

The Flux of YA Fiction

The culture of Young Adult fiction is evolving. Strangely enough, the family of Young Adult Fiction literature, a genre strung together only by a sticker that reads “for ages 13-20,” is becoming increasingly ageless. The culture surrounding literature at one time known to be “for teens” is spreading itself upwards and out. Adults are pouring over teenage vampire love stories and kids are begging publishers to invest in progressively adult themes. The business of Young Adult Fiction casts a wider net with every coming year, egged on by the cross-cultural and seemingly generation-less successes of franchises like *The Hunger Games* or *Twilight*. At the same time, YA is also watching the emergence of a new wave of Salingers: authors like John Green and other “teen whisperers” are peering into the empathetic and impressionable minds of young adults in order to fill up their pages with a portrayal of youth that those same kids have been long-awaiting. They write tales of teenage-dom with a twist that feels nearly...adult.

What, then, are we asking of YA fiction today? The general consensus seems to be that the YA novelist has two distinct options: write a meritless, theme-less and, consequently worthless franchise series to make a quick million and stick around for the movie rights ...or, write an anthem for youth, and appease a new generation of Holden Caulfields in order to silence their theatrical sigh and collective "*Oh, Christ. Don't spoil it...I'm twelve, for Chrissake. I'm big for my age*" (Salinger).

The only commonality between the two seems to be an obvious absence of value. This, however, may not really be the case. Look to the persistent theme of “be all that you can be with the lot you’ve drawn” that laces the *Twilight* installments. Consider the reflective journey of Pudge, young protagonist of John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*, as he wrestles first encounter with sudden love, sudden death, and the potentially irreversible effects both have on the forming of a self.

I would argue that the unfortunate stigma that tags alongside every written YA novel is that the literature is taken as seriously as the young readers it was written for. In the case of young adult fiction, engaging and insightful material can be found in even the most flushed franchises, but in the words of one Holden Caulfield: "*People never notice anything*" (Salinger).

The YA World's "Coming of Age"

As mentioned, great tremors are running through what was historically known as young adult fiction, as a genre previously meant only to signify age, is being written and advertised for an ambiguous anyone. There are other typical elements of YA – for example “The protagonist is a teenager, themes address coming of age issues” (Trends and Issues in Young Adult Literature) – however, in other cases, ‘young adult’ may be gracefully referred to “as a contemporary term used to define a market, an audience and a developmental category,” (Bestselling Young Adult fiction: trends, genres and readership). Within this relatively nondescript field of literature, the world is witnessing a great change in character:

“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 flavor of things that had changed” (Beckton, Bestselling Young Adult fiction: trends, genres and readership).

So what exactly is this new ‘flavor’? And by what causes is it driven? In part, the literary community witnesses a fresh interest in YA from what many would imagine not to be an intended audience: “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. This collective flock to YA in recent years isn’t easily explained; however, it isn’t excessive to note the correlation between adult reader’s newfound interest in YA, and the simultaneous trend of young readers searching for more mature themes in their fiction. The supernatural, dystopian societies, and even increasingly sexually explicit trends – dubbed, ‘steamies’ – in YA are relatively new to the genre’s scene. It’s important to note, however, that this new wave of young adult fiction readers isn’t only arriving from older generations. While the maturity level of themes present in these works is increasing, the typical reader is becoming both younger and older.

