

Investigations of a College Bookworm: How Young-Adult Novels Impact the Writing of Their Authors and Those Who Read Them

Brianna Doyle

In this article, Illinois State student Brianna Doyle explores the genre of young-adult fiction in order to discover how YA novels make an impact on the works of two kinds of writers—YA authors and writers who read the genre. She relies on the CHAT aspect of reception to help explain her own theories about the positive impacts of reading this genre. Along the way, she considers her own opinions of the YA genre, explores the opinions of other YA readers, and looks at scholarly articles to back up her research. She ultimately concludes that some theories about writing are hard to prove, but stands by her own that young adult novels make a substantial impact on both their authors and audience.

Intro: *Shug* and I

I am proud to call myself a bookworm—reading has always been one of my ultimate passions. I feel thrilled when I crack open a new book and dive into its story. Often times, I can barely put the book down; and other times, I am glad to. The one thing I truly love about reading is how one can be transported into the story. One becomes sucked into the plot, characters, and setting of the story to the point where they forget about their own life for a short while. It acts as a great escape from the stresses of daily life.

When I first read Jenny Han's *Shug* (2006) in seventh grade, it was as if a door had been opened that wasn't open before. It was the first young-adult novel I had ever read, and I instantly fell in love with the genre. I remember wanting to be a writer like Jenny Han because I loved her writing style. Her writing style was casual, yet engaging and humorous. She made her books fun to read. Her writing continues to be this way, and I still love her writing style to this day.

The more novels I read that were similar to *Shug*, the more I found my writing style to change for the better. Whether I was writing a fictional story for English or a research paper for history, I aimed to have an informal yet engaging tone that was similar to the tone featured in young-adult novels. In mimicking this writing style, I discovered first-hand how others enjoy reading materials that have this tone. My writing ended up vastly improving after reading young-adult novels.

As I realized this idea, I also began to wonder if there was some other teen out in the world that was just like me—if they too read young-adult novels and found that their writing style had changed for the better. I also began to question if young-adult authors found their writing style to change in response to other young-adult novels. With the help of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), I began to examine the foundations of young-adult novels to find answers to these questions.

In order to further investigate the effects of young-adult novels on writers, I conducted two interviews with readers of the genre as part of my research. One interview was with Illinois State student Celina Torres. The other interview featured the professor of my Children's Literature class, who is also a doctoral student at Illinois State. I particularly selected one college student and one adult to interview to demonstrate the wide age-range of the young-adult readers.

What I Learned from CHAT

When I took English 101 at Illinois State University, my class revolved around connecting the idea of writing with a theory known as the cultural-historical activity theory, also known as CHAT. CHAT considers any piece of writing, from novels to newspapers to class essays. According to Joyce Walker in her article "Just CHATting," CHAT involves using six categories to examine writing. These categories are used to "help researchers investigate the complicated factors that impact what/how/when/why we write" (Walker 74). CHAT helps readers and writers alike to better understand the complicated activities of writing.

Young-adult novels can be considered through all of the aspects of CHAT. The novels are planned out (**represented**) by their writers. They are **produced** via pen and paper, via computer, or through other methods. The **activities** that each author does to write their novel play a large role in their writing overall. Once the novels are written, they are **distributed** to a wide audience in various formats. Some novels give back to the environment by using recycled paper or by being distributed digitally; this would be one

part of the **ecology** aspect. The readers of these novels (the audience) then **socialize** the stories by sharing their thoughts about them with others. These categories are all crucial to the young-adult genre and I think that they all play some role in shaping the writing of a reader. However, it is my theory that the young-adult genre's **reception** plays a particularly large role in shaping the writing of its readers. Reception focuses on how a text is further used by its audience (Walker 75).

It seems to me the genre of young-adult thrives upon reception. When a YA text is “further used” by its audience, I theorize that it ends up making a positive impact on writers. Consider the fact that the reception of one YA novel can lead to the creation of new works; they’re “further used” when they provide a foundation for other YA authors. YA texts are also “further used” when the constant reading of the novels lead to a gradual change in writing styles. I think that this change particularly occurs in writers that fall under the target age-range of YA (12-18 year olds). I will explain my ideas in further depth throughout my article. But before I begin, I want to give some background information on the YA genre.

