
Common Aspects of Recommended Young Adult Literature: An Historical Perspective

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Choosing young adult literature can be a formidable task, especially when one considers the multitude of offerings in today's broad market. Furthermore, separating the wheat from the chaff, the superb from the mediocre, can complicate the selection process. It is important for professionals and parents to be aware of those titles that are recommended reading, titles that can positively enhance and encourage the psychological, social, and educational maturation of adolescent readers. McReynolds (1971) brings to light Pilgrim and McAllister's (1968) belief in the need for optimistic, enlightening books that inspire young readers to develop positive philosophies and attitudes. While the tendency has been to include more sensational, shocking materials in the recommended lists, materials considered unwholesome by some opponents of adolescent literature, but deemed necessary developmental tools by some of its proponents, the end remains the same--to encourage the positive growth of adolescents.

Early contention centered on defining adolescent literature. McReynolds (1971) cited Burton (1970, 1951) who distinguished between *literature for adolescents* and *adolescent literature*. By 1985 critics equated adolescent literature with *young adult literature*. Nilsen and Donelson (1985) simply defined young adult literature as that reading material chosen by readers aged twelve to twenty. Appleby (1969, 1968) asserted that this type of literature could be material written expressly for young adults or simply literature available for their use.

The genre has now come of age, its identity settled. The more positive term young adult literature is synonymous with the labels adolescent literature or literature for the adolescent and has, over the years, softened the earlier tags' negative implications. Literature currently appearing on many, if not most, recommended lists, reflects this new identification.

A number of professional organizations provide recommended lists based on systematic reviews of content, style, and worth. These lists, such as the National Council of Teachers of English's *Books for You*, The American Library Association's "Best Books for Young Adults," and the *School Library Journal's* "Best Books," are accessible and up-to-date, reflecting changes in intellectual, social, and political thought. Despite the changing cultural atmosphere in America, and despite the evolution of adolescent literature, professionals continue to exert a constant, albeit indirect, control over the reading of young adults. Professional recommendations influence curricular choices as well as the ultimate reception of the genre. While these professional recommendations do not necessarily reflect adolescent preferences, the lists do mirror authoritative choices for young adults.

Historical characterizations trace the genre from its modest and subtle beginnings through a sometimes shocking and rebellious youth. Despite the labeling adjustment to encourage better reception, the genre remains aloof and isolated from the mainstream of traditional literature. Today, as the parameters that establish young adult literature begin to unravel, the measures used to determine its nature and quality are increasingly influential; marketing and censorship also play powerful, but indirect, roles in its explication. Young adult literature advocates continually point out its merits and its place in the world of *real literature* while opponents attempt to detract from the value of adolescent literature by assailing its quality and purpose. Recommended adolescent literature acts as a stabilizing agent that lends respectability and worth to the genre.

What, then, are the common characteristics of recommended young adult literature and how have these characteristics changed over the previous two decades? Just what is the big picture concerning recommended adolescent literature?

Several studies ascertain what literary aspects are common to the recommended literature for adolescents (Johnson, 1990; Johnson, 1983; and McReynolds, 1971). One particular replication (Johnson, 1990) further outlines the apparent changes in some of these characteristics over the twenty-year period. All the books selected for these studies are drawn from professional lists which recommend literature for adoles-

cents. The lists do not necessarily reflect popular young adult reading interest, nor are all the years from 1966 through 1987 equally represented by the randomly selected titles. However, similar instruments are utilized to determine the common aspects of the recommended literature and an overall sense of the commonalities and change is evident.

Literary Mode

McReynolds (1971) presents the theory of Tovatt and DeVries (1971) who contend that adolescent readers prefer nonfiction. Ellis (1985) believes that young readers prefer romance. And Fuchs (1988), Walker (1988), Reed (1985), and Egoff (1981) cite a rising interest in science fiction and fantasy. Walker (1988) acknowledges that books help young readers to face problems that plague them, but asserts that the problem novel is not necessarily a favored mode among young people.

