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Deborah Halverson

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*Writing Young
Adult Fiction*

FOR

DUMMIES[®]

Writing Young Adult Fiction

FOR
DUMMIES®

by Deborah Halverson
Award-winning author and editor

Foreword by M. T. Anderson
National Book Award Winner



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Deborah Halverson edited books with Harcourt Children's Books for ten years — until she climbed over the desk and tried out the chair on the other side. Now she is the award-winning author of teen novels including *Honk If You Hate Me* and *Big Mouth*. Armed with a master's in American Literature and a fascination with pop culture, Deborah sculpts stories from extreme places and events — tattoo parlors, fast-food joints, and, most extreme of all, high schools.

Deborah is also the founder of the popular writers' advice website DearEditor.com, a frequent speaker at writers' conferences nationwide, and a writing teacher for groups and institutions including the Extension Program of the University of California, San Diego. She freelance edits fiction and nonfiction for both published authors and writers seeking their first book deals. By conducting word-by-word line editing or more general substantive editing, Deborah helps authors hone their storytelling voices, synchronize age-appropriate language and subjects, and develop stories that appeal simultaneously to young readers and to adults such as parents, teachers, and librarians.

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Dedication

For Robin Cruise, who gave me not one but three big breaks . . . and more importantly, her friendship

Author's Acknowledgments

On my first day as an editorial assistant with Harcourt Children's Books, the managing editor walked me down the hall to view an art show of newly arrived paintings for a picture book then in production. I stood among a bustling crowd of editors, designers, production people, marketing gurus, and inventory, financial, legal, and support staff — all of whom had dedicated their careers and personal passions to creating entertaining and enlightening books for children — and it hit me: I'd found my people. I discovered that day what I've come to love about the writers and producers of children's books: They are a true community that cheers, collaborates, and works its knuckles to the bones in support of literature for young readers. The enthusiastic participation of the writers, agents, and editors who have contributed their expertise to the information you hold in your hand reflects that.

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Foreword

Do you remember the first time you, as a child, really fell into a book? When you turned the first page, you were sitting there on the sofa or lying on the floor or trapped in the back of a car with screaming siblings . . . and then a few more pages flipped, and you were no longer aware of pages or words or hair-pulling. You found yourself someplace else: standing on a mountaintop, sneaking through an underground lair, or curled up inside a hollow tree. You were completely lost in another world. It's an amazing sensation.

Our early experiences reading books can be intense. Every day, children are spirited away from bedrooms and kitchens and classrooms and the seats of buses. Toddlers demand the same book night after night, until they can recite each page and shout out each rhyme before their dozy parents can. Very few people are as passionate about books as children are. Kids devour books — in some cases, literally.

If you write to stir the emotions of readers, to move people deeply, to change people's lives, then you should consider writing for young adults. Who else will read your book 12 times? Who else will try to steal a copy from the library? Who else will sleep on top of your book? Who else will make a diorama of your book with the main character played by a Styrofoam cup? Who else, in short, will invest themselves imaginatively in your world like a young person will?

Young readers are still constructing their understanding of life. They do not yet know the ways of their species nor the ways of the world. As they read stories, they learn about justice and injustice, happiness and sadness, glory and delight and sorrow.

They also learn the rules of *story*. They learn how some novels reflect their lives and some novels take place on other worlds. They learn a grammar of stories — how sometimes things move quickly and sometimes things move slowly, how characters are different from and similar to real people, how plot twists happen and what makes a joke funny. Books for young people, after all, train us all to appreciate literature for adults — as well as to make some sense of our own teeming, crazy world.

So as you think about writing stories for young adults, remember that your audience will greet you ecstatically — but they'll also have high expectations. They will be fervent in their reactions, positive and negative. (Few adults, on finding a book boring, will throw it under the bed, start kicking the floor, and turn purple.) It's an amazing journey to take with a young person. I hope you enjoy it — and that you someday find young readers lost in your book, sunk in your world, whisked away from their bedrooms, their kitchens, their buses, exploring a place you made. That, after all, is one of the greatest gifts you can give them — and yourself.

