Recognizing the determination of a canon as an ongoing process of discussion and debate, which helps us to better understand the concept of meaningful and important literature, this edited collection turns a critical spotlight on young adult literature (YAL) to explore some of the most read, taught, and discussed books of our time.

By considering the unique criteria which might underpin the classification of a YAL canon, this text raises critical questions of what it means to define canonicity and designate certain books as belonging to the YAL canon. Moving beyond ideas of what is taught or featured in textbooks, the volume emphasizes the role of adolescents’ choice, the influence of popular culture, and above all the multiplicity of ways in which literature might be interpreted and reflected in the lives of young readers. Chapters examine an array of texts through varied critical lenses, offer detailed literary analyses and divergent interpretations, and consider how themes might be explored in pedagogical contexts. By articulating the ways in which teachers and young readers may have traditionally interpreted YAL, this volume will extend debate on canonicity and counter dominant narratives that posit YAL texts as undeserving of canonical status.

This text will be of great interest to graduate and postgraduate students, academics, professionals, and libraries in the field of young adult literature, fiction literacy, children’s literacy, and feminist studies.

Victor Malo-Juvera is Associate Professor of English education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA.

Crag Hill is Associate Professor of English education at the University of Oklahoma, USA.
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To all those young adult literature books in and out of view influencing our universe/s.
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Author Bio

Ashley S. Boyd is at Washington State University, USA
Jace Brown is at Brigham Young University, USA.
Rachel L. Carazo is at University of Southern Mississippi, USA.
Sean P. Connors is at University of Arkansas, USA.
Chris Crowe is at Brigham Young University, USA.
Darby Evans is at University of Notre Dame, USA.
Crag Hill is at University of Oklahoma, USA.
KaaVonia Hinton is at Old Dominion University, USA.
Julianna E. Lopez Kershen is at University of Oklahoma, USA.
Merrilyne Lundahl is at Southern Oregon University, USA.
Mark A. Lewis is at James Madison University, USA.
Kati Macaluso is at University of Notre Dame, USA.
Michael Macaluso is at University of Notre Dame, USA.
Victor Malo-Juvera is at University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA.
Mary McCulley is at Baylor University, USA.
Cori McKenzie is at State University of New York College at Cortland, USA.
Luke Rodesiler is at Purdue University Fort Wayne, USA.
Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez is at LaGuardia Community College, USA.
William C. Sewell is at Dakota State University, USA.
Brandon Sams is at Iowa State University, USA.
Lisa Scherff is at Community School of Naples, USA.
Angela Sparks is at University of Hertfordshire, UK.
The term “canon” is read as “White” in contemporary discourse. The high school canon, comprised of books commonly taught in the United States over the last 100 years, remains blindingly White (Hill & Malo-Juvera, 2019). “Canon” is read as exclusionary, the country club that has only recently added a person of color to its membership, a token (e.g., the high school canon adding Bless Me, Ultima, The House on Mango Street, The Color Purple, and The Bluest Eye). “Canon” is read as elitist, those with status in colleges and universities naming texts to a status unearned, the ranking enacted in undemocratic spaces. “Canon” is read as myopic, reifying the status quo or, worse, privileging a past that was more complicated than depicted by the literature included in high school curricula.

Instead, consider canon formation as a discussion starter (Nodelman, 1984) around the merits of a vibrant, new, and long-running body of work, these discussions building frameworks for understanding this literature, how it is different from other literatures, how it enriches all literature. Consider canon as a form of inquiry, canon-making not as a static event but “a never-ending process, a process of disagreement and discussion that, ideally, leads us to better understand what is good and what matters. As such, it’s merely another branch of literary criticism” (Nodelman, 1984, p. 51).

Volume Overview

Section One: The Center of the Canon begins with “The Giver in Our Midst: Grounding Dystopia as Total Institutions” by Michael Macaluso, Kati Macaluso, and Darby Evans, which takes up the concept of dystopia by using Goffman’s theory of total institutions from his work Asylums. The connection between dystopias is fairly straightforward; however, Goffman’s theory troubles the standard “checklist” or application-based idea of dystopia. If we conceive of dystopia as a total institution or as institutional, then the reality of dystopia can become more apparent. Through The Giver, readers can see dystopia as more real, analytical, relevant, and more than just something applied to a political system.

In “It’s Easier Not to Say Anything: Speak Through the Lens of Strategic Formalism,” Cori McKenzie considers the conditions in Speak that enable the
protagonist, the victim of a sexual assault, to tell her story. *Speak* resonates anew in a cultural moment in which survivors of sexual assault have told their stories and, in some cases, have encountered doubt and derision. Given the risks of saying #MeToo, this analysis deploys Caroline Levine’s strategic formalism, arguing that social patterns initially prevent the protagonist from telling her story, and her ability to speak at novel’s end is the result of the fortuitous destabilization of the complex social forms that once encouraged silence.