Fiction remains the dominant mode throughout the twenty-year span covered by the studies. Nonfiction has declined since the McReynolds study, possibly as a result of the increase in recommended fiction, but it remains somewhat stable since the mid-70s as the second most recommended mode. It is obvious that poetry is still the least recommended mode of young adult literature. Types of fiction recommended for adolescents include the graphic novel (a recent addition), science fiction, problem novels, and fantasy. Ellis (1985) suggest that the popularity of the problem novel which deals with weighty issues is declining and she foresees the increasing popularity of the romance as a reaction to the heavy realism of the problem novel. Romance novels and drama do not appear in the recommended literature sample.

A categorization of the recommended nonfiction reveals that recently recommended nonfiction selections, like the majority of the McReynolds samples, are historical. No science and art nonfiction recommendations appear and the overall tendency to recommend these modes has declined over the twenty-year period. Biographical and autobiographical recommendations show a sharp increase during the year 1976-1980, but stabilize during the period of the last study.

Table 1

Fiction, NonFiction, and Poetry

Literary Mode	1966-1970		1976-1981		1984-1987	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Fiction	47	58	22	75	22	71
Non-Fiction	30	37	6	20	8	26
Poetry	4	5	1	5	1	3
Total	81	100	29	100	31*	100

*Nine of these selections are specifically designated as adult literature for adolescents.

Youthful Characters

The utilization of young adult characters, particularly as protagonists, increases topic relevance and captures the young readers' interest. The importance of the adolescent character to the genre is evident in the increasing number of young adult characters portrayed in the recommended literature. Adolescent characters even appear in the adult literature recommended to young adult readers. Readers of all ages glean wisdom from the struggles of these characters. While the earlier studies do not attend to gender representation, the 1990 Johnson study points to a balanced use of male and female characters in the literature surveyed.

Table 2

Fiction Books with an Adolescent Among the Principal Characters

Principal Characters	1966-1970		1976-1981		1984-1987	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Adolescent (20 years or under)	36	77	20	91	20*	91
No Adolescent (20 years or under)	11	23	2	9	2	9
Total	47	100	22	100	22	100

*Four of these characters are minority youth.

Social Taboos and Issues

As society changes, so too does the literature that reflects its culture. Likewise, adolescent literature has similarly evolved, mirroring the values, issues, and themes of young Americans. When times are conservative, the literature for young adults is conservative (Ellis, 1985). This tendency is also true of recommended adolescent literature. The counter-culture movement of the late 60s and early 70s, particularly the propensity of that period's youthful culture to let it all hang out, is subsequently reflected in the literature, and, to a lesser extent, the recommended adolescent literature. As times tighten up, as in the early to mid-80s, the recommended literature reflects the more conservative thought of the adults who seek to teach and protect the young. Censorship has recently taken a firmer hold in many areas, and while the recommended literature is not censored, the times do influence professional choice.

McReynolds offers the opinions of Hentoff (1967, 1968) and Woods (1966) who support the inclusion of real life situations, characters, and themes that speak directly to adolescents. McReynolds also refers to Appleby (1969), Beatty (1969), and Davis (1967) who contend that taboo subjects (profanity and references to sexual activity) do appear in adolescent literature. While Carlsen and Sherill (1988) classify literature with this type of focus as subliterate, the fact remains that references to taboo issues are characteristic of young adult literature--even that literature recommended by professionals.

Profanity and sexual references are more commonly found in the recommended fiction than in nonfiction, but overall these aspects do not dominate the literature surveyed. A comparison of the data shows that the use of profanity and sexual references has declined since the less restrictive 70s. This decline supports Ellis's (1985) views.

Table 3

Literature Containing Profanity and Sexual References

Use of	1966-1970		1976-1981		1984-1987	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Profanity						
Fiction	5	6	11	38	5	16
Non-Fiction	5	6	5	17	3	10
Sex						
Fiction	3	4	10	35	9*	29
Non-Fiction	3	4	6	21	5*	16

*Three of these selections are specifically designated as adult literature read by adolescents.

The literature recommended for adolescents addresses a wide variety of social concerns. This representation supports numerous theories in the field that literature that presents real problems can help adolescents cope with and adjust to the real world. Religion, warfare, violence, parental conflict, racial strife, and poverty are the concerns most frequently addressed by the recommended literature. Death, suicide, and incest are additional social concerns evident in the most recent sample.