What One Can Find In a YA Novel

There are people in this world who are major fans of the young-adult genre. Then there are people that have no clue what the genre is. If you are one of these people, then I dedicate this section to you!

As the name implies, young-adult (YA) novels are written for young adults. The target age-group for this genre is for 12-18 year olds (“A Brief History of YA”). The protagonists of YA stories are within this age range to appeal to the target audience. There is a huge variety of young-adult novels to choose from, all from different time eras and covering different subject matters. However, the novels tend to have a common theme of escapism. Escapism involves “an activity or form of entertainment that allows people to forget about the real problems of life,” (“Escapism”). The characters of YA novel tend to be heavily involved with escapism. Let me further explain what I mean by this.

Adolescence is an important, albeit tough, time during a person’s life. Some teens are forced to handle situations that go beyond their years. It’s during these times of coming-of-age that many teens may want to escape from the issues going on in their life. For this reason, readers will find something to relate to in any type of young-adult novel—whether it be contemporary/realistic, classic, or dystopian—the characters within these books are typically trying to escape from whatever issues that have taken ahold of their lives. For

example, in Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places* (2015), the main character Finch is trying to escape from the depression that has taken over his life. He does this by befriending Violet, one of the most popular girls at his high school. In S.E. Hilton's *The Outsiders* (1967), the readers see main characters Ponyboy and Johnny leave town to avoid facing the consequence of a crime that occurred. And throughout Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011–2013), the main character Tris copes with various tragic events that occur to her. She focuses her attention on rebelling against the corrupted government to escape from this pain.

What the experiences of Finch, Ponyboy, Johnny, and Tris have in common is the idea of escaping. They each have unique issues they're dealing with. Sure, their methods of escaping from these issues are different from one another. But, on a basic level, all four characters are attempting to remove themselves from the issues occurring in their turbulent teenage lives. They don't want to handle these problems, so they choose to focus on other activities in their life. This applies to other young-adult novels as well. Each protagonist has a personal battle with themselves as they grow up. They deal with clashing morals and emotions as they mature physically and emotionally, and this mirrors real-life adolescence. When a person cracks open a young-adult novel, they'll find a protagonist that they can relate to from their teenage years. They'll be able to connect to the protagonists' emotions, because they have (or have had) those very emotions.

A Never-Ending Collaboration

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that YA thrives upon the CHAT element reception. Reception involves text being "further used" by its audience. One portion of YA's audience I'm going to focus on are the authors of YA that read the stories of their genre. It seems to me that YA texts are "further used by their audience" when they act as inspiration towards the release of other YA texts, allowing new dynamics to occur within the genre. I think that the positive or negative reception of a YA novel (via word-of-mouth, written reviews, etc.) is what impacts future novels of its kind. To put it more simply, I believe that reading YA novels leads to the creation of more YA novels.

An example that I believe supports my theory involves the *Hunger Games* trilogy (Collins 2008–2010). Common praise for the *Hunger Games* trilogy has been that the series reinvigorates dystopia for the younger generation. It features common themes for dystopian novels (such as "government surveillance and poor living standard"), while bringing a new story to life—

the story of a young woman who volunteers to fight in a televised fight-to-the-death match (Nyman, n.d). The *Hunger Games* novels brought a new kind of dystopia to the genre of YA, one that was both familiar and intriguing. It could be said that their release paved the way for more dystopian YA novels to be written. Some examples include Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011–2013), Keira Cass' *The Selection* novels (2012–present), James Dashner's *Maze Runner* series (2009–present) and many more. These novels did what *Hunger Games* did: they took common themes featured in dystopian novels and added a new twist to it.

I feel that the *Hunger Games*' impact on the YA genre effectively demonstrates an aspect in the relationship between reading and writing. Reading can open up new possibilities for writing. In this case, it seems like the *Hunger Games* opened up the possibility for dystopian YA novels to flood the book market. I can't say for sure that the novels mentioned above were directly inspired by *Hunger Games*—that is, I can't say that the authors read them and decided to write the next *Hunger Games*. However, my guess is that they did read the novels and found some aspects of them to be useful in their own dystopian writing. Maybe they even borrowed some concepts to help bring their own story to life. Regardless, it seems that the *Hunger Games* led to a new era for the YA genre, one that consisted of many well-written, dystopian stories being released for young adults.