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, signifying is a form of revision, a trope rooted in Black American literature manifesting itself through theme, rhetoric, and literary history. KaaVonia Hinton contends that Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster* signifies on *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest J. Gaines, repeating and reversing Black male experiences put forth in Black American literature in general and in *A Lesson Before Dying* in particular. “Do You See a [Hu]man Sitting Here?” Signifying in *Monster* traces *Monster*’s revision of *A Lesson Before Dying*’s exploration of the continual effects of racism from slavery to mass incarceration, the use of literacy in the quest for human dignity, and the positioning of Whites within the legal system (and society), which contributes to the dehumanization of the characters.

In “‘Lost, Squared’: Reservation Realism and the Borderless Imaginary,” Angela Sparks considers how the boundaries in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*—geographical, temporal, and racial—are both delimited by the events of the novel and overcome by Alexie’s treatment of the White characters and Arnold’s growing connections within and beyond the reservation. Sparks maintains the novel marks a departure from the “angry” rhetoric of Alexie’s earlier work, instead focusing on new possibilities for Indigenous young adult futures. In addition, the use of comedy and cartoon are examined as a feature of both Native writing and a YA trope that serves the narrative by balancing, but not negating, the realities of reservation life.

**Section Two: Seminal Works** opens with “From Maven to Mentor: The Archetypal Coaches of *The Contender*,” Luke Rodesiler and Mark A. Lewis’s analysis of Robert Lipsyte’s (1967) *The Contender*. The story presents several sports coaches that support Alfred Brooks’s, the protagonist’s, boxing prowess and rise as a contender. These coaches—Donatelli, Dr. Corey, Bud, Henry—all represent coaching differently, such as hard-nosed instructor, teacher, and counselor. The authors employ an archetypal analysis of these coaches. They contend that understanding the complexity of coaches portrayed in young adult literature can remind readers to be mindful of the messages students receive about athletic coaches through sports-related YAL.

Although Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* has frequently been banned, scholars consider it one of the best and view Cormier as a progenitor of young adult realistic fiction. William Sewell’s “‘Peace at Any Price’: A Marxist Reading of *The Chocolate War*” chapter reveals how hegemons like Brother Leon employ state apparatuses and battle opponents. Additionally, *The Chocolate War*
reflects a dialectic between the hegemonic and the oppressed class, exposing conflicting ideologemes. Finally, the text reflects the cultural logic of late capitalism, which legitimizes itself, commodifies violence, and alienates people. In this constant struggle, the oppressed accept “peace at any price.”

First published in 1975, Judy Blume’s *Forever* . . . remains a popular young adult book centered on a coming-of-age female protagonist. In *Forever* . . ., Katherine tells her story of love, sexuality, and friendship as she develops self-agency and a sex-positive attitude through body exploration, sex education, and sexual interactions. Read with critical complexity, the text offers readers a chance to interrogate representations of female agency, the female body, and heterosexual female sexuality. Julianna E. Lopez Kershen’s chapter maintains that *Forever* . . . conveys sex-positive sociocultural perspectives, presenting female protagonists who seek to understand, assert, and control their bodies.

After winning the 1977 Newbery Medal, Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* earned near canonical status in schools throughout the United States. Teachers value the novel for its use of an authentic African American voice to tell a more complex story of early 20th-century racism and its consequences on African Americans and Whites. Chris Crowe and Jace Brown, in “*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*: Disrupting the ‘All-White World of Children’s Books,’” use cultural studies and critical race theory to examine the text in context with its history and relationship with readers and to consider how the novel played a role in disrupting the “all-White world of children’s books.”

Chapter 10, “More Than Esperanza: Revisiting Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*,” by Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez, examines Cisneros’s text alongside conversations on diversity in the publishing industry. Rodríguez discusses the importance of coming-of-age narratives and the child narrator in Chicano literature of the 1980s and 1990s and contemporary Chicanx/Latinx youth literature in order to better understand the social impact of *Mango Street*. She argues that youth need more than Esperanza in the classroom to help them challenge harmful ideologies about Latinx cultures and communities. By positioning Cisneros’s text alongside contemporary Latinx youth literature, Rodríguez urges educators and readers to expand understandings of Latinx experiences beyond *Mango Street*.

The trope of the strong female protagonist in works of children’s and youth literature has an origin in Avi’s 1990 Newbery Honor novel, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, in which a young girl finds herself on a ship full of men and in a dangerous situation of intrigue and murder. Rachel L. Carazo, in “Dominating Gender: Female-Controlled, Decolonizing Power and *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*,” maintains that Charlotte’s transition is significant since it allows her, rather than the male characters on the *Seahawk*, to eventually determine her own gender identity and overcome their “othering” and “colonizing” (Orientalist/post-colonialist) behavior. This reality thus exhibits the continued and canonical relevance of the novel for contemporary readers and gender studies.
Section Three: Contemporaries starts with “‘The Earth Is Speaking to Us’: An Ecocritical Approach to Stargirl” by Merrilyne Lundahl, who writes that the natural world has a strong presence in Stargirl, and ecocriticism, a critical lens that examines relationships between literature and the environment, brings nuance and depth to the text. Examining Stargirl’s characterization through an ecocritical lens reveals a fully dimensional, rounded character. An ecofeminist reading posits that one implicit message of the novel is utilitarian: Stargirl, like the environment, exists to serve patriarchal systems. An ecopedagogical reading is more hopeful and holistic: it argues that Stargirl conveys positive environmental values of ecoliteracy for readers to nurture within themselves.

