

# Does YA Mean Anything Anymore?: Genre in a Digitized World

by John Green

When we look to the astonishing growth of children's books—especially YA books—in the last twenty years, we like to credit individuals—J. K. Rowling, for instance. But while it's a kind of national obligation in the United States to praise individuals over collectives, I want to argue tonight that making good books for teenagers is dependent upon a vast and fragile interconnected network that collectively functions as what I am going to call the YA genre. All of this is offered, by the way, with the caveat that I might be wrong. I am wrong all the time.

My colleagues at *Booklist*, where I worked from 2000–2005, will tell you two things about me: first, that I was just about the worst publishing assistant in the 110-year history of the magazine; and second, that I am a bit of a worrier. Like Wemberly in Kevin Henkes's won-

derful picture book *Wemberly Worried*, I worry about big things (like whether there is any meaning to human life), and I worry about little things (like which suit I should wear to the Zena Sutherland Lecture). More or less, any time people ask me, "How are you?" the true answer is not "fine" or "good" or "sad"; the true answer is: worried.

This suits me well as a writer, since a big part of the job is to think about all the things that might happen and try to choose the best one, which is very often the most worrisome one. It suits me somewhat less well as, like, a person



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living in the world, because there is so much to worry about that if you are going to be a seriously anxious person, you have to devote all your time to it. You have to become like Bodhidharma, the Buddhist monk whose legs atrophied while he sat staring at a wall for nine years, except instead of meditating you have to worry. So tonight I'm going to share with you some of my worry, but I'm going to wait until toward the end in the hope that you'll now have to spend the next thirty minutes worrying about why I'm so worried about the future of YA fiction.

Before that, I want to talk about what I think fiction does so well, and why I think it remains so relevant to the lives of children and teens.

When I was a kid, I was a big fan of Ann Martin's *Baby-Sitters Club*, a series of novels about enterprising girls who built a small business and also dealt with the everyday problems of being a kid and taking care of kids and dealing with adults and occasionally having boyfriends. I loved these books. I also loved Lois Lowry's *Anastasia Krupnik*

books and many other books that were called "girl books," and I think I loved them both because I saw myself in them—I worried like Anastasia; I felt socially uncomfortable like Ann Martin's Claudia—but also because I could *escape* myself. This was the first big thing that fiction did for me as a kid: it allowed me to see myself but also to escape myself. For me, one of the big problems of being a person is that I am the only me I will ever get to be. I am not like the main character "A" in David Levithan's *Every Day*; I wake up every day in *this* body, seeing the world out of *these* eyes, and because my consciousness is the only one whose reality and complexity I can directly attest to, the rest of you seem—pardon the unkindness here—sort of *not real*. Even the people I love the most I see in the context of me: *my wife*, *my children*. But Claudia in the *Baby-Sitters Club* is not *my* anything; she is Claudia, through whose eyes I can, in an admittedly limited way, see the world.

This phenomenon is often credited with leading to empathy: through escaping the prison of the self and being able to live inside fictional characters, we learn to imagine others more complexly. Through story, we can understand that others feel their own grief and joy and longing as intensely as we feel ours. And I think that's probably true, but I also think it's just nice to be outside yourself at times, so that you can pay attention to the world outside of you, which in the end is even more vast than the world inside of you.

Here's the other thing: I think there is an omnipresent pain inside us, a constant and gnawing pain that we ceaselessly try to distract ourselves from feeling, a pain way down deep in what Robert Penn Warren called "the dark which is you." For most people, almost all the time, we don't even have to think about this pain, but then sometimes you'll be sitting in a doctor's office waiting room or riding on the train or eating a chicken caesar salad at your desk at work and the pain will come crawling out of the cave darkness inside of you and you'll feel an awful echo of all the pain that has ever befallen you and glimpse all the horrors that might still befall you.

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Maybe *you* don't actually know this pain, but I do, and for me it is the pain of meaninglessness. I fear that our selves are without value, that our vast interior lives will die with us, and that our brief miraculous decades of consciousness will not have been *for* anything. For me there is a terrifying depravity to meaninglessness, because it calls into question not only why I should read or write or love but also why I should do *anything*, in fact *whether* I should do anything, and so grappling with that way-down-deep-in-the-darkness-which-is-you pain is not like some abstract philosophical exercise or whatever but a matter of actual existential importance.

The obvious thing to do about this deep-down pain is to try very hard to ignore it, because at least in my life, I find that it comes on mostly in undistracted and quiet moments. And, look, if you can distract yourself from pain, great. I don't want to minimize the importance of pleasurable distraction, of what's sometimes called "mere entertainment," be it *Flappy Bird* or *CSI*. But we have plenty of it. To quote David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*,

Surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airports' gates, SUVs' backseats. Walkmen, iPods, Black-Berries, cell phones that attach to your head. This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do. I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called "information society" is just about information.