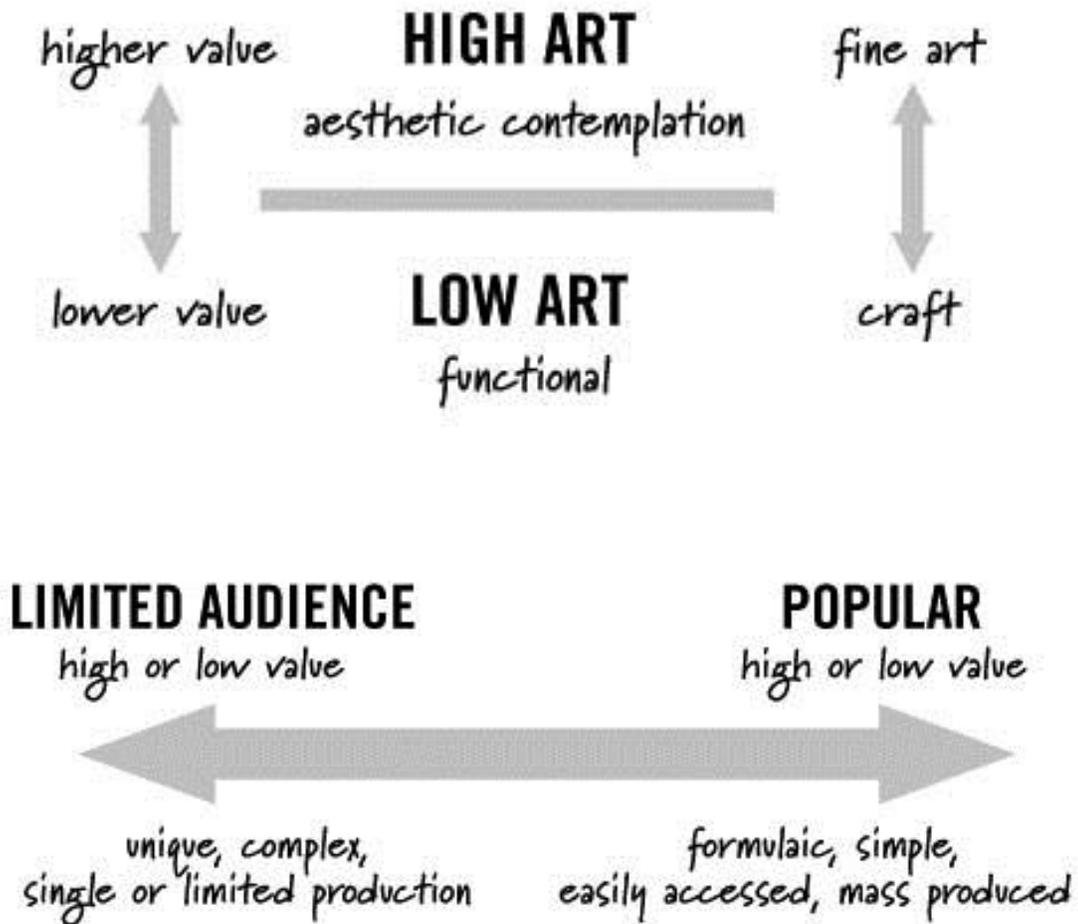
This change is, in part, due to the previously mentioned new adult kick to the YA genre, but the institutions involved in producing these works are also certainly not trying to slow this change. In fact, publishers are very intentionally blurring the lines of the desired target market. An excellent illustration of this ambiguousness is in YA fiction’s book covers: “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” (Beckton, Bestselling Young Adult fiction: trends, genres and readership).

The genre of Young Adult fiction is for everyone. By that qualification, Young Adult Fiction *is* popular culture.

High Art and Low Art: How “Success” Became a Bad Word

What is good art? *That*, as you can imagine, can’t be answered in this analysis. In fact, it’s widely understood that “What is good art?” shouldn’t be an answer found within any given time restraints. However, of course, this has been vehemently attempted over time. Most commonly, consumers and critics have a tendency to make sense of the slippery matter of an artwork’s value by an association with its individual accessibility. Is this piece of art tucked away from the unremarkable masses? On a similar note, is it from a genre that would ensure this sanctity of audience? Is it disparate from any other produced pieces of art? And how can we deduce the exact measure of thought put in to its creation?

Welcome to the clash of “High Art” versus “Low Art.”



This distinction, also described as “popular art” and its superior opposite, is easily felt, but not easily classified. Asking which of the two is “high art” Beethoven’s 9th symphony or Taylor Swift’s *Blank Space*, is simple enough. However, naming the specific parameters that force these taxonomies is not so effortlessly achieved. The qualities typically associated with high art dance around ideas of elitism; the works should be too clever for just anyone to read, they should be too distinctive for just anyone to create, and more than anything, high art should serve as an honest luxury with no functional purposes. “A common assumption is that high art is “edifying” and low art is “mere entertainment.” If only the masses can be steered into the concert halls and museums, the power of high art will awaken them from their low art-induced stupor” (Plescher, High and Low Art).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, “low” or “popular” art is everything inclusive and easy. According to John A. Fisher of the University of Colorado, Boulder, popular art experiences the following diminishing traits: massification (which requires that the work sink to a low enough level of intelligence for any reader to understand), passivity (the audience should be able to experience the work without personal engagement), formulaic tendencies (in order to reach the extensive audiences of popular art, it will likely follow a common formula leading to widespread success), and autonomy (in order for art to be honest and real, it must not feel commercial burdens).

Young Adult Fiction, then, qualifies itself as “low art” in nearly every conceivable way. The genre is indisputably marketed to reach expansive audiences. While personal engagement is possible within works of YA, it isn’t crucial for the understanding of Bella Swan’s adoration for Edward Cullen in the same manner that *Sense and Sensibility* forces a reader to consider the way we as individuals perceive love.