In the next chapter, “Parties, Pranks, and Privilege: Reading Looking for Alaska Through the Lens of Critical Whiteness,” Brandon Sams and Ashley S. Boyd investigate Looking for Alaska through the lens of Critical Whiteness Studies. In particular, they examine the novel’s setting of Culver Creek Academy as a critical site for the maintenance of Whiteness ideology. The boarding school, they argue, serves as an isolated racial (read White) bubble where White students learn how to participate in the unmarked cultures of destructive Whiteness ideology. Their analysis of Looking for Alaska offers a model for how to disrupt the logics of Whiteness in other texts.

Sean P. Connors, in “Attending to Cultural Models in Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis,” argues that by addressing the presence of cultural models, teachers and students can examine how the text occasionally engages in problematic discourses about Iranians and Muslims. At the same time, part of the genius of Satrapi’s text is that it does not simply reinforce a humanist model of essential sameness. Western readers may recognize themselves in the main character, Marji, but the text nevertheless invites them to also consider the formative role that culture plays in shaping a person’s belief system.

In “‘So What Am I Supposed to Do Now?’ Border Crossing in American Born Chinese,” Lisa Scherff explores the questions raised in Gene Luen Yang’s award-winning graphic novel American Born Chinese, including, can one be both American and Chinese without the exclusion of the other? The novel provides an opportunity to interrogate this question through an analysis of how identity is tied to theories of borderlands, border crossing, and (trans)nationalism. Each of the three storylines presents issues of identity and borderlands/border crossings and, in addition, such tensions can be read across them as well.

Mary McCulley, in “The Literacy Thief: A New Literacy Studies Analysis of The Book Thief,” analyzes Zusak’s holocaust narrative through the lens of New Literacy Studies (NLS). NLS extends the idea of literacy beyond the cognitive processes of reading and writing and proposes that literacy is a social activity that creates different relationships among people, broadening the classification of literacy to include plural modes based on various activities within specific social networks. McCulley argues that The Book Thief complicates traditional notions of literacy and positions multiple literacies as means of activities that move the course of human events.
Works Cited


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Popular culture is dominated by young adult literature. Young adult (YA) texts have been an impressive presence on the silver screen over the past decades as cinematic series such as *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, *Percy Jackson*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* have dominated the box office. The impact of these films and others are felt beyond theaters as many YA books have become cultural phenomena, expanding YA franchises into theme parks, Broadway plays, and endless paraphernalia. The publishing industry has benefited from the explosion in YA and has witnessed children’s and YA fiction grow. From 2013 to 2017 sales increased 11.3%, representing 3.67 billion dollars and accounting for 14% of the entire publishing industry’s revenue (Association of American Publishers, 2018). With such growth, popularity, and influence come critiques, judgments, and rankings—and notions of canonicity soon follow.

**Canonicity**

The concept of canons is well entrenched throughout history in fields such as Greek and Roman literature, architecture, music, and biblical literature. The term “canon” may have slightly different meanings depending upon which context is being used, in literature it is often defined as a group of texts believed to be of enduring literary quality (Cuddon, 2013) but has also been described by Bloom (1994) as “a list of books for required study” (p. 17). Although in previous centuries the power of critics and scholars was central for a text to attain canonical status, in the 21st century, perhaps reflecting the shift to a consumer culture, the impact of consumption must also enter into the discussion of any literary canons. A text that is not read is not canonical.

We have previously argued that “to be taught is to be canonical” (Hill & Malo-Juvera, 2019, p. 3) when discussing the canon of secondary schools; however, when addressing young adult literature, a more nuanced set of criteria is warranted because YA literature does not dominate high school classrooms to the same extent as traditional texts. Thus, because YA texts are not ubiquitously taught outside of a few YA textbooks (Bucher & Hinton, 2013; Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 1980/2014) and in YA literature classrooms on college campuses, general readership plays a more important role in
discussions of YA literature and canonicity. Although there may be a causal relationship between the reading and teaching of classic texts—teachers assign texts that students purchase and, ideally, read—when considering YA literature this relationship may not exist because YA texts are not assigned as whole-class required readings as frequently. There are some exceptions, such as *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967), considered by many to be the first young adult novel, and *Speak* (Anderson, 1999), which were both found to be among the most taught books in high schools with similar frequency as established canonical titles such as *Lord of the Flies*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Night* (Stotsky, Traffas, & Woodworth, 2010).