It's also, of course, about distraction. For some readers, books *can* still be read purely for distraction, but for contemporary children and teenagers, there are far more effective distractions. My four-year-old son does not ask for a book to relieve himself of the terror way down deep in the darkness. He asks for the iPad, so he can play *Angry Birds*.

For contemporary kids, who can find sufficient distractions in gaming and video, I think books must do something more than just divert attention in order to be successful. And this brings us to morality.

Once upon a time, I gave a speech at the ALA Annual convention in which I said that I believed in the old-fashioned

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idea that books should be *moral*. And afterwards, the publisher of *Booklist*, Bill Ott, a man I've always looked up to immensely, took me aside and said, "That was a good speech except for all that bullshit about *morality*." Fair enough. It was, in retrospect, bullshit. Books are not in the business of imparting lessons. What I was trying to say, I think, was that books should be *honest* without being *hopeless*. It's easy enough to write a hopeful story, one that proclaims that *If you can dream it, you can do it*, or that *God has a plan*, or that *Everything happens for a reason*. Be grateful for every day. I parodied these ideas a little in *The Fault in Our Stars* by having one of the characters' houses plastered with such pithy sentiments: *Without pain, how would we know joy*, and so on. In the book they call them Encouragements.

But these Encouragements are unconvincing, at least to me. Sure, you can write a novel about how if you can dream it you can do it, but in actual nonfictional fact there are a bunch of things that you can dream that you cannot do. For instance, I recently had a dream in which I was a banana that had escaped the Earth's orbit and was slowly floating farther and farther away from my home planet.

What we need, and what good stories provide, are better Encouragements. Encouragements that aren't bullshit. This is not a question of books being moral; it's a question of books being hopeful without being dishonest. This is what good YA novels do for teens

that *Angry Birds* cannot: they offer light that can burn bright even in the way-down-deep-darkness-which-is-you. I know this is an old-fashioned way of imagining the making of art, but I believe it. I believe that fiction can help, that made-up stories can matter by helping us to feel unalone, by connecting us to others, and by giving shape to the world as we find it—a world that is broken and unjust and horrifying and not without hope.

So that is why I think books matter. Now I want to turn to genre and talk a bit about why I think *it* matters.

Whenever a properly good writer—Michael Chabon, say, or Joyce Carol Oates—writes a mystery or a romance or whatever, reviewers sometimes say that the author is *upending the conventions of the genre*. I don't really find that to be the case—I think Chabon just wrote a really good mystery in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. Most conventions of the genre turn out to be really useful, I think, which is how they got to be conventions of the genre. At *Booklist* we used to joke about that old cliché that novels only have two plots: a stranger comes to town, and our hero goes on a journey. But that doesn't mean we only have two *stories*; we have countless stories, each of them building upon and relying upon others. We often imagine the best stories as having arisen *sui generis* from the mind

of a great genius. But, really, every good story is dependent upon millions that came before it, that incalculably vast network of influences that stand behind every novel.

In 2006, Malcolm Gladwell made a stir when he argued that Kaavya Viswanathan's plagiarism of Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* and *Second Helpings* wasn't really plagiarism, because, and I'm quoting here, "This is teen-literature. It's genre fiction. These are novels based on novels based on novels, in which every convention of character and plot has been trotted

out a thousand times before." Now, this was a ridiculous defense of plagiarism, and Gladwell later apologized, but he wasn't entirely wrong. My novels are novels based on novels based on novels. Almost all novels are. But they change in the retelling. Novels change to stay relevant, so that their hope might be less flimsy, so that they remain honest and relevant. It's a slow process—millions of writers and readers working together across generations to make stories that can be a light in the way-down-deep-darkness-which-is-you. Writing and reading are not about a singular mind emerging from isolation to create unprecedented art. It's a massive collaboration spanning millennia.

Let me explain how this works, at least for me. In my first novel, *Looking for Alaska*—in which, by the way, a

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stranger comes to town *and* our hero goes on a journey—I wanted to write a boarding-school novel—you know, like *A Separate Peace* or *The War of Jenkins' Ear* or *The Catcher in the Rye*—but I was also interested in boarding-school fantasies like Harry Potter and *A Great and Terrible Beauty*. I liked the pranks, and the freaks at war with the cool kids. I liked the sneaking around campus in the middle of the night and breaking the rules and the omnipresence of one's peers.

