

YALSA Board of Directors Meeting  
2007 Annual Conference  
Washington, DC, June 21-27, 2007

**Topic:** White Paper Draft for Review

**Background:** During the 2007 Midwinter Meeting the Board adopted guidelines for writing white papers and identified three topics for potential papers: the value of young adult literature, the importance of teen spaces in public libraries and the need for libraries to include a professional trained in teen services on staff. Michael Cart has created a paper on young adult literature, which is provided below. Kim Bolan is working on the teen space topic, and Audra Caplan is working on the staffing one.

**Action Required:** Action

---

*What is the value of young adult literature?*

To ask “What is the value of young adult literature?” is to beg at least three other questions:

1. What is meant by “value?”
2. What is meant by “young adult?” and
3. What is meant by “literature?”

To answer these questions, in turn:

1. “Value” is defined, simply, as “worth.” When used in juxtaposition with the term “young adult literature,” it invites an assessment of how worthwhile, important, or desirable that literature is – measured, as we will see below, in terms both of its aesthetic success and its personal impact on readers and their lives.
2. “Young Adult” is officially defined by YALSA as meaning persons twelve to eighteen years of age. Unofficially, however, it is acknowledged that “young adult” is an

amorphous term that is subject to continuous revision as demanded by changing societal views. Since the early 1990s, for example, it has (again, unofficially) been expanded to include those as young as ten and, since the late 1990s, as old as twenty-five (or even, some would argue, thirty).

3. “Literature” has traditionally meant published prose — both fiction and nonfiction — and poetry. The increasing importance of visual communication has begun to expand this definition to include the pictorial, as well, especially when offered in combination with text as in the case of picture books, comics, and graphic novels and nonfiction.

Often, the word “literature” is also presumed to imply aesthetic merit. However, because young adults have, historically, been accorded such scant respect by society — being viewed more as homogeneous problems than as individual persons — the literature that has been produced for them has, likewise, been dismissed as little more than problem-driven literature of problematic value. Accordingly, the phrase “young adult literature” has itself been dismissed as being an oxymoron.

The Young Adult Library Services Association takes strenuous exception to all of this. Founded in a tradition of respect for those it defines as “young adults,” the Association respects young adult literature, as well. A proof of this is the establishment of the Michael L. Printz Award, which YALSA presents annually to the author of the best young adult book of the year, “best” being defined solely in terms of literary merit. In this way, YALSA values young adult literature — *as literature* — for its artistry and its aesthetic integrity.

But to invoke the Printz Award is to invite one last definition: this time of the very phrase “young adult literature,” for — like “young adult” — this is an inherently amorphous and

dynamic descriptor. Narrowly defined, it means literature specifically published *for* young adults. More broadly, however, it can mean anything that young adults read, though it must — of necessity — have a young adult protagonist and addressing issues of interest to this readership. This broader definition is demonstrated by YALSA’s annual selection of what it calls “Best Books for Young Adults,” a list that often includes books published for adults and even, sometimes, for children.

Whether young adult literature is defined narrowly or broadly, however, much of its value is to be found in how it addresses the needs of its readers. Often described as “developmental,” these acknowledge that young adults are beings in evolution, in search of self and identity; beings who are constantly growing and changing, morphing from the condition of childhood to that of adulthood. That period of passage called “young adulthood” is a unique part of life, distinguished by unique needs that are — at minimum — physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal in nature. By addressing these needs, young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers. And by addressing not only their needs but also their interests, the literature becomes a powerful inducement for them to read, another compelling reason to value it.

Yet another of the chief values of young adult literature is to be found in its capacity to offer readers an opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Young adulthood is, intrinsically, a period of tension. On the one hand young adults have an all-consuming need to belong. But on the other, they are also inherently solipsistic, regarding themselves as being unique, which is not cause for celebration but, rather, for despair. For to be unique is to be unlike one’s peers, to be “other,” in fact. And to be “other” is to not belong but, instead, to be outcast. Thus, to see oneself in the pages of a young adult book

is to receive the blessed reassurance that one is, not alone after all, not other, not alien but, instead, a viable part of a larger community of beings who share a common humanity.

Another value of young adult literature is its capacity to foster understanding, empathy, and compassion by offering vividly realized portraits of the lives – exterior and interior – of individuals who are *unlike* the reader. In this way young adult literature invites its readership to embrace the humanity it shares with those who — if not for the encounter in reading — might forever remain strangers or — worse — irredeemably “other.”

Still another value of young adult literature is its capacity for telling its readers the truth, however disagreeable that may sometimes be, for in this way, it equips readers for dealing with the realities of impending adulthood and — though it may sound quaintly old-fashioned — for assuming the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

By giving readers such a frame of reference, it also helps them to find role models, to make sense of the world they inhabit, to develop a personal philosophy of being, to determine what is right and, equally, what is wrong, to cultivate a personal sensibility. To, in other words, become civilized.

So what, finally, is the value of young adult literature? One might as well ask “What is the value of breathing?”, for both are essential, even fundamental, to life and survival.

—Michael Cart