Ultimately, though, independent readership of texts is much more important in young adult literature than it is in traditional literary canons.

**What Is Young Adult Literature?**

Before examining the elements that contribute to membership in the YA canon, it is important to explicate what YA literature is. Hill (2014) pointed out that one reason for the continued misconceptions about the literary and educative value of YA literature might be because even those who study and teach it have not reached consensus on a definition. Lacking one, it is difficult to have clear, substantive conversations about what YA literature is. In many cases, some of the definitions that have been offered to date may even create confusion, while others lack the breadth and depth with which to focus and foster the kind of critical inquiry that will enhance the understanding and value of young adult literature.

One prominent definition that one of the co-editors of this project shared when he was teaching high school English was Nilsen et al.’s (1980/2014) definition that young adult literature included books that readers age 12–20 chose independently. This definition then included *The Giver* next to *Infinite Jest*, *The Hunger Games* next to Plato’s *Republic*, and *Slaughterhouse Five* next to *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, all books his students were choosing to read and talk about with their peers. Later, as an instructor of a YA literature class at a university, that definition became unwieldy and then was far too inclusive when he began to write critically about YA literature. Though *The Giver* may share some themes with *Infinite Jest*, the differences in the two books made it impossible to explore both as examples of YA literature.

At the other extreme, Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2010) offered a concise definition with two criteria: YA literature is a “literature written for young people age eleven to eighteen and books marketed as ‘young adult’ by a publisher” (p. 4). The specificity of this definition sharpened the focus needed for literary criticism, narrowing the number of books critics might study, tightening up the field. Yet more descriptors are needed to give that focus the nuance to enable deep and rich critical inquiry, such as Small (1992) provided when he wrote that YA literature includes a teenager who is the main character and, as the center of the plot, engages in problems related to and relatable to the
The Young Adult Canon

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lives of teenagers. In addition, dialogue in YA literature will be representative of teen speech, while the “point of view presents an adolescent’s interpretation of events and people . . . and the actions and decisions of the main character are major factors in the outcome of the conflict” (quoted in Herz & Gallo, 1996/2005, pp. 8–9). Campbell (2010) fleshed that out by arguing that the voice of the narrator is important, YA novels are told by “a teen protagonist speaking from an adolescent point of view, with all the limitations of understanding this implies” (p. 75).

To distinguish YA literature from children’s literature, Trites (2000) argued, “YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding the relationship between the society and the individual rather than focusing on Self and self-discovery as children’s literature does” (p. 20). Coats (2011), separating YA literature from middle-grade literature, believed that novels with a closed moral universe in which the bad are punished and the good rewarded is “pre-adolescent, whereas a book that calls that moral universe into question, such as The Chocolate War . . . or Monster . . . is clearly YA’ (p. 322). Some critics have argued against the term “young adult literature” itself. Aronson (2001) asserted that the term “requires us, simultaneously, to define three inherently unstable terms: what are young adults, what is literature, and what is the literature that has some special link to those readers” (pp. 31–32).

Though the discussions around defining YA literature have mapped out that term in ways that shape critical inquiry in the field, we realize these discussions, now decades in the making, are ongoing. However, for this project, we put forward the definition that has framed our thinking and the thinking of our chapter authors. The YA literature explored in this collection, 13 novels, one graphic novel, and one graphic memoir, engages readers in the experiences of adolescents, lived and imagined. Across all 15 books, the narratives, whether written from a first- or third-person point of view, enable close identification, engendering empathy, particularly with the narrator and/or protagonist. In agreement with Trites (2000) and Coats (2011), we also maintain that YA literature explicitly or implicitly problematizes the dominant norms of the world within which the characters navigate. In all 15 books, the characters perceive their world differently—and are perceived differently by those in their world—at the end of the novel. For some characters, those differences are resolved; for others it remains to be seen what the effects of the events the story will have on their lives.

Historical Context

Born almost in the same year—so sisters, in some ways—the Children’s Literature Association (ChLA; in 1972) and the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN; in 1973) shared initial purposes: to gather those interested in studying children’s and/or young adult literature (ChLA subsumed young adult literature in children’s literature at the time and, in many ways, still does;
Pattee, 2017); ALAN focused on literature for adolescents, age 12–20 (e.g., Nilsen et al., 1980/2014), to share ideas, to move forward the understanding—and, for ALAN, the teaching—of the literature for and about children and adolescents.

