THE EXPERIENCES OF ADULT READERS OF YOUNG ADULT FICTION

by
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Approved by:

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Advisor

This study provides insight into the range of experiences of adults who read young adult fiction. The data was collected using two focus groups to interview sixteen adult readers about their perceptions of themselves as readers as well as the contributions of young adult fiction to their lives as adults. Once analyzed, the data was used to clarify that adults are motivated by many factors when choosing to read young adult fiction, and that their lives are indeed enriched by the experience.

Headings:

Reader’s advisory – Adult
Readers – Adults
Literature – Young Adult
Genre fiction – Studies
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INTRODUCTION

For some, it is clear why so many young people love the books in the *Harry Potter* series. It’s hard to top a well-written story about a young, sympathetic protagonist who’s dissatisfied with his horrible home life until the day he discovers he’s actually a legendary hero in an alternate magical world of wizards, spells, and possibility. Four books, two films, and seven years later, readers remain rapt and entranced by every cliffhanging ending. Booksellers are excited that sales of *Harry Potter* as well as other books about wizards and magic have increased; they call its contagious success the “Harry Potter Syndrome” (Sherman, 2003, para. 9). Librarians have called this effect the “Harry Potter Halo” noticing that since *Harry Potter* arrived in the fall of 1996, circulation is up for books containing similar themes and adventures (Maughan, 2003 para. 6). *Harry Potter* has become a fantastical force to be reckoned with in the book-loving world.

Inasmuch as it has reignited children’s publishing, from the beginning *Harry Potter* has also stirred up controversy. Because it occasionally deals with death, magic, and the “dark arts,” it is included on the American Library Association’s list of “The Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-1999” (American Library Association, 2003, para. 2). Some people question whether or not such supposedly menacing material is appropriate for people as young as the protagonist himself, who started off the series in his eleventh year. More recently, a new *Harry Potter* controversy has appeared on the
pages of magazines and in newspaper editorials. This time, it’s adults who are being accused of making inappropriate reading choices.

In 2000, New York Times columnist William Safire was one of the first to declare that the trouble with Harry Potter isn’t that young readers are “being lured into a belief of witchcraft,” but that adult readers are being pulled into and obsessing about a children’s book of less than stellar quality (para. 5). Many of these adults criticized for reading down come clean by saying that Harry Potter has been the first book they’ve read since childhood, certainly the first book they’ve really “lived in” since childhood (Byatt, 2003 para. 16). In 1999, Library Journal editor Francine Fialkoff explained the silver lining to this phenomenon by saying that perhaps Harry Potter is what “adults who haven’t been reading are reading” (p. 60).

Fialkoff goes on to hypothesize that such books are “safe” and “non-threatening” and can be read quickly, often in one evening or one rare and unscheduled Sunday afternoon. It could also be that Harry Potter has been able to re-inspire adults who haven’t been reading to dive in again after a long hiatus brought on by being out of school or just busy raising families, having one or more jobs, and all the other various obligatory activities that divide up one’s life. In the end, Safire declares Harry Potter to be far from “prize-worthy culture” and says that too much of it would be a complete “waste of adult time” (Safire, 2000, para. 10).

Even as recently as July 2003, editorials continue to support Safire’s outlook and concerns over adults reading, enjoying, and finding meaning in books intended for young people (Bristow, 2003, Byatt, 2003). Every time an editorial appears in the New York Times bemoaning the blurring of youth and adult literary tastes, a slew of letters to the
editor arrive from adult readers more than ready to explain themselves and justify their “infantile” reading habits. The letters range from passionately moved to scholarly and skeptical. One adult reader writes in to say how she “wept upon finishing *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in part because of the losses” she herself has been mourning, “including the loss of the idealization of [her] parents” (Biondi, 2003, para. 1). Another reader eschews exaggerated critiques like Byatt’s and Safire’s simply by contextualizing them in the long and “venerable literary tradition of pretentiousness [and] snobbery” (Green, 2003, paras. 1-3).

Reaching back further to a 1956 article wittily entitled “Literature for Adolescents – Pap or Protein?,” literary critic Frank G. Jennings describes the entire genre as “mealy-mouthed, gutless, and pointless” (p. 226). Even when *appropriately* aimed at young people, it seems that the books themselves have not always been looked upon favorably. Less than a decade later J. Donald Adams not only jabs at the genre itself by calling it “a phenomenon which belongs properly only to a society of morons,” (1965, p. 251) but goes on to make a dig at the adults who might read and enjoy it as well by wondering “what person of mature years and reasonably mature understanding…can read without impatience a book written for adolescents?” (p. 252). Though his question is surely rhetorical in nature, intended more as a critique of adults who read and enjoy what is currently called young adult fiction, the fact that similar searing criticisms continue today as more *grown-ups* admit to *reading down*, indicates a need for investigation. Titles like Byatt’s “Harry Potter and the Childish Adult” and worrisome statements claiming that such adult reading habits lead to “cultural infantilism” (Bristow, 2003, para. 4) and the “loss of a sense of what a classic really is” (qtd. in Safire, 2003, para. 7) indicate a deep...
disconnect between certain cultural critics and the experiences of adults who read, learn from, and are moved by young adult fiction.

Even though the critiques of adults who read young adult fiction have not changed much in fifty years, the young adult genre itself continues to evolve. The stories and characters of today’s young adult fiction are notably different from the moralistic tales of the 1800’s or the ground-breaking but often unsurprising problem novels of the 1960’s and 70’s (Nilson & Donelson, 2000). The New York Times may run op ed pieces disparaging adults who read from the Harry Potter series, but it responded to the overpopulation of Harry Potter titles on the New York Times Bestseller List by starting a New York Times Bestsellers List specifically for children’s fiction, nonfiction, picture books, and chapter books (“‘NYT’ to Debut Kids’ Bestseller List,” 2000, p. 9). Since 1996, the National Book Foundation and the L.A. Times Book Prize have also added categories that recognize authors of books for young readers, specifically young adults (Cart, 1999).

Finally, in 1999 the genre gathered enough support from publishers and library professionals of the Young Adult Library Services Association to garner its own set of awards named after Michael L. Printz, a high school librarian from Topeka, Kansas (Gentle, 2001). The Printz Awards were established to create a distinction between juvenile books (ages 8-11) and books for young adults (ages 12-18) (Butts, 2002). Another function of the awards is to recognize young adult works of true literary excellence and merit (Lodge, 2002). At their core, the awards seek to reward quality books that will be relevant to their readers and have a powerful impact on their lives (Gentle, 2001). The final goal is to promote “edgier” books now (Butts, 2002, p. 342)
while at the same time encouraging risk-taking and innovation among writers and publishers in the future (Cart, 1999). Having redefined categories of quality for itself, developed standards and awards, and made it onto the *New York Times Bestsellers List*, young adult literature seems to have “come of age” (Cart, 1999, p. 33). Books in the genre are getting recognized for reflecting a more “complex view of human relations” as well as for having “fuller and more true to life depictions of the human experience” (Hearne, 1999, p. 175) than ever before in its history.

As the genre grows in popularity and gains both notoriety and praise from people of all ages, it becomes more important for librarians to be open to understanding the value of this material to a wider variety of readers. If, like literary critics past and present, librarians have “half-concealed or overt approval or disdain” for what a patron chooses or inquires about finding in the library, they may be indirectly “developing tastes” or demonstrating bias in ways they are unaware (Nell, 1988, p. 35). Understanding the experiences of adults who read young adult fiction will improve the librarian’s ability to help this population make more fulfilling choices and contribute to the growing field of adult reader advisory. Since it is not possible to create collection development policies without having a more thorough understanding of what certain readers get out of reading certain types of fiction (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002), library professionals must begin to understand the experiences of adults who read young adult fiction in order to make more informed weeding and purchasing choices. Clearly, there is a need to hear from the readers themselves. What if some adults are not, as Adams charges, made *impatient* by the genre? Finally, what, if anything, could such a study
uncover about how the young adult genre itself and perceptions of the genre are changing?

RELEVANT LITERATURE

In order to learn more about adult readers of young adult fiction I reviewed materials in two different categories, including sources ranging from popular to scholarly in nature. First, I reviewed sources that offered insight into what is currently known about the needs and motivations of adult readers in relation to the significance of adult reader advisory services. Second, I reviewed a wide variety of articles discussing the trends, implications, and experiences of adults reading young adult fiction. In choosing these two fields, I was trying to find out what is already understood about three main questions: What happens for adult readers when they read for pleasure? How do adults express the significance of reading? How is it personally significant to them that they choose to read young adult fiction?

One of the most often cited studies on the habits, motivations, and needs of adults reading for pleasure studied three hundred different readers over six years at the Institute for Behavioural Sciences of the University of South Africa in 1988 (Nell). Building on previous studies explaining that people read what interests them, Nell sought to delve into a more descriptive study of the pleasure-reader’s experience as well as why they found certain books and topics interesting. The study found that pleasure reading, even though it was often considered by the reader to be relaxing, is also a dynamic, consciousness changing activity. People’s reading choices and habits are shaped by social and cultural values, and it was not true that “as sophistication grows, coarser tastes wither away” (p.
4. In relation to adults reading young adult fiction, such a conclusion means that even after much schooling in the merits of sophisticated levels of thinking and learning to value, appreciate, and critique the classics, adults can still find meaning and comfort in other types of reading as well. One of the main reasons Nell found adults pursuing pleasure reading was to "escape" (1988, p. 228). The study concludes that when people use reading to "heighten" their awareness or "imagine a new way," they read fewer texts and experience them deeply. Nell found that readers would rather escape to dull their awareness or "take their mind off" something by reading many texts but being deeply involved in only a few (pp. 227-228).

Another more contemporary study of pleasure readers comes from England and focuses specifically on adult readers of "imaginative" or fantasy fiction (Usherwood & Toyne, 2002). The purpose of this study was to learn more about people’s transformations as a result of their experiences with the fantasy genre. Through analysis of data from thirty different focus group discussions, Usherwood and Toyne found that people read imaginative literature mainly to escape, relax, increase their literacy skills, and to learn about the world. Secondary reasons included instruction, self-development, personal development, to gain insight into others, and because they needed reading just as they needed to eat, breathe, and sleep (p. 34). Another conclusive key to the experience of adults reading young adult fiction was the finding that people’s concepts of themselves as readers is far from static; in fact it changes "according to time and personal development" (p. 33). In the end, it is clear to the researchers that reading is vital because through reading, "a person’s life can be transformed" (p. 33).
In 1940 Bryan writes about the importance of considering “the reader as a person” (p. 137) because the things that motivate people to read are the same “basic motivating drives to personality development” (p. 140). Bryan describes these factors as the need for security, assurance, and stability; the need for new experiences and change; the need for recognition and attention for our actions; and the need for a response from the universe in the form of love, affection, friendship, and companionship (1940). McClellan writes that a person reads in hopes of resolving eight deeper needs: to test and compare personal experiences against those of another, to search for meaning, to allow the mind a break from problems and frustrations, to confirm one’s own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs; to feel a sense of belonging; to be able to access and release certain feelings; to extend one’s own range of ideas and perceptions; and to experience empathy (1981). One final study on understanding fiction readers concludes that they will seek out materials to fill whatever needs they are having, but that readers’ understandings and responses to materials are unique and dependant on their particular sets of abilities and life experiences (Yu & O’Brien, 1996).

