Young Adult Literature: Scanning the Horizon for Readers

By
Richard Peck

A book that you hope young people will read had better not begin with these fatal words: "When I was Young...." No, in all the ways that count, you and I were never young, not as the young are in the 1980's. When we were twelve and sixteen and even twenty, we had not already won all the unearned freedoms of adulthood without any of the responsibilities. We did not enjoy a higher standard of living than our own parents. We could rarely elect a course, but we could flunk one and sometimes did. We still had mountains to climb and rites of passage. Some of us had draft cards and diagrammed sentences. We were not more powerful than we would be as adults, and so you and I were never young as the young now know it.

In the days since I grew up, adolescence has stretched far beyond its natural border into what used to be adulthood, now melding seamlessly with the lifestyle of the Yuppie, who is the child who refused to grow, still locked into conformity, consumerism, and his own sound system.

We Americans have a lot to answer for. We're the people who invented adolescence, and when we discovered that we'd devised the most troubled and troubling time of life, we invented graduate school to extend it.

But I can say to you, "When I was young, . . .," and so I will. As a high-school kid I played it cautious. As a result, I encountered a guidance counselor only once, and for a routine interview. I remember it well.

As I sat in his office, he said to me, "What do you want to do when you're grown?"

I was too cautious to tell the truth. Besides, the truth rarely occurs to a sophomore. I wouldn't spill my secret fantasy of becoming a writer. "I want to be a teacher," I said. Maybe I said it too fast.

The counselor said, "Let me give you some advice. Ninety-five percent of all people end up in careers they did not foresee. They even end up in careers that didn't exist when they were in school. Keep your options open."

What I remember best about that brief encounter is myself walking away from it. I was sixteen and shaking with rage. How dare an adult suggest to me that life is full of uncertainties, that you might need to innovate and change even in adulthood? What right did this so-called professional have to tell me there are no sure things?

And so perhaps I was young once after all.

Today I'm a writer and no longer a teacher, and I write chiefly in a field that didn't exist when I was in school, the field of Young Adult novels.

These are novels on the very American theme, coming-of-age. Their main message is that there are no sure things and that you'd better learn to innovate in the name of personal survival.

There was no Young Adult fiction as we know it now when I was coming of age. Instead, my generation was expected to make the imaginative leap from children's to adult literature on the first day of junior high in the dead center of the hormonal horrors of puberty.

Moreover, we were never introduced to contemporary literature or living authors. We were taught the literature of the past, presented as history: *Silas Marner, Ethan Frome, Evangeline, Julius Caesar, A Tale of Two Cities*. Our teachers taught from their college notes out of anthologies cheaply collected because the selections were in the public domain.

It was not a perfect system. American schools have never done very well in igniting young people to the possibilities of fiction. Most people slipped through without really understanding that literature is a necessary view of the world, even of their own lives.

But those were better days than these. Today the minority of youngsters who can read through the length of a book are increasingly in the "Gifted" program. Today a mounting majority of high-school graduates cannot read their own diplomas. Though graduation is their divine right, it prepares them neither for a world of work nor higher education.

But novels are never about well-fortified people living through easy times. Novels are always about the individual survivors of trying times.

And so our books burst into being, to give aid and comfort to the young in a trying time: in an era of schools flattened by liberal theory and political manipulation, in an era of families decimated by divorce and the welfare system and television.

Despite mounting illiteracy, we flourished. We flourished because we celebrate life whereas watching television is what you do with your life when you don't want to live it. These books arrived in the era that needed them, but where did they come from?

In the generation before us five landmark novels provided adult readers with a remarkably revised way of looking at the young coming of age. Those memorable novels were Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*, Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*, William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, and the emblematic *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger.

They were of course not Young Adult novels. Though they later entered school curricula, they were addressed to adult readers, and so they were easier to write.

That generation of us who turned to the Young Adult field were conditioned by these novels. We read them when we were young and impressionable. Then one day a new world was born, brought into being by a young girl who was a high-school junior in a provincial city in 1967. She came home from school every day to write a novel, and it was published in distant New York on the day she graduated from high school. From that day until this she has been a best-selling author. She signed her name S. E. Hinton, and she called her book *The Outsiders*.

All novelists are outsiders, but S. E. Hinton had not tried to make literature of her private life. She, a girl, wrote about boys. She, a loner, wrote about boys in a bunch, a gang of them who form a surrogate, parentless family for one another. The author was a quiet girl living a quiet life, but her characters live high melodrama. Somehow she knew that books have to be better than real life or we would not need them.

S. E. Hinton had the amazing maturity to notice that her own school was divided rigidly into three groups. There were the children of the privileged, the socialites she called "Soc's." There was the underclass, black-jacketed and scorned and statusless, "Greasers," she called them. Then there was that third element, the unorganized fringe of solitary observers like herself.

Wisely she chose the Greasers. Somehow she knew that other young people will identify in a book with precisely the people they snub and punish in real life. She wrote a loving book about the kind of people you try not to notice around school.

We learn from our colleagues. From S. E. Hinton I learned a lesson that led me to the writing of four books: *The Ghost Belonged to Me, Ghosts I Have Been, The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp* and *Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death*.

My books are not about boys in a bunch. They center instead upon a solitary girl named Blossom Culp. But *The Outsiders* was my inspiration because it reminded me of the attractiveness of a character who, being an outcast, is free to invent her own life, free from the constraints of conformity.

But of course *The Outsiders* cannot save me every time. When I'm looking for a new book, I turn first to theme. After thirteen Young Adult novels, I find the themes recurring, two of them in particular. The themes come not from me but from young readers. A novel had better never be the autobiography of the author. It had far better be the biography of the person the reader would like to be.

