



The Innovative World of Young Adult Literature

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We could begin a discussion of the current innovations of young adult literature ruminating on where the genre started and on the twists and turns it has taken in its 50-year history, but that topic has already been fully covered by others (Bucher & Hinton-Johnson, 2009; Cart, 2010; Cole, 2008; Donelson & Nielsen, 2004). For this article it is sufficient to say that what young adult literature is today is very different from what it was half a century ago. Today young adult literature is a vibrant and innovative genre that has wide applicability for pleasure reading, but also for in-depth and exciting classroom experiences.

A Vision of Young Adult Literature Today

It seems that in this regard young adult literature has always been on the cutting edge, which is really no surprise if you consider its target audience. Adolescents tend to be free thinking and innovative, and if you look at movements towards change, historically it has been the upcoming generation that really influences lasting transformation in the world. Consider Claudette Colvin, who at age 15 refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus (Hoose, 2009). Or look back further to Joan of Arc, who at age 17 led an army to victory (Demi, 2011). With the generations of young adults and their individualistic ideas influencing

the world around them, it seems to be no great surprise that the literature that attracts them is

also impacting the world of literature in unconventional ways.

The authors of young adult literature who are writing today are not only expanding the specific genre of young adult literature, but enlarging our fundamental idea of what literature is. Young adult literature today embraces a vision that is changing the way we look at story and the way both fictional and true narrative explain the world around us. The scope of these innovations is quite broad, and their many twists and turns cannot be covered fully, so this article will look at only three: innovations with illustrations, innovations for classic stories, and innovations in creativity, as authors create unique titles for reader enlightenment.

Innovations with Illustrations

Narrative has long been a textual medium. Whether spoken or written down, narrative has the purpose of evoking images and pictures with words alone. This does not mean that illustration has not been a strong component of storytelling; one has only to look at the Lascaux Caves in southwestern France to know that pictures and stories do go together. In modern times we also see exciting ways textual narrative and visual images combine to convey wonderful stories. Looking at the thousands of excellent picture

books published each year, for example, shows us how an effective balance of text and images results in powerful storytelling.

But despite these strong connections, we seem to come to a certain time of life when we appear to divorce ourselves from the connections between words and pictures. Those who see teenagers looking at an illustrated novel, for example, and feel disdain for reading a “baby” book at that age are among those who see true literature as text only. This disdain is not justified, however, as authors of young adult literature are redefining how we approach text and illustrations in a novel. In one of the most interesting innovations in young adult literature today, we no longer see the inclusion of illustrations as indicating that the novel is of lesser complexity or quality; instead it embraces the full range of storytelling possibilities to generate narratives that are richer because of the inclusion of illustrations.

For example, young adult author Scott Westerfeld acknowledges the power of illustrations in his trilogy *Leviathan* (<http://scottwesterfeld.com/books/leviathan/>). Working with illustrator Keith Thompson, Westerfeld was adamant that the series be published as a set of illustrated novels so they would look as if they had been published in 1914, a time when illustrations were the norm for all novels for both young and older audiences. The illustrations not only give these books historical context, but through their intense details they bring the story to life with a power that can be accomplished only by words and images together.

Westerfeld’s use of illustrations may reach back to a previous age, but today’s authors have found additional ways of expanding their use. Novels like *Countdown* by Deborah Wiles (2010) and *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs (2011) show just how innovative illustrations can be. Set in 1962, *Countdown* takes the integration of text and pictures to a whole new level by using primary source documents to provide context to the fictional story. During the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, 12-year-old Franny sees tensions

not only in the world around her but in her own home. Using photographs, newspaper clippings, and other documents, Wiles shows the reader the historical context in which Franny faces her fears. This book provides an innovative look at a historical period that goes well beyond the facts a textbook might give and beyond the fictional context a work of historical fiction might offer by combining the real and the imagined into a complete whole. In addition to a gripping story, this novel provides a strong model of how historical fact could be combined with historical fiction in a classroom setting to make the study of both much richer.