But then the sisters went their own ways. ChLA worked to establish a footing in the field of literary criticism in the Modern Language Association (McGillis, 2010), the professional organization supporting literary studies in departments of English in colleges and universities. To legitimize the critical study of children’s literature, members of ChLA and their associates published dozens of articles and books starting in the 1980s, analyzing children’s literature through a number of different critical lenses that had heretofore scrutinized adult literature. ALAN chose other vital, vibrant paths, working in and out of the trenches of grade 4–12 classrooms, illuminating—and advocating for—generation after generation of YA literature authors, strategizing ways to infuse YA literature into secondary English language arts curricula, in many ways and places disrupting/displacing the high school canon. The focus for ALAN was more on what the texts could do for students and less on what the texts were doing (that focus has shifted/is shifting as *The ALAN Review*, *SIGNAL*, and *Study & Scrutiny* publish critical articles in each issue).

To jumpstart critical scholarship, the Children’s Literature Association in 1978 formed a discussion group to select a canon of children’s books. The discussion began with two questions: “Is there a ‘children’s literature’—a defined body of works written for children? Then—if there is a ‘children’s literature’—has it a canon?” (Hanks, 1978, p. 12). The first question was answered in the affirmative. For the second question, the term canon seemed “ridiculously broad,” so the group decided to look at “genres, ages, or specific authors,” creating lists of books according to headings and subheadings such as “fiction” (dream books, fantasy, realism, historical fiction, science fiction) or “oral” tradition (myth, epic, folktale, ballad, hero tale, Mother Goose) (Hanks, p. 12).

The primary reason for these discussions was to establish a list of works “that should form, at least, the core of any university children’s literature course . . . because a great many of us who teach children’s literature have come into the field with virtually no background in it” (Ake, Bingham, Helbig, Shafer, & Stott, 1980, pp. 46–47). Because at the time there was very little criticism of children’s literature, what constituted literary merit was a large part of these discussions, especially about how the literary merit of a children’s book differed from an adult’s book.

These discussions produced preliminary lists of books shaped essentially by two criteria: literary merit and historical significance. “Books included in the canon should have literary merit, according to a large number of devotees of children’s literature; or they should be historically significant,” Nodelman asserted (1980b, p. 5). They should possess some historical significance, be either innovative or controversial when they were published, still be in print and widely read, “or they should reveal something important about the history of children’s taste or the ideas of grownups about children and their literature”
Ideally, books considered canonical would evidence both literary merit and have moved children’s literature forward historically. These lists were vigorously debated by teachers, librarians, and scholars of children’s literature in conferences and in professional journals, culminating in a series of pamphlets that ChLA issued in 1982 and 1983 with a list of 63 titles. This list, however, was met with some virulent disagreement, including Steig, who argued the list should be withdrawn because the field of children’s literature scholarship already has little respect: “[t]his error-filled product of a committee’s compromises should not be allowed to misrepresent the intellectual and scholarly standards of the ChLA’ (p. 38).

A major development for the field was the publication of the three-volume series, *Touchstones: Reflections on the Best in Children’s Literature* (1985–1989), edited by Perry Nodelman. The first volume solidified the initial canon of children’s literature with critical essays by noted scholars of children’s literature (e.g., Beverly Lyon Clark, Roderick McGillis, and Peter Hunt) on *Little Women*, *The Secret Garden*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Hobbit*, *Treasure Island*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and others. As the first part of the title suggests, these novels were considered the touchstones, the “criterion for determining the quality or genuineness” (Merriam-Webster), of children’s literature. These three volumes demonstrated that scholars in children’s literature were engaged in an evaluation of what books constituted the best in this body of literature, taking into consideration not only the literary value of a novel but also the sociopolitical forces that shape critical opinion (Schmidt, 1992).

Projects such as *Touchstones* were products of the intellectual energy spinning out of the discussions earlier in the decade. Children’s literature now has a rich tradition of theoretical scholarship spanning nearly four decades, a body of work that has given the field an abiding status in academia. Young adult literature also has a rich tradition, one focused on pedagogy geared to getting books in the hands of all kinds of readers, but one that has not moved the needle of credibility for those who work in the field (Though many professors have done extensive critical and empirical research in young adult literature, how many have been tenured as young adult literature scholars?). Over 20 years ago, Hunt (1996) pointed out that YA literary critics had not begun to discuss the existence of a canon, or what standards should be applied, or whether it is possible for books to remain canonical after their readership has completely deserted them. Without any agreement about the nature (much less the content) of a YA canon, further theoretical discussion has, understandably, lagged.

Hunt suggested that the field of YA literature was where children’s literature was 10 to 20 years ago, so roughly the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, just as discussions of a children’s literature canon began. In many ways, after such a
long separation, it is time for young adult literature scholarship to meet up with its sibling again.

**The Canon of Young Adult Literature**

We define the canon of young adult literature as the set of YA texts that is widely read, has enduring literary quality, and has influenced the field of YA literature. In this text, the canon we assess is that of the wide field of YA literature that includes all its subgenres such as contemporary fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian fiction. Genre was not a factor considered for canonicity. Subgenres of YA literature could be considered to have their own canons, such as canons of queer YA literature, sports-related YA literature, multicultural YA literature as a group or specific non-White cultures such as African American, Latinx, or Indigenous Native American YA literatures. Furthermore, the canon we describe herein is that of American readers, teachers, and scholars; other nations may well have their own sets of young adult texts that hold local influence.