—M. T. Anderson

National Book Award Winner, National Book Award Finalist, L.A. Times Book Prize Winner, and two-time Michael L. Printz Honor Book Author

Introduction

With young adult book sales rising and bestselling authors exploding onto the scene with multibook contracts and movie deals, aspiring writers of young adult (YA) fiction are more numerous than ever. But the appeal of writing YA fiction is more than creating high-profile bestsellers. It's writing for kids. It's expanding their vocabulary and their imaginations. It's forming reading habits for life. And it's adding to the impressive body of young adult literature, with its rich narrative voices, satisfying story arcs, intriguing concepts, natural and revealing dialogue, and robust characterizations. Young adult fiction isn't just for kids anymore; it has heft for grown-ups as well.

Your path to writing YA fiction likely began with your own passion as a young reader, so you know firsthand the joy kids find in books. Now you're going to create that for others. You've chosen a fulfilling mission. The realm you're entering — the children's book world — is an amazing community of writers, editors, agents, librarians, teachers, supporters, and champions of young readers. And then there are the readers themselves. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more sensitive, loyal, and responsive audience.

Young adult literature is a moving target as it transforms with each new generation of readers, but some things don't change: Young readers always want a great read. They want books in which they can see themselves and learn about the world and their place in it, all in ways that enlighten and entertain them. Your job is to meet those expectations. That's not as simple as it sounds, because you face challenges that writers for adult fiction don't: You need to talk to teens, to talk like teens, and, sometimes, to talk as if you were a teen yourself. That takes special craft skills and an understanding of your unique audience — the way they think, their interests, their fears, and their dreams.

This book helps you understand that audience so you can work your craft accordingly. I also explain how to operate in the very particular young adult fiction marketplace, because when all is said and done, you're entering a business with risks, rewards, and rejection. I explain how to think like a kid but strategize your novel and your career like an adult. Welcome behind the scenes of young adult fiction!

About This Book

My goal in writing this book is to provide you with the tools you need to become a published author of young adult fiction. To that end, I serve up a full plate of writing techniques, along with insights and tips to apply in all phases of crafting your young adult novel. I want to help you get and stay inspired, understand the ins and out of the YA publishing world, avoid common mistakes in trying to reach young readers, submit your manuscript to editors and agents with confidence, and move boldly into the realm of self-promotion. Above all, I hope to guide you in developing a voice and style that appeals to young readers and that is wholly, comfortably yours.

Writing is an abstract endeavor, and the way to make it tangible is to offer examples. So I've filled this book with examples. Tons of them. Exercises, too, so you can apply the skills at hand directly to your project. Working through the exercises chapter by chapter can take your fiction from idea to final manuscript. Along the way, I cover the fine points of writing craft in a comprehensive and how-to manner to help you meet readers' needs . . . and your own. Where step-by-steps are appropriate, I've stepped. Where checklists provide focus, I've checked. Where do's-and-don'ts drive things home, I've done. But know that there's no such thing as a recipe for the Great American YA Novel. Too much depends on how each writer blends the ingredients together. But there *are* ingredients, and I give those to you here. The bewitching brew you concoct with them is up to you.

Don't feel you have to read this book from cover to cover. You can skip around if that suits you, picking out topics as your needs dictate at any given time. This book is modular, meaning that even if you start in Chapter 12, the information still makes sense. However, if you prefer to work your way from idea to final bound book, I've organized the information so you can start at Chapter 1 and read straight through to the end.

Conventions Used in This Book

I use the following conventions in this book:

- ✔ Technical writing and publishing terms appear in *italics* and are followed by easy-to-understand definitions.
- ✔ Web addresses appear in monospace.
- ✔ I vary pronoun gender throughout the book, although you may find more *she*'s than *he*'s. The ranks of children's book publishing are abundant with women, as is the readership, so if I do lean, I'm sure it's toward the feminine.

- ✔ I use the term *young adult fiction* as the world at large does — as a comprehensive label for two distinct publishing categories: *middle grade fiction* (or simply MG) for ages 9 through 14 and *young adult fiction* (YA, also called *teen fiction*) for ages 12 through 17. Within the children's book industry, people frequently distinguish between MGs and YAs. When making the distinction in this book is necessary, I do so. But know that all the craft, submission, and marketing information work for both MG and YA fiction because the storytelling techniques are essentially the same and the same publishing players handle both categories.
- ✔ I use sidebars throughout the book to share my teaching podium with award-winning and bestselling young adult novelists. The material in these gray boxes, written by the guest authors, provides insight into how successful authors wield the skills you build in this book. At the end of each sidebar, I list some of the author's books. The best way to find out how to write for young adults is to read exemplary YA novels — start with these.