The discussion of readers’ needs and motivations for reading is complicated because fiction readers in particular may not be consciously aware of the needs they are trying to satisfy (Goff, 1985). It is useful for library professionals to try and understand the psychological factors at play within readers even though they are not completely able to articulate what exactly they want to find (Bryan, 1939). Bryan goes on to say that we must learn “what books do what things to what people” (p. 10) so that we can be better prepared to recommend “just the right book at just the right time” (p. 11). However, Bryan does not explicitly mention reader’s advisory services to adults seeking young
adult fiction. Her belief that measuring the value and effects of reading a certain book from a certain genre must be considered in light of “the changes in attitude and behavior induced in a particular individual, at a particular time” (1939, p. 8). This perspective definitely fits with modern attitudes about the relative nature of determining the meaning and value of the reading experience to the individual (Nilson & Donelson, 2000, Trites, 2001). Bryon also seems aware of what Philip Davis called the “vital relation” between “the reading and the living, the living and the reading” (1992, p. 303) when considering the whole reader and the whole person behind their needs and motivations.

Not much scholarship has been written about doing reader’s advisory for adults with young adult titles. In the past, there was a lack of interest in fiction librarianship for adults for several reasons. Young people are viewed as needing to have their books approved by an adult so that the wrong materials don’t accidentally fall into a young person’s hands. With adults, however, there is a lack of research about fiction services, which is odd considering the large amount of money, staff time, and shelf space allotted to it (Bryon, 1985). This research gap is attributed to a long-standing bias within the library profession that continues to treat light fiction reading as inferior to other more serious research topics (Van Riel, 1993).

There have been discussions about adult books that young adults might like (Campbell, 1998) and articles written about adult authors writing books with hopes of seeking a younger audience (Lodge, 2002). There is even a developing body of work to discuss and critique the childhood writings of popular authors such as Louisa May Alcott, Jane Austen, and both Bronte sisters. Within this genre known as “Juvenilia”--literature written by children with an adult audience in mind-- the “protagonists are generally
youthful adults, as are those of most novels for adults” (McMaster, 2001, p. 281). While these are useful for what they explain about the fluid nature of texts and their shifting relationship to different audiences, they offer little in the form of description or explanation of the adult reading experience.

In general, the literature about adults who read young adult fiction is more anecdotal than scholarly. Articles often focus more on critiques or praise of the young adult genre or a specific work of fiction (Follos, 2002, Hearne, 1999, Shulman 1999, Zvirin, 2000) and ignore the experience of the adult readers themselves. When, on occasion, the adult readers are considered in the discussion, it is usually to criticize them for being “creepy” (Munzer, 2001, p. 34), regressive, and “aspiring to be childlike” (Bristow, 2003, para. 17). Bristow goes on to claim that such adults seem to be uninterested in growing up, preferring instead to “cocoon” themselves up in “children’s books” (para. 15) in order to escape “from the complexities of adulthood in a dangerous world” (Carr, 2003, para. 7). In such articles, editorials, and even letters to the editor, rarely are adults consulted to speak for themselves.

Several studies do consider the motivations of adults reading young adult fiction, but approach them as the stewards of young people’s reading choices and not from the viewpoint of really benefiting from the readings themselves. In 1990, the librarians at the Sterling Public Library in Illinois attempted to match up adults with children’s books in order to increase circulation of their children’s collection. By creating programming that brought adults into contact with books they could then recommend and read to the young people in their lives, the library staff was able to help some adults experience the joys of children’s literature for the first time (Soderquist, 1991). Other studies completed more
recently note the assumption that most of the adults reading books intended for young people are either educators, students, or care-givers seeking out such reading materials in an attempt to examine, select, and weed out books for young people in their lives, but again, not for their own personal benefit (Nilson & Donelson, 2000, Wojtasik, 2001).

A recent BBC survey consulted adults on their top 100 “best reads,” and more than 25% were considered “kid’s books” (Byatt, 2003, para. 11) indicating, as bestselling author Michael Chabon said in an a 2002 interview with online magazine Salon.com, that “you never forget the delight that books you loved as a child brought you” (Taylor, para. 7). In his classic book of criticism, *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children’s Fiction*, Fred Inglis quotes writer C. S Lewis: “No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often more) worth reading at the age of 50” (1981, p. 102). Such readers say that the very best stories can be read on several different levels depending on one’s age and life experience.

Wendy Lesser wrote an entire book about the act of rereading and some of the experiences she discusses connect with books from her own childhood (2002). In it she notes that

As you engage in this rereading, you can also sense that…there is a core of experience shared by your two selves (perhaps there are even more than two, if you include all the people you were in the years between the two readings). (p. 4)

Arguably the value of reading and re-reading lies not only in the stories themselves, but also in what it is they suggest to adult readers about their own sense of what it meant to be a young person (Wojtasik, 2001). This may be different for every reader at every time in their life (Rubakin & Bethmann, 1937, Lesser, 2002, Tinker, 1963). Books for younger audiences also offer entry into a world remembered from youth (Rosen, 1997), a
time associated with “passion, imagination, and vitality” (Spacks, 1978, p. 235). Books like *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Prince*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and many by Dr. Seuss have long been known to provide adults with “philosophical insights” (Rosen, 1997, p. 28) as well as a connection to their childhood selves.

Children’s books like those recently written by actors Jerry Seinfeld and Jamie Lee Curtis and rappers L. L. Cool J and Doug E. Fresh have been popular with adults because of a familiarity with their previous work as entertainers (Rosen, 1997, Taylor, 2002). Adult readership of young adult titles has definitely increased as writers with “certifiable literary standing” and adult followers continue in the tradition of British writers like C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, E. B. White, and Rudyard Kipling who have long been considered meaningful and enjoyable by both young people and adults (Taylor, 2002). Similarly, adult authors have a lot to gain from casting their “creative nets somewhat wider” by switching to writing for children and young adults (Lodge, 2002, p. 28).

Booksellers have long been aware that children’s picture books appeal to adults because of their quick readability, often stunning visual appeal, and compact emotional themes. Rosen also reports that the appeal of picture books to adults as well as children could be a sign of the times. We are living in a visual age, rich with images and messages expressed through pictures and reinforced by text. Readers are comfortable following narrative communicated through illustrations as they are with text itself. The appeal to all ages can also be attributed quite simply to the fact that such books don’t underestimate a reader’s intelligence and as a result the books speak to a variety of audiences at many different levels of development as readers (Rosen, 1997).
When writing about young adult fiction for Salon.com, Charles Taylor describes the skill of being able to write essentially, which is different from writing simply (2002) and very different from dumbing down (Gatto, 1992). In order to speak to different aged readers a story has to be expressed clearly, often by using “suggestive concreteness” which is a way of “conveying action, character and setting in a few sharply defined strokes” (Taylor, 2002, para. 14). These types of “well-told stories that happen to have a teenager as the major protagonist” (Follos, 2002, p. 31) are both interesting enough and clear enough to keep adult and young readers engaged.

Today books originally written for one audience, but known to also appeal to another audience are known as crossovers (Rosen, 1997, Zvirin, 1998, 2000). Since the early 1990’s crossovers have played an important role in the popularity and success of today’s young adult fiction with adults. Publishers have gotten savvy about this category of books by releasing different versions of the same book with different artwork on the covers or reviews on the back covers to appeal to the target audience (Rosen, 1997). Looking at how publishers and book stores have been thinking about crossover literature is useful for helping libraries strategize about how to help readers identify and choose books in this category as well.

Book stores have tried to appeal to different audiences by eliminating the terminology that separates adult and young adult readers altogether. Rather than shelving a book in one section or the other, they will create a display and call it “great reads” or “classics” in hopes of getting the attention of a variety of readers based on their attraction to certain authors or themes in the display. The stores hope this will alleviate the pressure readers may feel from being pushed into a category based on perceptions of age.
or maturity, and some recognize such nebulous distinctions to be acting as more alienating dividers than helpful labels. When certain books are weeded out of the young adult section or even the children’s section and then placed in a more age-neutral display, they can attract people’s interest based more on content than on a narrowly defined audience. In this way, the potential adult shame of getting caught reading a book for teenagers is eliminated altogether as is the potential teenager’s embarrassment of getting caught trying to find a book in the *kiddie* section (Rosen, 1997).

In the 1980’s, two other interesting demographic shifts occurred that would transform the world of young adult literature and bring more adult readers to the genre. While the number of teenagers in the U.S. dropped, the number of infants and very young children spiked. Baby Boomers had grown up, had children, and were determined to provide them with the best of everything, including reading materials at an early age. The market for books for very young children expanded, and bookstores and libraries responded by stocking the shelves and providing appropriate services. But as local governments tightened spending and libraries needed to cut money from their budgets, it was most easily taken from money that would have been spent on young adult librarians and young adult reading materials. As a result young adult publishers sought to revive interest in young adult books by reintroducing series books, widening the definition of what counts as a young adult book, and making space for new forms and genres such as the graphic novel (Aronson, 2001). Due to more budget cuts and competition with the Internet, critics, editors, publishers, and even library professionals of the early nineties wondered if the young adult genre would survive (Butts, 2002, Cart, 1999).
Fiction that falls into the young adult category has helped to blur the lines between audiences even more than picture books. The popularization of crossover successes like *Harry Potter*, Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and Francesca Lia Block’s *Weetzie Bat* made it easier for publishers to believe in the profitability of youth fiction (Benfer, 2000, Lodge, 2002, Rosen, 1997, Taylor, 2002). As a result, publishers have been giving young adult authors much more freedom to experiment with voice, content, and style (Butts, 2002). These are books that can work for readers regardless of where they are shelved in the bookstore or library. They work for young people and adults alike for a variety of reasons. The writing is clear, the voices authentic, and the themes are expressed realistically enough that people of many ages can identify and empathize with the characters. In this way “the good novel for the adolescent reader has attributes no different from any good novel. It must be technically masterful, and it must present a significant synthesis of human experience” (Burton, 1951, p. 369).