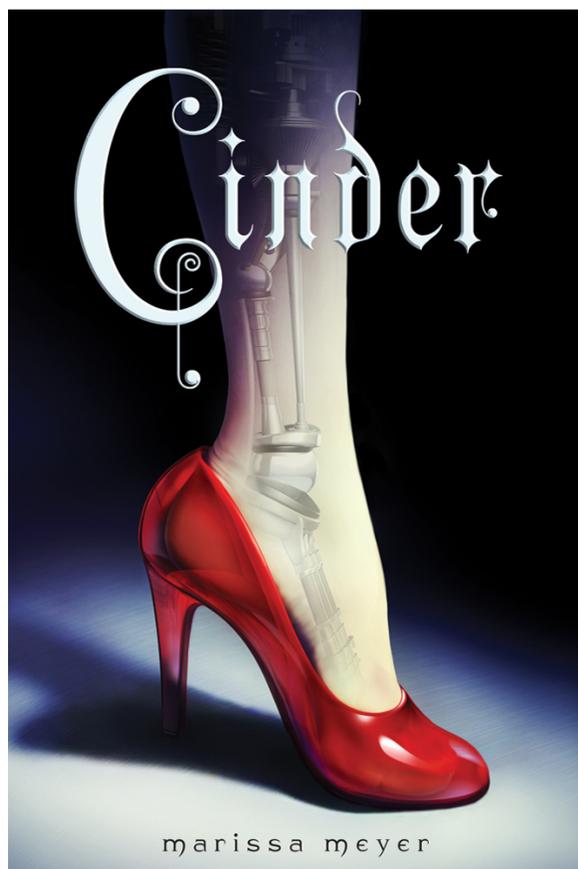
Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children takes a completely different approach by using historical photographs to create a completely fictional story. Using vintage photographs collected at swap meets and flea markets, Riggs weaves a tale of how these photographs might have become a collection. Riggs’ use of real life to inspire art not only creates an innovative novel, but also provides an interesting opening for teachers of writing to show how their own students can use the world around them for inspiration.

The worlds of text and illustration are certainly colliding in new and interesting ways in young adult literature. If we expand our consideration into the world of graphic novels, which have more illustrations than text, by looking at novels such as Chris Wooding and Cassandra Diaz’s *Pandemonium* (2012) or Matt Phelan’s *Around the World* (2011), then the scope of these innovations becomes broader and more intricate. In our increasingly visual world, the innovations with illustrations we see in young adult literature are bound to continue.

Innovations for Classic Stories

In his essay “On Fairy Stories,” J.R.R. Tolkien (1965) expounded his idea of “the cauldron of story.” His contention is that bits and pieces of story, myth, and legend have been bubbling around in a great pot for centuries. For their writing, authors dip into this pot and pull out ideas to recombine and reinvent into something entirely new. While Tolkien’s focus

was on the creation of fairy tales and fantasy, we should contend that all stories, no matter their genre, were found first in the cauldron of story. As they come from a similar sense of psyche and imagination, all narratives, both fictional and real, are included in this bubbling pot. Authors of young adult literature have seen the potential of all the options of story Tolkien's cauldron has to offer, and they have long been dipping in to re-create existing stories into something new, fresh, and modern. The strong trend of retold fairy tales is our first evidence of young adult authors' visions of the cauldron's potential. Books such as Jessica Day George's *Princess of the Midnight Ball* (2009), a somewhat traditional retelling of the Twelve Dancing Princess, and Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), about a cyborg Cinderella, show direct connections to just the kinds of elements of story Tolkien seems to have had in mind.



One recent trend in young adult literature is the expansion of retellings into the realm of

mythology. For example, in the span of five years three series and one stand-alone novel have built off the Persephone myth. The stand-alone, *Radiant Darkness* by Emily Whitman (2009), tells a purer form of the tale from Persephone's point of view, showing why she was drawn into the darkness of Hades. On the other hand, the *Abandon* trilogy by Meg Cabot (2011, 2102, 2013) and the *Everneath* trilogy by Brodi Ashton (2012, 2013) modernize the story by telling of a normal high school girl who is captured and dragged into the Underworld, who must then return home to make her peace or break the bonds that threaten to return her to the world below. Finally the *Goddess Test* series by Aimee Carter (2011, 2012) moves the story into the future with Hades looking for a new queen to join him in ruling the Land of the Dead. Each of these retellings has clearly found its inspiration from the original but ultimately taken the story to new depths as the authors use their own style to re-create what has come from the cauldron.