What You're Not to Read

You can skip parts of this book altogether if you want to. Information that accompanies a Technical Stuff icon offers extra insight into the process and business of YA fiction, but it's not crucial reading. The same goes for the gray-shaded sidebar boxes that pepper the chapters. That extra material is meant to fill out your knowledge of the industry and offer you examples of how pros do what I'm explaining how to do, but you won't sabotage your career by skipping the sidebars.

Foolish Assumptions

Just as you make assumptions about your young readers, I'm making some assumptions about you:

- ✔ **You want to be published.** This is your first stab at writing fiction, and you need to know where to start. Or you're a published writer in another category, and you want to try your hand at YA. Or perhaps you've been submitting your YA manuscripts but haven't yet landed a deal, and you want to change that. Regardless of your experience level, your goal is to see your name on the cover of a printed-and-bound YA novel.
- ✔ **You've got a story to tell.** Ever notice how many people say they have a book in them? You're one of them — only you're ready to act, and you have an idea already in the chamber. All you need now is the know-how to develop it.

- ✔ **You want to be a better writer.** Whether you're a newbie needing the basics or a veteran writer aiming to brush up, you want techniques and tips that you can put to work immediately with tangible results — and you want those techniques broken down in a way that lets you apply them with your own personal flair.
- ✔ **You want to enlighten and entertain young people between the ages of 9 and 17.** Young adults are still figuring out who they are and how this world works, and their novels play a part in their explorations. You want to contribute to their journey into adulthood — or at least make them smile as they forge onward.

If you see yourself anywhere in this list, then you'll find the information in this book edifying and productive.

How This Book Is Organized

I've arranged this book in a logical sequence, leading off with an overview of young adult fiction's unique marketplace and readership before jumping into the happy task of ushering you from your initial story idea through the development, submission, and promotion of your published novel. I provide exercises at every step so you can build your novel as you move through the book.

Part I: Getting Ready to Write Young Adult Fiction

Writers don't just sit down at a computer and spit out the Great American YA Novel. They must plan, brainstorm, and analyze first. During your prewriting phase, you pinpoint your exact audience in the wide young adult age range, find an angle that makes your story stand out from the masses, prep your writing space so you can work efficiently and distraction-free, and discover what makes young adult literature so different from every other literary category out there — and why it's so darn great.

Part II: Writing Riveting Young Adult Fiction

This part of the book helps you turn your ideas into a solid first draft by taking you step-by-step through the novel-development process. You shape your plot, sculpt believable characters, develop a convincingly youthful narrative voice and natural dialogue, and manipulate the setting to enhance all those elements. Along the way, you find techniques for connecting with an audience whose sophistication and maturity is in flux.

Part III: Editing, Revising, and Formatting Your Manuscript

Revising is writer's jargon for the act of rewriting parts of your story — adding things to it, rearranging parts of it, and removing things altogether — all with the intent of transforming your solid-but-not-yet-perfected first draft into a seamless, flowing final draft. This part tells you how to effectively tackle the items on your revision list and experiment with fixes in a constructive, confident, and safe way. Find out how to assess what you've done, identify what needs fixing, make a plan for fixing it, and then successfully execute that plan. I break the process down into methods and the most common boo-boos in grammar, execution, and overall storytelling. After that, you get to polish the manuscript and make it pretty.

Part IV: Getting Published

This part is all about sharing your final manuscript with the world. I tell you how to find the right agent and/or editor for you, how to craft a professional and enticing submission package, and how to promote your novel after it's published. I also demystify self-publishing so you can decide whether it suits your needs and situation better than traditional publishing.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Everyone loves lists, and the *For Dummies* people are no exception. In keeping with their tradition, I include a Part of Tens with lists that warn you about the most common pitfalls in writing young adult fiction, answer the most common publishing contract questions, and prep you for writers' conferences so you can get as much out of the experience as possible.

Icons Used in This Book

These five icons are sprinkled throughout this book to highlight information that deserves special attention.



This icon flags great strategies for employing the technique at hand or enhancing a particular aspect of your writing or story. Tips may save you time or help you come at something from an angle you hadn't considered. Try them out.