Dramatic changes in youth publishing have also led to a blurring of the lines between youth and adult books. By the end of the nineties crossovers were catching on as shown by the number of lists publicizing young adult books appealing to adult audiences. In 1998 alone, sources such as the popular *Entertainment Weekly* (Zvirin, 1998, para. 3) and the trade-oriented *Booklist* started running regular sections promoting children’s and young adult titles to adults in order to educate adult audiences about the quality of today’s literature for young audiences (Zvirin, 2000). These lists point to an increased awareness of the popularity of young adult titles with adults. Not until *Publisher’s Weekly* included an article quoting the confessions of adults admitting to
being so engrossed in young adult titles while riding the subway, that they missed their stops (Roback, 2000) did the voices of the readers themselves begin to appear in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

The purposes of this paper are to investigate the experiences of adult readers of young adult fiction, and to explain more about the genre’s effect on and importance to adults. Much of the literature about adults who read young adult fiction is written by literary or cultural critics or people with a vested interest in the profits of the books themselves. Consequently, the voices and opinions of the everyday reader are usually missing from the literature. Because the adult perspective on young adult fiction has not been sufficiently considered, this study seeks to document the opinions, perceptions, and feelings about reading experiences qualitatively, as revealed through focus group interviews (Krueger & Casey, 1998, Glitz, 1998).

Focus group interviews, as a methodology, were used because they are an efficient way to generate qualitative data (Robson, 2002) that can be analyzed to enrich the field’s current anecdotal findings, while at the same time establishing new directions for future studies (Glitz, 1998). We know adults are reading young adult fiction, but have not gained an informed understanding of what Glitz calls the “underlying psychological motivations” (p. 4). Once the motivations are understood better, librarians can use the conclusions to assess needs and plan services accordingly (Glitz, 1998).

To obtain people for focus groups, flyers (Appendix A) were made and posted in the Chapel Hill Public Library and on the UNC campus, and an announcement was
posted on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s School of Information and Library Science student listserv (Appendix B). Participants signed up by email or by phone for one of two focus groups. Several days before the actual focus group interviews, another more explanatory email was sent out to all participants who had expressed an interest in the project in order to better prepare them for the process (Appendix C). Volunteers were eligible to participate in one of the focus groups if they self-identified as being readers of young adult fiction. Prior consent was obtained orally or over email from each participant except for two people who came with friends because they were interested in the topic and had experience reading young adult fiction. Informants received snacks during the focus groups for their participation, but they were free to withdraw from the interview process at anytime without prejudice or penalty.

At the beginning of each focus group, every participant read, signed, and submitted a consent form (Appendix D) indicating they understood the nature of the project and their rights as participants in the focus group. All focus groups were tape recorded, and then the tapes were erased after being transcribed in full. Identifiers were excluded from these transcriptions. Each focus group lasted one hour and fifteen minutes. Only the participants and I were present in the room during the focus groups. The first focus group interview took place on Sunday July 13, 2003 at 2p.m. in a group study room in the R. L. House Undergraduate Library on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s campus. The second focus group interview took place the following evening, July 14th, and was conducted in a private meeting room of the Northside Gym of the Hargraves Community Center in Chapel Hill. A combined
transcript of both of these focus group interviews was typed up in order to better analyze all the data together (Appendix E).

In total, sixteen people were interviewed in focus groups of seven and nine people each. In the analysis of the data, no identifying characteristics of participants have been attached to participant answers. Table 1, however, indicates how many of the participants were professionals, library science graduate students, and graduate students of other programs. Table 2 indicates the gender breakdown of each focus group. Although the participants shared adult identities (here, defined as being over the age of 18) and an interest in reading young adult fiction, the focus groups were as heterogeneous as possible in hopes of stimulating an interesting discussion that might reveal multiple perspectives not yet included in the discussion of what adults get out of reading young adult fiction (Robson, 2002).

Table 1

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<th>Focus Groups Participants: Professionals and Graduate Students</th>
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<td>professionals</td>
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<td>graduate students (library science)</td>
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<td>graduate students (other programs)</td>
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Table 2
Focus Groups Participants: Gender Breakdown

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The following questions were asked to each group of participants in the study:

- Describe yourself as a reader.
- Why do you describe yourself this way? What has shaped you in becoming this way?
- Can you talk about the differences among the kinds of books you read? Feel free to offer specific examples of authors, titles, or genres you read.
- What contribution, if any, does reading young adult fiction bring to your life as an adult?
- What would it be like if, for some reason, you were unable to read young adult fiction?

All questions were asked by me, the researcher. These open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to articulate exactly what has been missing from the discussion of adults reading young adult fiction: their own “feelings, experiences, and impressions” (Glitz, 1998, p. 3). From the beginning of each focus group, participants were encouraged to share their own ideas as well as react to each other’s thinking,
building on fellow group members’ ideas in order to draw out revelations and future
directions for study that may not have been brought out in individual interviews. In this
way, there was also the hope of recording both shared views and divergent opinions
(Glitz, 1998, Robson, 2002).

**FOCUS GROUP RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

*Readers of Young Adult Fiction and Their Influences*

Like any group, the adult readers interviewed for this paper are unique; as a group it is impossible to generalize about them. In order to get a sense of how they each defined themselves in relation to the topic of this study, participants were first asked to describe themselves as readers. Participants described their own reader personalities with terms like “eclectic,” “voracious,” “addicted,” and “varied.” One person even said they were a “filler reader in that I’ll read anything that fills my time.” A couple of readers agreed that they felt more like browsers than anything else and often relied on “Zen and the art of book choosing” when trying to select reading materials. Several other people described themselves as “slow” readers, one even noting that they considered reading to be a “really hard activity to sit down and do.” Two people used the word “frustrated” because they felt like they didn’t get to read as much as they would like to because of work obligations and other time constraints.

Another one of the hopes of this study is to understand what experiences and motivations might lie behind their reading choices (McClellan 1981). Even though this issue is not the main focus of this study, it could surely have been expounded upon by each person, resulting in extended narratives about how they learned to read, how books
were treated in their family, and what type of messages they received from peers regarding reading while growing up. Instead, each person was asked to summarize in a sentence or two: “What, if anything, has shaped you in becoming this way?”

While not every person interviewed identified with being a reader when younger, many of the influential factors described by participants came early in life and from people close to them. People described older siblings who read a lot, parents who read to them a lot, and even elementary school teachers who took the time to read aloud to the entire class or allowed students to have a say in their reading choices. Being bored in school and having the ability (and probably the privilege) to bring in books of interest had an impact on one person as a child. Another person remembered being sick and bored in the hospital where the only thing for a kid to do was “watch really bad t.v. and read really bad books from the library.” Another person specifically mentioned the freedom of being able to go to the library to wander around and spend time alone reading whatever she pleased. The reading choices parents made were influential for some participants and they learned to develop the same sorts of tastes they saw their parents exhibiting.

In order to get a sense of what else influences and interests them as adult readers, participants were asked what they read as adults. The answers to this question were as varied as the contents of any well-stocked public library, indicating that these readers had wide-ranging interests. Again, though not the focus of this study, participants could have easily talked for quite a while about their reading interests.

The different ways that participants answered this question were interesting in how they showed a little about how people think about what they read. Even though
participants were encouraged to name specific titles and authors, many stated more broadly and named genres (autobiography, biography, classical literature, classical studies, queer studies, alternate histories, magical realism, news, sci fi, horror, history, historical romance, fiction, non-fiction, reference materials, cook books, how-to books, and of course, young adult) or formats that the reading appeared to them in (novels, series books, newspapers, magazines, ‘zines, comic books, short stories). Other times people named what they read by title (Harry Potter, A Swiftly Tilting Planet, Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret) or author (Erika Lopez, Dr. Seuss, Lemony Snicket, Stephen King). Reading for work and school also got mentioned (and groaned about) for taking up so much time (“boring law summaries,” social studies). Sometimes, participants just described what they read because it didn’t seem to fit neatly into any one-word category:

- reading things referred to in articles I read
- books I’ve read in the past and want to go back to
- anything that I think is gonna tell me something about the world
- modern Greek history…from about 1860 on
- I’ll read while I watch the movie
- things with a sort of fable element to it…like a character who uses wit and cleverness…or some kid who’s virtuous on his own
- really bad science fiction where the aliens always ooze green something

**Why Young Adult Fiction?**

The heart of this study is really addressed in the next question. To find out what is happening for adults when they read young adult fiction, participants were asked
“What contribution, if any, does reading young adult fiction bring to your life as an adult?” In the most general of responses, participants gave answers similar to readers in the Usherwood and Toyne (2002) study of readers of imaginative fiction as well as the pleasure readers of the extensive Nell study (1988). Like those studies, several participants associated reading young adult fiction with some type of “escape” and found it “pleasurable” or had a “good time reading it.” In line with all of these positive responses was also the fact that some people reported reading young adult fiction because it was “funny” and they could share it with their teenagers. In the simplest terms, these adult readers were coming to adult fiction as a leisurely or even “relaxing” activity. One person associated it with entertainment as well. Participants also liked that in most of the modern young adult fiction, young people are treated respectfully as characters rather than in a condescending way.

In contrast to the positive comments about reading young adult fiction was one reader’s observation that “some people think about [young adult fiction] as a literary ghetto” where some writers don’t necessarily “have the respect for their audience that they could have.” Young adult fiction was generally experienced to be more readable largely due to stories with interesting young people as narrators, especially when the young people were being written about with a respectful tone. As with readers of other genres and in other studies, adults reading young adult fiction demonstrated the ability to discern what they liked from what they didn’t like, indicating there was an evaluative quality to their selection process (Nell, 1988).
Young Adult Fiction Contrasted with Adult Fiction

Several negative comments were also made regarding how participants compared their experiences and perceptions of adult fiction with young adult fiction. Unlike adult literature which was described as often being “depressing” and “negative” depicting a world where “everything’s awful,” young adult fiction was praised for its “sense of wonder” and the ability of the characters to find “multiple ways of looking at things” rather than being “set in their ways.” Whereas adult fiction was described as “full of itself” and “faddish,” young adult fiction was felt to be much more “open-ended” and “creative.”

