1999), based on the speculation that Brian had not been rescued in fifty-four days but was forced to endure the harsh winter; and *Brian's Return* (Delacorte 1999), based on Brian's return to the wilderness, where he feels he really belongs.

RICHARD PECK, who has contributed to literature for young adults for almost forty years, has earned high awards. He received the 1990 Margaret Edwards Award for his contribution to young-adult literature, the Newbery Award for *A Year Down Yonder* (Penguin 2000), and a Newbery Honor Award for *A Long Way from Chicago* (Penguin 1998). An implicit theme in all his books is that young people can never begin to grow up until they experience independence from their peers. Peck has expressed this theme in a variety of genres. In the suspenseful novel *Are You in the House Alone?* (Viking 1976), Gail, a victim of acquaintance rape, must find an independent strength as she endures the doubt of family, friends, and police and as she frequently encounters her attacker, a son of a respected family. In *The Last Safe Place on Earth* (Delacorte 1995), fifteen-year-old Todd first faces censorship alone in his suburban community. In *Remembering the Good Times* (Delacorte 1985), Kate and Buck sadly look back on their friend Trav's suicide and realize that he never revealed who he was, much less declared his independence. However, Grandma Dowdel in *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial 1998) and *A Year Down Yonder* (Dial 2000) is one of Peck's most independent characters.

A Long Way from Chicago not only expresses Peck's most common theme, it also demonstrates his skill as storyteller. The novel's seven chapters are short stories, each set in rural Illinois during one week of seven consecutive summers (1929–35), which Joey and his younger sister, Mary Alice, spend with their Grandma Dowdel. Joey recounts the Depression-era events as an elderly adult who describes Grandma with wry benevolence. She trespasses, lies, poaches, cheats, and conspires—but for good motives. While maintaining she likes to “keep herself to herself,” she saves a friend's (or enemy's) house from foreclosure, secures Joey a plane ride at the county fair, feeds hungry drifters a catfish supper, and protects an abused child. Each short story reinforces her as a larger-than-life, ungrandmotherly trickster who imaginatively and surprisingly engineers laugh-out-loud justice. While communicating a heartfelt sense of time and place, the seven episodic chapters form one of the most humorous novels in young-adult fiction. In the same spirit, the sequel, *A Year Down Yonder*, is about Mary Alice's return to live a year alone with Grandma Dowdel.

VIRGINIA EUWER WOLFF writes contemporary realistic novels that engross readers with the struggles of everyday life. The first, *Probably Still Nick Swansen* (Holt 1988), is a poignant story about sixteen-year-old Nick Swansen who, being learning disabled, endures the taunts of classmates, a last-minute rejection from his prom date, and always the memory of helplessly watching his sister drown. In this story, Wolff achieves a completely believable narrative. In *Bat 6* (Scholastic 1998), Wolff masterfully develops the setting, a small town in the Pacific Northwest during 1949, where issues of race and war appear to be laid aside as attention focuses on the local rivalry of the

town's girls softball team. Team members include a player who lost her father in the attack at Pearl Harbor and another whose Japanese family was interned during World War II. Twenty-one versions of their story are told by different team members. Together, the voices reveal unacknowledged prejudice, shock when violence disrupts a softball game, and a slow realization that the community could have prevented the disaster.

Wolff has completed two novels, *Make Lemonade* (Holt 1993) and *True Believer* (Atheneum 2001), in the proposed *Make Lemonade* trilogy. The main character of each is LaVaughn, who is a fourteen-year-old babysitter bound for college in *Make Lemonade*. She and her mother know that education is LaVaughn's hope for a better life, and college is a concrete reality in LaVaughn's home, where “you have to walk around it in the rooms like furniture.” To save for college, LaVaughn baby-sits the two children of seventeen-year-old Jolly, a single mother. Jolly is a foil for LaVaughn, who sympathetically wants to help her, even to the point of babysitting without pay and thus jeopardizing her own dream. In sixty-six brief, free-verse chapters, each character clarifies her own values by eventually taking responsibility for her future and by focusing on education to escape from grinding inner-city poverty. In *True Believer*, fifteen-year-old LaVaughn maintains her optimism and resiliency during her relationship with her first boyfriend. Reflecting the sounds of teenage speech, the poetic narratives are compact, often ungrammatical, subtle, believable, and universal. Reading the voices aloud intensifies the setting's milieu of despair, poverty (“even the roaches are driven up the wall”), illiteracy, poignancy, hope, humor, and self-esteem (“steam”).

In conclusion, young adults will, ideally, find works by these authors as well as many other fine writers in large and diverse young-adult book collections in their public and school libraries. Wide access to books is necessary to meet young people's needs to understand not only where they are but also where they are going. As Richard Peck explains in his dedication to *Anonymously Yours*,

I read because one life isn't enough, and in the page of a book I can be anybody;
I read because the words that build the story become mine, to build my life;
I read not for happy endings but for new beginnings; I'm just beginning myself, and I wouldn't mind a map;
I read because I have friends who don't, and young though they are, they're beginning to run out of material;
I read because every journey begins at the library, and it's time for me to start packing;
I read because one of these days I'm going to get out of this town, and
I'm going to go everywhere and meet everybody, and I want to be ready.

For whatever reason any young adult is reading, he or she will have a better opportunity to find the most personally relevant book by visiting with the library's young-adult librarian. Furthermore, discussing that book with the librarian, a teacher, a parent, or a friend will strengthen the young person's reading experience. Young-adult literature is for everyone because it offers pleasurable opportunities to build understanding across the generations.

University of Oklahoma

¹ The Association of Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, annually presents the Newbery Medal to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children (to age fourteen years) published in the United States during the preceding year. The association may name Newbery Honor Awards for books that are also truly distinguished. The award is restricted to authors who are citizens or residents of the United States.

The Young Adult Library Services Association administers the Margaret Edwards Award, a \$2,000 prize given to an author whose book or books have provided young adults with a window through which they can view their world and which will help them grow and understand themselves and their role in society.

The Mike Printz Award, administered by the Young Adult Library Services Association, honors the highest literary achievement in young-adult books published during the preceding year, beginning in 2000. The association may also give Printz Honor Awards to books that are distinguished.

² The *Boston Globe*-Horn Book Awards for excellence in literature for children and young adults are presented in three categories: picture book, fiction and poetry, and nonfiction. The judges may also name several honor books in each category. Eligible books must be published in the United States, though they may be written or illustrated by citizens of any country.

³ The Association of Library Service to Children administers the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, which honors an author or illustrator whose books, published in the United States, have over a period of years made a substantial contribution to literature for young people. Since 1980 the association has presented the award every three years.

⁴ The Children's Literature Association, a professional organization that encourages serious scholarship and research in children's literature, presents the annual Phoenix Award to an author for a book published twenty years earlier but not honored by a major award at the time.

⁵ The American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table presents the annual Coretta Scott King Awards to young-adult and children's authors and illustrators of African descent whose distinguished books promote an understanding of and appreciation for peace and brotherhood.

⁶ The International Board on Books for Young People presents the Hans Christian Andersen Award in even years to an author and an illustrator whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature.

⁷ Mr. O'Dell established the annual Scott O'Dell Award in 1981 to recognize an outstanding work of historical fiction set in the New World. The Mystery Writers of America presents annual Edgar Allan Poe awards in various categories, including juvenile books.

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KATHY LATROBE is Professor of Library and Information Studies at the University of Oklahoma, where she teaches in the area of library materials and services for young people.

TRISHA HUTCHERSON, a graduate of the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies, is a school library media specialist at Nicoma Park Junior High in Choctaw, Oklahoma.