More indicative of YA’s “lowbrow” status than its perceived availability and unthoughtful nature, Young Adult Fiction gets called out for the obvious presence of formula.

“It almost seems like there is a checklist being passed round: star-crossed lovers and/or a love triangle/love square? Tick. Fight-to-the-death competitions? Tick. The swinging bait of a sequel at the end of a novel because all recent YA films have not been standalone? Tick” (Falling Out of Love with YA, Hawwa).

The above refers to the recent slough of YA novels centered on a female protagonist and dystopian or fantastical societies. If we’re talking about formulas, the checklist could have just as easily been of a different path to the box office and cash influx: a young, quirky-yet-philosophical kid that struggles with the crisis of growing up: an echo of Holden Caulfield.

Yes, it seems, there is truth to the censure: Young Adult Fiction is formulaic.

Twilight: The Cash Cow

The *Twilight* series, a fantasy romance of four installments, is the pinnacle of YA success. That is, if you’re speaking monetarily. Author Stephanie Meyer’s family of flawless, vegetarian vampires has enticed the kids that want to read as an escape, and as it turns out, the parents and adults of their lives as well. But with a success as universal as with the case of *Twilight*, there are critics close behind asking whether or not all of this accomplishment equates to anything greater than money. Much of the response to *Twilight* has been to say that the novel isn’t any kind of art at all, but rather, a simple wish-fulfillment series cleverly veiled behind the title of ‘YA novel.’

So then what factors contribute to *Twilight’s* success? The endless charm that millions of readers found in the Stephanie Meyer’s pages is tied very closely to the concept of empathetic reading. The partnership between empathy and fiction are in excellent company; the readers of fiction strengthen their empathetic abilities with every page, and in turn, read more fiction. “Neuroscientists mapping the brain have discovered that reading fiction taps into the same brain networks as real life experience. When you are engaged in reading a fictional story your brain is literally living vicariously through the characters at a neurobiological level.” Interestingly enough, empathetic reading seems to apply much more to the seemingly meritless franchises, such as *Twilight*, than other literary works. “Novels engaging reader empathy always do better in

the marketplace (possibly because of word-of-mouth recommendations). This sheds light on the *Twilight* saga's best-seller status: narrative empathy may be less influential as an effect of reading and more important as a sought-after experience." So if *Twilight* seems to be heavy on the 'experience' part of a 'reading experience,' then we should look at what qualities the novel possesses that make its experience so enjoyable.

First, we have the forceful theme of "otherness." The novel revolves around an idea of being separate from the masses. Whether that be a family of vampires, or a pack of werewolves, or their token human, Bella, the character's ability to be unique in comparison to everyone else is part of what earns *Twilight* a mass appeal. "The theme of *otherness* is fascinating when one is in the process of learning how to fit or not fit in with different groups."

Next, we can look to a reader's emotional desire for love and, consequentially, happiness. Meyers writes four novels all depending on the love triangle of Bella, Edward and Jacob. Readers can relate positively enough to the appeal and pain of loving and being loved. In *Twilight*, those feelings are illustrated in a way that can only be described as 'fantastical.'

"She presents cooperation as crucial in fulfilling her characters' happiness: the role that love and happiness play in the lives of Bella, Edward, and Jacob is intricately tied to commitment. The reader lives through the corresponding anguish evoked when the characters' actions are misinterpreted by those they love: Edward leaves Bella to save her life, or Jacob stops seeing her to obey his pack. The heroine's pain is witnessed by the reader in her monologues: her feelings and fears that any human being can relate to and the reader is thus drawn into the story."

The results of this formula have been wildly successful. *Twilight's* total franchise sales hit a massive \$6,145,100,000.

Looking for Alaska: The Modern 'Catcher in the Rye'

After John Green, author of the 2005 YA phenomenon *Looking for Alaska*, won the American Library Association's award for best Young Adult Fiction novel of the year, he naturally turned his primary focus to a Youtube vlog campaign. Naturally, because the youthful flair that has made John Green's career calls for the occasional vlog, angst-filled wisecrack, and, it seems, a charm that makes his books undeniably addicting to both young and old readers. "At 36 the author is himself studiously adolescent, punctuating his long, articulate sentences with bursts of enthusiasm that are laced with sarcasm, defensive wit and appealing self-deprecation, just like his 16-year-old protagonists'," (John Green: teenager, age 36).