The readers also enjoyed how deeply the young adult books impacted them. Some readers commented on being much more likely to be “changed” by reading young adult fiction as opposed to an adult novel where the feeling is sometimes more analytical and detached. One person said that after reading a “thousand-page” James Michener book, they set it aside as if the reading had been purely for entertainment but had no deeper effect on them as a human being. He compared how he often felt after reading a young adult book by saying that it was more like walking away feeling “like you got something out of it…the way you used to when you saw movies when you were ten…the rest of your day was different because you saw that movie.” The experience of reading a young adult book was more “touching” and stayed with the reader longer because the characters exhibited “a wider range of emotions.”

Young adult fiction definitely helped some of the adult readers to experience their lives more positively with more of a focus on potential and optimism. Without young adult fiction, some readers thought that they would be disappointed or have less fun
reading. Other people commented that it would be harder to remember childhood, and they might become more “self-absorbed” or “jaded” without access to what those memories represent.

Even when death came up in the young adult novels some of the participants had read, they thought the attitudes about it were much healthier because the characters struggled, dealt with it, and eventually tried to move on. Many readers in this study appreciated that the “romance” doesn’t necessarily need to lead to sex or the predictable trajectory of dating, marriage, and kids. For some readers, the lack of predictable sexuality is what one critic called “restful” (Byatt, 2003, para. 10). Another way to interpret this yearning for less complicated relations is to wonder if some readers, when faced with what they consider the conventional options for relationships between adults, might not be scanning the landscape for other, more nuanced options.

**Hope, Wonder, and Open-Endedness**

Overall, participants have experienced three main differences that make young adult fiction more appealing to them than some of the adult fiction they have read: feelings of wonder, open-endedness, and hopefulness. Each of these qualities was closely connected to the age of the narrators and the particular perspective they bring to how the stories are told. In other fiction where young characters are more marginalized or one-dimensional the reading experience was less satisfying for readers in this study. Well-written young narrators allowed for a more “idealistic” and “less pragmatic” and “less hardened” way of dealing with the world. Again, the “positive” nature of so many of the narrators despite their complicated lives gave the adult readers hope.
Unlike characters in adult fiction, young adult protagonists didn’t seem as “stuck” to some participants. The characters demonstrate “more ways of looking at things” and imagine more options. Some adults in this study seemed drawn to that specific quality in their reading. They liked feeling hopeful that they could work things out, too. They liked the “magic” of stories directed at younger people, and they liked being able to look at the way the world “could be” rather than always being expected to focus on how things already are (Wojtasik, 2001). Readers also enjoyed young adult books that presented bleaker depictions of youth and considered that being an adult made the readings even more viable. Evidently, having time and experience between our current lives and the painful parts of our past we may identify with in young adult characters, allows adults the respite of knowing “we made it” (Mondello, 2003) and that, too is hopeful.

“It’s so real”

In contrast to the imaginative and flexible quality, some adult readers also described liking young adult fiction because it was “so real.” Narrators and protagonists were thought to be more “sincere” and (in the really good books) less “stereotyped” or “reductive.” Some readers appreciated the trend, evident especially in modern young adult fiction, of having younger characters getting a chance to deal with what have traditionally been considered “adult topics” (like “pregnancy, alcoholism, rape, stuff teenagers were really going through”). Readers acknowledged there are definitely “different levels of sophistication” within the genre of young adult books. Overall, the ones they were the most affected by dealt with a wide variety of sometimes “heavy” topics respectfully while still managing to be well-written and entertaining.
Simple and Complex; Concise and Meaningful

Many of the adult readers mentioned the quality of the writing as a reason for enjoying young adult fiction to the extent that they do. They often found the writing in good young adult fiction to be “wonderful” because it was “more concise” and got to the point without “wasting time on just words.” Another reader liked how “clean” the writing was, without too much that was extraneous. This participant found the experience to be “refreshing.” Other readers described the language used in young adult fiction as “tighter” but still able to “express meaning,” still able to capture “the human spirit” and tell “the story of a life.” The simplicity of the language, what Taylor calls being able “to write essentially,” (2002, para. 13) was something that did not detract from the depth of the meaning some readers experienced while reading young adult fiction.

Even though young adult fiction was acknowledged as sometimes being “a lot simpler,” many books were also seen as addressing complex issues or conveying complicated situations. The authors seem skilled at differentiating the necessary from the superfluous when crafting their stories. One reader appreciated knowing that the stories were written “by someone a lot older” but “for someone a lot younger” and compared the word choice to props in a movie “when they’re showing things and everything is deliberate, everything has a clue in it...Every word is put there for a reason…and it’s just interesting.” For this reader, the experience was made richer by the fact that reading is certainly an activity that can be meaningful as both spectator and participant (Nell, 1988).

Being more concise and to the point was a positive aspect for some readers, because it allowed them to get pulled into the story, stay involved all the way through and
then finish without getting their attention diverted or becoming bored with the outcome. Most of the readers agreed that one of the big bonuses of young adult fiction is that it is meaningful, but not too time consuming. Other readers liked the brevity of the reading experience because then they could “carry on with the rest of [their] life sooner.” Many readers in the focus groups described how much they enjoyed how the authors use language skillfully to tell a story without having to spend too much time reading. One reader liked being able to “stay up all night and read” and finish a book and realized that he had really only done that with young adult books lately. Young adult books have to move quickly and get to the point faster (Young, 2003) because young readers have to be “hooked instantly” (Sherman, 2003, para. 28), and adults like this, too.

Some participants expressed quick readability to be a benefit because they felt they were slow readers or because they had a hard time doing anything else once they started a book they were really into because they wanted to finish it. Being able to read books quickly was positive for another participant because of the “whole sense of accomplishment” felt after reading several books in one afternoon. While some have argued that it is certain books’ readability rather than their quality that makes them notable from childhood (Bristow, 2003, Safire, 2000), this is not seen as a liability by all readers. In this study some readers really liked that some young adult books are shorter or just faster reads because they could finish them and then still have time to do other things in their lives.
Re-reading, Re-membering, Re-connecting

Many of the readers involved in the focus group felt that one of the most significant ways they grew from reading young adult fiction was by rereading books they originally read as young people. In doing this the readers talked about how sometimes the rereading was just as rich as the first reading, but different in that “you draw a contrast between the different way you experience it now and it tells you something about yourself and how you’ve grown and changed.” People commented that the changes they noticed in how they related to characters from young adult fiction differently now as adults. About a recent rereading of *The Catcher in the Rye* one reader said,

I read it when I was a teenager and did not actually feel real connected to it. But when I reread it as a grown up my heart just went out to Holden and I just…loved Holden and felt like he was this really tragic, broken kid, but [I] had this more nurturing instinct about him like I wanted to take him under my wing…but [I] didn’t identify with him.

Opinions change and where our sympathies lie is a shifting shelf. As the reader changes, reactions to certain characters change and it is as if a whole new book has been read (Rubakin & Bethmann, 1937, Lesser, 2002).

As young people, readers look to identify with characters and when they move into adulthood some readers noticed how the books reread as adults often “translate in different ways now.” Sometimes what is realized is that they themselves really are much different than they were when they originally read these books. “Back then I enjoyed them,” one reader said, “and now I critique them more.” Another person commented on rereading the Ramona books as an adult and how she had remembered “totally identifying with Ramona” as a child, but upon rereading the books as an adult she found some of the situations in the books to be more “funny and charming, but not something
[she] could see [herself] doing” now as an adult. Perhaps, as one young adult fiction publisher writes about teenagers who go back and reread books from their childhood, adult readers are also going back and “savoring a self they know they are leaving behind” (Aaronson, 2001, p. 39). Someone else reread Harriet the Spy and mentioned that rereading it as an adult was so much fun because the main character got to do all “the stuff you can’t really get away with” as an adult, so the pleasure is a vicarious one. Several people mentioned that there were even certain books they would try to reread every year in order to continue learning from them with the different perspective of whatever age they were.

Rereading books from earlier in their lives reconnected many readers with the joy they once felt about reading. One person said rereading “takes me back to when I was 14 and reading for the first time and enjoying [the books] over again, [it’s] the same positive experience again.” These comments echoed a Salon.com writer’s comments about how “for adult readers, kids books offer the strong, straightforward storytelling that reminds them of why they first started to read fiction” (Taylor, 2002, para. 3). Rereading also helped adults rediscover “what it was like to feel like a teenager or a young adult when I originally read certain books.” Lesser compares rereading books from youth to looking into a mirror only to find “the face of your own youthful self, the original reader, the person you were when you first read the book” (2002, p. 4). The books themselves become catalysts for resurfacing certain memories, feelings, and ideas forgotten about until the rereading.
Clarity About the Past

Readers also linked reading with remembering, an activity that many thought was important at any age. One participant said, “if I were 70 and I read a book where the protagonist was 30, it would be like, oh yeah, I remember that.” For some readers, being able to remember the self at different times and from different perspectives helps add richness to living regardless of one’s age. One person thought that it was important to remember what it was like as a young person because “as we get older, we start forgetting, kind of like your mind heals itself…[back then] everything was so passionate…[and] what you think about now is really no big deal. I don’t want to forget.” So much of growing up encourages people to disconnect, forget, and move on. In contrast, the effect of young adult fiction on adult readers leads some of them back to their own lives for a second look. This type of “reflective power” makes young adult fiction especially meaningful for adults (Follos, 2002, p. 30).

Readers agreed that there are plenty of adult writers who are capable of telling stories as powerful as those in young adult fiction, except that they don’t usually seem “as invested in it as young adult writers are about taking us back to that time.” Another reader described experiencing a sort of literary “hindsight is 20/20” because after reading certain young adult books, something else from the past is clearer than before. Another reader built upon this by saying how “different authors take you back there in completely different ways,” and this is useful because it’s a means of “revisiting the experience of childhood in a different way.” All of this helps readers bring more clarity to the past.

A grown up by the name of Socrates once said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Such an idea is at the core of many young adult books. One of the readers
interviewed in this study picked up on this quality and noted that so much of young adult fiction is about characters “re-evaluating” their lives and “values” and deciding who they want to be. Another great adult thinker, Paulo Freire, described this as the “the nature of being unfinished” and articulated the need “to become inserted in a permanent process of searching” because “keeping curiosity is absolutely indispensable for us to continue” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 11). It is no wonder young adult fiction works so well with people of all ages who recognize the benefit of engaging in re-evaluation at different times in their lives.

**Connections with Young People**

Reading young adult fiction helped some of the adults interviewed have more of a connection with young people now in their lives. Many of the people interviewed for the focus group either had teenagers of their own or had a job that brought them into contact with teenagers on a regular basis. The thing they all had in common was that they are older and of a different generation than the young people in their lives. Realizing the challenges of trying to relate to someone with a different generational experience, one reader said that without young adult fiction “you’d lose the opportunity to have insight into young adult lives.” Because “we each had our own experience but we had so many different kinds of experiences…decades ago” having books to enter now gave many readers another way to learn about what young people’s lives are like today.

