

# Young Adult Literature – A Coming of Age

## A Before you read

1. What is your favorite novel or one that you have read recently that made an impression on you? What topics does it address? Why did you like it and what does it mean to you? What did you learn from it? Tell a partner about your book.
2. You're going to read reports about a fictional book fair from 1971, 1999 and 2024. Before you read, discuss in small groups how topics, interests and reactions to young adult literature might have changed over the decades. What things do you think have remained the same?

### Book fairs

A book fair is a large event where many books are displayed, promoted and sold by different publishers. Visitors can meet their favorite authors, follow interesting discussions about literature, look at and talk about the most recently published books. The international book fairs in Frankfurt and Leipzig have been in business for hundreds of years, and since 2014 the Manga-Comic-Con has been hosted by the Leipzig book fair, attracting many young people.

## B Reading

While you are reading these three texts, make notes about the following two points:

1. Book fairs change over the years, but some things stay the same. Make notes about both of these categories.
2. Make notes about the different things that concern adults and those that are important to teenagers, according to the texts.

### World of Words, 1971: A new genre in its Bloom?



**Portland** For the seventh year in a row, the book fair “World of Words” took place in the Portland Expo Center from June

10-13 and attracted a total of 12,956 visitors – what a success! The event organizers were especially pleased by the increasing number of teenage visitors, which they had anticipated beforehand.

“This was my first book fair. It feels like the younger readers like me are finally being given a voice in literature – thank you, Judy Bloom!” said Monica, a 16-year-old girl from Beaverton, Oregon. What Monica is referring to is the book *Are You There God?*

*It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Bloom, published in 1970 and highly praised by many teenagers we talked to.

However loud their voices are, though, they cannot overpower the critical and concerned opinions of parents, teachers, and other adults. The debates center around the appropriateness of the novel and its potential negative effects on children. While books such as *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger have already broken taboos through the use of vulgar language or “questionable” decisions made by the teenage protagonist, Judy Bloom's novel directly addresses teenage struggles never overtly mentioned before. The novel turns its back on romanticized narratives of teenagers' lives and talks about topics related to puberty, such as menstruation and the protagonist Margaret's struggle to find her own faith.

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“I had no idea others have similar thoughts and questions as I do. I was so relieved to learn that Margaret got her first bra later than the other girls. I don’t feel as awkward anymore,” confides 14-year-old Linda from Portland. Nevertheless, these topics seem to make parents uncomfortable. “This book is too explicit for young readers, too much honesty, too soon. My daughter should not be concerned with

menstruation, relationships and sexuality. She should be having fun with her friends at the pool,” says Joanne Foster, mother to a teenage reader.

Whether through praise or protest, young adult fiction is no longer flying under the radar and will most likely gain popularity as the value of talking about once taboo subjects is recognized.

### World of Words, 1999: The perks of reading



**Portland** This year’s “World of Words” book fair at the Portland Expo Center sent the world a clear message that the

world of literature is changing. For years, teen-focused literature was quietly shelved between children’s picture books and adult romance. But at this year’s fair, publishers and readers alike made it clear that the genre is growing up – and fast. Some publishers had expansive young adult sections, which excited teenage readers. “It’s like they finally realized what we’re actually reading – not just the happy and easy stuff. That’s not our reality. These books feel like they actually get what it’s like being our age,” reported 16-year-old Rachel.

It was this craving for emotional honesty that may explain the buzz surrounding one debut novel that faces the dark and complicated corners of adolescence. “I bought *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky without really planning to, but once I started, I couldn’t put it down,” said Devon Ramirez, 17, from Salem. “Charlie thinks the way I think – like, too much and too dark – and it’s a relief to know someone else understands it.”

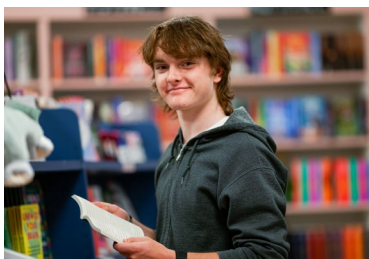
The novel targets a wide range of difficult but very real topics, which teenagers can relate to. We learn that the protagonist Charlie is struggling with

trauma, friendships, anxiety, his sexual identity and many more relatable topics. This novel once again introduces new subjects to young adult literature and creates a safe space for vulnerability, self-reflection and for the topic of mental illness. “It’s the quiet books that have the biggest impact and get you thinking,” states Lorraine Gibbs, a high school librarian. “Books like this help students start conversations they don’t know how to have otherwise.”

And yet, there is growing concern among adults about young adult literature. While young readers feel seen through truthful accounts, several adults we talked to feel that teenagers reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are overexposed to vulgar and explicit content, such as drugs, mindless partying, abuse and thoughts of suicide. From an adult’s perspective, it can seem as if Chbosky is glorifying drugs and other mindless behavior, leading young adults to imitate this lifestyle. However, you should not forget that the novel also offers a perspective on how things can improve by finding a sense of belonging and healing through seeking professional help.

