ONE NATION, UNDER TEENS: YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER

By

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To the ladies of the Cottage, past, present, and honorary:
Thank you for getting me through
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ONE NATION, UNDER TEENS: YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN TEENAGER

By

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This project examines the political and cultural construction of the American teenager in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries alongside the development of young adult (YA) literature. The histories of YA literature and the teenager have each been explored in extensive detail by literary critics, historians, and other writers, but, with limited exceptions, they have been treated as entirely separate discussions. In this project, I bring the two together in a significant way for the first time, as I argue that YA literature and the teenager have, in fact, always been part of the same conversation. I demonstrate that YA literature has historically acted as a reflection of the nation’s perception of the teenager, helping to establish how the country defines the teenager from decade to decade, while the changing value and use of the teenager in the political realm has regularly forced publishers of YA literature to adapt and innovate in order to maintain their relevance.

In order to more fully understand these overlapping histories, I employ a cultural studies approach throughout the project that incorporates the existing academic work on the teenager and young adult literature, historical selections from popular periodicals, and close readings of key works of young adult literature. Each chapter
takes up an essential moment of transformation for the American teenager: the pre-war tension of the 1940s, the budding counterculture of the 1960s, the conservative movement of the 1980s, and the looming threat and promise of the new millennium in the 1990s. The project pairs the historical analysis of each chapter with discussions of select YA texts—including foundational works such as *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), popular fiction series like *Sweet Valley High* (1983), and more obscure books like *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968)—that speak to the state of the publishing category and the state of the American teenager at each given moment. I conclude with a look at the present day, to consider how these intertwined histories have established the vibrant and varied worlds inhabited by the teenagers and YA literature we know in the twenty-first century.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: READ ALL ABOUT IT: FINDING THE TEENAGER IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The teenager began its print life as an afterthought.

In the early days of 1941, the world was at war, and the United States had but months before the fateful December day that would make its entry into the conflict inevitable. The very cover of the April 1941 issue of *Popular Science* magazine demonstrates that the Second World War was already viewed by the nation as more than a mere foreign issue, even before the events at Pearl Harbor. “What America Has Learned From The War” is the leading headline, written in black text against an image of blue skies, white clouds, and a seemingly infinite row of military planes soaring into the air. At the time, *Popular Science*, with its “three magazines in one” promise to focus on automobiles, home and shop, and mechanics, was a publication dedicated to bringing readers the most up-to-date information on the technologies that might affect their daily lives. An easy logic anticipates the articles within that discuss the newest submachine guns or the long-range aircraft that would defend American soil if the war came calling; these stories about the tools of war represent the anxieties of the time even as they display the latest and greatest technology on offer to the nation. These articles are, quite simply, exactly what one would expect to find in the pages of such a periodical.

A little less expected is the idea of *Popular Science* serving on the front lines of identifying the rise of a new social demographic in American society. And yet, buried 228 pages into the monthly magazine, we find a single use of the word “teen-ager,” in
what is generally accepted as the first in-print usage of the term as we know it today.¹

The coinage appears late in an article entitled “Denver Students Learn Movie Making in the Classroom,” in which writer Edith M. Stern chronicles the experiences of a group of students in Denver who are taking a class where they create documentary films as a means of learning about various public services. Stern describes the pedagogical approach as a “new way of bringing social studies together under one teaching device”—a word choice that puts the act of teaching squarely in the technological realm (77). Although Stern emphasizes that only a small amount of the class is devoted to “picture-making,” with most of the students’ time dedicated to research and interviews in preparation for making the films, it is plain that the article only appears in *Popular Science* because of the movies. Without the relative novelty of young people using filmmaking equipment to produce something of value, Stern would have had nothing to write about.

Digging a little deeper into the article itself, however, quickly reveals that the cameras and editing equipment are far from the only new technology at work in the story. The high schoolers at the center of Stern’s article are discussed in a way that suggests that they, too, are a new and interesting product that, if properly harnessed, could forward the nation’s greater good. Indeed, at the time of the article’s publication, the United States’s place in the war had yet to become one of actual military intervention. As such, the proper representation of American values was the best weapon available to the nation, and the pages of the magazine are filled with rhetoric

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¹ Recently, etymologies have shifted to date “teenager” as being used as early as 1922, although they do not cite a particular source. *Popular Science* appears to remain among the first, if not the very first, print usages of the word with its modern connotations.
that heralds the superiority of democratic life. “Be a Better Citizen,” exhorts one advertisement for a correspondence school, one of many reminders that having access to information is the key to a functioning society (5). Similar reminders are scattered throughout Stern’s descriptions of the work done by the students she followed. She notes their reliance upon informed discussion, happily declares that they have learned of the benefits of representative government, and praises them for making use of “their American prerogative” to criticize perceived flaws—and that’s all on the second page alone (78). Again and again, Stern tells us that these high schoolers are learning not only to make films but also to be the best possible citizens. They are a tool, being put to their ideal use.

It is this surprising faith in the nation’s young people that brings us, finally, to the moment in which “teen-ager” first appears. Stern supports her own belief in the value of the filmmaking the students have done with quotes from various members of the larger Denver community who have engaged with the students during the process of researching and creating the films. It is here that Stern quotes a nameless “dairy operator,” who declares, “I never knew ‘teen-agers [sic] could be so serious” (228). That the first naming of teenager in print comes not only as an aside—a tossed-off comment tucked away in the back of the magazine—but also as a backhanded compliment is rather fitting, given the less than generous connotations that the term has come to represent in the decades since. Even here, in this glossed-over usage of the word, it is obvious that ‘teenager’ was already becoming synonymous with frivolity and nonsense. If the dairy operator cannot believe that teenagers could be serious, the implication is that all of the teenagers he or she has encountered previously were, shall we say, less
than serious. What *Popular Science* promises, through Stern’s article and its constant focus on teenagers as upstanding citizens, is that this does not have to be the case. In the right circumstance, under the right guidance, teenagers can be the truest example of American values at work.

What Stern’s article shows so clearly is that the tension inherent to the nation’s perception of the teenager has existed from its very beginning. The teenager is silly, irrelevant, and barely worthy of note, but the teenager is also the site of so many of the nation’s hopes and dreams. And while the non-fictional realm of *Popular Science* might be the place where this new demographic first appeared in print, it proved to be only the beginning. In the decades since Stern’s article went to press, the teenager has grown well beyond the back pages of a science-oriented magazine, and now commands the pages of thousands of young adult (YA) literature titles. Like its subject, YA literature began in the 1940s as an unassuming new trend and transformed into a cultural force that should now only be underestimated at one’s own peril. The teenager’s print life might have begun as a small aside, but it did not stay that way for long: the history of the teenager is written into the pages of YA literature.

In this project, then, I intend to trace the co-evolution of the teenager and YA literature in the United States from the 1940s to the present day in order to interrogate and explore the ways in which each has influenced the other. More specifically, I will consider how, even since its earliest in-print conception in Stern’s *Popular Science* article, the teenager has worked as a blank slate onto which the nation can write its fears and concerns. The teenager’s political worth and importance has morphed over the years to accommodate a wide range of investments, and YA literature can be a
valuable tool in understanding these developments. I argue that YA literature has functioned as a reflection of the nation’s perception of the teenager, and that the ever-changing use of the teenager in the political realm has often forced publishers of YA literature to adapt and innovate in response. In short, this project will demonstrate that there is immense value in considering the American teenager and YA literature alongside one another, because they are irrevocably intertwined.\(^2\)

Admittedly, the history of the teenager and the history of young adult literature are both well-trodden paths in the academic world. Despite their many connections, however, academics have generally chosen to keep studies of the teenager and YA literature separate. Texts such as Grace Palladino’s *Teenagers: An American History* offer, at most, only a few lines at a time about YA literature as part of the development of teenage culture. Studies of YA literature, by contrast, often show resistance to fully exploring the category’s role in giving shape to our ideas about teenagers. Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, for instance, concerns itself more with the relationship YA has with literature more broadly than with the teenager to which the category supposedly caters. The question of audience necessarily plays a role in the positioning of these two fields in relation to one another, as histories of the teenager have rhetorical goals that exist outside of discussing its literature in detail, and vice-versa.

Which is not to say that discussion of the two are kept separate in every circumstance. Kent Baxter, for example, spends much of *The Modern Age: Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence* examining the role that

\(^2\) While the “teenager” is not a strictly American construct, and while there are young adult literature markets around the world, an international reading is beyond both the scope and intention of this project.
literature played in promoting specific ideals of youth and adolescence. The texts he
discusses, though, are what can best be considered precursors to modern YA literature,
and thus he does not pursue the question of how the teenager has changed—if at all—
since the category took shape. Similarly, Patricia Meyer Spacks makes the relationship
between the adolescent and literature the central question in her book *The Adolescent
Idea*, as she pursues the question of why literature so often concerns itself with
adolescence. Her focus, however, is decidedly not on young adult literature, looking
instead to Sir Walter Scott, James Joyce, and Jane Austen, among others. Kenneth
Kidd, by contrast, dedicates a chapter of *Freud in Oz: At the Intersections of
Psychoanalysis and Children’s Literature* to discussing how literature helped invent the
adolescent, in which he examines the role of seminal texts such as J.D. Salinger’s *The
Catcher in the Rye* in directing our understanding of the adolescent mindset. Kidd’s
chapter emphasizes the relationship between psychoanalysis and the way literature
represents the adolescent identity; in taking up the complexity of adolescent literature
across the twentieth century, he demonstrates how the adolescent figure is often
theorized through its related fiction. Roberta Seelinger Trites also considers how these
two questions might come together in *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in
Adolescent Literature*, as she examines the way in which books from multiple decades
shape and interrogate our notions of how the adolescent relates to the power dynamics
in their lives. What Trites and the other works have in common, however, and where my
project will differ from the arguments on offer above, is the fact that they are concerned
with the adolescent and adolescent literature rather than the teenager and YA
literature.³

³ Certainly, both Kidd and Trites work through the idea of the teenager and young adult literature as
The Teenager

Although this distinction in terminology might seem to be minor, it is no mere issue of semantics. Experts have spent the last six decades struggling to arrive at an effective definition for understanding both the teenager and YA literature, and complete agreement remains a trickier prospect than it might initially appear. We'll turn our attention to YA literature in the next section, but to begin, let's consider the delineation between the “teenager,” which is the central focus of this project, and the “adolescent.” Although the terms are often used interchangeably, they in fact carry specific connotations that mark them as separate ideas. Adolescence has deep roots in America (and beyond), existing long before the teenager arrived on the scene. Perhaps the most significant work in creating the nation's understanding of the adolescent, G. Stanley Hall's lengthily titled Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime and Religion (1904), helped to establish the adolescent as existing between childhood and adulthood biologically, psychologically, and socially. Admittedly, the teenager has inherited much of this reputation, especially Hall's enduring notion of “storm and stress” as the defining state of adolescence.