The more I travel in search of ideas from the young, the more concerned I am in exploring the inner lives, the emotions of boys. It seems to me that the emotional frigidity of men and boys is a national calamity.

Fewer and fewer young people know their fathers. In the 1980's we live in the age of the vanished father, expunged from his children's lives by divorce and the long suburban commute and the welfare system that replaces him with

a government check. But the uncertain roles of male family members is an older problem.

American boys have been expected far too early in life to decide how they are to be team players, how they are to defend their country, how they are to be competitive breadwinners, all at the expense of their emotional lives. This has taken its toll on the men they become and on the women in their lives. How well the Harlequin romances express our priorities. The boys in these stories are always minor characters, leaving the girls free to bask in the full expression of their emotions. Life imitates art, especially bad art.

Because I've met so many boys struggling to grow up without the role-modeling of fathers, I've written a novel about such a boy. He's a seventeen-year-old who believes he's made a complete adjustment to a long-absent father. In fact, the boy plays a role of father to his little eight-year-old brother who doesn't need a father nearly as much as his older brother needs to play a defensive role of false maturity.

When these boys are reunited almost forcibly with their own father, the novel traces their troubles as the three of them try to form an all-male family. They must begin to move beyond macho role-playing to a shared sense of humanity. That book is called *Father Figure*.

I have another recurring theme, and it's clearly visible to anyone who was ever a teacher. In all my novels the chief stumbling block to maturity is the peer group. Though the young don't know it, nobody ever grows up in a group. The peer group, more powerful now than anything adults remember, is in the business of keeping its members in line and retarding their individual achievement.

Our novels champion the independant thinker, the rebel against conformity. We writers aren't interested in team players. We're interested in lonely, long-distance runners. And so I have the antic adventures of that spunky outcast, Blossom Culp, and Matt in *Close Enough to Touch* who must learn to do his own grieving and Barnie and Teresa in *Secrets of the Shopping Mall* who pit their true friendship against the conformity of the peer group.

The young need permission to be themselves and set their own standards, even if they have to take their lumps for it. I begin to think our books are the last encouragement to individuality still available.

Young people, worried young people have jogged me again, and the result is a new book called *Remembering the Good Times*. It has finally occurred to me that their favorite reading topic is not romance; it's not even science-fiction/fantasy. It's friendships. Young people are looking for companionship in books and just possibly better friends than they have.

And so my novel is about a very special friendship that is formed between a girl and two boys. We follow it from the end of childhood to the middle of adolescence when it is shattered by the suicide of one of its members. A Young Adult novel is always about a survivor, and while a suicide does not survive, his friends must. In the format of friendship, I wrote a novel trying to

point out the warning signs of suicide: that inevitable series of messages the troubled send out to their loved ones before the irretrievable act. I wrote it because young people across this country are worried and bewildered by the suicides of their schoolmates.

The great killers of the young in the 1980's are drunken driving, murder, and suicide. The suicide rate is out of control today, often among the affluent, mainly among boys.

I wrote the novel because the young are disturbed by this new epidemic and because I have yet to enter a school where the telephone number of the local suicide hot line is prominently displayed.

We live in an age still turning away from its problems rather than confronting them. The move to suburbs or to private schools is meant to be a blanket solution along with the "Gifted" program and its invariable grade-inflation. There are still a good many topics we dare not mention aloud, and the nearer those problems come to our lives and our children's lives, the more silent we grow.

In the 1980's we live in a new golden age of censorship, though no one has made much impact upon the false values, the sexism, the increasing nudity and crudity of television. But book censorship flourishes. In the year after its one-hundredth anniversary, the forefather of the American novel, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is being condemned for its racism and racist language when it continues to be the most clenching condemnation of racial prejudice ever written. It's a national treasure for another reason as well. It's the first novel about coming of age in America, about being young in a new world that looks old to you.

The motives behind the golden age of censorship in the 1980's are increasingly clear. Some sixty-million American people are illiterate. A new generation of immigrant peoples are often illiterate in two languages, and our extensive, expensive systems of public and private schooling have failed newcomers and native-born alike.

To those rendered illiterate by lack of schooling, by television, by the charisma of religious zealots who want an unthinking constituency—to all these non-readers books are a threat. No real reader wants a book banned.

The greatest fear is of the unknown, and our country is filling up with people for whom books are the great unknown. Do seven hours of television, the American family's daily fare, have something to do with it? Yes, and the content of television is less damaging than the passive experience of watching it. Television conditions us, young and old alike, to be consumers and critics and never creators. Watching television is the same demeaning, dead-end experience as sitting up in the bleachers, being expected to cheer a team you never made.

Television is a great weapon against us, but it isn't the enemy. The enemy is the home in which books and ideas are never discussed, in which human

values are not passed from one generation to the next, the home that reaches the young before school can.

In defense of television, Eric Severeid once said that in many American homes television is the only coherent voice ever heard.

We want so much for our young people: a better life, we always say, than we have had. Yet we want our young to make bricks without straw. We want them to create and innovate, to share and survive with the necessary personal disciplines. We want them to draw together as a generation without a familiarity with a common body of literature. We want them to speak for themselves without the communications skills to give shape to their ideas.

Writers and teachers believe that civilization survives through the word: written and spoken and read. Novelists believe passionately in fiction. We believe that fiction bends the truth into new shapes, the better to see it and ourselves. And all of us who teach and write would like to share that truth with a new generation.

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