Reading fiction with young adult characters making decisions, figuring out who they are, and making a space for themselves also helped one participant “keep up with what kids today are learning about the world or what kids in the past learned about the
world” and described this type of exposure as a “really important window.” A really good young adult book will describe and render young characters, and then go on to provide clues and information as to why they are that way (Aldridge, 1991). Reading young adult fiction helped one of the younger adults interviewed realize that even thought there were still some similarities, now “it’s different from when I was a young adult.” Overall, having more up-to-date accounts of what young people’s lives are like helps some of the adults figure out how to connect with them in more real and meaningful ways.

Personally and professionally, many of the readers mentioned using young adult books as a “conversation starter with kids.” Having a book a young person has read and enjoyed as neutral ground to discuss can sometimes be what another participant called “the hook” to get them to open up about other things as well. Because books offer “another way to communicate” with teens he works with, one reader said that “not reading [them], I would feel like I was some old Scrooge.” Reading their fiction is one way to show young adults that adults are willing to learn more about them and that they are interested in hearing from them on their own terms. This is important to teenagers in particular because they are in a state of transition and trying to figure out what exactly their own terms will be (Aaronson, 2001, Erikson, 1950). Young adult books are “narratives of being and becoming” (Aaronson, 2001, p. 67) and reading them can give adults great insight into what that process might be like for the young people they know.

Reading books written by adults who really “get it” and are able to deal with the complexities in young people’s lives in ways that capture the “whole person” without flattening them into a stereotype helped another person feel like he could work with his
students better. Another reader who works with “juveniles who’ve had difficulty” talked about how he found reading books with characters struggling with similar problems as teens he knows to be humanizing in that they give him “more breadth to draw from in [his] understanding” of their situations and challenges. Having read these types of books it is also “very useful to be able to connect [young people] with the stories that are like theirs [so] that they can identify” with them and realize they are not as alone as they may have felt.

**Reading to Change**

Adults in this study discussed referring young people to certain books in order for them to gain awareness or widen their sphere of influential experiences. They used young adult fiction the same way for themselves. In his book, *The Experience of Reading*, Philip Davis writes that when “we find we cannot hold onto, or even recall, a certain way of feeling…books may re-open the feel of that interior attitude, nebulous in itself, yet substantiated in the possibilities it subsequently makes possible” (1992, p. 23). Reading encourages change in ourselves because it allows us to watch the process, the consequences, and sometimes even the absence of change to play out in stories we read. Like the readers in the Usherwood and Toyne study of 2002, many of the readers who participated in focus groups for this paper cited personal transformation as an important and recurring part of their experience of reading young adult fiction. One person interviewed described young adult fiction as “the type of book I’d like…to read for some sort of self-discovery.” Because the genre itself is often about people “aching with
awareness” and “gathering up courage” (Young, 2003, para. 5), the characters are excellent models for how to deal (or not deal) with adversity.

Using books to help people solve problems and understand themselves or other people better is known as bibliotherapy. Psychologists have been using books in this way since the early 1900’s in order to help patients deal with personal issues (Bryan, 1939, Nilson & Donelson, 2000). The practice has been popularized since the late seventies and now includes a variety of techniques used individually and in groups to help people develop new attitudes and overcome anxieties. Different varieties of bibliotherapy have been used in settings ranging from social services-type support groups to high school English classes and even library-sponsored book clubs (Adler & Clark, 1991). Some of the adult readers described using young adult fiction in this way rather informally in order to “find a new way of thinking about things.” One person put reading young adult fiction in a category with activities like “yoga and exercise or meditation” and reported using it to “regroup.”

One reader described a particularly poignant realization made after reading a book about a young girl’s growing awareness of her sexuality:

I took a young adult literature class and one of the books that really stuck with me was *Annie on My Mind*…I had had lesbian friends but I don’t think I really understood what it was like to be a teenager and to have a desire for someone and to not be able to show it because it was such a rite of passage being heterosexual just walking through the halls holding hands. And here were adults who I knew and I knew well, but I didn’t understand what that was like until a writer took me to that point.

By finding similarities between characters in the book, this adult reader was able to extrapolate an understanding of what it is like to live as young person with very different constraints and limitations. Davis describes this as the “starting point for
real thinking” (1992, p. 304) and says that not enough readers “do with your life what a writer does with a book --- explore yourself in it, in order to compose it” (p. 18). Adult readers of young adult fiction seemed quite willing, despite the difference between themselves and the characters they read about, to do exactly this.

A Universal Struggle

Everyone grows up. Look around at any room of thirty year olds, in any country, at any time in the history of the world, and the one sure thing they will share is that each of them was once a young person. Rites of passage, rituals of transition, and the exact source and solution to any number of growing pains will be different from culture to culture, century to century, and family to family. Even people in the same household, growing up in the same decade, and sharing the same culture will experience growing up differently. In as much as it connects us, growing up divides us as well.

The adult readers interviewed for this paper came together around the idea that young adult fiction offered up much that made their lives richer and sometimes even easier simply because so much of young adult fiction is about growing --- something people do their entire lives. Because the narrators are often experiencing things for the first time, there is an intensity to the way they try to figure things out and look for signs that “they’re doing the right thing in their lives.” Many of the characters people talked about responded to most strongly “had difficulties” and were “overcoming strife” the best way they knew how. Adult readers are able to experience this confusion and intensity from a safe distance while still living vicariously through these characters’ struggles. On
another level, however, what adults connect with is not just the feeling of awareness, but the feeling of the first awareness that came “when [they] were first charged with navigating [their] way through the world” as adolescents (Mondello, 2003, para.8).

Stories about young adults are filled with characters who are “in transition, struggling to make sense” of a confusing world (Mondello, 3003, para. 4). One of the adult readers suggested that the perspective of “trying to figure out how to make the transition from this really broad world, to something that’s a little more narrow in terms of working and living and being in the real world” is what makes this genre so appealing to people at any age, but especially to people living at this particular time in history. Readers connected with this theme because, as a global society, “we’re in a time of so many transitions” ourselves.

One reader quite astutely remarked that the situations, characters, and themes in young adult fiction “seem to be evocative of other interesting topics like how we see society.” Again, on a more personal level, adults connected with this theme in young adult fiction when they felt like they were also in a transitional phase in their lives and shared the sense of trying to figure out how to get where they wanted to be with the characters in some of the young adult fiction they have read. One reader described a time in her life “when she was working in the computer industry, and just thought [she] was wasting [her] life.” Going back to A Wrinkle in Time was helpful because of the themes of struggling against being controlled and wanting to be free. Especially in industrialized societies, these are issues people face their entire lives, but only at adolescence do they really begin to consciously try and find their own path to a solution (Erikson, 1950). Unlike adolescence, however, these challenges do not end at eighteen.
Adults relate to young adult fiction for the same reasons “people respond to archetypes” or relate to the classics of ancient literature (Alter, 1989): when they are well-written (and packaged just right) they have universal appeal. The cars, clothes, and slang may change, but the core challenges of figuring out an identity, being true, trying to hold on to those close to them, deciding whether or not to conform, who to follow, when to lead, what and when to risk, finding love, and how to change are all things that shift shapes, but remain constant forces to challenge people throughout their lives.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We still do not know a lot about the effects of fiction and its meaning in people’s lives. Without knowing the significance of every book to every reader, library professionals must look to data, trends, and patterns to help us know a larger proportion of our patrons. For this study, adult readers were interviewed in two focus groups where they discussed their own perceptions of themselves as readers as well as the contributions of young adult fiction to their lives as adults. By presenting the data, this study has provided insight into the range of experiences of adults who read young adult fiction. Once analyzed, the data has also clarified that adults are motivated by many factors when choosing to read young adult fiction, and that their lives are indeed enriched by the experience.

Adults in this study read young adult fiction for the perspective that its young narrators bring to the stories. They enjoy the genre’s elements of hopefulness as well as those of struggle and despair. Some connect strongly with the elements of fantasy, while others read for the realism and modern day portrayals of young adult lives. Reading
about characters waking up to themselves as powerful and vulnerable human beings
reminds some adults of their own first realizations and gives them the opportunity to
reflect on who they’ve become, of who they are always in the process of becoming.
Sometimes they use these portrayals to help themselves better understand young people
they already know, and sometimes they read more pensively to realize parts of their own
youth with the clarity that can only be brought on by time and the willingness to self-
reflect. In either case, the adults interviewed for this study came away from the stories
with more sympathy and a stronger understanding of what it takes to survive at any age.

Some of the stories were enjoyed for being easier to get into and easier to finish
quickly. This gave some readers a sense of accomplishment from being able to start
something and finish it. They also reported liking the increase in time they had to spend
on other things they enjoyed or needed to do. Overall, brevity and the ability to “get to
the point” were viewed as positive aspects of many young adult books. Strongest of all
the experiences among the readers interviewed for this study was that young adult fiction
reached them in ways that provided opportunities to grow. It did this especially well
when the stories were finely crafted and authors were able to tap into themes that
connected with the readers in classic, universal ways.

Based on Erikson’s widely accepted model of identity development, adolescence
is a stage characterized as “identity versus role confusion” (1950, p. 261) in which young
people are at a juncture of trying to figure out the kind of adult they will become, and in a
larger sense, their role in the world. This stage is understood in relation to the need for
books that young adults can identify with and test out their ideas for how to be (Adler &
Clark, 1991). In Erikson’s model the stages of identity development continue through
old age. Early adulthood is characterized as “intimacy versus isolation.” If successfully traversed, older adults move on to encounter “generativity versus stagnation” and eventually reach some point of maturity where they will experience the final challenges of “integrity versus despair” (Erikson, 1950). Many readers used young adult books in ways that helped them figure out how to get better at dealing with whatever challenges they were facing at this particular stage in their lives. It could be that Erikson’s stages are not so much linearly progressive as they are cyclical in that each one makes the next one possible, and that allows people access to deeper levels of knowing themselves. The fact that the characters adults sometimes chose to read about were younger than they were did not detract from the power of the reading experiences. They identified with them through their hopes and struggles in ways that affirmed their own process of searching and becoming. This led to a profoundly satisfying reading experience.