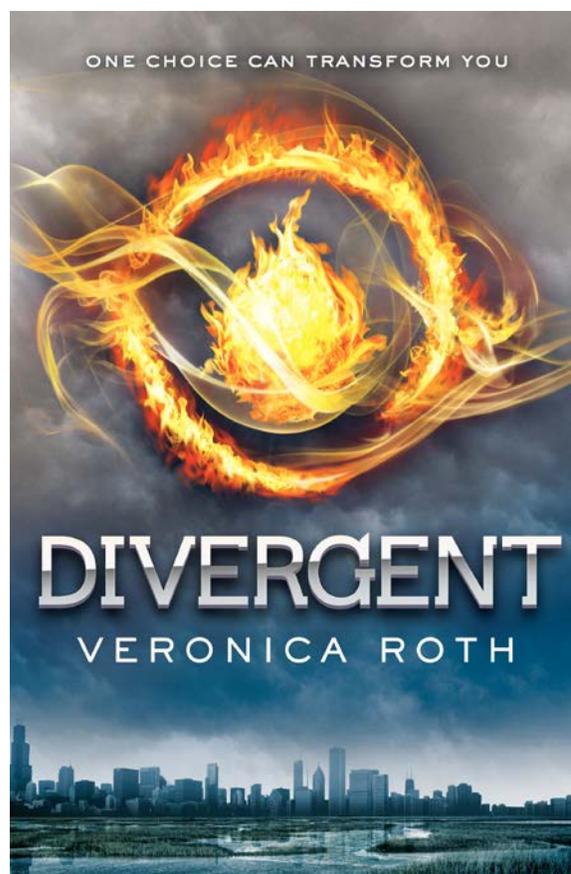
Authors of young adult literature have certainly found inspiration in our oral storytelling heritage; however, more and more they are finding it in our literary heritage as well. Another recent innovation in the field is the explosion of works that retell or reinvent classic pieces of literature. Works such as *The Dashwood Sisters' Secrets of Love* by Rosie Rushton (2006) and *Sass and Serendipity* by Jennifer Ziegler (2011), both modernizing the plot and characters of *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, bring new light to this classic story. Very few authors seem to be escaping this trend, with recent novels reinventing everything from Shakespeare to Shelley. Of particular interest are novels such as Stacey Jay's *Juliet Immortal* (2011) and *Romeo Redeemed* (2012), which explain the reasons for Romeo and Juliet's untimely demise in very different terms by continuing the story after their deaths in Verona. Shelly's gothic classic has also received a recent remake in Kenneth Oppel's *The Apprenticeship of Victor Frankenstein* series, which creates a prequel by telling the story of Dr. Frankenstein as a teenager. Shelly's story is then continued in *Dr. Frankenstein's Daughters* by Suzanne Weyn (2013), which tells the tale of the twin daughters of the Doctor. These titles serve as retellings or

expansions on the original, giving readers new insights into the world both sets of authors have created. One of the exciting things about such retellings is that they often lead readers back to the original sources for rereading or new discovery. Teachers can certainly build on this interest by pairing such works with their classic counterparts for classrooms study.

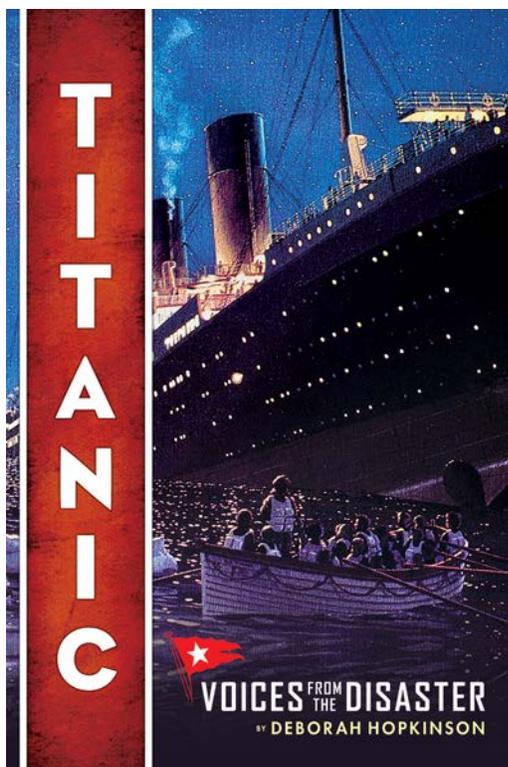
Innovations in Creativity

Illustrations help us to see narrative in new ways, and authors re-creating stories dipped from the cauldron of story help readers expand their experience with story elements; in addition, authors of young adult literature are enlightening readers with their own unique creativity. Young adult literature has long had a history of exploring tough issues without pulling punches. Recently many have criticized the genre as being too dark (Dark Side, 2010), a characteristic that they feel has overwhelmed the genre in a negative way.

