

## Central Queensland University

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### **Bestselling Young Adult fiction: trends, genres and readership**

#### Abstract:

Australia is not immune to the universal, and seemingly exponential, growing appeal of bestselling Young Adult fiction. The 2015 Sydney Writers' Festival, for instance, staged three separate events to reflect the rising popularity of this genre of writing, showcasing successful Australian authors as both panel members and facilitators of discussion related to issues facing the category. While debate touched on familiar points of contention such as the appropriateness and advocacy of content marketed as Young Adult fiction and for young adult readers, discussion centred on the growing appeal Young Adult fiction has for readers, writers, publishers and film-makers. This article extends discourse relating to international bestselling Young Adult fiction and provides research that, in scholarly terms, has eluded significant inquiry thus far. In examining this appeal, this article questions how increased stakeholder involvement is impacting patterns of readership, content, and genre trends within this category of Young Adult fiction. While the degree of change is not measured quantitatively, this research pinpoints strategies and behaviours exhibited by invested groups and institutions, which are affecting change. This builds on work by Heather Scutter and Sue Page, and references Anthony Eaton, who identifies that changing conceptions of young adulthood, in terms of sophistication, is defining how Young Adult fiction is shaped by those who create, produce and consume it (Eaton 2010).

#### Biographical note:

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#### Keywords:

Creative writing – Young adult fiction – Bestselling fiction – Publishing

## Introduction

‘Young Adult’ as a contemporary term used to define a market, an audience and a developmental category, is a construct rather than a stable term that neatly defines an age bracket. Scholars describe this literature category, in terms of definition, readership and content, as ‘experiencing an extraordinary shift’ (Wheatley 1994: 13), being in a ‘state of flux’ (Eaton 2007: 205), ‘vexed and varied’ (Chambers 2015: 8) and ‘fast-growing and ever-changing’ (Roy 2015: 2). These assertions correlate with similar views expressed in related fields of study such as psychology (Stringer 1997) and sociology, where Wyn and Woodman credit the ‘post-1970 generations with shaping a new adulthood as a result of governances in education, the labour market, welfare, health and the justice system which have played an important role in redefining the meaning and experience of youth’ (2006: 511).

Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett proposes a paradigm to address these considerations, which he names ‘emerging adulthood’, noting that these transitional changes constitute a separate period of the life course (2007). Arnett notes that in a short time this theory was adopted by many fields including psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, education, epidemiology, health sciences, human development, geography, nursing, social work, philosophy, paediatrics, family studies, journalism and law. With such extensive societal transformation, it is understandable that Young Adult fiction is similarly assimilating such change to reflect new and emerging norms and trends. The term Young Adult fiction in this context, therefore, seems to be less important than understanding that the fiction category is, itself, inherently amorphous.

Despite this flux, consensus generally affirms the increasingly sophisticated themes and content of Young Adult fiction today. Australian and international writers and scholars laud the merits of these changes, not only for young adults as readers but, ultimately, for the betterment of society (see, Pattee 2006; Nodelman 2008; Cart 2008; Hunt 2010; Howell 2011; Lanagan 2013; Bowe 2013; Harnett 2014). There is less commentary, however, related to the driving forces behind these changes, and the impact that (predominantly adult) groups and institutions are having on the readership, content and trends apparent within the Young Adult fiction category. The disproportionate involvement that adults as creators, publishers, marketers and consumers have on Young Adult fiction is, in my opinion, an area that requires further research.

A small number of writers and academics have discussed these aspects in relation to Young Adult fiction, and how that content is made available to younger readers. Writer and scholar Heather Scutter identified a ‘pressing need for greater scrutiny of the politics of young adult fiction,’ and titled her book *Displaced Fictions* (1999) to illustrate the fact that:

books for teenagers and young adults belong neither here nor there, neither in the free market of adult books nor in the closed shop of children’s books. While the many practitioners of teenage fiction and the institutions associated with it – schools, publishers, specialist book shops and various award schemes – speak long and loudly in favour, I suspect that its advocates and proponents are protesting too much (2).

Further to this Nodelman suggests that ‘what adults most frequently believe children need from their literature is education . . . Adults, thus, [perceive that they] have a duty to teach children what they don’t yet know’ (2008: 157). Both positions identify the influence that invested practitioners and institutions have on Young Adult fiction, and infer a range of potential motivations for their involvement – from altruistic and educational, to economic.