Identifying the canon of young adult literature is an endeavor that is guaranteed to leave some readers and scholars disgruntled because a text they feel should be included was left out. To this end, we want to emphasize that we have developed a set of qualifications that we “tested” texts against in order to discover, rather than decide, which texts qualify as canonical. We stress this because it is critical to understand that canons cannot be opened, because they are always open. Similarly, the YA canon does not exist in one place. It is not a single book list—there are many influences on the canon, and it exists not only within those influences but between them as well. A text does not enter the canon from a single point, making it difficult, if not impossible, for any one gatekeeper—censors, critics, educators, religious groups—to prevent a text from reaching canonicity; moreover, once a text has reached canonicity, it is a Herculean task to remove it.

**Influences on the Canon**

We believe the three most important qualifications to be considered for a YA text to be canonical are that it has been widely and continuously read over many years, that it is taught with greater frequency when compared to other YA texts, and that it may have been groundbreaking at the time of its release and/or had lasting impacts on subsequent writers in the field. Although scholars and critics played a major role historically in the formation of traditional literary canons (Hill & Malo-Juvera, 2019), because the primary consumers of YA texts—teenagers—do not generally read these types of publications, their influence on canonicity is minimal. The influence of university courses in YA literature may also be less than scholars would like to believe, as teachers’ instructional choices are heavily influenced by local concerns (Malo-Juvera, 2018), and because many current classroom teachers have not matriculated through traditional teacher education programs that would require these types
of classes. We believe that groundbreaking novels, such as *The Chocolate War*, *The Giver*, *Monster*, and *The House on Mango Street*, have influenced writers of young adult literature, transforming the field in many ways, but we do not have a way to measure the lasting influence of these works on the canon. Future critical studies of these novels could bear that out.

**Readership/Sales**

Though readership is a requirement of most literary canons, nowhere is this as dominant as in the YA canon. This is because most YA texts are read independently and not part of school curricula. Measuring how often a text is read is a daunting task, and though far from perfect, the most reliable way to measure readership is by assessing book sales. We recognize this may not reflect actual readership, because sales figures do not consider how often books are checked out from public, school, or classroom libraries or how often friends share books.

There are multiple outlets that provide sales data, and perhaps the most common is Amazon.com (2019) rankings, which provide daily sales figures ranked in a variety of lists: Top 100 overall texts sold, Top 100 in Teen and YA books, and then within the Teen and YA category, there are many subcategories addressing specific subgenres such as sports and outdoors, science fiction and fantasy, and historical fiction. Perhaps the most important list for our purposes is the Top 100 list in Teen and Young Adult Literature and Fiction, which is updated hourly. Though Amazon.com is just one source of sales data, it currently accounts for almost 50% of print books sales in the United States (Shatzkin, 2018).

Beyond Amazon.com, there are other sources of sales rankings, but most do not go beyond top 10 or top 20 lists. The *New York Times* provides weekly top 15 lists in many categories, including Children’s Middle Grade Hardcover and Young Adult Hardcover. These lists are useful; however, the majority of canonical texts of all types are sold as trade paperbacks, thus the *New York Times*’s lists provide an excellent insight into current readership of new releases, but fails at providing more meaningful data on texts that are primarily sold in soft cover. *Publishers Weekly* also provides bestseller lists, but their most valuable list for our purposes, Children’s Frontlist Fiction, includes texts that are clearly children’s books, such as *Captain Underpants*, on the same list as YA fiction, such as *Turtles All the Way Down*. Finding historical data is even more daunting; as most providers of historical sales data are geared toward business marketing and require expensive payments for access; ergo, Amazon.com may be the best glimpse into how often a text is read. We can also surmise, barring a unique event that reinvigorates interest in a text such as a film adaptation, that a text published 20 years ago that is still a top seller has a history of being consistently read.

**Teaching**

Although many young adult novels are read extracurricularly, assigned reading is still an important factor in determining canonicity; therefore, it is important to
assess which YA texts are being taught in schools most frequently. This is another daunting task, as most previous research has not specifically focused on YA texts and their results are dominated by texts that are not considered YA, such as works of Shakespeare, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Great Gatsby* (e.g., Applebee, 1992; Stallworth & Gibbons, 2012; Stotsky, Goering, & Jolliffe, 2010).

A Survey of Teaching YA Literature

In order to address this paucity, we surveyed attendees at the 2018 Adolescent Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English Conference (*n* = 89) and the 2018 Summit on the Pedagogy for Young Adult Literature at the University of Las Vegas Nevada (*n* = 15). Our survey asked respondents which young adult texts they had taught in the last five years, offering them a checklist of 29 bestselling YA texts published before 2008 and a section to add in any texts that were not listed (see appendix for survey). There were teachers of middle school (33%), high school (29%), and college (32%) who took the survey and who were located in urban (32%), suburban (36%), and rural (22%) schools (7% responded their school was in a combination of the three). The respondents’ average experience teaching was 16.7 years with a range of 1–44 years. Next, we present the results of our survey.