The finer points of this argument are addressed elsewhere; however, most readers of the genre will tell you young adult literature deals with the harsh realities of life with a hope and humor delivered in ways that other genres fail to capture. Authors of young adult literature want to re-create readers' visions of the world by telling them a story. The genres of science fiction and fantasy are particularly adept at doing this, for real issues seen through the lens of the imagination are made clearer and sharper than would be possible in life's messy realities. This may be why genres like dystopian science fiction are popular right now: not because they expose the darkness, but because they help us see the light of possibility. Through the imagination we take on issues like the power of emotions in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2012) or even more controversial issues like teenage pregnancy in Megan McCafferty's *Bumped* (2011). Both of these novels are innovative takes on what society could become, and through their futuristic settings they enlighten readers about current issues they are facing today.



Enlightening perspectives are not exclusive to fictional worlds; one of the strongest innovations we are seeing in young adult literature today is the development of strong voices in nonfiction literature written specifically for an adolescent audience. For example, *The Rise and Fall of Senator Joe McCarthy* by James Cross Giblin (2009) takes an important historical figure who has impacted our culture and politics in a way few modern teens understand and made him approachable for a young adult audience. Award winning books like Steve Sheinkin's *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* (2012) and Deborah Hopkinson's *Titanic: Voices from the Disaster* (2012) offer fresh takes on important topics written in an engaging narrative style that will draw all types of readers into the text. All of these unique creations of young adult literature are building the entire genre as fresh new voices and styles enter the field to create books that enlighten and engage readers.



An Age of Continual Change

Young adult literature is an expanding and changing genre. This discussion could be enlarged to include other innovations and trends. The explosion of debut authors, the use of innovative textual presentations such as printing text blocks in color, or even the engaging use of narrative techniques such as changing points of view throughout a novel all show how vibrant works of young adult literature are today. But even if we confine ourselves to the innovations in illustrations, in retellings, and in creativity that result in uniquely engaging works, the genre of young adult literature is certainly one that has great potential. From providing engaging personal reading for teens and young adults to offering complex concepts primed for classroom study, young adult literature has something to offer for every situation and season. Now is the time to dive in and explore the rich realm of young adult books.

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With young adult literature regularly burning up the bestseller lists, it's clear many young adults don't need an excuse to seek out the written word. The roots of young adult go back to when "teenagers" were given their own distinction as a social demographic: World War II. "Seventeenth Summer," released by Maureen Daly in 1942, is considered to be the first book written and published explicitly for teenagers, according to Cart, an author and the former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association. It was a novel largely for girls about first love. In its footsteps followed other romances, and sports novels for boys. Young adult literature offers an authentic, meaningful, and critical way to teach for social responsibility. This article offers an overview of the different elements of social responsibility. These ends are important, but, as others point out, young adult literature is also capable of complexity and literary sophistication, and it can challenge stronger readers as well (Connors, 2013; Miller & Slifkin, 2010; Soter & Connors, 2009). Reading young adult literature has the additional positive affect of preparing adolescents to participate in a democratic society by challenging them to reflect on a range of issues and problems that are endemic to the communities they inhabit (Wolk, 2009). Young Adult (YA) literature is founded on the bildungsroman genre. YA novels are often stories that focus on the protagonist's personal growth, their transition between childhood and adulthood and how they are forming a personal identity in relation to their greater society. In the genre of dystopian YA especially, the protagonist's personal growth is set in a world of adversity, based on rebellion against oppressive regimes and tend to not only form an adolescent identity but also the identity of a hero. The Divergent trilogy (2011-2013) by Veronica Roth follows the story of Tris Prior and her