The increase in titles published for young adults coupled with the increase in scholarship and recognition the genre has received since the early nineties indicate that we are currently living in a “Golden Age” of young adult fiction (Gentle, 2001, p. 27). As awareness and acceptance of the genre have increased, more adults have been noticed and subsequently criticized for reading fiction intended for a much younger audience. Since ideas about what good literature is shift depending on cultural values, this paper does not seek to explore the literary merits of young adult books. Instead, this paper provides a group of adult readers the chance to respond for themselves about why they read young adult fiction and what they get out of it. The perspectives of the adult readers also demonstrate that the value of a certain genre to certain groups of readers can be best assessed by listening to those readers themselves. Their responses also give emphasis to
the multitude of ways that people “use art” (Davis, 1992, p. 304) to provide hope, make changes, remember, relate, and generate new ideas and realizations about their own lives and the world at large. Librarians are in the business of connecting readers with the information they want or need in a timely, respectful manner and can learn a lot about what is valuable to have in libraries by dialoging with readers directly.

The trend in genre fiction over the past decade has been an increase in “genreblending” (Herald, 2000, xiii). Thus, librarians involved with adult reader’s advisory and young adult fiction collection development need to get together more often to learn from each other and share details from review sources about current and potential crossover books. Adults benefit in that they are able to meet specific reading needs and grow in ways that are important to them at a particular time in their lives. Adults who read young adult fiction also help to build bridges of common experience between young and adult readers. This type of reading should be supported by library professionals through specialized crossover reading lists, intergenerational book displays, and programming that encourage adults and young people to read about each other and with each other more often.

FURTHER RESEARCH

It is important to note that only a total of sixteen adults were interviewed for this study. The insights they shared and the ways they described the impact of young adult fiction to their lives as adults are eloquent and detailed, but the study is limited and should be viewed as a starting place for future reader surveys and inquiries.
Further research could include one-on-one interviews where participants could be asked questions without having to share answering time with so many other interviewees. There were occasions during each of the focus groups when many people wanted to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of reading young adult fiction but could not due to the natural constraints of sharing the talking time with other focus group participants. Any number of answers could have been elaborated upon to explain more of the individual why’s and how’s that are not often possible in group interviews. As it was, people talked as freely as possible about the importance why young adult fiction to them as adults. A more private setting could facilitate more personally revealing answers as people are often more comfortable opening up in one-on-one interviews.

Hearing from readers in more detail can help librarians evaluate the impact of different kinds of literature in people’s lives. The more we learn about our patrons as readers, the more we can improve reader’s advisory services to serve the community in more inclusive ways.
Appendix A: Focus Group Recruitment Flyer

In Search Of....
grown-ups (18 and older) who LOVE books for teens/young adults

Are you an adult who reads young adult fiction?
Yes? Great!

Will you be around this summer?
Yes, again? Awesome!

Would you like to participate in a focus group discussion?
Yes? Hooray! You rock!

Research has been done on books for adults that are appropriate for younger readers, but not much has been written about which young adult books adults enjoy. Even less has been written about the experience of adults who read young adult fiction. This study will explore the experience of adults who choose to read books intended for young adult readers. I’m hoping to document why this genre is so great!

But I can’t do it without your help!

Kelly C. 423-4413

If you’re interested, please reply via email. I will send you a copy of the book(s) we will be discussing. Your responses will be kept confidential. Thank you so much for your help!
Appendix B: Focus Group Recruitment Email

Feel free to forward...

In Search Of...
 grown-ups (18 and older) who love books for teens/young adults

Are you an adult who reads young adult fiction?
Yes?
Great!

Will you be around this summer?
Yes, again?
Awesome!

Would you like to participate in a focus group discussion?
Yes?
Hooray!
You rock!

Research has been done on books for adults that are appropriate for younger readers, but not much has been written about which young adult books adults enjoy. Even less has been written about the experience of adults who read young adult fiction. This study will explore the experience of adults who read books intended for young adult readers. I'm hoping to document why this genre is so great, but I can't do it without your help!

Sign up to be in the focus group for my master's paper on the experience of adult readers of young adult literature. Email me by July 9th if you can come to a one-hour focus group.

Option #1) Sunday July 13th at 2pm
Option #2) Monday July 14th at 7pm

Email to sign up...keloverton@aol.com

Thanks,
Kelly O.
Appendix C: Focus Group Explanation Email

Hello to everyone out there who expressed interest in the young adult fiction focus groups!

The following email includes a description of what will happen during the focus groups, the questions I will pose to the group during the time we're together, and directions to each of the locations. Feel free to email me or give me a call anytime this weekend if you have other questions. My cell phone number is 919-423-4413. Please don't hesitate to give me a call.

Focus Group Description:
A focus group is a way to gather a small group of people together for a discussion around a specific topic or to process a common experience. I will act as the moderator, posing open-ended questions for the group to answer for one hour. I will also tape the discussions for transcription at a later time.

When you arrive I will ask you to read over and sign a release form that gives me your permission to use what you say in my Master's Paper on "The Experience of Adult Readers of Young Adult Fiction." I will have a selection of young adult books available for people to look at and read through until the focus group begins. You are welcome to bring your favorite young adult books with you if that would be helpful. Once we begin, I will hand out copies of the questions as well as pen and paper so you can jot down notes if necessary. We will meet for between an hour and an hour and 15 minutes.

Everyone in the group can speak or not speak as much as they feel moved to. You are all welcome to engage with each other and build on each other's comments. In fact, I'm hoping this is exactly what happens.

Because the study is conversational in nature, the type of data collected in a focus group is much more qualitative than it is quantitative. As a focus group participant, you are encouraged to speak from and about your own experiences and perceptions of the young adult fiction you've read as an adult.

I hope to find out more about why "grown-ups" read fiction intended for young adults in order to expand my understanding of why people read for pleasure, how they make the reading choices they do, and how people's lives are changed forever by stories they read.

The Questions:
How would you describe yourself as a reader?
Why do you describe yourself this way?
What do you read now as an adult? Feel free to offer specific examples of authors, titles, or genres you read.
What contribution, if any, does reading young adult fiction bring to your life as an adult?
What would it be like if, for some reason, you were unable to read young adult fiction?
Logistics:
Each focus group will last between one hour and one hour and 15 minutes. There are two different meeting time options. You only need attend one.

Sunday July 13, 2pm, Chapel Hill, UNC Campus, House Undergraduate Library, Study Room 221 located on the second floor. Parking is free on campus all weekend.

Monday July 14, 7pm, Chapel Hill, Hargraves Community Center, 216 North Roberson Street, Northside Gym, Meeting Room. Parking is freely available in the parking lot. To get to Hargraves Community Center, while heading towards Carrboro from Chapel Hill, take a right onto N. Roberson off of Franklin Street or Rosemary Street. Hargraves is a couple blocks up on the right.

I can help with rides to either location. Just give me a call a little bit before the meeting starts.

Thank you so much for your interest in this topic. Come prepared to gush. I look forward to experience.

~Kelly
423-4413
Appendix D: Focus Group Participant Handout

The Experience of Adults Who Read Young Adult Fiction: Focus Group

1. Introduction to the Focus Group:
- We are inviting you to be in a focus group to discuss the experience of Adults who read Young Adult fiction.
- As you may already know, Young Adult fiction is defined as any literature written for people between the ages of 12-18.
- Kelly Overton of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is doing this study.
- Dr. David Carr of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is overseeing this study.

2. Purpose:
- The purpose of this focus group is to learn about the experience of adults who read young adult fiction.
- Information learned from this focus group will be used in Kelly Overton’s Master’s Paper.

3. What Will Happen During the Focus Group?
- You will be asked to come to one of two focus groups and discuss questions about why you read young adult fiction and what your experience has been like. The focus group may last up to one hour and fifteen minutes.
- These questions will include:
  - How do you describe yourself as a reader?
  - Why do you describe yourself this way? Describe what has shaped you to become this way?
  - Can you talk about the differences among the kinds of books you read? Feel free to offer specific examples of authors, titles, or genres you read.
  - What contribution, if any, does reading young adult fiction bring to your life as an adult?
  - What would it be like if, for some reason, you were unable to read young adult fiction?

- The researcher will be present at the focus group to record the group conversation on audio tape.
- Your comments may be quoted anonymously in the researcher’s master’s paper.
- If you have any questions or concerns about being in this focus group, you should contact Kelly Overton at (919) 423-4413 or keloverton@aol.com or Dr. David Carr at (919) 962-8364 or carr@ils.unc.edu.

4. Your Privacy is Important:
- We will make every effort to protect your privacy.
- We will not use your name in any of the information we get from this study or in any of
the research reports.
- Any information we get in the study will be recorded with a code number that will let Dr. Carr know who you are.
- When the study is finished the key that shows which code number goes with your name will be destroyed.

5. Risks and Discomforts:
- We do not know of any personal risk or discomfort you will have from being in this focus group.

6. Your Rights:
- You decide on your own whether or not you want to be in this focus group.
- You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to be in the focus group.
- If you decide to be in the focus group, you will have the right to stop being in the focus group at any time.

7. Institutional Review Board Approval:
- The Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved this focus group.
- If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the AA-IRB at (919) 962-7761 or at aa-irb@unc.edu.

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me. I have read the information in this consent form, and I agree to be in the study. There are two copies of this form. I will keep one copy and return the other to the researcher.

______________________________                                __________________________
(Signature of Participant)                                                   (Date)
Appendix E: Combined Focus Group Transcript

1. How you describe yourself as a reader?
   - eclectic
   - eclectic
   - voracious reader
   - I read a lot…it’s ridiculous…I read everything: magazines, ‘zines, fiction, non-fiction, everything. I just have a stack of books by my bed…and I kinda pick them up and read whatever’s there.
   - My reading runs the gamut
   - it’s hard to read at one sitting
   - I get kind of addicted to it (reading)
   - I’m an addictive reader. When I start a book I have a hard time doing what else I’m supposed to be doing because I want to finish it
   - sometimes I’m a voracious reader, but I have to ween myself off of it so I can do school work
   - I’m a filler reader in that I’ll read anything that fills my time
   - I’m a really slow reader and I don’t want to read any faster
   - I would also say I’m a slow reader
   - I’m a slow reader, I’ve watched myself read and I’ll read every word in my head
   - I don’t read as much as I’d like to because of work. I wish I could just pick up books and read them, but unfortunately I can’t
   - I’m an English teacher so reading is a big part of my life and my job, and my job sort of gets in the way of it, so I’m sort of a frustrated reader.
   - I read too many essays and too few books, so I’m a frustrated reader.
   - I’m a voracious reader…I read to the detriment of everything else. I’m always in the middle of like, five or six books and some never get finished I’ve always read like that…mostly fiction, too. It’s more exciting, it is an escape.
   - I’m a varied reader, an informational reader
   - it’s a really tranquil activity
   - it’s a really hard activity to sit down and do

2. How did you get this way?
   - I was in the hospital for a really long time when I was a little kid and there really wasn’t anything to do by watch really bad TV. And read really bad books from the library in the hospital, so now I watch a lot of bad TV. And read a lot of bad novels
   - I think people read to pass the time, they’re in transportation, they’re on a lunch break
I think of myself as a reader because I can’t remember a time really when I couldn’t. Books have always been very important in my life. I was in English major. Both my parents are readers.

my parents encouraged us to read and it was the only thing they were totally hands off about. So, when we were sent to the library there was never any prohibiting us to read anything. it was also a really good means of escape

I spent a lot of time in the library and wandered around and avoided people

(teacher) So, in the summer, I’m reading a lot.