A decade later, in 2010, Australian Young Adult fiction writer and academic Anthony Eaton, in his article ‘Growing Older – Young Adult Fiction Coming of Age?’, identified the liminal nature of Young Adult fiction by comparing excerpts from two contemporary and commercially successful young adult novels, Meme McDonalds’s *Love Like Water* (2007) and Mal Peet’s *Exposure* (2008), with Matthew Riley’s *Seven Ancient Wonders* (2005), which was published and marketed as adult fiction. In this study, Eaton suggests that new ideas and directions in Young Adult literature may serve as a benchmark to measure, or plot, the relationship between the creators of art and those who consume it. Eaton goes further to propose that, through this lens, these measures can, in turn, lead to useful consideration of the changing nature of adolescence, in that:

increasingly, the institutions which influence young adult writing in Australia (publishers, book councils, awards, committees) seem to be recognising as valid ‘young adult fiction novels’ which, just a decade or two ago, would have been considered adult: protagonists above school age, emancipated from the family unit, dealing with concerns and contexts more traditionally associated with the adult world (2010: 53).

In this, Eaton posits that, in 2010, the classifying parameters of young adult fiction were changing, and these changes were being recognised more widely by a range of associated institutions. When revisiting this research in 2013, Eaton again marked the increased sophistication in the way works are written and marketed as Young Adult fiction, and also in the way they have been ‘positioned by publishers, librarians, parents and key organisations through award structures, critical response, and market positioning’ (6). By accepting these more sophisticated works as Young Adult fiction, institutions are, effectively, resetting the literary parameters and definitions around what are currently, and in the future, understood as belonging to this category of work.

As a result of my research, I believe it is difficult to quantify the degree to which these and other institutions affect the content, themes and the reader demographic of Young Adult fiction as, regardless of its level of sophistication, works are predominantly created, marketed and selected for younger audiences *by* adults. This power imbalance extends to institutions that would traditionally be considered safe havens of choice for younger readers such as libraries, schools and award-winning book lists where, even though children and young adults are seen to be making independent choices in terms of their reading, this freedom is subject to the arbitrary selection of works that are made available to them by adults. In this way, these repositories play an important role in defining and constructing a perception of what Young Adult literature is.

Sue Page (2005), in her exploration of the choices that Australian young adult readers make, also identifies this power imbalance, and defines dominant adult groups as ‘gatekeepers’ of Young Adult fiction content because, to a degree, they limit the freedoms that younger audiences have to select and, therefore, consume works. Page identifies areas of inequity such as ‘the relative lack of power of young adults compared with the economic, critical and social power of those adults who claim to be operating on their behalf’ (2005: 11), arguing that these adult-dominated groups (including educational institutions and the wider community) have the power to limit the access that young readers have to contentious Young Adult fiction. Page goes on to assert that this influence extends to, and can frustrate, writers and publishers. I would add to this by contending that adult-dominated industries also wield power to affect change over Young Adult fiction content, themes and readerships.

The connection between these dominant groups and institutions and the rapidly changing landscape of Young Adult fiction content, themes and readership, although established in the research above, is relatively intangible and constantly shifting and, therefore, difficult to definitively measure in quantitative terms. Sales statistics may measure a work’s, or even a group of works’, popularity, but they do not identify or define industry strategies or the institutional and consumer behaviours that contribute to shifts in content and/or readerships. For this reason, the following discussion does not attempt to quantify the degree to which these connections impact upon each other. Rather, by examining the market trends of bestselling Young Adult fiction and identifying behaviours and strategies common to stakeholders aligned with this literature, I assert that the interrelation can be observed and a basis set up for future (and possibly quantitative) research and investigation. While most aspects of this interrelation are viewed as positive in terms of the development of writing and publishing opportunities by those invested in the Young Adult field, this article also outlines concerns that these developments may actually narrow the diversity of Young Adult fiction and limit publishing opportunities.