Five novels. The Micheal L. Printz award. 10.7 million copies of his most recent novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* sold. An astronomical 2.3 million followers on *Twitter*. It seems that John Green, in the world of young adult fiction, can do no wrong. How is it that his stories can be so young – coping with the trials and tribulations of any 'coming of age' ranged kid – and yet, feel so incredibly *old*? And why is it that his readers and critics are delighted to realize that 'we've heard this all before?'

While most, if not all, of John Green's novels could be made to make a sound argument as a 'modern *Catcher in the Rye*,' his first novel, *Looking for Alaska* might be the best of many good answers. The novel keeps track of the socially-awkward and skinny Miles Halter, who meets an equally eclectic bunch of friends when he switches to a new boarding school. His story revolves around his meeting and eventually falling for the charmingly dark Alaska Young. The story itself is gripping enough, but more so is the way Green walks the line between hope and hopelessness, offering readers of any age a muddled romanticization of a young kid's story. Sound familiar?

"Green's books were narrated in a clever, confiding voice. His protagonists were sweetly intellectual teen-age boys smitten with complicated, charismatic girls...a youthfully insatiable appetite for big questions: What is an honorable life? How do we wrest meaning from the unexpected death of someone close to us? What do we do when we realize that we're not as special as we thought we were?"

-The Teen Whisperer, The New Yorker

Finding Worth in Presumed Worthlessness:

The discussion of High Art and Low Art in the defense of Young Adult Fiction, however, is less of a question of whether or not YA is "low art" (it is), and more so whether or not two distinctive categories of worth are fair to begin with.

"If the distinction between high art and low art is like the distinction between art and non-art, then why do we need both distinctions?...I am already lumbered with an art/non-art device, shouldering it because I cannot seem to get along without it. Why do I also drag along a wedge for separating high art from low art? What extra work does it do?" (Cohen 1993: 152)

Today, there is the robust, opposing echo following every dialogue about the comparative merits of "high" and "low" art. Namely, that creating a chasm between good art and bad, or real art and somehow not-real is nonsensical. In the words of Ad Reinhardt, "Art is art, and everything else, is everything else." In that vein, simply because a YA novel is written – formulaic as it may be – should it be subject to potentially being deemed "unreal?" Do we really want to start doling out authentication to artists on whether or not their works are allowed to be called art?

When we begin denouncing genres for what we deem to be lack of legitimacy, it reveals unfortunate trends within what we decide is legitimate. Patriarchal thinking, hegemonic thinking; as it turns out – *shockingly* – an institution of grading art created by 18th century men in Western cultures, does not allow much credit to diversity. "...The way we have talked about YA fiction since 2005 has largely been constructed around privileging authenticity, or the idea that certain genres and books are inherently more "real" or "prestigious" than others. Gender ties into this argument because more often than not, the YA works pegged as authentic and legitimate are written by men and fall into the category of realism" (*We're Talking About Young Adult Fiction All Wrong*, Fowle).

Even if we were to entertain that the distinction of "high art" and "low art" were plausible on a basic level, and then decided that there was no problem with maintaining the outdated

practice of championing Western male culture, we still have to recognize the many things we gain from the genre of Young Adult Fiction.

Twilight may be an escapist franchise, founded on the formula of empathetic reading, but it also serves legitimate literary purposes. Kids and adults that find themselves obsessively reading the series are treated to themes of love as a vehicle for individual change, the gradual understanding that the things we want aren't always the things that we need, and families grown out of respect and a desire to love, rather than family by obligation.

The merits of another familiar formula – the lost, but charming teen with an identity crisis – are already more acquainted than is probably already recognized.

J.D. Green and John Salinger: A Changing Perception of YA Fiction

The merits we recognized in *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger in 1951, are still very much alive. We praised J.D. Salinger, when he invented the genre with his novel, for being a teenager in the most brilliant way possible.

“...its sympathetic understanding of adolescence and its fierce if alienated sense of morality and distrust of the adult world, the novel struck a nerve in cold war America and quickly attained cult status, especially among the young” (The Learning Network, J.D. Salinger and the *Catcher in the Rye*).

And yet, today, when YA fiction is seen as a genre for the masses – unoriginal, unworthy, and nearly immoral – writers offering the same kind of reflection of youth are deemed silly.

J.D. Salinger was a genius for inventing the painfully real Holden Caulfield. Today, when John Green is praised for his work, it's followed by some account of his “silliness” or “eccentrics.”

“I think that one of these days,” he said, “you're going to have to find out where you want to go. And then you've got to start going there” (Salinger). Young adult fiction has changed directions a number of times since its creation, but more than that, we've changed the way we perceive it. Let's keep that in mind next time we crack open a YA novel.

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