Adolescence, defined by Spacks as “the time of life when the individual has developed full sexual capacity but has not yet assumed a full adult role in society,” often encompasses the teenage experience—often, but not always (7). As we will come to see, any such definition of adolescence fails to sufficiently illuminate the traditional conception of the teenager not because it is inaccurate, but because it is incomplete.
The teenager in America has a key, defining characteristic that nearly every definition of
the adolescent lacks: the teenager is, first and foremost, a consumer.

Although this conception of the American teenager as consumer most strongly
took hold during and after World War II, it has what Jon Savage refers to as an
extensive “prehistory” (xv). In truth, it took decades of societal and economic overhaul in
the United States to make the emergence of this new demographic possible. Most
accounts pinpoint the rise of industrial labor and urbanization in the latter portion of the
nineteenth century as the first steps in the teenager’s conception, as these transitions
marked a shift in the opportunities available to young men in the work force.4 According
to Kent Baxter, “Industries, banks, warehouses, and insurance companies needed labor
to satisfy a suddenly international market that was growing by leaps and bounds…Many
of these workers were young men, turning their backs on their fathers’ profession” (25).
By flocking to city centers, young people were able to open up a variety of options for
the work that they would be performing.5 This wider job market soon forced another
major transition, as the favor of employers began to fall upon those who had some
formal education. Joseph Kett explains, “The colleges did not want anyone who had not
attended secondary school, and employers were increasingly prone…to look to the
colleges as sources of managerial recruits” (153). Middle-class families were therefore
more likely to ensure that their children—their sons, specifically—enrolled in school
during their teen years in order to enhance their later job prospects. At this point in time,

4 Joseph Kett goes even further back, arguing that the first “critical transition” for American youth came
between 1790 and 1840 (5). He marks this moment of industrialization and urbanization as the second
critical transition.

5 I want to note here that, especially in these early days, the history being tracked by writers like Baxter,
Kett, and others is largely the history of white, middle-class youth. Throughout this project, I will attempt to
challenge and critique this focus, though it is difficult to escape entirely.
young people’s place in the market remained largely confined to the labor they could provide, and schooling was largely a means to an end for those who could afford to pursue it in full.

With the arrival of the Great Depression in the 1930s, however, the occupational options for the younger generation began to dry up. Many young people were pushed out of the job force by employers who preferred to save their limited jobs for adults desperate to feed their families, with adult labor viewed as more essential to the family’s survival. Child labor laws further restricted the work options available to American youth, including the provisions set out in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. As competition rose and opportunities declined, then, more and more children entered high school. This influx of attendees was crucial to evolving high school beyond merely being the stomping grounds of upper-middle-class kids. “By 1936, 65 percent [of teenage youth] were high school students, the highest proportion to date,” Grace Palladino writes in Teenagers. “In the process, adolescents had become an age group and not just a wealthy social class, a shift that helped to create the idea of a separate, teenage generation” (5). In short, the Great Depression displaced the youth worker, and forced an entire generation into high school as a stop-gap measure.

If a temporary solution lasts long enough, however, it becomes all the more likely to wind up being permanent. As more and more young people delayed their entry into the work force, high school transformed from a temporary aberration to the new normal. While a high-school based adolescence had, as Palladino notes, once been a mark of wealth and class, in the thirties it began to become merely a marker of age. This is not to say that class was no longer relevant in the high school setting, because a youth’s
relative economic status could play a significant role in what she did once she enrolled in high school. Only those who belonged to “the most prosperous, professional families could afford to enjoy a social life,” for instance (Palladino 9). But while the middle- and upper-class might still have carried certain advantages with them into high school, no longer could they and they alone lay claim to it. High school transformed from being the realm of the wealthy into the land of the young; economic crisis drove young people to the high school life, but soon it was tradition that kept them there.

Many consequences emerged from this shift to high school as the standard way for young people to spend their late teenage years, but chief among them was the emergence of a distinct consumer market aimed at high schoolers. This market was, in part, a response to the new needs of those kids stuck in high school. Where they once might have been already on the road to adulthood, they were now confined to four years of schooling that kept them marked as young—specifically, as not adult. As such, high schoolers were eager to find ways of distinguishing themselves from the children they no longer wanted to be, and did so in part by creating a baseline social standard that all high schoolers were expected to live up to. Even if students remained largely dependent upon their parents financially, they were soon able to create a sense of identity and independence by cultivating tastes unique to their age group. As Murray Milner Jr. points out, teenagers have been associated with “shallow” concerns almost since their inception, with social status being their primary focus. Milner argues that this preoccupation emerged “because they have so little real economic or political power” (4). As he explains, high school students are required to spend years following rules and learning a curriculum set out by adults in a space meant to strip them of many
facets of their “power.” What they do have, however, is “one crucial kind of power: the power to create an informal social world in which they evaluate one another” (4). Many students came to value popularity with their peers over adult respect.

Marketers were quick to see an opportunity in this “informal social world” that a more widely standardized high school experience had begun to create. Soon enough, teenagers were offered a wide-ranging market just for them. Teens could expect magazines, films, music, gathering places, and more to be tailored to their needs and interests—and if they had to pay to access these products, well, that was nothing to be concerned about, for either teens or their parents. Jon Savage suggests that the teenage market flourished in part because of what it was not:

Coming to prominence through an intricate ecology of peer pressure, individual desires, and savvy marketing, the Teenage [sic] resolved the question posed by the [Second World War]: what kind of mass society will we live in? In contrast to fascism, the American future would be ordered around pleasure and acquisition: the harnessing of mass production to disposable leisure items like magazines, cosmetics, and clothes as well as military hardware. (465)

As easy as it would have been for adults to dismiss teenagers and their focus on seemingly unnecessary consumer items, the ideologies inherent to such a drive were, at least initially, laudable. If faced with a choice between the austerity of fascism and the opulence of capitalism, then surely even teenagers should be allowed their indulgences. In many respects, the emergence of the teenager was the purest sign of post-war American values at work, as it presented to the world an entire generation whose lives were defined by education, leisure, and commercialism because they were not required in the work force. If spending money was to be a patriotic act, then teenagers were the greatest patriots of all.
Young Adult Literature

As the market for the new teenage demographic blossomed, the publishing industry was eager to jump on board. Books aimed at young people were nothing new in the 1940s, as the history of children’s literature would show. But because teenagers were new, so were books written specifically with them in mind. As such, young adult literature was born in the immediate wake of the teenager’s emergence. Although it is easy to name many antecedents to the kinds of books labeled as YA literature today, such as Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick books or even Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, YA literature marks itself as different from its predecessors due, in no small part, to its intentional move to fill a perceived gap in the teenage consumer market. Teenagers were quick to be given their own music, their own movies, and even their own cosmetics, so there was no reason they shouldn’t be given their own books, too.

Understanding the true nature of YA literature, however, is a somewhat complex task. Much like the teenager, who must be understood as distinct from the adolescent, it is important to draw a line between adolescent literature and young adult literature. Or perhaps less a line than a Euler diagram of sorts, because while all adolescent literature is not young adult literature, young adult literature is generally perceived as a subset of adolescent literature. Sheila Schwartz, writing in the 1970s, cites the American Library Association as having three categories of adolescent literature—books written for adolescents, books about adolescents, and books of interest to adolescents (3). In discussing this breakdown, Roberta Seelinger Trites suggests that only the first, books written for adolescent readers, qualifies as YA literature (7). That is, YA literature is not defined solely by the presence of an adolescent protagonist or character, nor by a
book’s inherent interest to teenage readers. Instead, YA fiction is a more specifically tailored category, one seemingly defined in part by intention. Trites goes on to declare YA novels to be “a marketplace phenomenon of the twentieth century” and to clarify that “publishers rather than teenagers bestow the designation of ‘YA’ on these books” (7-8).\(^6\) In short, YA literature is a publishing category manufactured to be consumed by teenagers.\(^7\)

Despite this rather simple definition, however, YA literature remains a complicated field. Consider the name itself. Even though the books are ostensibly written about and for teenage readers, the category is best known as young adult literature, not teenage literature. Part of this may be because, while the books are marketed primarily to teenage readers, the actual audience for YA literature is a bit harder to pin down. Librarian Michael Cart declares the difficulty in defining the term “young adult” early in his book *Young Adult Literature*, asserting, “it’s anybody’s guess who—or what—they are!” (3). Later in the book, though, he offers a more precise estimation of the group under consideration: “Surely the term no longer embraces only twelve- to eighteen-year-olds—it must now also include nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds (or even older, as the twelve-to-thirty-four MTV demographic has become an increasingly desirable market in publishing)” (119). That Cart offers three possible age ranges for “young adult” in the same sentence is indicative of the amorphous nature of

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\(^6\) The role of gatekeepers such as publishers, librarians, teachers, and parents in determining the boundaries and goals of YA literature cannot be understated. We will see examples of their influence across this project, most notably when we reach the “paperback revolution” in Chapter 4, but in an effort to maintain a closer focus on the category’s relationship with the teenager, I have chosen not to delve too far into the various controlling interests behind YA literature. See Michael Cart’s *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* for a more detailed discussion on the subject.

\(^7\) Throughout this project, I will refer to YA as a “category” rather than a “genre.” This is because YA literature is not confined to any single kind of story, and contains genres as disparate as historical romance and dystopian fiction.
the term. Although the category ostensibly serves teenagers, the reality is that teenagers are not alone in reading YA literature. Younger children “read up,” eager to see what lies ahead for them, and many older readers continue to read YA well into adulthood. Teen films, music, and fashion have a long history of spreading beyond the borders of thirteen to nineteen; YA literature simply carries this flexibility in its name.

It is worth noting, however, that YA literature is not the only nomenclature under which these kinds of books are discussed. Although, as noted above, adolescent literature covers a wider array of books than YA literature does, it remains one of the key terms used when writing about these novels in an academic context. Scholars such as Trites and Amy Pattee make the choice to use “adolescent literature” in the titles of their books (the aforementioned Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature and Reading the Adolescent Romance: Sweet Valley High and the Popular Young Adult Romance Novel, respectively) in order to mark them as participating in a specific discourse. Compared to the more nebulous “young adult,” “adolescent” offers a more academic and interdisciplinary way of labeling the literature. Since G. Stanley Hall’s 1904 introduction of the adolescent into psychology, the concept of the adolescent has bled into fields like sociology, history, and even biology. Whether or not the adolescent is a genuine biological phase of life, using “adolescent” as a descriptor for this sub-set of literature helps to situate the work of literary critics within a broader academic discourse. This means that the adolescent figure can be studied through any number of lenses, and adolescent literature as a whole can take up a wider

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8 That Pattee uses both “adolescent” and “young adult” signals a recognition of a distinction between the two terms.
scope, encompassing both books written for the adolescent and books written about her.