My older sister read a lot

My father also liked really bad novels...like those serial war novels...like Webb Griffin...he writes these serial war novels, and they’re all the same book but the names of the characters change

I was bored at school and so I wanted to bring other books in

all the books they make you read in school are terrible...some are, some aren’t

letting kids choose their own books, that’s cool, that’s good

unless you have cool teachers, somebody who really has an interest in exposing students to really good books, it’ll really make a difference

in the 4th grade we had a great teacher who read us The Bridge to Terabithia...It was the most beautiful, sweet, just moving, incredible book about friendship and death...the whole class of 4th graders was in tears

when I was younger I didn’t really read that much

When I was a child, when it wasn’t my job, when books weren’t my job, but just something that I loved (I still love them, by the way) but, I think the term reader or to say someone’s bookish, it’s almost sort of like a source of identity...like, that person’s a jock, that person’s class president, and that person’s a reader is the person with the books and that was a big part of who I was especially in elementary school.

...a whole variety of stuff...topics move around depending on the time of year, gardening right now.

I write a lot and when I read books written for young kids it’s really interesting to me because you know it was someone a lot older writing for someone a lot younger. And the word choice it’s kind of like in a movie when they’re showing things and everything is deliberate, everything has a clue in it. And it’s the same way with words. Every word is put there for a reason. There’s nothing extraneous and it’s just interesting...

3. What do you read now as an adult?

- reference materials how to books
- comic books
- classic literature
- young adult lit
- a pretty good variety
- non-fiction
- cook books
- young adult books
- anything in front of me
- anything that I think is gonna tell me something about the world
- reading things referred to in articles I read
- mostly non-fiction
- newspapers and magazines
- books I’ve read in the past and want to go back to
- social studies
- my worst reading habit is I like bad novels…b-grade novels
- escape…escaping into another world
- historical romance
- really bad science fiction where the aliens always ooze green something
- there are certain young adult books that I’ll read every year (swiftly tilting planet I read every year)
- they’re just fun and mindless
- I’ll read while I watch the movie
- boring law summaries and opinions
- fiction, non-fiction
- I read those books on Mothra, Godzilla and stuff like that
- Fiction…I’m an addictive reader. When I start a book I have a hard time doing what else I’m supposed to be doing because I want to finish it. So, I guess that’s one of the advantages of young adult stuff is that you can carry on with the rest of your life sooner because when I pick up an adult book I might not get back to what I’m supposed to be doing I might not get back to it for a day or two.
- I like things with a sort of fable element to it…a character who uses wit and cleverness…or some kid who’s virtuous on his own
- comic books, sci fi
- I just read Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret and it was great
- I just finished the first three books of the Lemony Snicket series…and it’s funny
- Harry Potter, Dr. Seuss
- There are different levels of sophistication in young adult, children’s, juvenile fiction…I just finished reading two awesome young adult books: a mango shaped space and that summer….on par with adult literature…Frindle…more story and less character development…really funny and captured the kid-essence
- I’ve read a lot of books related to my profession which is social work with juveniles who’ve had difficulty, who are in a treatment program, actually: Monster (about a kid on trial for murder), America (about a kid in foster care), breathing under water, I’ve used with a kid in working with him clinically…(about an adolescent who gets so angry that he hits his girlfriend). And I guess I’ve found that it helps me understand or it gives me more breadth to draw from in my understanding of my work with adolescents. It also is very useful to be able to connect them with stories that are like theirs that they can
identify that I’m not the only person that this is. And I’ve had kids say “I’ve never read a book until I read this book.”

- I’m drawn to books that have child protagonists and so that’s true of the adult fiction that I read as well as the young adult. So I guess I just look for something that seems to be sincere or real or not stereotyped or simplistic or reductive…the heart is a lonely hunter…There’s something about the perspective of the child looking at the world that’s really enlightening often times whether it’s adult fiction or young adult fiction for me.

- I read a lot about food because I’m obsessed. I read cookbooks. I read books about the political aspects of food, the culture of food. And I also read cultural studies, queer studies…and that’s the kind of young adult stuff I go to, the stuff with the gay and lesbian characters because I’m kinda curious to see how they’re doing that now. I know there wasn’t any of that in the Lincoln Library in the mid to late 80’s really…a variety of science fiction usually by women. Sometimes if I read a review I’ll go look that up and read it…like a heard this review on NPR while back…I like the idea of alternate histories…the years of rice and salt….Erika Lopez…I get a lot of stuff just by browsing

- I’ve been reading a lot of trendy stuff lately…the newest *Harry Potter* and the Hilary Clinton autobiography

- a lot of modern Greek history…from about 1860 on.

- I tend to read a lot of non-fiction, too

- Zen and the art of book choosing

- I’m very much a browser

- there should be an “I feel lucky” button in the catalog

- I really like biographies…there’s something about reading about people’s lives…especially about what people have done with their lives…super obsessed people…unusual people who stand out…Abbie Hoffman for example…people who have had a negative impact on the world…people who were robber barons, evil politicians, gangsters…I read a really great biography of Mickey Cohen…just interesting people

- fiction…I like short stories a lot

- I’ve always been in awe of the short story

- young adult fiction, certain authors I read as a kid and will still go back and read their stuff today

- Daniel Pinkwater is one of my favorites

- Paul Zindel…what I really like about him is he was one of the first people to really inject realism into

- young adult writing…to tackle adult topics with young adults, to write about the things teenagers were really going through. He was a pioneer of social realism that overtook the field in the 70’s…teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, rape, stuff teenagers were really going through

- I like new journalism where the author is putting themselves in the story

- sci fi, horror

- Stephen King, I’ve always had a soft spot for him
I read library science journals
I prefer magical realism
I’ll typically read non-fiction because I want more information, typically biographies and books of that nature
I’m reading Madeline L’Engle right now and it’s just easy…not to say it’s easy reading, but it’s easier with the wording that she’s using, and it’s not that she’s using one syllable words all the way through, it’s just something she just captures the spirit, the human spirit, what we need to know, what we thrive and live for and I find that I enjoy that much more than just reading something fictional…what I’m reading now is just telling a story of a life

