

# “You Can’t Handle The Truth!”: Reality, Censorship, and the Young Adult Novel

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Perhaps the strongest argument regarding the value of literature for young adults is that it allows the juvenile reader to experience a host of scenarios that he or she has never experienced and, ordinarily, will probably never undergo in real life. This vicarious function may, of course, be true of any literature but is of particular interest to me when it applies to an audience assumed to be going through a particularly dynamic stage characterized by the changing expectations, both of one’s self, of others, and of the world.

Parallel to that argument would be the assertion that a realistic YAL story should portray both positive and negative experiences, thus providing a more balanced and accurate picture of the world. Yet throughout the existence of the novel for YAs, there have been those who remain hesitant to allow young readers exposure to stories which delve into the harsher realities of growing up such as crime, violence, drugs, and the like.

For purposes of this paper, I am defining YA fiction as stories purposely written for readers between the ages of twelve and twenty which is the age group designated in “Literature for Today’s Young Adults” by Aileen Nilsen and Stephen Donelson. Such books were once characterized by action-oriented plots, shallow themes, one-dimensional characters, and overly optimistic, upbeat endings. It would seem that since people believed that children would model their lives after what they read, they naturally wanted their kids to

read happy stories since a happy life was what they desired for their children (Nilsen and Donelson 114). In the late 1950s, as the value attached to fiction for YAs moved toward the direction of providing the reader with more realistic vicarious experiences, so did the mode of stories for young adults change. From this emerged “new realism,” or what Nilsen and Donelson prefer to call the “problem novel,” which is based on the philosophy that young people will have a better chance at understanding their world if their expectations are realistic and if they are made aware of both the positive and negative things about the society in which they live (115). It is this sort of fiction I am focusing on in this paper: stories about and for young adults which are set in a realistic world, populated by realistic people, with realistic problems.

Most scholars of YAL trace the early history of young adult literature as we know it today, to J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Australian librarian and YAL critic Mary Owen notes that it was around this time that YAL saw the emergence of real stories about real people with real problems. Such were a departure from the plot driven adventures popularized by the likes of Enid Blyton as well as the Hardy Boys-Nancy Drew series which painted a more sanitized picture of the world and which were the standard reading fare chosen by parents for their children. The sixties saw the emergence of other landmark novels of the realistic genre such as S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), Robert Lipsyte’s *The Contender* (1967), Ann Head’s *Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones* (1967), and Paul Zindel’s *My Darling My Hamburger* (1969). These books pushed the boundaries of what had previously been seen as acceptable in books for young people (Owen). For instance, issues dealt with in these books included gang warfare, the plight of African-American youth, teen pregnancy, death and abortion.

Owen goes on to describe YAL of the 1970s as having given the genre “some of its modern masters, like Robert Cormier, Judy Blume, M.E. Kerr, Walter Dean Myers and Lois Duncan.” She quotes children’s literature critic Maureen Nimon who described the period as “the golden age of YAL, when a highly intelligent and demanding literature was written for young people