On the other end of the naming spectrum, far away from the attempts for an objectively academic name for the literature, is the impulse to refer to it as “teen literature.” This terminology is almost exclusively the provenance of booksellers, most often found in the in-store and online categorization of their books. If a reader wishes to find young adult books in large chains like Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million, she must go to the store’s “teen” section. Amazon.com also labels its young adult books in this way; until recently, the section on their website for the category was simply called “Teen,” though in 2014 it updated to be called “Teen and Young Adult.” Because teenagers are primarily defined by their position as consumers in the American landscape, it is quite telling that retailers are the ones encouraging the labeling of young adult books as “teen” books. Although these stores make no effort to prevent those who are no longer or not yet in their teen years from browsing the Teen sections, the choice of language indicates the stores’ awareness of the value of the teenage consumer market. They are most likely to successfully sell to those whose only job is to buy.

Each of these terms—young adult, adolescent, and teen—carries with it a valuable set of connotations and implications; one’s choice of language is often revealing of the investments writers have in the category. For this project, I have chosen to default to “young adult literature” as my primary descriptor, although the other terms will be used when and if appropriate when citing other writers. My reasoning is twofold. First, “young adult” is, as Trites explains, understood to be more specific than “adolescent” when it comes to literature. Second, the relatively limited use of “teen,”
makes it a less valuable term, as authors, publishers, and academics are less likely to use that particular language. Indeed, the institutionalization of the term “young adult,” begun in part with the 1957 establishment of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association, has played a key role in establishing “young adult” as the more useful of the terms. Moreover, my investment throughout this project is with those books that have been written, published, and marketed as YA literature specifically. While I recognize the value of books written for adults that have teen appeal, and will reference many of them throughout the following chapters, the central texts I will be discussing are, with few exceptions, precisely identified as YA literature. YA literature is a response to the teenager, and as such, it will be my central focus.

**Project Overview**

What the previous two sections demonstrate, more than anything, is that the teenager and young adult literature are both complicated, unstable concepts that are continually being shaped and re-shaped to fill the needs of the moment. Throughout this project, I hope to bridge the gap that exists in academic discussions of the two by reading the teenager through YA literature and YA literature through the teenager. Rather than treating the two concepts as largely separate from one another, I intend to embrace the messiness that comes from their interactions. To that end, I employ a cultural studies approach that places academic surveys alongside historical selections from popular periodicals and close readings of YA literature and other teen-oriented media. When combined, these seemingly disparate texts create an interwoven narrative.

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9 The Young Adult Services Division was the name for YALSA, the Young Adult Library Services Association, until 1992.
that reveals just how integral YA literature has been to supporting the national narrative of the American teenager.

I begin this effort in Chapter 2, with a discussion of the ways in which the origins of the teenager and YA literature overlapped and fed into each other as they each tried to establish their own boundaries and expectations. In 1942, the year after Stern’s article appeared, Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* was published. Often identified as the first YA novel, Daly’s novel of first love and summer romance positions the teenager as thoughtful and deliberate, and constantly pushes back against the notion that the teenager is inherently flighty or anything other than important. Moreover, Daly’s relative youth as a writer lends an aura of authenticity to the book; as a member of one of the first generations of teenagers, Daly and her book were presumed to have a more “realistic” understanding of the teenage mind. When positioned against the backdrop of the Second World War, then, *Seventeenth Summer* helps to reveal the country’s relative uncertainty about the level of faith and trust they should have in this new demographic at a time when the future was entirely uncertain.

Chapter 3 moves into the 1960s to examine how, two decades after the teenager formally appeared, the nation’s perspective on the teenager began to shift from one of relative hope to one of outright suspicion. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, the specter of juvenile delinquency gained traction in the American mindset, turning teenagers from the promise for the nation’s future into a threat to the country’s very lives and families. Teen media had been quick to embrace the figure of the delinquent, perhaps most notably in the 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*, and it wasn’t long before YA literature joined in. One of the most foundational texts in the history of YA literature,
S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) took up the discussion of the juvenile delinquent, but in a manner that attempted to create an ease of understanding between the kids who were getting in trouble and the adults who were punishing them. By pairing *The Outsiders* with Kristen Hunter’s lesser-known *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968), Chapter 3 unpacks the ways in which YA literature challenged and reframed discussions of juvenile delinquency by exploring issues of family life, poverty, and structural racism.

The renewed vigor of the conservative movement in the 1980s serves as the backdrop for Chapter 4. As the country moved away from the heights of the sexual revolution and upheaval of the Civil Rights movement in the previous decade in favor of a Republican-led conservatism, YA literature performed a similar move away from the darker stories of the problem novel and into the more carefully contained and constructed world of series romance fiction. The debut of *Sweet Valley High* in 1983 best represents this transition, as it takes the American dream-land of suburbia and malls and turns it into the setting for a wide array of all-American teens. Additionally, the return to a book-packaging model akin to that of the Stratemeyer Syndicate from the 1930s to produce the *Sweet Valley* series indicates that YA publishers were no longer entirely dependent upon the actual teenager in order to create stories that would seem relevant and entertaining. While previous iterations of young adult literature had invoked the image of the “authentic” teenage voice, *Sweet Valley High* favored mass-production to keep teenage readers engaged. In *Sweet Valley High*, it wasn’t only the capitalist version of the American dream family promoted by Ronald Reagan’s presidency that was bundled up and presented with a neat bow for readers of the series—it was the
teenage voice and experience, too. The teenager was contained, and thus safe once more.

By the turn of the century, however, conversations about the teenager weren’t just about whether they could be trusted. Instead, they were about whether the teenager would continue to exist at all. In Chapter 5, I take up this moment of transition, which was a moment that reached both the teenager and YA literature. While cultural commentators were wondering if the Internet would displace and disrupt the function of the teenager, YA critics were lamenting the decline in sales and reputation for the publishing category as a whole. Although neither side’s predictions proved to be correct—the teenager is still going strong, and YA literature has more market power than ever—the sense of fear in the face of a new century spoke to the nation’s renewed uncertainty about the future. The whole world was not at war, as it had been when both the term “teenager” and YA literature emerged, but it was changing, thanks to the Internet and other digital media. As such, young adult fiction would have to find a new form that would allow it to remain relevant in this impending future. To understand these tensions, I turn to the inaugural winner of the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, Walter Dean Myer’s Monster (1999), and consider how its combination of prose, photos, and screenplay brings all of these conversations together in one place.

In the conclusion, Chapter 6, I turn my attention to the present day, a time when YA literature is a thriving market force that spawns across media, creating adaptations and extensions in film, television, video games, music, and more. It is also a time when the teenager has, in the national mindset, become intimately linked with the Internet and
digital technology. Chapter 6 will offer a brief overview of the current state of young adult literature, before turning to a short analysis of Marvel Comics’ ongoing *Ms. Marvel* (2014-present) series. I will use *Ms. Marvel* to show how YA literature has expanded well beyond the borders of prose novels, as well as how recent YA titles have taken up conversations about race, sexuality, and technology to present a picture of the teenager that intermingles hope and suspicion in one neat and not-at-all tidy package.

Individually, these case studies each represent a moment of transition for the teenager and for young adult literature. Across the project, I will demonstrate how young adult literature has reflected the upheavals of teenage life at various historical moments: the initial development of the first “teenage” generation in the World War II era, the rise of juvenile delinquency as a threat to “polite” society in the fifties and sixties, the desire to safely contain the inherent dangers of teenage life during the Reagan presidency, and the turn-of-the-century worry that the teenage demographic might be on the verge of disappearing completely. Moreover, this project will show the ways in which young adult literature has been forced to adapt in response to the nation’s ever-changing image of the teenager within its pages. The category has often been as unstable as its subject, with its texts vacillating between glossy romance and stark realism, from ostensible authenticity to manufactured versimilitude, and from reliable formulae to innovative experiments. The case studies within this project have been chosen because each of them illustrates a prime example of the relationship between the teenager and young adult literature, thereby offering a compelling narrative for how and why the teenager can be explicated through attention to YA fiction.
Indeed, the collective narrative presented by these case studies is one that suggests that the ongoing evolution of the teenager in the United States has long been reflected by the kinds of stories being told in young adult literature. As I will argue throughout this project, the shared history of the teenager and young adult fiction is one of ongoing renegotiations of the status quo. The national image of the American teenager has undergone many moments of crisis, moments when the country has been forced to ask if the boundaries of who is and is not allowed to be a teenager should be redrawn—or if the teenager should exist at all. At each turn, young adult literature has offered works that both reflect these crises and, ultimately, help to ameliorate them. The teenager began its life as the domain of a select few—white, middle-class youth—and as a symbol of hope for the nation in the wake of the Second World War. Although this definition of the teenager has proven to be far from stable, with teens of color and lower-class youth regularly fighting to access to the teenage identity and the adult world continually finding reasons to be suspicious of young people, it has also proven to be impossible to fully reject. Perhaps there has been progress, I will argue, but that does not necessarily mean there has been fundamental change. As we will see, today's teenager is born out of all the teens that have gone before, and YA literature is more necessary than ever to understand exactly how we, as a nation, perceive those darn kids today.
CHAPTER 2
HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEARTS: SEVENTEENTH SUMMER AND THE WARTIME TEENAGER

In 1944, the United States government was fighting hard—to keep teenagers in high school. According to the September 11, 1944 edition of *Time* magazine, World War II had taken its toll on high school enrollment: “In the last three years the nation’s high schools have lost 1,000,000 pupils to wartime jobs” (72). Faced with the realities of seeing their nation at war, many teens no longer found high school to be a satisfying option for their lives and sought other, seemingly more productive means of occupying their time. By entering into the workplace, however, these young people were raising the concerns of the U.S. Children’s Bureau. The Bureau had begun to worry about the many effects that these teens in the workplace might cause, including “violations of child-labor laws…industrial accidents to children, [and] job hunting young wanderers” (72). The government’s response to these fears was a widespread media campaign that encouraged teens to leave their summer jobs behind and return to high school, in what *Time* calls the “biggest back-to-school drive in history” (72).

