The YA Conspiracy—and How I Grew Up [1]

September 14, 2015 Media Debate [2]
Talking Indie [3]
Children's Lit [4]

TW Column by David Biddle

Or How I Became a Born-Again Reader

Next week, TW's Fall 2015 issue launches with a focus on young adult literature. Here, David Biddle offers a first take on "Why YA?"



I hated Harry Potter for about fifteen years—the books, not the character. In 1998, I read the first in the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. A year later and two chapters into the second, I'd had enough and threw *The Chamber of Secrets* across the room.

It felt like a conspiracy was underway. Many of my friends are well-educated and successful, but back then, few read fiction or books of any kind. At parties, I got teased as "weird" for wanting to talk about the latest collection of Alice Munro stories. Then the Potter kid showed up. Suddenly, these same friends were into books, raving that they'd never had so much fun reading.

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Ugh! It bothered the hell out of me that people all over America were standing in line waiting for midnight sales of, say, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. As someone who had been reading and writing literary fiction for more than twenty years, I was both incensed and brokenhearted. *I'll never read young adult fiction again!* I swore. *And I'll never, EVER attempt to write a story for, or even about, kids.*

So, I let my wife read all seven *Harry Potters* to our boys. I fantasized about the day our last son would head off to college and I'd pile the whole Hogwarts compendium into a box, dumping it on Goodwill.

Once again, I'm admitting in the pages of *Talking Writing* that I used to be a lummox and a fool.

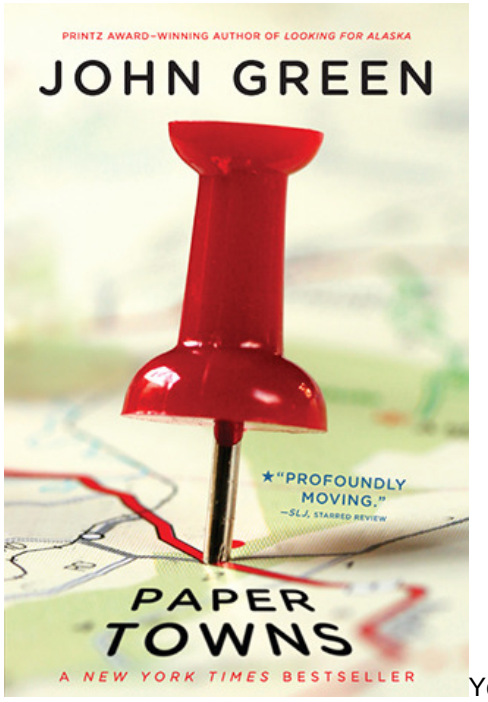
In 2013, my oldest son gave me *The Hunger Games* trilogy for my birthday. He knew I had been impressed with the growth of heroic female characters in movies and TV shows over the last decade. Out of curiosity, I read the first few pages of Katniss Everdeen's story. Ten days later, I'd blown through all three books by Suzanne Collins. The writing style seemed overly simplistic at first, but honestly, I hadn't had so much fun reading fiction in a long time.

I spent a week or two wondering what had just happened. What the hell was young adult fiction, anyway? Stories that involve children or teens and have to do with coming of age was the obvious answer. The trouble is, I realized that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Catcher in the Rye,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*—three of the most important American literary works—are all YA fiction by that definition. I also recalled I'd never read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, figuring I'd get to it "someday," maybe unconsciously turned off by the little kids in the opening.

An experiment seemed in order. I wasn't about to reenter the Hogwarts world, but even I knew that John Green is the YA author of the post-millennium. I decided I'd read as many of his books as I could stomach. Of the three Green novels I read, *The Fault in Our Stars* was particularly touching. Then I read Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. I loved it so much I made my wife watch the movie with me the night after I finished the book.

A few weeks after *Wallflower,* it happened. One morning, I felt odd as I went up to my office on our third floor. Sitting down in front of my computer, I began typing. These are the words that hit the screen: *No one told us we were going to have a summer-long visitor until the night before that visitor arrived.* An entire story opened up in my head—a coming-of-age, gender-identity story. A YA novel.

I've been working on that manuscript now every day for the past eighteen months. In doing so, I've thought a lot about books for teenagers, coming-of-age stories, why they're so successful, and why I'm now writing one myself.



You could say I'm just being mercenary. Literary fiction is the least-purchased

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kind out there. As I type this in late August 2015, Roxane Gay's excellent 2014 literary novel *An Untamed State* sits at #56,851 on Amazon's Best Sellers list. Green's *Looking for Alaska*, published way back in 2005, sits at #285. The staying power of YA fiction and the market potential is undeniable.

But as I've discovered, there's so much more to YA's success than sales, starting with two related factors that literary writers ignore at their peril: readability and a direct appeal to the emotions.

Obviously, the way language is presented in books for and about teenagers makes them easier to consume. I don't feel like I'm reading John Green's stories about wayward, rebellious teens; it's more as if I'm absorbing them. He is by no means a pedestrian writer. His use of language is direct, but honest and emotionally sophisticated. Here's a typical excerpt voiced by Quentin, the narrator of Green's *Paper Towns*:

> My parents always liked it when I cursed in front of them. I could see the pleasure of it in their faces. It signified that I trusted them, that I was myself in front of them. But even so, it made them sad.