But there were conventions of the genre that were really problematic for me, like the one in which the boy—for the sake of simplicity, let's call him Holden—flutters around, essentializing women, and the only person who ever gets hurt by his total failure to see women as actual humans is Holden himself, when in fact this habit boys have of imagining the girls they admire as flawless goddesses whose problems cannot possibly be as real or as important as Boy Problems...that habit turns

out to be bad for women as well as the Holdens of the world. So, okay. You try to show *that* in your boarding-school novel. This is not upending a genre. It's trying to make an honest, human story that isn't bullshit. But lots of people are making YA boarding-school novels at the same time, and in a way we're all working together. I think E. Lockhart, for instance, gave the genre its best book in recent years with *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*, but she did it by writing a proper boarding-school novel that also happens to be a proper feminist novel and a proper post-modern novel and a proper romance.

Basically, I believe that genre is good. I don't think there's anything embarrassing about being a genre writer. Like, you know how they always have those crazy concept cars at auto shows that look futuristic and exciting and entirely new, but then it turns out that this futuristic car seats 1.5 people and gets four miles to the gallon, and by the time the car actually gets to market...it looks like a car. That's genre to me. It's the thing that works. So, yeah, cars look different than they did fifty years ago. They're safer and more efficient and cheaper to build. But we didn't actually get there through radical change. We got there through incremental change, by drivers and engineers and designers all working together.

I was thinking a lot about genre while writing my most recent novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. It's a cancer book, but one that is very aware of cancer books. There's a lot I like about



cancer books, but here's what bothers me: there is often a sick person who suffers nobly and bravely and in the process of dying so beautifully teaches the healthy people around him or her important lessons about how to be grateful for every day, or in the case of American literature's most famous cancer novel, the lesson that "love means never having to say you're sorry." This is ridiculous, of course: love means *constantly* having to say you're sorry.

Anyway, I'm troubled by this convention because it imagines that sick people exist and suffer so that healthy people can learn lessons. This essentializes the lives of the sick, just as teenage boys essentialize girls when they imagine them as larger-than-life, when in fact the meaning of any life is a complicated and messy business that is about more than learning lessons. I wanted to write a cancer story that was about the sick people, not the lessons the healthy learn from them, about people who are disabled and human, who experience love and sex and longing and hurt and everything that any human does. I didn't invent this idea, though; it's the plot of many love stories. A stranger comes to town, and love blossoms, but an obstacle appears. Sometimes the obstacle is a basilisk. Sometimes it's a jealous ex-husband. Sometimes it's one's own body.

And this brings me at last to *worry*. For genre to work best, I think, you must have basilisk stories *and* jealous ex-husband stories *and* cancer stories. Genre is not about individual geniuses; it's a conversation that benefits from many voices.

The great strength of our children's and YA genres is that we're broad—we publish thousands of books a year, whereas Hollywood makes a few dozen movies aimed at kids and teens. Coe Booth, M. T. Anderson, Stephenie Meyer, Sarah Dessen, and Ellen Hopkins share the shelf. We've got poetry and sci-fi and romance and so-called literary fiction; we've got standalones and series and graphic novels and every subgenre imaginable. This year's Printz winners included a romance, a futuristic fantasy, a violent fairy tale, a boarding-school novel, and a dystopian thriller. Nothing against the Pulitzer Prize, but it rarely offers such diversity. But I think there's mounting evidence that our breadth is at risk. Consider the recent study by the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison saying that of 3,200 children's books published in 2013, just ninety-three were about black people. That's better than Hollywood is doing, but not *that* much better. Okay, so here's my worry: we'll see the breadth and diversity of our literature—at least the stuff that gets read—continue to decline, because there will be less institutional support for non-blockbuster books. There will be fewer review journals, fewer school libraries (and those with ever-shrinking book-buying budgets), and far fewer bookstores.

Imagine a world—and I don't think this is hard to do—where almost all physical books bought offline are purchased at big box stores like Walmart and Costco and Target, which carry a

couple of hundred titles a year. Anything that gets published that doesn't end up in one of those stores doesn't really get *published*, at least not in the sense that we understand the word now, because it won't be widely available: it will only be available at the vast, flat e-marketplaces of Amazon and iTunes, where readers will choose from among a vast and undifferentiated sea of texts. Ultimately publishers will only be able to "add value" to the two hundred or so books a year that are sold at Walmart and Costco and Target, which will kind of mean that Walmart and Costco and Target will choose—or at least have a lot of say in—what gets published. Every now and again, a book will rise up out of the sea of the Kindle store and become so *50 Shades of Grey*—popular that it will transition the author from online distribution to physical distribution, but most books that find readers will be franchises. In short, publishing will split: traditional publishing ends up looking a bit like Hollywood, focusing all its resources on a few stories a year that might make a lot of money. And then everything else will live on Amazon.