The rapidly changing nature of Young Adult fiction presents a number of challenges, not least of all, the sourcing of valid academic research to establish the cause of these changes. With this in mind, a combination of existing academic research and grey literature (including non-published government, academics, business and industry materials) will be used to identify and define the behaviours and strategies currently exhibited by readers, writers, publishers and film makers that may be contributing to change within young adult fiction. The examples of bestselling Young Adult fiction in the following research are in no way an exhaustive, or representative list, rather, each title is chosen for its ability to illustrate a particular point or discuss a link between behaviours and strategies exhibited by invested institutions, and changes related to Young Adult fiction.

### **Global bestselling Young Adult fiction**

A ‘bestseller’, for the purposes of this discussion, is a novel that appears on both the *New York Times* and *USA Today* Young Adult Bestseller lists and is defined, as such, by sales data from vendors including ‘independent book retailers; national, regional

and local chains; online and multimedia entertainment retailers; supermarkets, university, gift and discount department stores; and newsstands' (*New York Times* 2015). While there is no current agreed definition or measure by which international Young Adult bestselling fiction is described, 'global bestsellers' tend to have a different sales, publishing and marketing trajectory than mainstream Young Adult and/or literary fiction. That is, they maintain a consistent presence on identified leading, high profile bestseller lists, and the comparable international lists as well. Additionally, global bestsellers tend to be accompanied by corresponding book-to-film adaptations, extensive marketing campaigns, and film/book related franchises (including movie soundtracks, merchandise and memorabilia).

Most recent and current Young Adult global bestsellers are from the USA. In Australia, these titles feature on the bestselling lists of sites such as *Booktopia* and *Books and Publishing*. Movie adaptations and their accompanying franchises are also duplicated in Australia (Chambers 2014). Recent examples of these films include *The Hunger Games* (2012), *The Book Thief* (2013), *Divergent* (2014) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2014). Lo's study of diversity (with reference to character race, gender and disability) in the *New York Times* Young Adult Bestseller list discovered that 'titles are on list for an average of 11 weeks, however ... the number of weeks that a title is on the YA bestseller list is much lower: three' (2014: 4). Lo concluded that most young adult bestsellers do not stay on the list for more than a few weeks, and those that do, tend to hit the list at the bottom end. My research confirms that the few titles that skew Lo's data by appearing on the list for many weeks or months, or even years such as *The Hunger Games* and *The Fault in Our Stars* then go on to become global bestsellers.

### **Patterns and trends in young adult fiction**

Every second year, the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship Award is bestowed to enable its recipient to research and report on publishing and editorial trends in the USA. Susannah Chambers, in 2014, assessed the state of Young Adult literature, and questioned whether the category (and Australia) was 'being flooded with huge-selling US imports'. After investigation, she declared that:

something *was* happening to Young Adult literature, it was happening in the USA, and it was spreading around the world ... Yes, there has been a change. Yes, the huge success of *Twilight* changed Young Adult editing and publishing. And yes, the subsequent blockbuster Young Adult titles have cemented that change. I met many editors who had worked for a long time in children's literature in New York, and all of them felt that things were different than when they had begun their careers, even if it was sometimes just the *flavour* of things that had changed (14).

This international editorial perspective aligns with, and validates, changes evidenced by writers and scholars of Young Adult fiction identified earlier.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), originally written for children, enjoyed global success and attracted a diverse readership of child, young adult and adult readers, however, it was, arguably, Stephanie Myer's *Twilight* novels (2005-

2008) that cemented the international bestselling popularity that Young Adult fiction now enjoys with all these readerships, and particularly adult readers, who now appear to be firmly aligned with the category. Since the publication of the *Twilight* series, Young Adult bestseller sales statistics have outstripped age – and genre – defined categories, with research undertaken by the Association of American Publishers in 2012 highlighting an increase in sales revenue of 41 percent (Boog 2012). In 2014, Young Adult book sales experienced a 20.9 percent increase, while the adult fiction category showed a slight decline (Association for American Publishers 2015). Although the data does not conclude that adults are choosing Young Adult fiction as a preference over adult fiction, the results do indicate that adults are attracted to the themes, genres and content which are currently trending in this category.

The increased sales of Young Adult fiction reflects genre/theme patterns occurring within the bestselling Young Adult fiction category overall during this period. The publication of *Twilight*, for instance, sparked a supernatural and vampire genre trend which inspired a sequence of similarly themed fiction. A series of dystopian and utopian themed novels then dominated after the success of Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* (2008–2010), Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* (2007–2014) and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* novels (2011–2013).