The campaign spanned the country, supported by over 30 states, and called upon an impressive array of personalities to deliver its message. Big-name celebrities stepped in, with Bing Crosby starring in a short film and Frank Sinatra penning a newspaper editorial. Fictional characters got in on the act, too, as the campaign featured appearances by Superman and The Lone Ranger. These choices seem telling, a clear demonstration of the voices that the U.S. government expected teens to be willing to listen to when faced with a potentially unpopular message. Even this early into the American teenager’s lifespan, celebrities and popular culture entities were an obvious way to attract the attention of the youth in question. These figures were flashy
and well-loved, and thus worthy of respect. But *Time* also cites two other important figures in the campaign: “the Air Forces’ General H. H. Arnold” and “the Marines’ Lieut. General A. A. Vandegrift” (72). By including these two high-ranking officers in the push to send kids back to school, the campaign revealed a more complex understanding of the motives driving teens away from school. For many of them, leaving school to work or join the military was a genuine effort to help support their country. While some teens could be persuaded by making school seem “cool” through association with various celebrities, others needed something more. They needed to know it was their civic duty.

*Time* seems skeptical as to whether the campaign would actually make a difference in enrollment numbers, suggesting instead that layoffs in the work place and the knowledge that the war would someday end might play a bigger role in turning teenagers back to the high school scene (72). Whatever the reason, *Time* happily reports on a number of locations across the country where teenagers were leaving the factory behind in favor of the classroom once more. The explanations the various teens offer come in many forms, from disdain for the intelligence of their co-workers to simply wishing to follow in the footsteps of their friends, but it is the story of a boy leaving his job in Houston, Texas that is the most striking today. “‘I go into the Navy around Christmas,’” he says, “‘and want to get in one more season of football’” (72). In one sentence, this nameless boy encapsulates the dichotomy of the 1940s teenager in America: civic-minded enough to join the military as soon as possible, but carefree enough to spend a semester playing football first.

It is this tension—referenced here in *Time* in 1944, and, as noted in Chapter 1, in the 1941 *Popular Science* where Edith M. Stern first identifies the teenager—that will be
the central focus of Chapter 2. Throughout the 1940s, the teenager was, if you’ll forgive
the wordplay, in its infancy. No one quite knew what this new demographic was, or how
it was supposed to fit into the daily rhythms of American life. As we will see, however,
one of the chief ways in which this question came to be answered was by the
emergence of young adult literature. Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* (1942), a
novel about summer romance that helped establish the YA category, appeared at just
the right moment to offer readers invaluable insight into the mind of a teenage girl on
the edge of adulthood. In Chapter 2, then, we will explore the ways in which Daly’s book
helped to establish so much of our current understanding of YA literature and its
subject, due in no small part to its expression of the uncertainty that was central to the
nation’s relationship with the 1940s teenager. As I will show, Daly understood the new
teenage generation so well because she had grown up as a part of it, and her novel’s
intimate narrative voice prioritized the teenage perspective in a way that would come to
define young adult literature. Moreover, *Seventeenth Summer* offers insight into the
ways in which the teenager’s habits of socialization and consumerism could be
balanced against their burgeoning maturity, creating the foundation for the perception of
the teenager that persists to this day. Daly’s novel captures the cultural zeitgeist of the
teenager’s moment of creation, and responds by assuring readers that the teenager can
be thoughtful *and* impetuous, romantic *and* realistic, all at the same time. With a
depression behind and a war ahead, this was the only kind of promise that stood a
chance of convincing a wary nation to make room for these perplexing new arrivals.

**The First Teenage Generation**

Of course, in the early 1940s, no one quite knew what young adult literature was.
Although most scholars do pinpoint *Seventeenth Summer* as the start of the new
publishing category, it is something of a retroactively applied title—after all, for it to have been the first entry in the category implies that no previous version of the category existed. In many interviews, Daly noted that when she wrote the book, she expected and intended for it to find an adult audience. According to her, “the book was in print for 20 years before someone noticed that teenagers were reading it and designated it YA” (qtd. in Carroll 12). Presumably, then, Daly did not intend to create a new publishing paradigm with the publication of her novel, but intention and result often differ. For teen readers encountering the book in the early days of its publication, the novel seemed poised to fill a gap that no one had even realized existed yet. Simply put, it told the truth.

*Seventeenth Summer* is a quiet story. Told through an intimate first-person narration by a seventeen-year-old girl named Angie, the novel is a tale of firsts: first dates, first love, first heartbreak. Wallflower Angie gains the attention of popular boy Jack, and as they begin to date, she has to learn how to navigate the intimidating social waters that come with dating a boy in the in-crowd. Although she and Jack do fall in love over the course of the summer, the novel offers no romantic, fairy-tale ending. Jack offers a panicked proposal as the summer ends, desperate at the prospect of their separation, but Angie does not accept. At the end of the book, Jack goes off to work for his uncle in another state and Angie goes off to college, both of them left only with the memory of their time together. The very simplicity of the novel is the point: Angie is an ordinary teenage girl, facing ordinary teenage problems.

Part of what made this quiet novel revolutionary was the arrival of the teenager itself. As Chapter 1 explained, the 1930s played a key role in the establishment of the American teenager. Throughout the Great Depression, the nation’s young people began
a migration out of the work force and, eventually, into high school. The reasons for this shift were varied, but many of them came back to changes in the opportunities available to younger workers. Activists worked to ensure the passage of child labor laws, which made many of the positions previously held by children and teens alike illegal. Moreover, with the weight of the Depression hanging over the job market, paying positions were increasingly restricted to adults—often men—who carried the burden of feeding their families. With employers increasingly shutting their doors in young people’s faces, many teenagers grabbed their books and walked through the always-open doors of the public high school.

What this influx of teenagers into high school did most effectively was to create a sense of community. Most histories of the teenager in America agree that it was putting the country’s youth into a single space that sparked the emergence of the teenage demographic. Thomas Hine argues, “The enforced separation of young people from the economic mainstream and the emergence of high school as the common experience of young Americans led directly to the emergence of teenagers as we know them today” (204). Of key importance here is the notion of a “common experience” that is centered on the high school: for the first time in the nation’s history, its youth were not scattered across places of employment. They were together, to the near-exclusion of adults, and that mattered. According to Jon Savage, “Within the high school grade system, adolescent immersion in their immediate peer world was total. Just as 1920s college youth had experienced the sense that they were an important social group, their

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1 In addition to those entering high school, Jon Savage discusses the 200,000 out-of-work wanderers who were called the “Children’s Army,” which he describes as a “very small but highly visible proportion” of young Americans who were unemployed and did not attend school (279).
younger, high-school-age siblings began to feel the same” (285). Grace Palladino echoes this sentiment: “When a teenage majority spent the better part of their day in high school, they learned to look to one another and not to adults for advice, information, and approval” (5). The teenager was thus born out of shared space, the result of a world in which American youth could set their own expectations for one another.

Not that the high school experience was ever truly uniform. From its earliest days, the high school was a space meant primarily to benefit the white and well-off. Palladino describes the young people who expected a full high school education in the nineteenth century as “a tiny elite,” which constituted only a small subset of the full teenage population. Part of the reason that high school spent so long as the domain of the wealthy was, put simply, necessity. “Through most of the [nineteenth] century, there were a dozen [teenagers] on farms for each one in high school,” Hine writes. “Americans believed in schooling for their children, but they didn’t think they could afford to forgo the income that their teenage offspring could provide” (140). While this situation may have changed in during the Great Depression, in part by making that extra income impossible to obtain, it did not entirely level the playing field. Working-class kids that did manage to enroll in high school were accused of not taking their education seriously enough, because they were often the first to have to drop out of school to support their families (Hine 216). Moreover, school segregation would remain in effect until the sixties, which meant black and other minority students were regularly denied the same level of education offered to their white counterparts. Even those who pursued schooling knew they stood little chance of being viewed as equal to white teenagers
with similar ambitions. “Black teenagers who played by society’s rules and took
education seriously [still] knew that they could never move beyond the bounds of their
own, separate communities,” Palladino explains (13). Working class and minority youth
were, in fact, more likely to enter high school and receive an education than they had
been in the previous century, but doing so offered no guarantee of success in a world
that was built for someone else entirely. Indeed, they remained at a severe
disadvantage in one important area of the high school experience: their social lives.

Although the high school brought together teens from across social classes, it did
not necessarily serve as a democratizing force that suddenly made them all equal. A
key consequence of the new high school culture was the development of a set of new
social expectations that all teens were expected to meet, whether they could afford
them or not. “It took money and family status (measured by a car, a telephone, a
spacious house, and an ample allowance) to rate as part of the high school crowd—
assets that were rare indeed during the Great Depression” (Palladino 9). Students from
wealthier backgrounds (and, in some cases, with more permissive parents) had an
easier time of meeting the standard, which went a long way to ensure that they were the
ones setting the standard. The result was an image of the teenager—white, wealthy,
and well-socialized—that rather belied its reality. Working-class youth could not always
afford shoes to wear to school, let alone to participate in the kinds of social activities
well-off teens considered commonplace (Hine 207). The financial divide would often
manifest in the social dynamics of a school, as exemplified when Hine quotes a
working-class girl who knows none of the richer kids will dance with her if she attends
the school dance (216). However important attending high school was to the
development of this new demographic, being a student alone was not yet enough to guarantee that a young person would get to be a “teenager”—and the teenage identity did not come cheap.

Throughout the 1930s, then, the American high school provided a foundation upon which the concept of the teenager could grow. Even in a time of extreme economic hardship, when most students could never hope to have extra spending money, it became clear that to be a teenager should involve at least wanting to have the kind of social life put on display by the wealthiest students. The social standards dictated by a select group of students thus became the standard against which all others were to be judged, making non-academic activities like dating a central part of the teenage experience. This transformation happened quickly, and in a teen-occupied space, out of the sight of most adults. As such, the emergence of the teenager created a lack in the media world: stories about teenagers, rather than simply about those in their teenage years. Intentionally or otherwise, Maureen Daly and her novel were perfectly poised to fill this gap. Daly herself was among the many young people that made up this first generation of teenagers, and her novel represented the thoughts and fears that were unique to her cohort. As we will see across the rest of Chapter 2, Daly was able to do more in *Seventeenth Summer* than simply represent the new teenager. She would legitimize it.

**Finding the Teenage Voice**

The changes in circumstance for American youth in the 1930s that led to the arrival of the “teenager,” then, meant that Maureen Daly had something entirely different to write about than her literary predecessors; at the very least, she had a different perspective to draw upon in penning her novel. Daly was only twenty-one upon the
1942 publication of *Seventeenth Summer*, her debut novel, which places her high school years squarely at the end of the previous decade. Daly’s relative youth quickly became a central piece of the rhetoric surrounding her novel, and was regularly presented as one of the book’s many selling points. According to Michael Cart, Daly herself was known to claim that she was, in fact, a teenager at the time she wrote the book. Cart qualifies this claim, noting that “The New York Times reported that only fifty pages of the book had been written before the author turned twenty,” before dismissing this particular distinction as ultimately irrelevant (16). While this assertion has merit in some respects, as her age makes no difference when it comes to evaluating her prose, I would argue that Daly’s youth as a writer has had immense bearing on the critical and cultural reception of her novel.