The inclusion of sensitive social concerns has increased over the two decades surveyed. Egoff (1981) explains that death is a recurring theme used in young adult literature to express rites of passage, a journey all adolescents must face. The inclusion of social issues reflects the concerns of a youthful society, assists in problem solving, and encour-

ages the development of values (Auten, 1984; Cline and McBride, 1983). Recommended young adult literature no longer merely extends a simple, moral lesson to innocent adolescents, but seeks instead to present, through vicarious experience, a possible pathway for today's more experienced youth toward self-discovery and eventual maturity.

Table 4

Social Issue*	1966-1970		1976-1981		1984-1987	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
War/military	10	13	3	4	10	12
Racial strife	15	20	5	7	9	11
Poverty	3	4	6	8	9	11
Ecology	2	2	1	1	3	4
Space	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dropouts	0	0	2	3	2	2
Drugs	0	0	9	12	5	6
Teen pregnancy	1	1	9	12	3	4
Religion	0	0	9	12	12	14
Violence	4	5	9	12	10	12
Parental conflict	3	4	12	16	10	12
Homosexuality	1	1	7	10	2	2
Communism	1	1	0	0	3	4
No issues	37	48	2	3	4	5

*Themes occurring in recommended young adult literature.

Social Class Representation

While our nation struggles with the dissolving middle class, the previous decades remain true to the middle class ideal. The recommended adolescent literature surveyed focuses almost exclusively on the middle class white. Rarely are other classes represented in the literature recommended. Minority characters are beginning to find a place in the recommended adolescent literature, however, and Native Americans such as the Eskimo and American Indian are represented within their respective cultural situations.

Family Structure

Teenage pregnancy, divorce, and drug abuse are problems that plague young adults from all walks of life, from all types of families. The portrayal of the family in the midst of the boiling issues of contemporary society is an aspect common to most of the recommended young adult literature. While the middle class, white, nuclear family continues to dominate the literature recommended for adolescents, a shift in family portrayal is notable. Overall family representation has increased and single-parent families are more evident. The representation of the family unit is perhaps yet another example of realism's influence on the literature.

Table 5

Family Structure Representation in Recommended Adolescent Literature

Family Structure	1966-1970		1976-1981		1984-1987	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Both parents	14	28	16	55	12	39
Father absent	10	20	5	17	11	35
Mother absent	4	8	1	3	6	19
Foster parents	6	12	1	3	0	0
Sibling parents	2	4	0	0	0	0
Grandparents	1	2	1	3	1	3
No parents mentioned	13	26	5	17	1	3

Conclusions

The twenty-year span of the study reveals that young adult literature has expanded to include a variety of fictional modes. Taboo subjects are present in the literature, but emphasis is shifting away from profanity and sex toward relevant social issues. Multiculturalism is only a glimmer in the eye of the writers during the periods scrutinized here, but the increased attention to minority characters and issues will undoubtedly produce more literature that will be highly recommended along these lines. As the literature continues to evolve and reflect the times, we are certain to find a return to family values reflected in the recommended literature, even though the family unit may more and more reflect the single parent's dilemma.

The tendency to guard the reading of adolescents continues. While the romance enjoys a growing popularity in the book stores (and sometimes the shelves of school and public libraries), it is not a popular item on the recommended lists. There is a concern that adolescents be presented with factual material that is relevant and accurate, and nonfiction as well as fiction selections deal with warfare, human rights, sexual abuse, and AIDS. The tendency to recommend academically sound literature instead of enjoyable literature appears to have subsided somewhat. Most of the selections are enjoyable (some easy) reading that also maintain practical content in an effort to aid the young reader's growth in many areas.

The popular appeal of the selections is questionable. Few of the recent books recommended appear on the list compiled by the *English Journal* (Conner, Tessmer, Fetz, Tolorie, 1984), the list with the most input from adolescents. Hence, it is important for educators, librarians, and parents to determine the purpose of using a particular recommended book list so as not to be misled. A reliance on several sources, as determined by McReynolds (1971) seems best in order to produce a well-rounded list.

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