The release E. L. James's bestselling adult erotica novel *50 Shades of Grey* in 2011 may, at first, appear unrelated to Young Adult fiction, however, there seems to be an indelible connection between James's sexually explicit novel, Myer's *Twilight* series and the age-based readership dynamics of the Young Adult fiction category, especially as *50 Shades of Grey* was written as a work of online fan-fiction based on the novel *Twilight* (Bertrand 2015). Fan-fiction, although it is a stand-alone genre, mimics the themes, characters and often the plot of the novel it is based upon. This demonstrates that James, as an adult, was enjoying Young Adult fiction and was inspired creatively by it to write her adult work. Additionally, the sophisticated themes, content and narrative of *Twilight*, although categorised as Young Adult fiction, were also mature enough for James to use to construct a successful adult novel. Some journalists consider the juncture of the two novels as the catalyst for a greater number of published Young Adult works that contain sexualised narratives. Allen Salkin, for instance, reports that 'Publishing industry veterans say the *Twilight* series, with its love triangle of Edward, Bella and Jacob, opened the floodgates for more complicated romantic situations in YA' (2015).

This porosity of content and flexibility in relation to age-defined readership between categories is similarly evident in the emergence of the 'New Adult' literature category, which was originally defined by Sarah Jones, in 2009, in a competition for St. Martin's Press. The association between New Adult fiction and Young Adult fiction is explained on *New Adult Alley*, a fan-based website that focuses on this particular genre of writing, which states that its readers:

view New Adult fiction as a category of literature – meaning, it gives readers content expectations, but it does not dictate genre-based criteria. Typically, a novel is considered New Adult if it encompasses the transition between adolescence – a life stage often depicted in Young Adult fiction – and true adulthood that protagonists

generally fall between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six, though exceptions may apply (2010).

This is an interesting explanation given that the flexible age-based parameters often attributed to Young Adult fiction (as described earlier) often encompass this same transition period. The site goes on to explain that ‘New Adult characters are often portrayed experiencing college, living away from home for the first time, military deployment, apprenticeships, a first steady job and a first serious relationship’ (2010). While it is true that most young adults are not traditionally represented at college or in full-time employment in Young Adult fiction, these novels often include the same plotlines involving serious relationships and experiences away from home. Additionally, the site states that, as with Young Adult fiction, the New Adult fiction category ‘can be combined with all genres and sub-genres for every type of reader to enjoy’ (2010).

The rapid rise in popularity of New Adult fiction can be seen in how American social networking site Goodreads.com recorded a 500 percent rise in New Adult book listings between 2010 and 2012 (Vincent 2013). By 2013, the New Adult label appeared as a stand-alone category on many large bookseller and publishers’ websites including Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Macmillan. It was during this time that commentators on popular websites and periodicals began to note both a rise in the sophistication of content, and the decreasing age of consumers of, Young Adult fiction. Similar sub-genres as those popular in the New Adult category were concurrently appearing and trending in the Young Adult categories and many of the works, regardless of the category assigned to them, shared comparable levels of narrative and content sophistication.

One such category – contentiously labelled ‘Steamies’ by commentators – featured significantly more, and increasingly detailed, sexual content than traditional Young Adult fiction. Although Young Adult novels often delve into sexuality, most, up to this point, had alluded to sex as a component of the narrative or plotting rather than detail specific sexual acts or showcase sexuality as a dominant theme (Books and Arts 2013). With this in mind, the New Adult name became synonymous with the Steamies category and also linked to the Young Adult fiction category where ‘the influence of New Adult fiction has been so great that some publishers and authors are winkingly describing the new category as “*Harry Potter* meets *50 Shades of Grey*”’ (Kaufman 2012). Salkin goes further to suggest that ‘the shelves of books aimed at the 14 to 17-year-old reader are groaning – make that moaning – under the collective weight of explicit scenes involving multiple partners, or love triangles’ (2015).