In fact, if we look at the ways in which *The New York Times* discussed Daly’s novel upon its release, we can see that the author’s age was considered quite relevant indeed. The theme of youth is heavy throughout Edith H. Walton’s review of *Seventeenth Summer*, which the writer begins by discussing the “quality of freshness” that she believes characterized Daly’s award-winning short story from 1938. Walton notes that this freshness can be “partly explained by the circumstance that the author herself was a 16-year-old girl” (BR7). The critic then continues to invoke the youth of Daly and her novel throughout the review: she calls the book “lyrically young,” suggests that Daly being “so close to an experience not easy to recapture” is much of the reason for the story’s success, and praises the novel for being “completely up to date in its

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2 I would actually argue that the interview Cart cites is not quite as specific as he makes it appear. All the article notes is that the first fifty pages won an award when Daly was twenty-one. While it does indicate that she “finished her novel,” the precise timing as to when that occurred is not made clear in Robert Van Gelder’s interview with Daly. It certainly does not indicate that she had only written those fifty pages before she turned twenty.
idiom and its atmosphere” (BR7). A couple months later, in an interview with Robert Van Gelder, Daly is able to push these themes herself. She reiterates that she has been writing since high school, and notes that much of her writing is semi-autobiographical, drawing upon her own social experiences as a teenager. Taken together, these two pieces suggest that no small part of Seventeenth Summer’s notability in 1942 came from the relative novelty of Daly’s youth. The novel might have been expected to stand on its own, but it stood out because of its author.

Nonetheless, it would be disingenuous to suggest that Seventeenth Summer was the first book to ever hold appeal to American teenagers, however “fresh” Daly’s perspective might have been. Indeed, the roots of young adult literature stretch wide and deep, reaching far enough to include adventure novels, dime novels, gothic novels, and conduct novels, to name but a few. In the 1930s in particular, the decade that saw the teenager first beginning to take shape, dime novels and series fiction saw an explosion in popularity among children and adults alike. Among the best-remembered of these texts today are the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, launched by the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate at the start of the decade. The novels in the series follow the titular Nancy Drew, a spunky teenage girl who can solve every mystery she comes across—which is to say, at least one per book. Aimed primarily at young female readers, the series was a near-instant bestseller: the first three books sold like gangbusters, and the series soon became one of its publisher’s only ways of ensuring survival during the Great Depression (Rehak 121). Edward Stratemeyer, head of the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate, was known at the time as a “literary producer,” or someone who created
formulaic stories en masse that could be produced, sold, and bought cheaply. The Syndicate’s prolific publishing rate was made possible to a streamlined mode of production, which began with Stratemeyer creating a character that could sustain a series and writing a brief pitch and short book outlines. Once the broad sketches of the series were in place, he would then assign ghostwriters the task of expanding these summaries into full books (Baxter 136; Rehak 25-6). The Nancy Drew books were written using this model; the Syndicate had a formula, and it stuck to it.

For as popular as the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories were and continue to be, however, the timing of their publication at the start of the thirties meant that they could not fully capture the image of the teenager, if only because the teenager had not yet fully developed. Moreover, the hyper-constructed nature of the series meant it could never quite make the same claims to capturing the true teenage experience as Seventeenth Summer. While the same woman, Mildred Wert Benson, wrote many of the early Nancy Drew books, it was never her name on the cover, but that of the fictional Carolyn Keene (Martin). Certainly, Benson did not have the luxury of being interviewed by The New York Times to discuss her influences in the same way that Daly did, because the “truth” behind the publication of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories was a carefully controlled bit of information. What’s more, the series relied upon a distant third-person narration, the tone of which suggests an adult presence in the text. This voice,

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3 Kent Baxter points out that this title “reveals a great deal about the status of juvenile literature at the turn of the century, which is tied to what then and now is called cheap reading” (137). In essence, because the content of Stratemeyer’s books was perceived as having no literature value, he was resigned to the realm of “production” rather than “creation.”

4 In fact, the Nancy Drew series—and Nancy Drew as a character—is arguably the most popular of all the texts I discuss in this project. Not only has the series been updated and rebooted multiple times over the years, it has also seen multiple film adaptations and a massively successful video game franchise. In January 2016, CBS also ordered a pilot for a new television adaptation of the series.
too, ran counter to Daly’s more intimate novel; as we will soon see, much of the appeal of Daly’s novel came from the rejection of such an “adult” influence. As such, neither Nancy Drew nor any of the dozens of other series produced by the Stratemeyer Literary Syndicate could hope or claim to offer the kind of perfectly timed, singular perspective that Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* promised its readers.

Indeed, *Seventeenth Summer* is often positioned as the text that established the popularity of the “junior novel,” a category of literature aimed at young readers that emerged as one facet of the burgeoning teenage consumer market. Writing in 1955, Richard S. Alm noted the arrival of this new category as distinct from the Nancy Drews that had previously populated the world of young people’s literature. He addresses what he views to be “a flood of slick, patterned, rather inconsequential stories written to capitalize on a rapidly expanding market” before turning to the junior novel, which he describes as featuring “the personal concerns of the teen-ager” as its central focus (315). This shift toward “personal” insight was key to the development of the subgenre, and as Amanda K. Allen notes in her article on reader responses to *Seventeenth Summer*, Daly’s novel was quickly held up as one of the leading figures in the field. According to Allen, one of the primary ways in which *Summer* was established as a junior novel—and as a junior novel for girls, specifically—was through the influence of librarians in promoting the text as relevant to the lives of young, female readers (27).

While Daly may have expected her novel to find an adult readership, it quickly became

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5 The junior novel is often positioned as a precursor to what Amanda K. Allen refers to as the “canonical” version of young adult literature that would emerge in the late 1960s (24). While this is certainly true in the sense that the category would not be widely known as “young adult literature” until that point, I would argue that much of the work the junior novel—and Daly’s book in particular—performs in representing the teenager is on equal footing to those later texts.
institutionalized as a book that offered arguably unprecedented insight into the life of the teenager.

Where Daly’s novel broke from its predecessors, then, was in its motions toward authenticity. As a young person—as a recent teenager, in fact—Daly could be presumed to know better than any other writer what it was to live and play as part of this new demographic. Daly may not have been the only voice of the first teenage generation, but she would certainly come to be among its loudest. After all, no less an august publication than *The New York Times* helped to create a narrative that suggested Daly’s youth made her work all the more genuine. That *Seventeenth Summer* begins with its narrator confessing to a moment of doubt suggests that part of understanding the “authentic” teenager involves recognizing the uncertainty which marks the teenager’s life. Angie’s narration begins, “I don’t know just why I’m telling you all this. Maybe you’ll think I’m being silly” (1). Angie is not entirely capable in this moment of articulating why, precisely, she feels the need to recount the events of this one summer, and she is already well aware that her words and experiences might be easily dismissed. As we saw in Edith M. Stern’s *Popular Science* article that opened Chapter 1, the expectation that the teenager would be un-serious was already well-engrained into the public point of view. Angie knows that her experience is likely to come under criticism, and acknowledges that possibility immediately. By foregrounding Angie’s moment of doubt, Daly suggests that anxiety over the value of the teenage perspective is one of the most important battles being fought in the teenage mind.

This moment of teetering uncertainty, however, is promptly followed by a reversal of course and an impassioned defense of the worth of Angie’s story. Angie moves away
from her insecurity, instead deciding to stand firm in her choice to relate the tale. She asserts, “But I’m not [being silly], really, because this is important. You see, it was different! It wasn’t just because it was Jack and I either—it was something much more than that” (1, emphasis in original). In this moment, Angie makes a move that clarifies her place in the world, or, at least, how she sees it. She believes that her story is valuable because it is “different,” a notion she goes on to develop even more later in the paragraph. She explains that her love for Jack “wasn’t as it’s written in magazine stories or as in morning radio serials,” suggesting that the disposable media aimed at her and her peers does not capture the reality of being a teenager and falling in love. She further adds that it “wasn’t puppy love or infatuation or love at first sight or anything that people always talk about and laugh,” and reiterates again that it “wasn’t silly” (1). By including such a long list of ways Angie anticipates her story being dismissed, Daly makes it clear just how deeply the instinct to criticize and devalue the teenager already ran in the national consciousness. Moreover, this moment shows that Angie knows the best way to establish her own validity is to position herself against that which is most likely to be deemed “silly.” Not only does Angie know she runs the risk of being written off by readers if she doesn’t offer a firm justification for sharing her story, but she also knows the most efficient way to make such a justification is by dismissing other tales of young love in turn.

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6 Although the subject of Angie’s second-person address here is left unidentified, context suggests that it is likely to be an adult. Her peers would, one presumes, be less likely to require quite so much convincing that a teenage love story matters.

7 One could also easily argue that Angie’s defense here doubles as Daly’s—that is, that both character and author are explaining why the story is worth reading.
Seventeenth Summer thus opens with an acknowledgment that the teenager is often dismissed as silly, but then forges ahead anyway simply because Angie deems her own voice important, italics and all. More than anything else, this narrative move is the key to understanding why Seventeenth Summer is so easily positioned as the first young adult novel. By allowing Angie to share her experience even in the face of doubt, Daly presents us with one of the earliest examples of a novel that is about teenagers to the potential exclusion of the opinions and perspectives of adults. In the very first paragraph, her protagonist recognizes that adults might not approve of her story and actively decides not to care. Although this is a seemingly small moment in the full scope of the novel, it speaks more broadly to the transition the American teenager had undergone across the previous decade. Angie effectively demonstrates the teenager’s “independent attitude” that Palladino describes as deriving from high school students coming to be more interested in each other than the adult world (6). Seventeenth Summer declares right from the start that it is going to reflect this new, more independent teenage experience. The adult world might exist, but it just doesn’t matter.

The novel’s narrative point of view helps to further establish this dynamic. The first-person perspective leaves room for little separation between character and reader, refusing to let readers step away from Angie’s specific viewpoint. As a result, it is not merely a story about a teenager that is being valued in the novel, but the specific perspective of a teenager. Daly claimed to have made Angie’s experiences a priority in her writing, having pushed back against her editors when they suggested adding a plot in which Angie’s older sister has an abortion because “it could occur in someone else’s summer, but it could not occur in Angie Morrow’s summer” (qtd. in Carrol 16). For Daly,
the novel needed to be exclusively about Angie and her experiences, no matter what adults or other outsiders might think. Daly allows her teenage character to speak for herself, without any textual means of filtering or containing her voice. At a time when the notion of what it meant to be a teenager remained very much up for debate, this was a bold move—and, for young adult literature, a foundational one.