Fifteen-year-old Jeff from Hillsboro reports, “I was going through some stuff – like really bad anxiety – and Charlie made it feel like I wasn’t the only one. It didn’t fix me, but it helped me breathe.” Maybe it’s not about whether a book is too dark, too raw, or too real. Maybe it’s about whether one teenager, like Jeff, can find something on those pages that helps them breathe. And maybe that’s enough.

### World of Words, 2024: Anguish, Anarchy, and Autographs



**Portland** Another year, another reason to celebrate the world of books. And what a party it was this year at the “World of Words”

book fair in Portland from June 6-10! Hundreds of teenagers waiting to get a glimpse of their favorite author, get a picture with their beloved “Bookstagrammer” and listen to panels featuring viral “BookTokers”. Kirstin Schneider, an accompanying mother of 15-year-old Ashley, voiced her astonishment.

“When Ashley asked if we could go to “World of Words” together, I was not expecting this. My last time here was in 1993, when Judy Bloom had just published her novel *Here’s to You, Rachel Robinson*. At that time, I had thought that there were a lot of us young adult readers, but it’s nothing compared to this. We’ve been waiting in this line for two hours, so Tomi Adeyemi can sign Ashley’s copy.” Ashley is clutching the book *Children of Anguish and Anarchy*, the latest trend on BookTok, eagerly awaiting her favorite author and creative hero, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants to the US.

Social media’s influence on the literary world has grown immensely over the last few years, impacting book sales, the publishing industry, and how readers engage with stories, authors, and each other in a global, community-driven space. Book influencers share recommendations and make creative and visually attractive videos about the books they would “erase their memory for just to read them for the first time again”, as one trending BookToker put it. Ashley mentions a sense of community, the joy of finding like-minded young readers and an opportunity to share their thoughts and discuss them with others.

The rise of BookTok during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 sparked a dramatic increase in book sales. At this year’s “World of Words” entire displays were dedicated to trending books on BookTok. One was for Ashley’s favorite book *Children of Anguish and Anarchy*, a novel that honestly portrays the current developments in young adult literature. It belongs to the genre “Romantasy”, a blend of romance and fantasy that BookTok helped popularize. “It’s not just the emotions and the suspense, though. The book touches on the topics of racism, oppression and social issues in general. It teaches us to stand up for justice and for ourselves,” said Jasmine, a 17-year-old BookToker.

Tomi Adeyemi’s novel is a good example of how this young adult generation demands diversity, inclusiveness and representation of minorities; in other words, a literary landscape reflecting the world around them. Young adult novels now influence social media conversations, inspire film and TV adaptations and serve as entry points for discussions about current issues.

Nevertheless, Jordan Porter, a literary critic, voiced a more critical standpoint, and he is not the only one to do so. “BookTok is more about aesthetic covers and dramatic premises than the actual literary value,” he said. “It has turned literature into a popularity contest and turned books into nothing more than virally trending marketing tools.”

Despite the criticism, social media has revolutionized the way people engage with literature and has made reading more appealing for a diverse audience of young adults. Whether it’s through fantastical worlds or contemporary struggles, young adult literature has been given a prominent stage where identity, justice and imagination can unite. And thanks to platforms like BookTok, the spotlight has never been brighter.

# Young Adult Literature – A Coming of Age

## C Tasks

### 1. Comprehension

- a) Based on what you have read here, describe some of the main characteristics of young adult novels. Point out the common topics addressed in young adult fiction.
- b) Using all three newspaper articles, sum up the arguments about why young adult literature is so popular with teenagers, and what aspects appeal to females in particular. Do the descriptions in the three texts match the ideas you discussed in pre-reading exercise 2?
- c) Summarise how the popularity and presence of young adult fiction has changed over the past decades.

### 2. Research

- a) There are many different awards for young adult literature, ranging from those based on general literary excellence, such as the Michael L. Printz Award, to awards that celebrate diversity, for example the Coretta Scott King Award. Do some research on what awards are presented and select the most suitable one for your favorite novel.
- b) Prepare a one-minute BookTok reel on why you are convinced your favorite novel should win the award.

### 3. Creative task

- a) In the world of young adult literature, authors draw on a wide range of genres to tell their stories. In the exercise below, you will find fictional opening sentences from YA novels.

**Match each one** to the genre it best represents.

|   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| 1. On the morning after the Starfall Ball, Liora woke up to find her veins shimmering silver and no memory of last night's events.              | a) Romance              |
| 2. He smelled of salt and wind, his eyes were as deep as the ocean – and before I knew it, I got lost in their depth.                           | b) Mystery              |
| 3. The moment we touched, I saw a red spark travel to the sky and I knew I was destined either to love him or to destroy him.                   | c) Contemporary fiction |
| 4. The day I turned six was my last day playing marbles with my friends. Now, all that is left is working for <i>THEM</i> , so that I survive.  | d) Romantasy            |
| 5. School was finally over, which meant there was no more danger awaiting me behind every corner, no more toilet water being poured on my head. | e) Fantasy              |
| 6. The note on my locker said, "We know what you did," but the problem is – I'm not sure which secret they meant.                               | f) Dystopia             |

1. \_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_ 4. \_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_ 6. \_\_\_\_

- b) Choose your favorite opening sentence and use it as inspiration for writing a YA short story of your own.