This icon means you're getting a heads-up about something you should keep in mind as you read onward.



Red alert! Every activity has its trouble spots, and writing and publishing for young adults is no different. Spare yourself confusion, dead ends, and wasted effort by heeding these words of warning.



This is extra in-depth stuff that you don't *have* to read in order to write and publish successfully . . . but it's cool to know if you feel inclined to linger.



Look for this icon when the writing bug bites or when writer's block descends. The text next to this icon gives you some direction for putting my tips and tricks into practice.

Where to Go from Here

I've done my best to organize this book so you can give it a thorough read if you're new to YA fiction and to writing in general. Or you can dip in and skim if you're just trying to brush up. The choice is up to you now.

If you're new to YA fiction, spend some time with the prewriting chapters in Part I to get to know your special audience and the categories and genres that define YA lit. If you've been in the YA realm awhile, you can dip into the craft chapters as needed to buck up skills that need bucking and to remind yourself of what you already knew but lost sight of — a common happening for writers, who must balance so much.

I'll send you into the book proper by telling you the same thing I tell all the writers I edit — bestsellers and newbies alike — and all the writing students I've ever taught: Be open and be willing to experiment. Writing is not about applying formulas, no matter how many checklists and step-by-steps I give you. The magic happens when you let your hair down and go beyond the formulas. Try new things. Do what you never thought you'd do. Let the "rules" and formulas anchor you, yes, but then get funky from there. This is YA fiction, after all, and Rule No. 1 for teens is that rules are made to be broken.

Part I

Getting Ready to Write Young Adult Fiction

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“Read this. It’s a draft of a novel I’m writing for the young adult market. I want to make sure there’s absolutely nothing in it you can relate to.”

Y ***In this part . . .***
oung adult fiction is as different from adult fiction as teenagers are from adults. It has its own rules, its own quirks, and its own very opinionated audience: teens.

Ultimately, the elements of storytelling are the same for both categories, but YA fiction writers must come at those elements with a different mindset. This part initiates you into that way of thinking. You find out what YA fiction is and how it constantly evolves, you discover the category's core traits that defy change, you target specific age ranges and genres, you choose themes and conflicts that appeal to young readers, and you get yourself organized to write. Above all, you master the first steps in creating stories that resonate deeply with teens, a wonderfully fickle, self-centered, sometimes reluctant, and ultimately fleeting readership who reads to define teens and their roles in the world — and who just plain loves a good story.

Chapter 1

The Lowdown on YA Fiction

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what YA fiction is and isn't
 - ▶ Exploiting YA's unique opportunities
 - ▶ Facing YA's unique challenges
 - ▶ Reaping the rewards of writing for young adults
-

The Me Generation. Generation X. Generation Next. Each new crop of teens has its own culture and view of the world and their place in it. Their fiction — collectively called *young adult fiction* — shifts with the ebb and flow. This constant state of flux creates new opportunities for aspiring and veteran writers alike. Understanding YA fiction's changing nature gives you insight into how you can fit into its future. This chapter offers a glimpse into its transitive nature while listing core traits that distinguish YA fiction despite its flux, along with the unique challenges and opportunities you face as a YA writer.

Introducing YA and Its Readers

Young adult fiction is distinguished by its youthful focus and appeal. The main characters are usually young adults (exceptions include the animal stars of Kathi Appelt's *The Underneath*), and their stories, or *narratives*, reflect a youthful way of viewing the world that puts them at the center of everything. Characters act, judge, and react from that point of view until they mature through the events in the story.

One of the unique aspects of YA novels is that they have nearly universal appeal; YA fiction offers something for every interest and everyone who can read at a middle school level or higher. The audience includes young teens who fancy tales of first love and other relationships, older teens who can't get enough of other teens' troubles, and even grown-ups who like stories that help them remember what life was like when they thought they knew it all.