*Seventeenth Summer*’s position as the first young adult novel is derived, then, from a peculiar combination of Daly’s youth, the novel’s narrative voice, and the teenager’s increased independence from the adult world. In the Van Gelder interview, Daly speaks about the autobiographical bent to her work: “What I’ve tried to do, you see, is just write about the things that happened to me and that I knew about—that meant a lot to me” (BR2). While all fiction is an exercise in imagination, there is, Daly’s quote suggests, something to be said for lived experience. Daly could capture the voice of a teenage girl so clearly because she had been one herself—a luxury that nearly all writers older than her could not enjoy. Even those wealthy few who had once been high schoolers could never hope to understand what it was to be part of the first teenage generation; only someone who had lived as a “teenager” could be trusted to invoke a supposedly genuine image the experiences and emotions of teenage life. Whether or not Daly’s age left its mark on the quality of her prose or her ability to render a beautifully detailed character beat is, of course, impossible to say with any certainty. What we do know, however, is that in *Seventeenth Summer*, Daly lays claim to an “authentic” kind of teenage voice that had previously been absent. It was a book by, about, and, even if only accidentally, *for* the teenage generation.

It was the birth of young adult literature.
A New Social Order

By 1942, then, the teenager had staked its claim on the American landscape and, even if no one quite knew it yet, the first young adult novel had hit shelves. As I will argue across the rest of Chapter 1, however, the value of this new publishing category came not in its mere existence, but in the insight it could offer into precisely what mattered most to this new subset of young people. We have already seen the ways in which the development of widespread high school attendance was crucial to the creation of the teenage demographic, as it allowed for teenagers to turn to one another instead of to adults for behavioral and social expectations. The high school educational experience thus came to see the intended purpose of providing teenage youth with an academic education supplemented by this unofficial focus on keeping up and fitting in with the “right” way to be a teenager. It is unsurprising, then, that the importance of the high school social world would prove to be among the most prominent themes throughout Seventeenth Summer. Across the novel, Angie finds herself preoccupied with navigating the ins and outs of a social order she does not entirely understand, thereby allowing Daly to demonstrate just how important these peer-based expectations could be for the newly arrived teenager.

As its title would suggest, Seventeenth Summer is set during the course of a single summer season. Due to this limited time frame, the actual high school institution fades almost completely into the background of the novel. Angie graduates from the private Academy she attended shortly before the start of the story, and the arrival of fall sees her off to college. Some occasional references to and memories of Angie’s private school and the public high school attended by most of the other teenage characters in the novel is as close as we readers actually get to entering the high school setting,
because the summer holidays have made it unnecessary for the novel to do so. It would be easy to assume, then, that Daly’s novel has little to say about the high school itself, and in some ways, this is an accurate claim to make. Readers are given no insight into Angie’s daily school routine, or whether the curriculum at the public high school would allow the kinds of filmmaking programs Stern wrote about in *Popular Science*, or any other type of information that could only come from the novel embracing a high school setting. Even though Angie never once steps foot inside a high school, however, the importance of high school to the teenager’s social development threads its way across the novel’s pages.

Indeed, even though Angie graduated shortly before the start of the book, it soon becomes clear that high school has not been quick to release its grip on her peer group. The few particulars readers are offered about the experiences Angie and Jack each had in their secondary education serve to highlight the differences in their exposure to the “teenage” scene. Angie, readers learn, attended the all-girls Academy “just outside of town” (1). The spatial aspect here is significant; not only did Angie attend a school that only allowed her to interact with other girls, but she did so outside of town, and therefore away from many of the other kids her age. Which is not to say, however, that Angie learned nothing of import in her time at the Academy. We are told, after all, that she had a history class—but that history class was primarily useful because it was where she first heard of Jack, who used to date a girl who shared the history class with Angie. Jack’s experiences in the public high school are left similarly vague; Angie tells us little more than that he played basketball well enough to merit mention in the local papers (5). Jack, unlike Angie, had the advantage of being known and respected by his peers,
not least because he attended the public school instead of Angie’s more restricted private one. For as much as the details of their respective academic high school experiences appear to be little more than fading memories, however, the pair continue to be influenced by their social experiences.

Throughout the novel, readers are shown the variety of ways in which Angie’s Academy education denied her some very important lessons in how to successfully navigate the choppy waters of teenage social lives. Partially due to her attendance at the all-girls school and partially due to her own shyness, Angie emphatically considers herself an outsider to the social circle run by the popular kids in town. Jack, on the other hand, is part of the in-crowd. Despite never having crossed paths with him before, Angie knew of Jack’s position on and importance to his school’s basketball team and remembered the stories her classmate told about her dates with Jack. She recognizes him easily upon their first encounter at a drug store called McKnight’s, though she presumes he could not have any interest in her (2). Their difference in status is confirmed when he shows up at her house to ask her on a date a couple days later. When Angie says how she read about him in the local paper once, Jack initially declares her “just another one of [his] fans” (5). Immediately after this accusation, he comments that he knows her name, but only because he had to “find out after [he] saw [her] in McKnight’s the other night” (5). Between the two of them, Jack clearly has the social advantage. He may have had to do some work to learn who she is, but they both know that if she were more popular, he would have known her name before that night when they first met.
By positioning Angie as having less power in the pair's social dynamic, Daly strikes upon a rather effective means of conveying the complicated expectations that come with being a teenager at the time. If Angie instinctively knew how to curry popularity, then the full stakes of the teenage social scene would be harder for readers to grasp. By casting Angie as something of an outsider, Daly is able to communicate just how intimidating it can be to not be able to keep up with one’s peers. The night Angie first sees Jack offers an excellent example of the value of this dynamic, because even though Angie is a wallflower, she is keenly aware of what it takes to be part of the popular crowd. When her father asks her to run an errand, she explains, “McKnight’s is where all the fellows and girls in Fond du Lac get together and I really would rather not have gone in alone—especially on a Friday night when most girls have dates” (2). High school might technically be behind her, but because Angie does not have a social or romantic life to speak of at this point in the novel, she remains in a perilous position. Entering the drug store on a Friday night, as a teenage girl without a date, runs the risk of further establishing her as a social outcast. Although the gamble ends up paying off for her, as it leads to her relationship with Jack, the anxiety Angie feels is legitimized through Daly’s prose.

Not attending the public high school does more than make it hard for Angie to work her way into the popular crowd, however, as it also makes it that much harder for her to know how to conduct herself once she makes it there. When Jack invites her to a party at a cottage, she becomes keenly aware of her social naïveté. A younger girl—

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8 Angie does note that she has to go into the drugstore because she “didn’t want to tell her father” the reason she was reluctant to do so. Whether this is because she didn’t want to reveal her potential embarrassment to him or because she didn’t think him capable of understanding is left undetermined.
only fifteen, and declared, in what is one of the novel’s many disturbing sexual
dynamics, “a find” by the boys for her willingness to date in their crowd—mentions
drinking alcohol, and Angie suddenly realizes just how little she knows about the kinds
of activities that might happen at a party. She can figure out on her own that they would
not “just sit around and listen to Viennese waltzes all night,” but she cannot imagine
quite what the alternative might be (65). Her ignorance makes her uncomfortable, not
least because she knows no easy way to alleviate it. She considers finding a more
knowledgeable girl and simply asking what to expect, but soon realizes this plan is no
good: “I didn’t want them to know that I’d never been at a party like this before. It was
important to act as if you had been around” (65). Because she attended a private school
on the outskirts of town, Angie has literally been denied the chance to have “been
around” these kinds of events. She did not take part in similar social gatherings while in
high school, and as such, she lost her chance to ease her way into this unfamiliar world.
And while her high school education might have been lacking when it came to
explaining what a party would be like, it had made one thing quite clear: there would be
nothing attractive about admitting her ignorance.

It does not take long for Angie’s unwillingness to admit confusion to send sharp
consequences her way. When she accepts a date with Tony Becker, she ends up
temporarily bungling things with Jack by tarnishing her reputation. The first time the
novel references Tony, it’s in an innuendo-heavy conversation between Jack and his
friend Fitz about whether Tony will make an appearance at the party. Jack expresses
his doubt by saying, “But if he gets the car I don’t think he’ll waste his time at the party—
huh, Fitz?” Fitz immediately agrees: “No, sir, that boy don’t waste no time” (64). Tony’s
reputation as a “fast boy” is clearly known to the other teens, though their conversation is vague enough that a listening Angie “couldn’t understand what they were talking about” (64).\(^9\) But because she knows better than to ask for clarification, and because she and Jack are not “going steady,” she sees no problem with later accepting the date Tony offers.

Only once her burgeoning relationship with Jack begins to suffer does Angie come to realize that she has made a mistake. After all, the cost of Angie always pretending to know what is going on is that everyone assumes that she actually does know what is going on. In other words, by refusing to admit her ignorance of her peer group’s social code, Angie ends up acting outside of that which her friends have defined as acceptable behavior. Her friend Margie is the one who finally explains the situation to her, saying, “No one thought you were the kind to go out with a fast boy like that” (107). Angie is confused when faced with this information, because as she notes, “But he hadn’t been when he was with me, so how was I to know that Tony was a fast boy!” (107). In truth, the answer to Angie’s rhetorical exclamation is rather simple: she would have known if she were truly a part of the social circle she was pretending to understand. What Daly’s novel argues in these and other moments throughout the text, then, is that effectively negotiating the new world of teenage social dynamics requires nothing less than fluency in the social codes established by the popular crowd. Moreover, the text validates Angie’s quest to better understand these social standards, rather than criticizing her for it. While she claims to want to read everything, and while

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\(^9\) Angie is regularly depicted as completely naive about sex. She doesn’t know why there are so many more cars parked outside a dance than she would have expected given the number of people inside, for example, and later can barely manage to survive a conversation about necking with her sister. Indeed, just kissing Jack is enough to make Angie talk in highly sexual metaphors—her innocence is greatest in this particular area.
her mother encourages her to get a head start on reading for college, the only intellectual pursuit she actively engages in is the one in which she tries to understand what is expected of her in a given social setting. What Daly’s novel suggests, and what the experiences of the earliest teenagers make clear, is that a high school education is only ever as good as the social currency it offers to students.