Now, think of the reverence for Ernest Hemingway's pared-down, direct sentences. Hemingway has long been lauded for his deceptively simple, journalistic style. His sentences are certainly easy to read—so easy, in fact, that if you're not careful, you don't realize how much comes across in a story like "The End of Something":

> She was intent on the rod all the time they trolled, even when she talked. She loved to fish. She loved to fish with Nick.

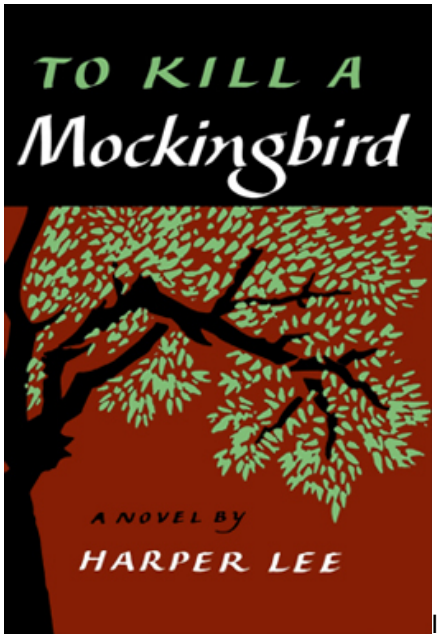
I find it ironic that so many "serious" writers today get carried away with complexity and lyrical style. That approach really turns off non-writer readers. I stopped taking myself so seriously after the twentieth rejection of my first novel—an "adult" book that had nothing to do with kids. All the bold-faced aesthetic positions I took in my grumpy years were just that—the defensive grousing of an ill-informed critic. Exactly what point are we trying to make by being even a little bit difficult?

Second, while the best YA is often plot driven, the most significant reason readers eat these books up is because the characters express their emotions directly. Teens in 2015, even pre-teens, are fearless and open with their feelings, and that's what comes across in their stories. I know that's why I'm so entranced by all the YA books I've been reading, and I get the same thrill creating young characters who become empowered through talking about their inner lives.

Every one of us over the age of 21 has gone through adolescence, a time that's supercharged with emotional changes and challenges. Once we're adults, we usually don't think about how much pain we went through as teens—that first heartbreak, our parents' divorcing, a friend dying of cancer, another friend becoming a drug addict, confronting prejudice, dealing with bullies and unjust adults—but boy, can we relate when we read someone else's story.

So, yes, there is a YA conspiracy going on. It's been underway for nearly fifty years (at least since the publishing of S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in 1967). But it's a conspiracy for the greater good. Literary writers of adult fiction, especially indie writers interested in self-publishing, can learn a lot from YA books. People want stuff that's fun to read. It can be heartfelt and deep, but it still needs to be a gripping tale.

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I finally took on *To Kill a Mockingbird* this year. Maybe because I wasn't forced to read it for seventh-grade English class, it was one of the best reading experiences of my life—right up there with *Huck Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye*. As with good contemporary YA, it absorbs the reader. Harper Lee's adult narrator Jean Louise (Scout) recalls the 1930s world of the Jim Crow South, and her wry voice and child's-eye view are an immersive pleasure. For instance, after a misadventure involving bogeyman Boo Radley—and redoubtable father Atticus's threats of a "lickin"—Scout describes her older brother:

> Jem stayed moody and silent for a week. As Atticus had once advised me to do, I tried to climb into Jem's skin and walk around in it: if I had gone alone to the Radley Place at two in the morning, my funeral would have been held the next afternoon. So I left Jem alone and tried not to bother him.

Stories about young people are almost always the best stories. That's where life happens, and I'm glad I figured that out. And in case you're wondering, no, I haven't sent that enormous seven-volume *Potter* set to Goodwill. I'm keeping those books to one day read to my grandchildren, if they'll let me.

Publishing Information

- *Paper Towns* by John Green (Dutton, 2008).
- "The End of Something," by Ernest Hemingway in *In Our Time,* originally published in 1925. (Scribner, 1996).
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, originally published in 1960 (HarperCollins, 2014).

Art Information

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David Biddle is TW's "Talking Indie" columnist. He's the author of the novel *Beyond the Will of God* and several collections of short stories. As a freelance writer, David has published articles in everything from the *Harvard Business Review, Huffington Post*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* to *Kotori Magazine, InBusiness,* and *BioCycle*.

Of his experience writing YA, David says, “This year, I joined the online reading community WattPad, fed mostly by young teen writers. It’s fascinating watching people who are actually still living through adolescence tell their stories to each other so fiercely.” Check out these WattPad writers:

- Diary of a Teenage Time Traveler *[6]* by P.K. Hrezo.
- Sky City: The Rise of an Orphan *[7]* by R.D. Hale.
- Sun Kissed (The Encante Trilogy *[8]: Book 1*) by Coco Nichole.

You’ll also find a reading draft of David’s YA novel, *New Creatures*, on WattPad.

For information about his other writing, see David Biddle's website [9].

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