Knowing what makes a YA a YA

It's easy to think that having a teen lead is what makes this fiction "young adult" fare. That matters, yes, but it's not a defining factor on its own. Many adult books feature teenagers but have adult themes and exhibit adult sensibilities, sophistication, and awareness. Here are six traits that together help distinguish young adult fiction, all of which I talk about extensively in this book:

- ✔ **Teen-friendly casts:** Teen novels star young adults with similarly aged peers who all exhibit youthful *characterizations*, or ways of thinking and behaving. These characters usually lack the empathy of an adult, worrying about how things affect them first and foremost. They don't put themselves in others' shoes well or readily, nor do they analyze why they or other people do things — at least not at the beginning of the story, before they've matured through their adventures. Adults are generally background characters or not present at all. (Chapter 5 gives you direction on writing characters that teens love.)
- ✔ **Universal teen themes:** The themes in young adult fiction are *universal* ones that real teens struggle with every day. The stories deal with issues and developmental hurdles that affect every generation, such as peer pressure and falling in love for the first time. (Flip to Chapter 2 for pointers on your theme.)
- ✔ **Accessible narrative styles:** The stories are structured with clarity, accessibility, and teen social culture in mind — perhaps with frequent paragraphing, lots of white space, short chapters, or structures that mimic journaling or electronic correspondence, such as texting or e-mail exchanges. All these style decisions depend on the intended audience's specific age and sophistication level.
- ✔ **Youthful narrative voice:** The narrators' choice of words and the sophistication of their views reflect the dramatic, often self-centered mindset of teens. Teen characters who narrate their own stories sound like real teens thanks to relaxed grammar and syntax and immature observations, whereas the adult or all-knowing (*omniscient*) narrators demonstrate an appreciation of how the teen mind works. Although first-person narration isn't a requirement, it's common enough to be called another helpful defining characteristic of YA fiction. (Chapter 9 helps you choose your narrator and have her tell the story from a teen's unique point of view.)
- ✔ **Moral centers:** Young adult stories generally have moral centers, with their young characters growing and changing in a positive way. Even if the story does not have a happy ending, the story ends with the maturing of the main character, with that new wisdom being the positive factor. These novels avoid preaching, however, letting the story demonstrate the lesson while the readers interpret the "message" for themselves, which increases their sense of independence. You reveal this wisdom through your story's plot. (Chapter 6 walks you through building a perfect plot.)

✔ **Teen-friendly concepts:** The themes may be universal, but the plots that embody those themes are unique and particularly intriguing to young adults. The events are believable within a teen’s experience as well as within the fictional world of the story, and they take place in settings that teens can relate to. The stories are often timely, reflecting current events, politics, or social norms. (Chapter 7 explains how to ratchet up the tension in your story, and Chapter 8 helps you create a believable setting.)



Above all, young adult fiction is not watered-down adult fare. The stories are rich, artistic, and compelling. They respect the audience instead of coddling or talking down to readers. The “young adult” moniker is about the age and sensibility of its audience rather than the quality of the story’s content.

The book that changed everything: *The Outsiders*

“Young adult literature” has only been a formal category since the late 1950s, about the time the American Library Association formed its Young Adult Services Division (now known as the Young Adult Library Services Association, or YALSA). In fact, the term *teenager* had been widely recognized only the decade before, so it’s understandable that it took a while before writers focused on the angsts and dreams of that new age group.

Prior to that, stories written about kids and childhood were mostly written with adult readers in mind, and the ones written directly for young readers were often thinly veiled morality lessons rather than novels intent on exploring the experiences of that audience. There were notable exceptions like J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, which signaled an interest in the emerging teen psyche in 1951 with its brooding young man caught between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, but otherwise writers had yet to connect with this emerging audience in a collective way. Even when folks did start writing novels with young adults officially in mind, the fledgling

category got little respect as anything but fluffy entertainment.

Then came 1967. That year, Viking Press published 17-year-old S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*, and a gang of greasy no-gooders who smoked, drank, “rumbled,” and knocked up girls totally changed the tone of books written for young people. Young readers finally saw themselves in a book — their own worries, their own interests, their own potential triumphs.

The publication of *The Outsiders*, with its “real” teens, ushered in the 1970s “issue book” or “problem novel.” This literary phase had authors tackling universal teen problems with fervor. Getting your period, having your first sexual experience, smoking, rape . . . these books served up social angst galore. And teens gobbled them up. Judy Blume was perhaps the queen of the issue novel, captivating young readers with hits like *Forever* and *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*. The topics were big, and the young characters embodied the issues and fought the battles on their own terms. Young adult fiction had come into its own.