**The Frivolity of Consumerism**

*Seventeenth Summer* argues, then, that navigating the precarious waters of the social order is not merely a side effect of the high school experience for the new “teenager” but is instead its primary purpose. For the 1940s teenager, however, the struggle to keep up with the dominant social code was about more than knowing who was and wasn’t appropriate to date. It was also about knowing what to wear, do, and order while on the date—in other words, it was about knowing how to consume. As we saw earlier in Chapter 1, the kinds of conspicuous consumption associated with “teenage” behavior were generally the purview of the nation’s middle-class, white youth. Even as more working-class teens began to attend high school, they struggled to keep up socially with their wealthier classmates. It is worth reiterating, then, that the teenager we encounter in the pages of *Seventeenth Summer* is not, by any measure, fully representative of the experience of youth in wartime America. What Daly’s version of the teenager does represent, however, is the larger cultural narrative that sprang up around this specifically white, middle-class subset of high school students. *Seventeenth Summer* does not worry itself overmuch with representing the challenges working-class youth might have faced at the time, thereby subtly reinforcing this boundary. Moreover, the novel’s depiction of Angie’s relationship with consumerism makes it clear that being a teenager costs money. For all that Angie worries about fitting in with the popular
crowd, she never once has to worry about her financial situation, which is key to proving that she is a “proper” teenager. Angie may have issues understanding the social world she is trying to enter, but she will never have a problem obtaining whatever items are required to keep her there.

The consumer culture in which Angie takes part as a teenager of the early forties is rather less extravagant than the one that would emerge in the post-war era and grow into the 1950s. In fact, Angie’s consumer experiences seem rather limited in their scope within the text. While she is utterly concerned about fitting in with the popular crowd, only some of that anxiety is born out of her desire for or lack of a particular consumer good. As such, consumerism manifests in Seventeenth Summer in a much more subtle manner than we might expect. A prime example of this comes in one of Angie’s first dates with Jack, when he takes her out to Pete’s, one of the local gathering places for teens. Angie admits her nerves over being seen at Pete’s at all: “I felt a little scared. It was almost like making my debut or something” (32). That Angie compares making an appearance at Pete’s to making her formal debut into adult society should not be overlooked. Her language marks this moment as a rite of passage that signals a moment of change in her life: not from child to adult, but from wallflower to social butterfly. For a teenage girl like Angie, entering a public place with a boy and taking part in the social rituals of the evening carry a significant amount of weight; she must see and be seen in order to take part in the teenage world. More importantly, though, she must consume. After all, Angie notes that the moment when “the evening of [her]
‘coming out’ truly started was when Jack asked her a simple question: “What will you have, Angie?” (32).\(^{10}\)

In this moment, *Seventeenth Summer* depicts the act of choosing what to order as foundational to Angie’s social experience. Our narrator is quick to note, however, that her options were somewhat limited: “At Pete’s you choose from only four things—beer, root beer, coke, and peanuts salted in the shell. No one ever wants anything else” (32). Her phrasing here is key, because she doesn’t say that Pete’s only serves four things, but rather that there are only four things from which “you”—in this case, the town’s teenagers—are meant to select. Moreover, the language Angie uses suggests that this list of four items has been curated, perhaps unconsciously, to represent a universal desire among this particular population. No reason is offered for why these items are the only things worth wanting at Pete’s, but everyone knows to fall in line anyway, lest one risks making the wrong decision. Indeed, the specter of judgment is never far away in this scene, because even selecting from such a limited list can speak volumes about an individual’s relationship to the group. Angie settles for a soda while Jack opts for a beer, a small but representative difference. As the sheltered, naïve girl, Angie shies away from alcohol; as the popular, experienced boy, Jack is unafraid to drink the beer. Their choices help to define who they are in relationship to one another and to the rest of the teens gathered at Pete’s, a clear indicator of the way in which consumerism has already settled into the teenager’s daily life by the early forties.

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\(^{10}\) This question is so important to Angie that she shares it, in this exact phrasing, with the reader twice. First when Jack actually asks, then a few moments later as she tells us about the reason the moment matters.
The fact that consumer culture is lightly but noticeably threaded throughout such moments in *Seventeenth Summer* speaks to another trend in literature the novel would help spark. Amanda Allen refers to Daly’s novel as the “wellspring” for the genre of commodity tales, which she defines as “a subgenre established in the young adult literature of the postwar/Cold War era that appropriates earlier folk and fairy tale elements to advance a formula of consumerism” (284). Although *Seventeenth Summer* is less direct in pulling from fairy tales than some of its successors would be, many of the other characteristics of the genre ring true. “Commodity tales were novels aimed specifically at white, American, teenage girl readers,” Allen explains, and they “function to teach girls how to become women” (284). Certainly, Daly’s text points to each of these markers in its own way. Intentionally or otherwise, the novel found a readership among teenage girls, and through its focus on Angie’s maturation, it provides, if not a precise guide for girls on the cusp of adulthood, then at least a general outline of one.

If we consider *Seventeenth Summer* to be what Allen identifies as a “commodity tale,” then, we can perhaps better understand the smaller moments when Angie’s consumerism appears throughout the text. While on the date with Jack mentioned above, for instance, Angie realizes that she can’t use a hairpin to carve her initials into the wood of their table like so many others had because it would cause the curl to fall out of her hair. The thought makes her self-conscious: “I took the little mirror out of my purse to look at myself—I didn’t often wear my hair with that big curl on top, and because they had all gone to the movies there was no one at home to consult before I left” (33). This is not a moment of outright consumerism, because Angie makes no purchases or selections for herself. It is, however, a moment *steeped* in consumerism.
The hairpins and the mirror are both small luxuries that allow Angie to try to fall in line with the current fashions; without both, she could not style or check her hair. Even the reason that she was not able to “consult” with any of her family members as to how it looked is couched in consumer culture, as they have all gone off to the cinema to watch a movie. The very subtlety with which these items are layered into the story is what makes the novel a successful and influential commodity tale. Even a not-quite-popular girl like Angie merits hairpins and pocket mirrors, which takes such items away from the ‘optional’ pile and transforms them into a basic need for any teenage girl trying to thrive in the high school scene.

There are, however, consequences for constructing the image of the teenager to reflect such a consumption-oriented mindset. If we turn back to Seventeenth Summer’s opening lines once more, we can see almost immediately what these consequences might be. As we saw earlier in Chapter 1, the novel opens with Angie admitting to her uncertainty over her decision to tell her story at all, the first paragraph amounting to an argument between the part of her that believes her story is “important” and the part that knows the reader might think it “silly.” Reading these first words again in the light of Angie’s consumerism helps to clarify why she is so preoccupied with whether she will be taken seriously. As she begins to specify why her story matters, she does so by positioning it against some familiar forms: “It wasn’t as it’s written in magazine stories or as in morning radio serials where the boy’s family always tease him about liking a girl and he gets embarrassed and stutters” (1). The materials Angie references, magazine stories and radio serials, are each forms of light entertainment that are supposed to have youth appeal. They are to be read or listened to, which is to say consumed, and
then abandoned in favor of the next edition. The disposability of these texts meant that they did not matter in and of themselves, which is why Angie insists that her relationship with Jack is different. Whatever adults might be inclined to think, throughout the novel she declares again and again and again that unlike those other shallow tales, hers is, most adamantly, not silly.

That Angie must repeat this claim so many times speaks to the double-standard that had so quickly become the norm in teenagers’ lives. It was the actions and decisions of adults that forced teenagers out of the workplace and into the high school, and it was the adult-designed and -led structure of the high school that made consumerism and social competition so important to the teenager. And yet, the very act of teenagers seeking out consumer products and focusing on self-policied social standards made them appear frivolous and un-serious to adult eyes. Teenagers were, in essence, led to water and then promptly judged for drinking it. As we will see as we move into the next section, however, the nation’s conception of this early version of the teenager had room for more than just the presumption that the young people of the 1940s were inherently shallow and silly. The teenager was plenty eager to show a more thoughtful side—it was just waiting for the country to ask.

**The Thoughtfulness of Maturity**

If there was one thing teenagers had already decided high school was a good time for, it was experimentation. Even in the thirties and forties, teenagers had begun to realize that this extended moment of delay, with the rest of their lives on hold until graduation, meant that the consequences of high school were different. Palladino quotes one teenage boy who lays it all out: “I understand myself. I know my weaknesses and I know my assets, too,” he said. ‘Everything I do, right or wrong, I
consider part of my education for life” (6). Adults and teens alike already knew that high school was about different kinds of education; high schools housed academic education, yes, but they offered a space for social and consumer education, as well. If teenagers already hoped to learn so much from spending four years in high school, why not add self-education to the list? Adults wanted teenagers to grow into respectable members of society, after all, so recognizing them as capable of an ever-increasing maturity and allowing them room to explore it would, in an ideal world, be an accepted part of the teenage experience.

One of the earliest dedicated teenage markets soon sprang up around this very notion. Throughout the early twentieth century, so-called “character builders” began to lay a strong claim to the thoughts and minds of teenagers. Character builders emerged as a form of after-school programming, in which middle-class teens learned the kinds of skills that would prepare them for adult life (Palladino 18). Groups like the Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls offered ways for teens to spend time together away from home under the careful supervision of adults; soon, magazines like American Girl and American Boy emerged to offer guidance and advice for teens on how best to navigate their not-quite-adult lives. Although adults still organized and managed all such character builders, teens could at least take solace in the fact that the adults involved were not their parents. Indeed, much of the goal of character builders was to provide young people with another positive influence in their lives—beyond their parents—without overtly controlling them. “Pragmatic ‘modern’ parents accepted the fact that they could no control teenage behavior,” Palladino writes. “Like character builders, though, they firmly believed they could still mold it along acceptable lines, as long as they were
flexible” (30). Character builders thus offered parents support in the endeavor of guiding teenagers into becoming responsible, mature adults. The junior novel was one of the many outgrowths of the character building movement as it progressed into the forties; as Richard Alm notes, the writers of the junior novel often “present a sugar-puff story of what adolescents should do and should believe” (315). Using media like the junior novel and magazine advice columns to offer guides for how navigate teenage life thus became another means of offering adult oversight on teenage experiences outside of parental supervision. The framework these character builders provided is reflected in how Daly’s novel structures Angie’s growth and development across the text, although Daly herself did not position her novel as part of this character-building movement.

Angie is a modern teenager, caught up in a world of dating and consumerism, but she is also a good teenager. Her parents have every reason to trust her, and she ultimately chooses to end her relationship with Jack rather than alter her own ambitious plans for her life. Her story provides reason to be hopeful for the future of this new generation, suggesting that teenagers might, in fact, already have character worth building upon.