To quote the well-known YA author John Green, “Writing and reading are not about a singular mind emerging from isolation to create unprecedented art. It's a massive collaboration spanning millennia.” (19). In light of this, I believe that YA authors are in constant collaboration with one another, whether it's intentional or unintentional. Their works are impacted by one another, considering how one successful book or series can lead to additional writing being published for all to read and experience.

The Power of Preferences

I'm now going to turn the focus away from my suspicions about the writing of YA authors, and on to an investigation about the writing of people who read YA. Throughout this investigation, I kept in mind that teenagers are the intended readers of young-adult novels (as I mentioned above, YA's target age-group is 12-18 year olds). I knew that these teens practice their writing skills with the academic projects they're assigned with in high school. And, of course, some teens even write for pleasure outside school. But I also knew that there were also older young adults who greatly enjoy these novels. So, I chose to widen my inquiry.

"I like the [YA novels] that are more realistic because you get a sense of what's going on in the Real World. . . It's nice to get that 'the-world-isn't-perfect' kind-of-thing"
-Celina Torres (Student)

"Much of realistic young-adult fiction represents the world as it is or maybe just a slight bit better- the world as it could be . . . I like to be a sort-of happy person, so I like to see [YA novels] that end well."
-Niall Nance-Carroll (Doctoral Student)

I have long found that readers of YA novel—whether they're teenaged or adult—find that they have a preference about what specific type of YA story they like to read. In order to confirm this idea, I conducted interviews with two people that I knew shared a love for contemporary young-adult novels. When asked, Celina Torres told me that she typically reads contemporary YA stories because they "give a sense of what's going on in the real world" (Torres). She also said that she liked how these type of YA novels demonstrate how the world is imperfect. Niall Nance-Carroll (the professor of my Children's Literature class), on the other hand, noted that he prefers the contemporary/realistic young-adult stories due to their more upbeat portrayal of the world—"the world as it could be. . ." (Nance-Carroll). These two examples confirmed my theory that readers of YA novels have specific preferences over the novels they read. But do these preferences play into the reader's style of writing?

I feel that the reception of YA novels further play into this idea. The preferences of the readers are "further used," when the novels go on to impact the writing style of the reader. I think that, in the long run, these preferences for specific YA novels help to shape the reader's writing. The reader chooses to read the YA novels they enjoy the most. As a result of reading so many YA novels with the same type of writing, they start to mimic that style of writing. This style of writing is incorporated into their writing assignments at school, and with their own material (if they pleasure-write outside school). At least, this is what had happened to me.

As I had mentioned earlier, I saw a shift in my writing as I continually read contemporary YA novels. Over the years, I saw my writing style turn into that of Jenny Han and numerous other contemporary YA authors. I never really noticed *exactly* when my writing style changed; it gradually occurred over time. But my experience is only my own, and I cannot speak for others. Some teens may find their writing style to change over a few weeks, or others over a few years. No two readers may ever have the same shift in writing. Each writing experience is likely unique for each person. But one thing that I am still convinced about is that reading the YA novels makes an impact on the reader's writing. I believe that readers become inspired to improve their writing after reading these stories.

Conclusion: Reading YA

I understand that there are limitations to my research. But regardless, I stand by my theory that young-adult novels make a great impact on both their

authors and audience. It seems that for authors of the genre, some YA novels foster the publication of other YA novels. For the audience of the genre, it seems that the novels that they read end up shaping their writing. The CHAT element reception likely plays a key role in these impacts. When a YA novel is “further used” by its readers and writers, it could make a positive impact on writing. I believe that YA novels have the ability to act as a foundation for the stories of other YA authors. I also believe that they are capable of shaping the writing of their core readers, which are teens between the ages 12-18, as well as other avid readers of this genre. The intentional or unintentional usage of YA novels can end up creating an effective and substantial impact on these writers.

I want to end this article by acknowledging that it has been six years since I first read *Shug*. Within those six years, I personally saw my own writing style grow into something great. I hope that each reader of YA experiences this type of growth in their own writing. And to the writers who have never read a YA novel, go check one out! I think you may be surprised by how much your writing changes for the better.

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Brianna Doyle is currently a junior at Illinois State University and is majoring in Elementary Education. She dedicates her time to her studies, her family, and her friends when her nose isn't stuck in a book. She continues to be an avid reader of young adult novels today.