In another new categorisation, bestselling Young Adult works that contemplate serious life-and-death issues, such as suicide, rape and cancer, have also been controversially labelled ‘Sick-lit’. This sub-genre has also proven popular with young adults and includes bestselling works such as *13 Reasons Why?* by Wiseman and Asher (2007), *In Darkness* by Nick Lake (2012) and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) – a novel that is also currently trending as contemporary realistic fiction. Editor and literary agent Laura Rennert notes that the success of works that deal with these hard-hitting subjects ‘demonstrates the voracious appetite that exists among

teen, and a cross-over adult audience, for gut-wrenching fiction’ (qtd. in Corbett 2013). Similarly, Green’s recent publications, which frequent both international adult and Young Adult bestseller lists have revived a trend for contemporary, realistic fiction in the Young Adult category, a trend encompasses the rising appeal of thriller and memoir among young adults (Corbett 2013, Chambers 2014). It is interesting to note the commonality between the themes of Green’s bestsellers, these predicted genre trends for Young Adult fiction, and the fact that memoir and thrillers are currently trending adult fiction genres.

## Readers

The link between adult fiction and trending Young Adult fiction has been discussed in relation to trends above, however, a definitive measure of Young Adult fiction, and the appeal it has for adults, can be seen in statistics from Bowker’s 2012 biannual study carried out by marketing researchers, which identified that 55 percent of people purchasing Young Adult fiction *to read* themselves (that is, rather than buying a book for a child or teenaged reader), were over the age of 18. This shows that adults are seeking out fiction that contain elements consistent with Young Adult fiction, but possibly also driving demand for more sophisticated content and themes.

American author and scholar Michael Cart points out that ‘kids have been reading adult books since at least the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, however, he does recognise that nowadays ‘publishers of adult books are increasingly offering books that will also appeal to teen readers’ (2013: 2). Eaton, in his 2013 paper, ‘Transition to Threshold: Redefining “Young Adulthood”’, corroborates this view by identifying a number of popular Australian literary and award-winning works that do not meet the conventional criteria of Young Adult fiction, even though they have been defined as such. A sample of Eaton’s selections include Sonya Harnett’s *Sleeping Dogs* (1996), *The Ghost’s Child* (2000) and *Butterfly* (2010), Marcus Zusak’s *The Messenger* (2002) and *The Book Thief* (2005) and Melina Marchetta’s *The Piper’s Son* (2010) (6).

Evidence that publishers recognise the attraction that adult fiction has for a younger readership can be seen in behaviours and strategies used by literary agents and publishing houses, where agents actively search for Young Adult manuscripts that mirror the content of bestselling adult fiction. In Corbett’s examination of publishers’ perspectives on Young Adult fiction trends, American literary agent Molly Jaffa notes that ‘everyone is looking for a YA *Gone Girl*’ (2013), referring to the success of Gillian Flynn’s 2012 thriller which entered *USA Today*’s adult fiction bestseller list on June 14, 2012. On the back of *Gone Girl*’s success, Flynn has signed a publishing contract with Delacorte Press to pen a Young Adult novel in the same genre. There is an expectation that the impending novel will push the boundaries of Young Adult fiction content: ‘given that themes of self-harm, violence, small-town prejudice, and family dysfunction run through Flynn’s adult novels, it is likely that any modified version for the Young Adult market will also delve into such dark territory’ (Lee 2012). This industry-driven desire to duplicate the success of this novel, and other similarly adult-themed fiction, raises questions about the motivation of invested



institutions where content is seemingly designed and generated to suit the industry's purposes of sales and franchises rather than created specifically for a younger readership.

In Australia, at a community level, school and public library staff generally choose and shelve fiction, arbitrarily, according to their perceptions of age suitability and, although there are no formal classifications, some schools restrict novels with what are understood as 'mature themes' to readers in higher grades. The increasing popularity of Young Adult fiction, however, has seen many libraries and bookshops dedicate specific areas, such as storefront shelf space, to showcase works with more mature themes to potential readers/purchasers and to direct readers to trending literature.

The marketing of Young Adult fiction to young readers in schools begins with the distribution of sale catalogues within primary schools, where these works share sales space with novels in the younger, children's literature category. Often, some Young Adult novels that are designed for a more mature readership, do not have an age suggestion attached to the book image supplied on the brochure, whereas picture books are, most often, age-specified. The example below, for instance, displays the *Hunger Games* series alongside items designed for ages between six and nine years of age and, although there is a marker that notes the presence of mature themes within the series, the positioning of Collins' series between these items may give the buyer the impression that they might be suitable for younger children.