4. How would you describe what YA adds or contributes to your life as an adult?

there’s something about the perspective of the child that’s often enlightening whether it’s young adult fiction or adult fiction
it alters how I see the world and then I go back to non-fiction
I have a good time reading it
It’s funny
I woke up really late Sunday afternoon and I read book 3 in like 2 hours and the whole rest of the day I was like, “rah, I finished a whole book today” I was all, so proud of myself, but it was really cool ‘cause I had this whole sense of accomplishment
I think a young adult book is more likely to change my view of things than the typical novel
I think if I tend to gravitate towards fiction it’s usually young adult fiction because adult fiction, the typical novel is much more susceptible to intellectual “faddism”, marketing fads…they have an editor who’s like, okay, where the romance, where’s the sex scene.
It seems far more open ended and creative, like for example, Watership Down, if you’re trying to write this for adults…anything can happen in this genre. it’s far more open-ended
The romance doesn’t need to end in culmination…anything can happen. whereas, if you have an adult novel and nothing happens…if that happens, people are like “what is this”, whereas if that happens in a young adult book, it’s like, oh that’s really poignant. it’s not that they reflect reality, it’s just that they tend to have a wider range of emotions than adult books and that’s why I prefer to read it and I’m far more likely to be touched by it
Just mention that they might be naked…and everyone’s all giggling…it’s enough
Young adults are far more likely to have an unhinged mind where anything can happen
An adult is gonna be more suspicious of it
there’s so much money at stake that there’s less freedom to write what you wanna write
• the average adult may have read young adult fiction, but only recently with the Harry Potter stuff are editors starting to realize there’s a market here and they don’t have to publish the same old schlock
• someone besides Disney is actually doing something
• I think my biggest problem with adult books as compared to young adult books is that they put a lot of premium into giving you a twist, like somewhere in the middle of the story something in the middle with change and then the whole novel will be different…like where the good guy turns out to be a bad guy…and with young adult books are a lot more straightforward…there is a lot less fake plot progression
• maybe it is the jadedness because the adults are like, “I’ve seen it all, give me something different”
• sometimes I’ll pick up young adult books because I can pick it up in the library and read it in like 45 minutes
• and when I go into the regular adult section, it just seems like all the stories are just so depressing and their lives suck and sometimes I just don’t want to read that about people who can’t get their lives together and stuff like that
• there’s a lot less death, or if it’s death…there’s not gore and that’s a good thing
• they say someone’s dead and then the protagonist moves on
• there is some heavy stuff out there
• I think the themes in young adult fiction tend to be more universally applicable
• like in the little prince, who could read this book and not have something relate to their lives, read it and realize it speaks to them, it relates to some experience in their lives
• anything by Tom Clancy is like, I’ve never been an international spy
• I just finished a James Michener book, and it was like, 1000 pages, and I could have written the same story in like 20 pages. I’m not gonna ever look back and relate to anything that happened, it’s more just like entertainment, whereas in young adult books, they’re more touching. You walk away feeling like you got something out of it, the way how you used to when you saw movies when you were 10…the rest of your day was different because you saw that movie
• There’s common themes…defeating and overcoming…they speak to universal truths…there are a lot of changes that young adults are going through
• They’re a lot simpler, but also complex…a good writer is someone who can take a complex subject and make it seem really simple
• they seem to be evocative of other interesting topics like how do we see society and how we think of things
• Reading a YA book the protagonist is seeing things through a 14 year old’s eyes… and I can really remember being 14 and having that perspective
• I can still read it and it can be entertaining
• One of the reasons I like YA books which is rediscovering what it was like to feel like a teenager or a YA when I originally read certain books. I will definitely go back to classics that I read as a teenager and read them again and revisit that time through the pages
• To keep up with what kids today are learning about the world or what kids from
the past learned about the world. These books, for a lot of kids, these books are
their first exposure to the world
• It’s a really important window
• I don’t see how it would be different if I was 70 and I read a book where the
protagonist was 30. It would be like, oh yeah, I remember that. It’s also, going
back and re-reading books…I read the Lord of the Rings Trilogy when I was 13 or
so, and then I read it again a couple years ago, and I was like I remember this
book, but you read it in a different way as you get older, a different perspective
• You appreciate it in different ways, like wind in the willows
• You can remember how you first experienced the book and draw a contrast
between the different way you experience it now and it tells you something about
yourself and you’ve grown and changed
• They can be appreciated on so many different levels
• You’re kind of biased because you don’t go back and read all the crap…it’s not
like you go back and re-read Babysitter’s Club #7
• The good ones are the ones where you really learned something, and the other
ones are the ones that you just read to escape from your life
• Then you go back you re-read just the good ones
• So maybe people read things about transitions now because we’re in a time of so
many transitions
• The thing about the Harry Potter book is I would’ve liked it at any age
• Most young adult books you’re really re-evaluating your life and your values and
you’re decided who you wanna be, so if you’re frequently in your life, re-
evaluating yourself
• Adult books assume that the world is one way and maybe young adult books
really don’t
• I like the perspective of the stories…overcoming strife…they’re very imaginative.
• I like the personalities of the characters a lot…they’re not young people that
everything is really easy for…they have difficulties
• I like the archetypes, people seem to respond to the archetypes
• Are You There, God? It’s Me Margaret is realistic, the themes are far more
realistic than an episode of Dynasty
• One of the reasons I like to read YA fiction is ‘cause you can read them real
quick, like you can stay up all night and read, some of the few books I’ve stayed
up all night to read have been young adult books. Other books, my attention’ll
get diverted and I’ll pick it up in the course of a week and it’ll go away and I
won’t pick it up again
• A lot of time like, with the adult fiction, it’s like they have to make it long and
wordy…the young adult fiction, they have to be more concise…they’re just like,
get to the point, drag you in…and it’s wonderful writing, but they don’t waste
time on just words. They stick to the story.
• She prefers it because a lot of adult fiction is kind of full of itself and she finds the
YA fiction a little easier to get into
• It’s tends to be tighter…the language used to express meaning
• It’s clean, there aren’t extraneous, and there’s something refreshing reading it because when it does tell a story, it tells it in a kinda clean way. It may be over-simplistic at times (things are more complicated) but the ones I’ve read have done a real good job of being real clean with language and I like that
• It’s about kids and children have always been of interest to me and as a adult and because of my profession (high school teacher) I like adult fiction that focus on children but most adult fiction doesn’t. Donna Tart’s new book, I really like that because it really was vivid about childhood
• And I love the Lemony Snicket books, too because they treat children in a respectful way and not a condescending way
• That’s also one of the pitfalls of some young adult fiction is because some people think about it as a literary ghetto and they don’t necessarily have the respect for their audience that they could have
• There are some things that make me wanna run screaming because of that
• I do work with children and I like to see how they’re portrayed in these books, too, because I think some authors get it more than others…I’ve definitely read my share of YA or children’s fiction that doesn’t really capture what kids are like and you can tell
• For me it helps, I don’t read a lot of young adult fiction that’s happy. I usually read stuff that parallels with the people I’m working with. And I find that generally…it does a pretty good job of capturing the whole person and it doesn’t flatten them into a stereotype…it deals with it fairly complexly and that helps me with working with kids, too
• It’s more a sense of wonder, whereas with adults, yes, there’s wonder there, but with adults it seems like, I want an answer, I want more about that so I can finalize why this is this way. With children’s books or young adult books there’s more a sense of wonder. there are things that say yes I’d like to see the difference between this or that, but more a sense of wonder and multiple ways of looking at things
• They’re not so set in their ways
• They’re looking for something that says they’re doing the right thing in their lives
• That’s the thing that gets to me, the level of honesty is much greater than in adult books. That perspective, I think, that it’s about trying to figure out how to make the transition from this really broad world, to something that’s a little more narrow in terms of working and living and being in the real world…and the introduction into that is also part of it.
• Growing up is a universal experience
• I have two teenagers in my house, and one of the joys and motivations of reading is that any one of us will read something and then cast if on to the other one in conversation
• I’m finding that most of the stuff I like, my kids like, too…humor is a big part, too
• It’s a conversation starter with kids. If you’re reading young adult fiction then you have something to talk about with kids. It can be as simple as for pleasure or the kids you work with or if you’re a teacher
• Kids are important and I want to be working with them
• Sometimes if kids aren’t so talkative and so if I can talk to them about something they’ve read, then sometimes that’s the hook…and I learn more about them that way
• And sometimes there might be students who aren’t so engaged
• Plus you get the insight…a different perspective that helps you and helps you remember what it’s like
• My relationship to YA fiction is really selfish because if I can’t write I go right to the young adult section….and sit down with a book and refocus…you’re bringing everything down to a much baser level of when you were younger and it just helps me regroup in the same way that I use exercise and yoga and meditation….gives me a new way of thinking about things
• I find it really pleasurable
• I’m really lucky that I’m in a profession that I get to read so much of it
• I really like a lot of the series books…you can get interested in a character and have it continue….some characters are amazing….the thought of not having a new story with those characters sounds horrible
• I like reading young adult fiction because it’s kind of like, hopeful, there’s a feeling of you can still work things out…as bad as things are…
• It is more positive
• A lot of adult fiction is so negative and the world’s awful and everything’s awful
• Young adult’s a lot more positive
• And it kind of takes me back to when I was 14 and reading for the first time and enjoying them over again, that same positive experience again
• Back than I enjoyed them, now I critique them more
• I think it’s a case of hindsight is 20/20, you’re like, oh, now I get it…you can rework thinks whereas when you’re a teenager reading these books you’re thinking, okay so there’s so many possibilities what am I gonna do?
• Different authors take you back there in a completely different way and you’re like, oh, I remember what that was like. And then when you read something else by someone else and it’s good, but in a completely different way from their different perspective, so that’s something about it, it’s kind of revisiting the experience of childhood in a different way
• It’s leisure
• I do have friends who’ve made fun of my young adult collection. With movies and TV. I’m kind of critical and there’s not a lot out there, but with young adult fiction, there’s a lot out there, it’s leisure, it’s fun. I have a lot of books on my shelf that I’ve not read, but all the young adult books I’ve read
• I did re-read *A Taste for Blackberries* which I think I must’ve read in middle school… a kid who gets stung by a bee at school and dies and when I was in middle school it had a huge impact on me but when I went back and reread it recently and not I can’t figure out what the big deal was…so it does translate in different ways now when I do read the ones that I like
• I’ve picked up some about sexuality and coming of age and that sort of thing and a lot of those really remind me of experiences in high school and so I think it’s different from when I was a young adult
• I find myself rereading the same things a lot because I always get something different out of it, but they sometimes serve the same purpose…when I was working in the computer industry and just thought I’m wasting my life, I went back and read a wrinkle in time and it was helpful
• There’s something about young adult fiction that takes you back to that age and makes things a little clearer…
• They’re not as hardened. Sometimes they’re seeing things for the first time, it’s a new perspective, a new experience for them. With young adults, either they’re trying to figure themselves out or trying to figure the world out, and so you as the reader can kinds re-think things again for yourself.
• I like the teenage perspective. They’re kind of angry at the world, but yet not…coming of age, figuring things out, figuring themselves out
• And they’re not so pragmatic
• They’re idealistic still
• One book I read doing my teaching certificate, I took a young adult literature class and one of the books that really stuck with me was Annie on My Mind…I had had lesbian friends but I don’t think I really understood what it was like to be a teenager and to have a desire for someone and to not be able to show it because it was such rite of passage being heterosexual just walking through the halls holding hands. And here were adults who I knew and I knew well but I didn’t understand what that was like until a writer took me to that point. And I think an adult fiction writer can do that but I don’t think that they’re as invested in it as young adult writers are about taking us back to that time
• I think it’s interesting rereading as an adult and that your perspective changes so much…I recently reread Catcher in the Rye…and I read it when I was a teenager and did not actually feel real connected to it, but when I reread it as a grownup my heart just went out to Holden and I just like loved Holden and just felt like he was this really tragic broken kid but had this more nurturing instinct about him like wanted to take him under my wing, like didn’t identify with him
• I recently reread the Ramona books…but I remember when I read those as a child and totally identifying with Ramona…when I reread passages I thought they were funny and charming but not something I could see myself doing
• Rereading Harriet the Spy…she gets to hide in a dumbwaiter…and she wouldn’t get arrested…it’s the stuff you can’t really get away with
• Acknowledgement…for me there’s a lot of race stuff from when I was a teenager that I was just starting to get and I think it provided me the opportunity to start to deal with some of that and some of the other –ism’s as well by presenting in a really simple way…And I know that for me as a kid it served the purpose of what the Internet may do now. Whereas nobody in my neighborhood was talking about homophobia…And I think now going back to those…the sense of hope, when the world seems really complicated after reading the paper or watching the news or
whatever, bringing back that to that simplicity, I think that’s the real gift of young adult fiction
• It’s tapping into another source of creativity…something outside of your normal realm that would expand your thinking
• It’s another way to communicate with them [young people]
• Not reading it I would feel like I was some old scrooge

5. How do you think you’d be different if, for some reason, you could not read young adult fiction?

• I would want to read something, it’s not to say that the YA genre is the only good
• You might have to settle for second best
• All of as we get older, we start forgetting, kind of like your mind heals itself and being that age you’re so, and everything is so passionate. Like, what you think about now is really no big deal. I don’t want to forget, I think it’s really important
• It’s a great escapism
• It’s not the only thing we all read
• It’s like a color in a palette, we would miss out on that perspective
• It would be a huge disappointment
• They’re some of the most magical pieces of literature
• I think I’d become a lot more self-absorbed
• It wouldn’t be very fun
• It would be harder to conjure up those sensations of childhood that are so important
• I might become more jaded.
• We would be lacking in being able to access that sense of wonder
• You’d lose the opportunity to have insight into young adult lives, because we each had our own experience but we had so many different kinds of experiences…And also with my experience having been so many decades ago is different from what’s being written about today…So I think it’s real important for that insight
• It’s a genre about hope and possibility and wonder…and that would be a big loss…in the same way that contact with kids or interaction and insight with kids reminds me of that, juvenile fiction is another way to be reminded of when things were still possible or when the world was still in front of you and weren’t…and it’s nice to be reminded of that
• It’s the type of book I’d like to have with me on a road trip or that I’d like to read for some sort of self-discovery it’s usually a young adult book, so it would just be a huge loss
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