### 4. Discussion

Novels such as Judy Bloom's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* or Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were sometimes described as 'problem novels'. This means they focus on the protagonist's mental struggles that can be very difficult for individuals to deal with by themselves.

- a) Discuss whether these problem novels are more helpful or more triggering (= causing a strong emotional reaction of fear or worry because someone is made to remember something bad that has happened in the past). Find arguments for both viewpoints and talk about them in small groups.
- b) Explain whether you think trigger warnings should be required at the beginning of books.

### 5. Going beyond the text

In the second article Jeff comments on *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by saying; "I was going through some stuff – like really bad anxiety – and Charlie made it feel like I wasn't the only one. It didn't fix me, but it helped me breathe."

What he is describing in this quote has been called 'bibliotherapy'. This refers to the confrontation, exploration and coping with one's own mental health through reading about a protagonist with similar problems. To what extent do you think bibliotherapy can replace therapy with a professional psychotherapist? What are the possible risks of doing it yourself?

### C Tasks

#### 1. Comprehension

a)

- YA novels feature young adult protagonists
- emotional honesty and realism, breaking of taboos
- focus on identity and self-discovery, topics relevant to growing up
- use of more raw language similar to that which young adults use
- emphasising diversity and representation

b)

- teenage readers feel seen and understood through authentic representation of their struggles
- the female audience especially appreciates the emotional and relational depth
- they can read about topics they might not be able to talk about to adults (subjects considered off-limits), of which females have even more (menstruation, female sexuality, body image, ...)
- other topics important to teenagers such as social justice, providing a voice for underrepresented groups (also: girls and young women)
- provides space for vulnerability
- sense of community and connection, especially nowadays with social media
- YA literature stays current with trends

c)

- YA fiction started out as a controversial and niche genre, confronted with lots of criticism for breaking taboos in literature.
- With time, YA literature started addressing darker, more raw and complex topics such as mental health. It gained popularity among teenagers due to this honesty and gained visibility in bookstores, though adult concerns about explicit content and influence persisted.
- Nowadays, young adult literature cannot be ignored in the literary world. It has a strong presence on social media and influences trends, book sales, and cultural conversations. It embraces greater diversity and inclusivity, has shaped new genres, such as "Romantasy", and has an impact on movies and television. Critics sometimes question the literary value due to the novels' viral appeal.

#### 2. Research

a) **Stonewall Book Award:** Recognizes exceptional books relating to the LGBTQIA+ experience.

**William C. Morris YA Debut Award:** Celebrates a debut book published by a first-time author writing for teens.

**Amelia Elizabeth Walden Award:** Presented for a YA book that exemplifies literary excellence, widespread appeal, and a positive approach to life.

**Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature:** Recognizes books that promote Asian/Pacific American culture and heritage.

b)

- Find a phrase that grabs the viewer's attention in the first few seconds (e.g. "Three books that made me believe in love again.").
- Make it emotional, maybe even a bit dramatic
- You can use trending sounds/music
- Don't forget the aesthetics - clear background, good lighting and sound, etc.
- Address your audience and encourage interaction

### 3. Creative task

a) 1. e 2. a 3. d 4. f 5. c 6. b

b) Individual solutions.

### 4. Discussion

a) They create a "safe space" for readers otherwise overlooked by society, making them feel seen and understood in their struggles. On the other hand, they may bring up issues within the young readers which might be best discussed with a trained professional.

b)

#### Pros:

- Trigger warnings can protect young, vulnerable, possibly traumatized readers and can help prevent re-traumatization.
- Readers have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether they are able to handle difficult and perhaps explicit parts of the book.

#### Cons:

- Sometimes they spoil the plot.
- Warnings can make the contents of the books appear more severe than they actually are.
- They can foster avoidance of difficult but crucial topics, which could negatively impact the overall awareness of the topics.

### 5. Going beyond the text

#### Pros:

- It can raise awareness about mental disorders, their symptoms and effects (a form of "psychoeducation"), and can spark self-reflection.
- Oftentimes situations in YA novels make real-life issues easily understandable.
- Readers can identify with and relate to somebody their age, which makes them feel better understood and seen (recognizing themselves in others).
- The endings are often hopeful and provide a perspective.
- Easily accessible to everybody (no long waiting times and high costs, as is the case with therapy).



### Cons:

- Content can be more triggering than helpful, promoting a downward spiral.
- Many parts of novels can be very problem-oriented instead of resource-oriented.
- Young readers may identify with characters to such an extent that they adapt thinking patterns they would not have had by themselves.
- Young readers may “self-diagnose” (and misdiagnose) their issues based on incomplete and perhaps romanticized portrayals of mental disorders, an over-simplification of the actual diagnosis.
- While bibliotherapy can promote self-reflection it can never replace the work of a professional psychotherapist who has sound knowledge about mental disorders, works interactively with the patient and can select the best-suited and most effective intervention.