Amazon's position is that in the future everyone will be on a level playing field because all authors will have access to all readers and the publishing business will be entirely disintermediated and books will succeed or fail based on whether actual readers actually like them. But of

course that's not *actually* what happens, as we're already seeing.

What actually happens is that the richest and most challenging fiction of any category, particularly if it won't appeal to a mass readership, struggles to find an audience in a world without critics and institutional support. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* became a huge bestseller forty years ago. It's hard to imagine that happening today, barring

Oprah's endorsement or something, and harder still to imagine it happening in the future.

The problem of discovery is complicated by the terribleness of Amazon's recommendation engine. It is terrible for bestsell-

ers—right now, it implies that if you enjoyed *The Fault in Our Stars* you might also enjoy *Gone Girl*, which is just—I mean, that is not good readers' advisory. And it's also terrible for books that aren't bestsellers. For instance, there is a great nonfiction adult book called *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber* about an alcoholic Transylvanian semi-professional hockey goalie who becomes a bank robber, and right now if you go to that book's Amazon page, it will recommend that if you like that book, you might also like A. S. King's wonderful YA novel *Ask the Passengers*. These two books have exactly two things in common: they both contain text, and about a year ago, I recommended them both in a vlogbrothers video.

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So what will it mean to write YA in a future where your work might be recommended alongside nonfiction books about bank robbers or adult mysteries about a very, very bad marriage? Well, we'll keep writing and sharing stories for children and teens, of course. And lots of people—including kids themselves but also adult supporters such as other authors and librarians and teachers—will continue to recommend them. The genre will go on. But YA was weaker and less broad before it got its own physical sections in libraries and bookstores, and I worry that we will find it difficult to grow stronger and broader in the future.

These days, my career is often held up as a model for how YA novels will get to the next generation of teen readers: authors will build communities online around their work, and those communities will read and share their books. We won't need gatekeepers or institutions to help us share books; we have Twitter for that now. But there are some problems with this idea. For one thing, there's a massive advantage to being white and male on the internet; you experience less harassment and many privileges. And there's also a massive advantage to speaking English on the internet. Furthermore, many people who are good at writing novels are bad at Twitter. I realize this advantage has long been with us—Twain owed much of his success to his crazy hair and hilarious lectures—but it's a strange and dangerous business to judge a novel by its author, and stranger and more

dangerous still to judge a novel by its author's tweets.

But most importantly, it just doesn't work. My books didn't become successful because I was famous on the internet; at least initially, I became famous on the internet because I'd written successful books. My first novel, *Looking for Alaska*, sold a couple of thousand copies—many of them to libraries—before it won the Printz, an award chosen by a committee of librarians. When my brother Hank and I began our video blog series in January 2007, the few hundred people who watched us and helped to found the nerdfighter community were almost entirely fans of my books—including many YA librarians. Without institutional support, without librarians and teachers and critics and the rest of the human infrastructure of YA literature, my books would not have an audience. And neither would my video blog.

All of us together are making up what YA means as we go along. We are *all* creating the genre, by choosing what we read and write and lift up, by pushing ourselves and one another to think more complexly about teenagers as readers and as characters so that we might welcome them in to the great old conversations. This is no small thing. We are not in the widgets business, my friends. We are in the story business, the business of bringing light to the way-down-deep-darkness-which-is-you. And in that sense, at least, business is good, because that darkness ain't going anywhere. Our

need to turn scratches on a page into ideas that can live inside of our minds ain't going anywhere. We're not at risk of people losing interest in strangers coming to town or heroes going on journeys, and we will always need ways to escape the prison of consciousness and learn to imagine the Other complexly. And this is why, despite my ceaseless worry, I remain quite hopeful. We need to grow the breadth and diversity of YA literature. We need to get more books to more kids so that publishing doesn't become a business driven entirely by blockbusters. And we need to preserve the roles—critics, librarians, professors, teachers—that contribute so much to the continual

growth and change in our genre. None of this will be easy, of course, and it's all *intensely* worrying.

But I also know that story will go on. That's the great thing about genre, about novels based on novels based on novels. The stories go on. They find a way through budget cuts and new technologies, winding their way through the flawed vessels who write and review and share them, flowing past history and memory, a process that has been going on so long that our stories, and our readings of them, are shaped by ancient stories we will never know. Somehow, improbably, even long after they are forgotten, the stories endure. And through them, so do we. ■