Results

YA Texts Most Frequently Taught in the Last Five Years

1. *Speak*
2. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
3. *The Giver*
4. *The Outsiders*
5. *The House on Mango Street*
6. *American Born Chinese*
7. *Monster*
8. *The Book Thief*
9. *Persepolis*
10. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

YA Texts Most Frequently Taught in Middle School

1. *The Giver*
2. *The Outsiders*
3. *The House on Mango Street*
4. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
5. *Speak*
6. *The Book Thief*
7. *Esperanza Rising*
8. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*
9. *Number the Stars*
10. *Monster*

**YA Texts Most Frequently Taught in High School**

1. *The House on Mango Street*
2. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
3. *Speak*
4. *Persepolis*
5. *The Giver*
6. *The Book Thief*
7. *The Outsiders*
8. *Esperanza Rising*
9. *American Born Chinese*
10. *Hatchet*

**YA Texts Most Frequently Taught in College**

1. *Speak*
2. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*
3. *American Born Chinese*
4. *The Outsiders*
5. *Monster*
6. *The Giver*
7. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*
8. *Persepolis*
9. *The Book Thief*
10. *The House on Mango Street*

The results are probably not surprising to scholars, educators, and readers of young adult literature, as the lists are comprised of YA texts that have been well known for years—many for decades. Perhaps what is most notable about the results is how canonical the texts chosen by our respondents actually were. We had expected much more variation considering that attendees to the ALAN conference are voracious advocates and consumers of YA literature; in fact, we would expect that this group would show the most variation of any teachers of YA literature. That their most taught titles were so reflective of overall readership/sales may argue that teachers who are not so deeply invested in the field of YA literature may show even less deviation from traditionally known YA texts. The results also echo the research discussed previously, which found *Speak* and *The Outsiders* to be among the most frequently taught texts in high schools (Stotsky et al., 2010).

**The Canon**

The canon of young adult literature is made up of texts that dominate the aforementioned qualifications. They have been and continue to be read widely.
by adolescents. They are among the most frequently taught YA texts in schools. Many have and continue to influence not only popular culture, but the field of YA literature in groundbreaking ways.

We envision the canon to be a dynamic and multilayered organism, structured somewhat similarly to the solar system. In this metaphor, we would find the most canonical texts residing in the center, much like the Sun, with other texts orbiting similarly to planets, and others, whose influence is waxing or waning, could be approaching or leaving the canon much like asteroids. Next, we describe our conception of the canon of YA literature, list the major texts included, and provide a brief rationale for each.

The Center of the Canon: The Sun

In the center of the canon of YA literature are the texts that are the most undeniably and frequently read and that exert influence over the entire field of YA literature. These texts are firmly established and have demonstrated lasting staying power. We provide brief information on each text and its rankings of teaching from our survey and from Amazon sales rankings gathered from 9/1/2019–9/2/2019. “Overall” refers to the sales ranking for all types of books at Amazon.com; other categories are self-explanatory and follow Amazon.com’s wording.


JK Rowling’s series about the boy who lived is undoubtedly at the center of the YA canon. The books of the *Harry Potter* series are perpetually in the top ten bestselling YA texts on Amazon.com, the cinematic adaptations were all blockbusters, and the series has spun off the *Fantastic Beasts* movies, a theme park at Universal Studios, the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, travel tourism, college classes, fan fiction, and endless paraphernalia.

**The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton (1967)**

Considered by many to be the text that birthed the genre of young adult literature, *The Outsiders* has spawned a box office hit film adaptation, a television series, and a stage adaptation. More than 50 years since its release, it still dominates YA books sales and is one of the most frequently taught texts nationwide in ninth grade (Stotsky, Traffas, & Woodworth, 2010).

**Survey:** #4 Overall; #2 Middle, #7 High School, #4 College.

**Sales:** #27 Overall, #18 Teen and YA Fiction; #1 Teen and YA Classic Literature.

**Hatchet by Gary Paulsen (1987)**

Paulsen’s tale of survival in the wilderness won the Newbery Award (1988) and is the first of the five-book Brian’s Saga series. *Hatchet* was a *New York*
The Young Adult Canon

_The Times_ Best Seller, and over 30 years after its initial publication, its robust sales speak to how widely read it still is; in fact, it missed the top ten of our survey of books taught in high school by only one spot.