Figure 1. Primary school marketing catalogue, Ashton & Scholastic, Gosford, 2013

The idea that this, and similar, strategies is a purposeful tactic to attract younger readers to more mature texts is a view supported by book buyer and distributor Rachel Seigal who identifies that, 'while it's true that most publishers do suggest reading levels, they tend to keep them as broad as possible, understandably being afraid of limiting their audience by being too specific' (2012). As early as 2005, stakeholders noted that publishers were increasing the number of avenues that purchases have to buy sophisticated Young Adult fiction:

The advent and increase of online booksellers such as Amazon.com enables readers to search for novels according to particular issues 'by clicking on 'teen books', then

‘social issues’ which provides headings such as Dating and Intimacy, Drug Use and Abuse, Pregnancy, Suicide and Violence (Yampbell 2005: 351).

With this increased access, Yampbell argues that ‘Young Adult literature has broken nearly every boundary of acceptable subject matter in trying to address real-life problems and intrigue teen readers’ (351).

## Writers

Many literary and bestselling authors such as J. K. Rowling, Marcus Zusak and Sonya Harnett claim not to write with an age-specific audience in mind, and adopt a fatalistic approach when considering the categorisation of their work. Others make no secret of their attempt to mimic the success of adult fiction when it comes to writing for the Young Adult market. Author Liz Banks, for example, admits that her young adult novel, *Irresistible* (2013), featuring a 16-year-old protagonist, was ‘an attempt to capture the *Fifty Shades of Grey* success, within the teen market.’ Her goal is reiterated by the author’s publishing agent who states, ‘*Irresistible* is about passion and love, touching rather than sex. It is aimed at sophisticated teenagers aged 14 and above’ (Vincent 2013).

Conversely, an increasing number of authors known for their adult novels are now writing Young Adult fiction. This includes James Patterson, Tim Winton, Nick Hornsby, Alexi Sherman, Emma Thompson and Fiona Paul. Regardless, however, of whether a writer considers an intended audience when penning Young Adult fiction, academic consensus and literary market trends, as outlined above, reflect a Young Adult category that now includes more sophisticated themes and content. This conclusion is outlined by Eaton who agrees that:

while ‘traditional’ young adult narratives and concerns continue, quite rightly, to be the mainstay of ‘YA’ writing there is, at the same time, a growing awareness of the potential for young adult fiction to stretch beyond the age-circumscribed boundaries of ‘teenage writing’ and into other, more sophisticated, worlds, speaking to those ‘young adults’ (and indeed adults) who require something different of their reading. A ‘coming of age’ if you will, not so much in terms of writing ‘growing up’ as ‘growing out.’ And this notion excites me tremendously, as a writer, teacher, and academic (2010: 53).

Eaton’s argument holds true, not only with literary and award winning fiction but also for bestselling Young Adult fiction where, due to this increased awareness and the popularity of novels within this category, the field offers greater opportunities for writers and publishers.

## Publishers

Chambers identifies three ways in which recent changes within the Young Adult fiction category have been manifested. Firstly, from an industry perspective, Chambers asserts that there are now more publishers of Young Adult fiction and notes not only an ‘increase in the number of imprints specialising in Young Adult fiction, but also big publishing houses that have no previous record of publishing Young

Adult literature have established YA imprints' (2014: 14). Chambers also states that the value of the advances given to Young Adult authors has risen. Finally, she notes that resources – money and time – allocated to marketing Young Adult literature has radically increased, stating that 'the more money you spend to acquire a book, then the more you spend to ensure the book is a success' (16).