Understanding why YA fiction is for kids

Young readers want to see themselves in their books, and young adult fiction satisfies that need. Teens get stories that reflect their situations and concerns, and they feel empowered reading about kids their own age who solve their own problems. For young readers who aren't at the top of the reading spectrum, teen fiction offers reading experiences that respect and welcome them rather than intimidate. Advanced readers who are educated or sophisticated enough for books with adult themes get challenging, inspiring stories about kids their own age. All these readers can learn about our crazy, ugly, wonderful world from the safety of their reading nooks, and kids can immerse themselves in a book to escape the troubles of real life just like adults do. Young adult fiction offers teens stories about themselves and their world.

Every young adult novel is written for a very specific age range, which determines everything from theme to sentence length. I break down those age ranges in detail in Chapter 2, but for now, understand that *young adult fiction* is actually an umbrella term for two very different publishing categories:

- ✓ Middle grade fiction, aimed at kids ages 9 through 14 (also referred to as *MG* or *tween fiction*)
- ✓ Young adult fiction, or YA, for teens ages 12 through 17 (also called *teen fiction*)

Looking at why it's not just for kids

Even though young adult fiction's primary audience is tweens and teens, adult readers get great pleasure from these novels as well. More and more adults are discovering that young adult fiction is more than stories about high school girls who get crushes on high school boys and then teen angst ensues. These novels have edgy storytelling and offbeat humor; they have strong narratives, plot, and characters; and they scrutinize the complex concerns of young people under all sorts of lenses. Above all, they entertain.

In fact, some of the most ardent fans are 21-and-overs. *The New York Times* reports that 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-old women and 24 percent of same-aged men buy primarily young adult books. The same is the case for one out of five 35- to 44-year-olds. And YA lit book clubs for adults are plentiful. These adults love the timeless themes, they enjoy the trips down memory lane, and they relish the strong storytelling that fills YA fiction. A young adult novel has lessons and entertainment for every age, and the stigma of reading "a kid's book" has long since disappeared.

Books with equally strong appeal for young and old readers alike are said to have *crossover appeal*, meaning they cross over the line that divides the adult and young adult markets.



The other book that changed everything: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

After deep explorations into teen issues in the 1970s, young adult fiction faltered as the old issue books started feeling stale, safe, and irrelevant to kids of the '80s. As would happen time and again, the category was about to undergo change. American teen culture was venturing into darker, edgier handling of teen topics, and the market for young adult fiction sagged under the restlessness of the next emerging teen culture.

The mass market teen romance phase of the 1980s was the first real sign that the shift was taking place. There also arose an interest in multicultural stories that reflected the full range of American demographics. But the category didn't take a solid upswing until the mid-1990s with the publication of a new kind of teen novel that featured edgy, realistic themes. These books mesmerized young readers — and unsettled adults. Complex, compelling, and often experimentally structured novels like Ellen Hopkins' *Crank* pulled no punches. They showed life at its grittiest, tackling universal problems from an entirely different aesthetic. This shock-and-awe version of issue books breathed new life into the young adult fiction category. The gloves were off now, and teens responded by opening up their own wallets, for the first time taking the reins in buying paperbacks themselves in mall-based stores.

Still, an upswing is no volcanic eruption. That had to wait for the arrival of a bespectacled

young wizard named Harry Potter. No one was prepared for the book that rocked the publishing world. A dozen publishers rejected J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* before it was finally published in modest numbers in England in 1997 and shortly thereafter in America as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. At that point, a publishing phenomenon erupted. Both kids and adults loved the series, taking it to such sales heights that when the seventh and final volume was published in 2007, it sold a record-breaking 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours. The series became a media empire complete with its own merchandise, movies, and even a theme park. The books were sold in chain stores, mall-based stores, and retail and warehouse stores. Harry Potter was everywhere.

The subsequent publicity boon for all young adult literature was immense. Initially books about wizardry benefitted from the interest the series, but that eventually spilled over into all categories and genres of YA lit. New and reluctant readers had discovered the joy of reading, while kids who'd been readers their whole lives found their interest turning to passion, and older readers rediscovered the world of YA literature. Thanks to Harry Potter, young adult literature reached a new level of mass-media exposure, paving the way for the commercialization that defines today's young adult fiction marketplace.