**Survey:** N/A.
**Sales:** #237 Overall; #40 Teen and YA Books; #30 Teen and YA Literature and Fiction.

_The House on Mango Street_ by Sandra Cisneros (1983)

Cisneros’s story of a Latinx teenager coming of age in Chicago told through a series of vignettes won the American Book Award and was a _New York Times_ Best Seller, having sold over six million copies (Cisneros, 2018). _Mango Street_ has been one of the most widely taught texts for decades, and the results of our study and robust current sales rankings suggest that its popularity in and out of schools has not waned.

**Survey:** #5 Overall; #3 Middle School; #1 High School; #10 College.
**Sales:** #145 Overall; #1 Hispanic American Literature and Fiction; #3 Teen and YA Classic Literature; #4 Short Stories (Books).

_Speak_ by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)

Laurie Halse Anderson’s groundbreaking story is as centrally entrenched in the canon as _Harry Potter_. _Speak_ was adapted into a graphic novel (Anderson & Carroll, 2018) and a Showtime movie, was ranked as the most frequently taught text in our survey, and has also entered the canon of secondary school literature as one of the most frequently taught texts (Stotsky, Traffas, & Woodworth, 2010).

**Survey:** #1 Overall; #5 Middle School; #3 High School; #1 College.
**Sales:** #992 Overall #6 Teen and YA Fiction.

_The Giver_ by Lois Lowry (1993)

Lois Lowry’s dystopian tale is not only at the center of the YA canon but is also the seminal dystopian YA text. _The Giver_ has been adapted into a movie and a graphic novel and is ranked in the top ten in each category in our survey of teaching YA texts.

**Survey:** #3 Overall; #1 Middle School; #5 High School; #6 College.
**Sales:** #93 Overall; #29 Teen and YA Books; #1 Teen and YA Dystopian.


The most recent entry to the center of the canon, Alexie’s YA novel, with illustrations by Ellen Forney, has been the subject of numerous scholarly works (e.g., Malo-Juvera, 2017). Despite it being a frequently challenged...
book (American Library Association, 2019) as well as generating controversy surrounding Alexie’s sexual behavior, his text continues to be widely read and taught.

**Survey**: #2 Overall; #4 Middle School; #2 High School; #2 College.
**Sales**: #394 Overall; #53 Teen and Young Adult Books; #42 Teen and YA Fiction; #1 Teen and YA Comics and Graphic Novels.

**Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2001)**

*Monster* won the Printz Award (2000) and was a National Book Award finalist and a *New York Times* Best Seller. The ambiguity of the protagonists’ guilt inspires multiple readings of this text, which was adapted into the movie *All Rise*.

**Survey**: #7 Overall; #10 Middle School; #5 College.
**Sales**: #1,377 Overall.

**The Planets**

Outside the center of the canon, these texts are major players in the solar system of YA literature. These texts weave in and out of orbits making it difficult, and in many ways problematic, to reliably rank them. Much like the dwarf planet Pluto, there may be texts at the far reaches of the solar system that are indeed canonical but that are not as visible as others. In order to avoid any type of ranking implication, we present these texts in alphabetical order, based on title.


Teaching: #6 Overall; #9 High School; #3 College. Sales: #2,699 Overall; #62 Graphic Novels.

**The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2007)**

Teaching: #8 Overall; #6 High School; #9 College. Sales: #1317 Overall; #82 Teen and YA Literature and Fiction; #1 Teen and YA Holocaust Fiction.

**Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan (2002)**

Teaching: #7 Middle School; #8 High School. Sales: #527 Overall; #2 Children’s Hispanic and Latino Books.

**Holes by Louis Sachar (1998)**

Teaching: N/A. Sales: #501 Overall.
Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
Teaching: N/A. Sales: #747 Overall; #2 All Time; #1 All Time Kids and Teens Books; #89 Teen and YA Literature and Fiction.

Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
Teaching: N/A. Sales: #2,276 Overall; #12 Teen and YA Literature and Fiction.

Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chobsky (1999)
Teaching: #10 Overall; #7 College. Sales: #1,764 Overall; #4 Teen and Young Adult Gay and Lesbian Fiction.

Percy Jackson by Rick Riordan (2005)
Teaching: N/A. Sales: #241 Overall.

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi (2000)
Teaching: #9 Overall; #4 High School; #8 College. Sales: #257 Overall books; #1 Literary Graphic Novels.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred Taylor (1976)
Teaching: #8 Middle School. Sales: #1,396 Overall; #45 in Children’s Classics.

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
Teaching: N/A. Sales: #1,846 Overall; #13 Teen and Young Adult Fiction.

Asteroids, Comets, and Meteors
Although the center and the planets represent the most canonical texts, there are always others approaching or departing. In some cases, these texts may have been previously central titles, but have now drifted to the edge of the canon. Seminal texts such as The Chocolate War, A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ but a Sandwich, Charlotte Doyle, The Pigman, M. C. Higgins, the Great, and Forever . . . fit as such and we would still consider them to be canonical. Conversely, there are recently published texts that are widely read, taught, and may be on the way to becoming canonical, but only time will tell if they fully achieve canonicity.

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