Publishing and distribution strategies lead to books meeting their desired target audiences, and it is here that market segmentation strategies can have the greatest influence on readership. Some bestselling novels, such as the *Harry Potter* series, are now marketed to age-defined categories with separately designed book covers for each category, while others have generic book covers aiming for dual appeal (both young adults and adults) like *The Hunger Games*. Additionally, the marketing of works that contain contentious content does not always extend to the cover synopsis where some offer scant reference to the explicit nature of the content within. In conjunction with this, the depictions of characters on these covers are often indistinct, making it unclear what age of reader the novel is attempting to attract. The 2009 cover of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky 1999) is an example where the back cover synopsis does not clearly define the explicit nature of the content within the novel. The cover depiction of Charlie (the main protagonist) does not similarly reveal a clear image of his face and it is therefore difficult to accurately assign a clear age guide to him or the readership that might be interested in his story. New book covers, or re-jacketed issues, have coincided with each reprint of Chbosky's novel to attract and reflect a changing readership. This includes a film adaptation tie-in cover in 2013 where, as a marketing strategy, the actors are featured on the cover (see Figure 2). Re-jacketing is a common marketing practice where 'a common industry belief is that covers become stale; they need a facelift to suit the times and potential audience' (Yampbell 2005: 361).

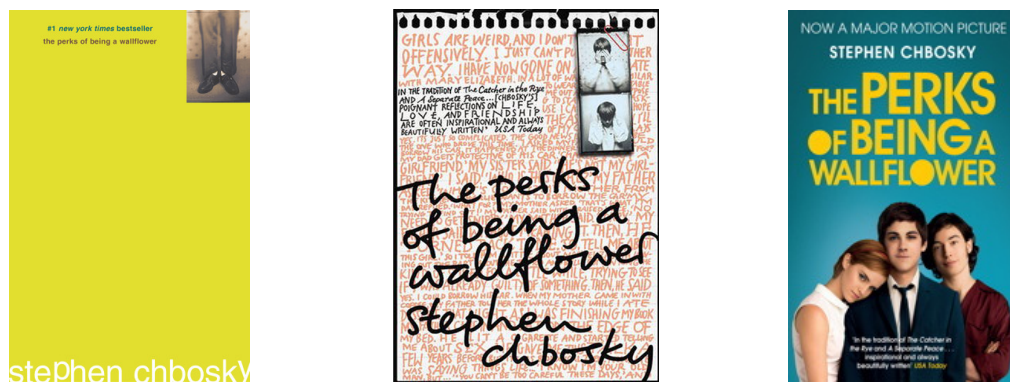


Figure 2. Re-jacketed editions of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Goodreads.com 2015

The unprecedented popularity of many recently published Young Adult novels possibly reflects the marketing strategies employed by publishers and book distributors during this period. Research undertaken by the American Press Association in 2012 identified a 300 percent increase, from the previous year, in e-book purchases of Young Adult fiction. Publishing aims to connect with the widest

possible target audience and CEO of Hachette Book Group, Michael Pietsch, claims that e-books:

which didn't exist 15 years ago, now make up 20 percent of all unit sales and are rising rapidly. As that number climbs, it changes readers' relationship with books, as well as the books themselves. The instant gratification factor is turning garden-variety bestsellers into juggernauts by removing the friction from the purchase. Readers who finish one instalment can immediately start the next without the interruption of a bookstore trip or an Amazon delivery wait. Lower e-book prices also encourage binge buying. All of which encourages multibook series (qtd. in Bercovici 2013).

Popular works within the Young Adult fiction category boost these e-book purchasing behaviours. The immediacy of online e-book sales, for example, enhances the sales of series such as *Twilight*, *Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* because consecutive novels are easily accessed either individually or together as a set. When buyers purchase novels online, sites often suggest additional purchases that have similar content and themes, or offer recommendations according to similar purchases that others have made. In this instance, buyers can be exposed to suggested material from any category – adult and/or Young Adult fiction – depending on the trending fiction at that time and the purchasing behaviours of others accessing the site.

The rise in e-book sales across most fiction categories has coincided with a decline in storefront bookshops (Inside Retail 2015). At the same time, small selections of popular hardcover and paperback novels are now sold at discount department stores. The final decision of where and how a book is published and marketed now is, according to Michael Cart, 'made on the basis of not the content of the book, but rather, its sales potential and whether it will do better with adult or young adult buyers' (2013: 2). In this way, the marketing behaviour of a certain text, determines the target audience to an extent. Some stakeholders view this level of controlled marketing as economic rationalisation and are sceptical about the strategies used to source, market and distribute bestselling Young Adult fiction.