Over the years, young adult fiction has developed into an age-defying literature, most significantly with the publication of J. K. Rowling's famous Harry Potter series. When that now legendary wizard hit the scene in 1997, kids suddenly found themselves competing with adults twice or three times their age for the front of the line at Harry Potter launch parties. And then with the explosion of paranormal hits and mainstream crossovers in the early 2000s, YA fiction attained a new level of prosperity and audience appeal. Wonderfully, the classics still hold strong, creating a rich market for young adult fiction.

And let's not forget the Nostalgia Factor. Nostalgia calls adults back to the books they remember from their own teen years, like Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* or maybe their favorite issue books from the 1970s. Adults reread these books and share them with the young adults in their lives.

Maneuvering through the Challenges

With such a wide readership, writers of young adult fiction have great opportunities. They also have challenges that writers of adult fiction don't toil against: reluctant readers and gatekeepers.

Reaching reluctant readers

In education and publishing circles, *reluctant readers* refers to those teens and tweens who aren't so keen on spending their free time — or their assigned time, for that matter — with a book. What makes them so reluctant? Many simply haven't yet found joy in reading. Or they see reading as a chore when they could be indulging in “fun” things (such as TV, movies, video games, hobbies, and activities with friends and family) or going to school, doing homework, and participating in extracurricular activities. And then, of course, some young people simply lack solid reading skills.

Reluctant readers make up much of your potential audience, especially in the middle grade realm. You can take this into account in your fiction by

- ✔ **Putting big words in contexts that make their meaning clear:** Some kids love consulting their dictionaries, but reluctant readers aren't in that group.
- ✔ **Writing clear, tight sentences:** Even the best readers don't want to fight their way to the meaning. Keep it accessible.
- ✔ **Keeping up a fast pace:** Young readers generally don't have the patience of adults, who may stick with a slow-starting book because they've heard great things about it or are especially intrigued by the promises in the jacket flap copy.
- ✔ **Hooking young readers instantly:** Help young readers get emotionally invested right off the bat . . . or risk losing them.

Writing stories with high teen-appeal is especially important with reluctant readers, so give careful consideration to your target audience; identifying your target audience is a vital prewriting phase I cover in Chapter 2. Give these kids a reason to read instead of succumbing to frustration or to the million other things screaming for their attention.



You may hear of a subcategory of young adult fiction called *Hi/Lo*, as in *high interest, low reading level*. These books are created specifically for reluctant readers. They're packaged to look like any other book, but the text is written with their needs in mind. The stories are short, from 400 to 1,200 words, and they have many illustrations. Hi/Lo books feature distinct characters who are quickly characterized — no going on and on about anything in a Hi/Lo, which uses quick pacing to keep interest. Sentence structure is short, simple, and clear. Storylines are straightforward and avoid jumps in point of view or time. Because boys are three times more likely to be reluctant readers than girls, Hi/Los are commonly geared to boy interests, emphasizing funny situations, sports, disasters, teen conflict, family/friend problems, and street kids and gangs, and they embrace the sci-fi, mystery/spy, and adventure genres. Hi/Lo is a small, specialty subcategory. I focus this book on *trade fiction*, or the general market, which sells through standard outlets to the general reader.

Pacifying gatekeepers

Unlike writers for adults, you don't have direct access to your audience. Instead, you and your novel must wend your way through a group of people who in one manner or another screen books before they reach the kids they're written for. I'm talking about librarians, teachers, parents, book reviewers, even booksellers. These are the *gatekeepers* of young adult fiction. Every one of them has opinions about what young people should read, with some of those gatekeepers holding the purse strings.

This means you have to please a lot of people before you ever get to your primary audience. Edgy stories that offer rougher views of the world may not squeeze through the filters. Language, sex, and violence all get careful screening. In principle, that's not necessarily a bad thing; adults *should* be aware of what the young people under their wings are reading. But it does add a many-people-deep wall that writers for adults don't have to work around . . . or under or over or right through in some paper-and-ink version of the old Red Rover child's game.

Cases of banned books and censorship arguments periodically crop up in the young adult fiction news, reminding the world of the most ardent gatekeepers. But your chief awareness should lie at the level of everyday screening for age and individual appropriateness. Keep in mind the role of gatekeepers in your readers' lives as you make decisions about your story's content and word choice. Young adult novelists must by default consider their gatekeepers . . . but whether you choose to pacify gatekeepers, work within general boundaries, or blow the boundaries apart is completely up to you.