One of the most popular contemporary Young Adult fiction writers, John Green, questions the impact that some marketing strategies may have on Young Adult fiction, and laments the possible negative developments that these behaviours could have on the future diversity and availability of works within the category. He writes:

Imagine a world – and I don't think this is hard to do – where almost all physical books bought offline are purchased at big box stores like Walmart and Costco and Target, which carry a couple of hundred titles a year. Anything that gets published that doesn't end up in one of those stores doesn't really get *published*, at least not in the sense that we understand the word now, because it won't be widely available: it will only be available at the vast, flat e-marketplaces of Amazon and iTunes, where readers will choose from among a vast and undifferentiated sea of texts ... Every now and again, a book will rise up out of the sea of the Kindle store and become *50 Shades of Grey* – so popular that it will transition the author from online distribution to physical distribution, but most books that find readers will be franchises (Green 2014).

Green's commentary is unusual given that current marketing and distribution behaviours, and strategies employed by the publishing industry, have rewarded him

with several global bestsellers, however, his belief in the integrity of Young Adult fiction and criticism of counterproductive corporate strategies is shared by a small, but growing number of commentators who suggest that marketing intervention is actually narrowing the diversity of the Young Adult fiction market (see, Cart 2013, Lo 2013 and 2014, Chambers 2014, Roy 2015).

## Filmmakers

Once a novel is established as a global Young Adult bestseller, it is almost always followed by a movie adaptation (Goodreads.com 2015). According to Nielsen statistics:

movies based on young adult books have emerged as the newest genre in which content creators are investing big money. And their investments are paying off. YA adaptations are a growing slice of the box office pie, increasing 6% from 2013 to 2014 ... where 43% choose YA adaptations as one of their favourite genres to go see in a movie theatre (2014).

These film adaptations are often marketed with new novel print-runs with corresponding film tie-in covers. It is interesting to note that the classification attached to many of these movies, which often reflect the same content in the novels they are based on, start at an M rating, for mature audiences, and with parental guidance recommendation for children under fifteen years of age. Recent examples include the films in the *Twilight* series (Hardwicke 2008), *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012), *The Book Thief* (Percival 2013) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (Boone 2014). This contrasts to the book versions of the movies where age-related classifications do not exist.

The franchises associated with these film adaptations offer diverse marketing opportunities to value-add to the book titles with accompanying film soundtracks, DVDs and related merchandise. Nielsen's study of Young Adult fiction movie adaptations, and their franchises, found that:

Suzanne Collins' latest film, *Catching Fire*, burned up the box office last year, and has sold 3.8 million discs since its home video release in March 2014. The first film in the series, *The Hunger Games*, has sold over 8 million discs since 2012, which is no surprise considering the series of books, combined, sold over 11.4 million print copies in the same period. Following *Twilight*'s example, *The Hunger Games* franchise has also broken into pop music, inspiring two soundtracks (so far) featuring popular artists such as Arcade Fire, Coldplay and Lorde, among others (2014).

The formulaic franchise marketing approach that is assigned to these blockbusting bestsellers, and the accompanying profit margins that result from it, supports Green's argument above, 'that most books that find readers will be franchises'. However, his prediction that this development will also result in a narrowing of reader choice is yet to be confirmed.

## Conclusion

The interplay between Young Adult fiction and those institutions invested in its production, distribution and consumption continue to contribute to the redefinition of fundamental components of this writing. This impact is particularly pronounced with the recent, and continued, rise of global Young Adult bestsellers where strategies and behaviours of readers, writers, publishers and filmmakers direct and mould trending genres, themes, content and readerships. Conversely, the influence that an older Young Adult fiction readership has on invested institutions, where target audiences are demanding more sophisticated content and reading books that contain trending genres and themes, encourages specific behaviours and strategies by invested institutions in order to capture and satisfy the widest possible market. While the positive potential that these diverse changes promise for Young Adult fiction is well received by the academic, educational and publishing communities, there is concern that bestselling Young Adult fiction, and the institutions driving their success may limit the very potential that their popularity claims to offer.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support provided to me in writing and revising this article. This includes the anonymous *TEXT* reviewers, whose insightful and generous suggestions were of great assistance in redrafting this article. Thank you too, to Dr. Jess Seymour and Professor Donna Lee Brien for comments on drafts. All errors are, of course, my own.

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