However positive these non-parental influences might have been, however, the fact remained that teenagers situated much of their search for identity away from their parents’ watchful gazes. As I have established throughout Chapter 2, the development of a separate “teenage” demographic happened in no small part due to the spike in high school attendance, which resulted in increased distance between teenagers and the adult world. Although this separation was grounded in the high school experience, it soon carried over to the outside world, as teens found more satisfying social dynamics with each other than within their families. Seventeenth Summer proves no exception to
this rule, as even quiet homebody Angie finds a peculiar thrill when she realizes how
much different the world looks when she’s not at home:

It was then that I realized how much older I felt when I was away from my
family. It wasn’t that I felt taller or fatter but just more important. At home
they cared about what I thought, of course, but in a different way. They
cared whether I would rather have pork chops or steak for dinner or
whether I would rather have a white collar on my dress or no collar at all,
but they didn’t seem to think much or care what was actually in my head.
(88-89)

In this moment, Angie returns again to the question of importance that she so firmly
declared and owned as defining her story in the novel’s first paragraph. Angie again
defines her sense of importance as the validation of her own ideas and perspective; by
conflating age and importance as she does here, she suggests that experiencing this
validation is often a consequence of maturity—or of, perhaps, adulthood. Moreover,
Angie situates this moment of realization not as being explicitly tied to going out with
Jack but, significantly, to being “away from [her] family” (88). This is a small distinction,
but an important one; Angie’s recognition that her own thoughts have value is informed
not merely by her participation in a romantic relationship but rather by her accumulated
experiences beyond her own home.

This is not to say, though, that the social world into which Angie enters plays no
role in her development as an individual separate from her family. In the above
passage, for example, we see that the kinds of opinions she is asked to have at home
are matters of personal preference. Her parents allow her to weigh in on small items of
domestic consumption, such as the specific meal she would prefer to eat, but they deny
her the chance to speak about what is “actually in [her] head” (89). Her moment of
epiphany continues as the page goes on: “When I was away from [the family] it was
different. In McKnight’s Margie had been interested in what I thought of Fitz; Jack had
been interested to know if I liked Tony Becker—at home you are just part of a family, but away from them you are really somebody!” (89). The difference between her family’s questions and those of her peers is primarily that of subject matter: her friends ask about people, while her family asks about possessions. If her opinions of Fitz and Tony Becker are meant to stand in for her “actual” thoughts, as the phrasing would indicate, then she is expressing to the reader that she finds special value in her opinions of others. Running precisely counter to the earlier moment when she makes her “debut,” Angie reveals that she does not want to be asked what she wants to have so much as how she responds to the people that she meets.

If Angie provided no further insight into her understanding of importance, it would be easy to accuse her of falling into the shallowness we saw being assigned to the teenager earlier in Chapter 2. After all, her definition of that which makes her “really somebody” appears to be little more than gossip. But Angie and Jack also share a number of moments in which their ever-increasing intimacy allows them to reach for a bigger, arguably more “adult,” perspective on what their lives could be. On their first date, Angie admits that she wants to learn about “everything beautiful,” a notion to which Jack responds enthusiastically by exclaiming that he has always wanted to be “cultured” (12). This unexpected connection leaves Angie somewhat unsure how to proceed, because she desperately wants to express deeper thoughts on the subject but remains at a loss for the precise words to capture them. “I wanted to tell him something too,” she explains. “There were so many things I had always thought about to myself and never wanted to tell anyone before” (13, emphasis in original). Part of Angie’s growth throughout the novel comes in the way that she is increasingly able to articulate
the mass of thoughts that she had previously had no reason to share. In making a connection with someone new, Angie realizes that, however limited her life experiences might be, she is not always going to be alone in her thoughts and desires.

Late in the novel, we see the result of the growth Angie undergoes across the course of the summer. When Jack informs Angie that he is moving to Oklahoma at the end of the summer, they have a conversation in which he explains the pleasure he gets out of performing physical labor. He asks if Angie understands why he feels this way, and she responds enthusiastically, because she is “surprised to realize [she] knew exactly what he meant” (198). Angie’s recognition of Jack’s feelings, in which she articulates the pleasure of being able to “feel things,” provokes an eager response from him: “That’s just it, Angie! You’ve got it,’ he said in excitement. ‘I never knew that anyone else felt like that’” (198). Although the prospect of Jack moving to Oklahoma further dooms their relationship, this conversation marks a transformative moment for the pair. Jack has begun to look to his future, with the hope of finding a career path that might suit him better than simply joining the family business. Angie is able to look beyond her own disappointment at Jack’s impending relocation and convey her thoughts in a manner that supports and affirms his admission. While neither one seems quite ready to fully claim the mantle of adulthood, as symbolized through Jack’s failed, desperate proposal in the summer’s final days, each of them has used their time together in a space outside the reach of their families in order to learn more about themselves. It has been, to borrow a phrase, part of their “education for life.”

But even though so much of the teenage experience and move to maturity happens amongst one’s peers, Daly’s novel shows us that there were lessons to be
learned a little closer to home, too. Indeed, while the teenager’s external social life could prove instrumental to the development of a more adult perspective on the world, Angie’s experiences suggest that the family dynamic teaches a rather different lesson. It is only at home that Angie becomes fully aware of the intermingling of time, age, and maturity, in part because it is the only truly intergenerational space she inhabits. She sees her mother and father as irrefutably adult, believes her college-age sister to be worldly but not yet settled into her maturity, and assigns her little sister notions of innocence and childishness. In each of her family members, she thus sees an image of who she once was or who she may one day become. While the complexity of Angie’s family life is too much to fully explore in this space, let’s consider two examples of how her interactions with her family members, in this case her little sister and her mother, respectively, help to clarify her understanding of the world.

On one hot afternoon, Angie leaves her little sister, Kitty, behind when she goes swimming with Jack, even though Angie knows quite well that Kitty would like to come along. Angie’s conscience pricks at her, but she consoles herself with the promise that Kitty simply does not yet understand the situation and muses, “Someday, I thought to myself, when she is very much older—say, eighteen or so—I will explain to her and she won’t be angry with me at all” (153). There’s a particular humor in the notion that Angie thinks Kitty will not be able to understand until sometime in the future when she is older even than Angie is now, but it nevertheless draws a precise dividing line between Angie and the land of the child. She has knowledge that her younger sister does not, and that is to be expected and allowed as part of growing up—as part of being a teenager. What she experiences on the date with Jack, both emotionally and physically, is something
beyond the ken of her younger sister for now, but not forever. Daly has Angie reiterate this point less than a page later, in almost the exact same words: "Someday when Kitty is very much older I will explain to her and I know she won’t be angry with me. She won’t be angry at all" (154). Angie's inclination to speak of childhood as a phase, as something that Kitty will grow out of, helps to further establish that Angie knows herself to no longer be a child. Moreover, it indicates that she believes her teenage experiences to be universal enough that Kitty will someday be able to fully understand and empathize with Angie’s choice. Kitty is not a teenager now, but she will be.

On the other end of the spectrum from Kitty’s youthful incomprehension are Angie’s wonderings about what the future holds for her mother. The morning before Angie and Jack go swimming, Angie’s mother announces that she intends to put off canning the rest of the peaches for another day because the heat is too much for her. It is a small comment, but it sparks a spike of worry within Angie:

A sudden thought struck me. Wouldn’t it be odd if my mother got old! After so long. After so many summers of picnics and parades and long walks around the park in the peace of the afternoon, to be suddenly tired. It is only natural that when your children are big you must be older but somehow I had never thought of its happening to my mother. It made me feel queerly conscious-stricken and there was a strange stiffness around my lips. What a peculiar thing to think of in the bright sunshine of the afternoon! (152-153)

Angie’s awareness of the precariousness of her own age sharpens here in this moment, as she suddenly realizes that if she grows older, her mother must, too. Perhaps this is an obvious realization for Angie to have; it is, at least, a common one. But in a summer where Angie has become increasingly aware of her own growth and maturity, it is to be expected that she might begin to see her mother’s, as well. Of course, the prospect of her mother growing old is not a turn of events that Angie is prepared to view positively.
The thought makes her uncomfortable, and seems to her quite at odds with the cheerfulness of the afternoon sun. The discomfort she feels is for her mother, yes, but also potentially for herself. Angie can no longer deny that she is teetering right on the edge of adulthood.

While we never see Angie turning to character builders like the advice column in *Scholastic* magazine for guidance in her life, then, each of these above moments position her as a guide for what the best-case-scenario of growing up might be. The very adults who would be inclined to worry over whether young people were being corrupted by their focus on silly consumer goods would also have reason to fear what teenagers might discover if they were given too much freedom to learn about the world for themselves. Daly’s novel suggests, however, that a parent with reason to trust their child would not necessarily be wrong to do so. Angie’s time away from home transforms her, but it does so in a way that better positions her to enter into the next phase of her life. She comes to learn, like so many teenagers at the time, that she is but one piece in a much larger puzzle. Her mother will grow old, she will grow up, and her little sister will become a teenager herself. As scary and uncertain as teenage life could be, *Seventeenth Summer* helped to show teens and adults alike that it was only ever temporary.

**In the Aftermath of War**

Even with a supposedly authentic voice like Daly’s as an example of all teenage youth could be, it would take a World War to ultimately reconcile the serious and silly sides of the teenager. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, the teenager was a mystery the country was still trying to solve. Having arrived as a result of economic crisis, the teenager represented both a solution to a pressing problem—what to do with
teenage youth when they were being denied access to the work force—and a new problem to be solved. Because teenagers looked at their time in high school as a chance to create their own sets of rules and expectations for their lives, they began to transform their relationships with adults. No longer was the adult world the sole arbiter of what should and shouldn’t be done; suddenly, teenagers were able to look to one another to decide what how they wanted to live their lives. They set the rules, and waited for adults to get on board.

As we have seen throughout Chapter 2, though, the result of these new social rules was a moment of confusion. Because the teenager vacillated between vapid consumerism and thoughtful maturity so often, it was impossible for the country to reach any sort of stable understanding of the teenage identity. Given all this doubt and uncertainty, was it worth taking teenagers seriously at all? The emergence of young adult literature in the wake of Maureen Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* offers what seems to be an affirmative answer. Daly’s semi-autobiographical novel works as one of the first steps toward bridging the gap between these two halves of the teenage experience. By presenting the story of a teenage girl’s first romance through a narrative that treats her voice seriously and with respect, Daly illustrates one way in which the seemingly superficial concerns of the teenage social world can connect with the deeper growth and development of a girl on the edge of adulthood. This assertion that the inner lives of teenage youth are valid, even if they do not meet with adult approval, set the stage for decades of young adult literature to come.

Not even Daly’s groundbreaking novel could fully ease the anxiety that existed between the nation and its new youth demographic. The book represented the tension
thoughtfully and precisely, but could not resolve it. If we return at last to the *Time* article that opened Chapter 2, however, we can see that this is because the nation was simply waiting for the catalyst that would bring it all together. During and after the Second World War, the very qualities that had been so vexing about teenagers at the start of the decade took on a different sheen. A teenager in high school was learning information that would lead to a better-educated workforce. A teenager who dropped out of high school was no longer lazy but was instead patriotic, eager to help the war effort. Even a teenager who spent money on products they didn’t need took on the tinge of patriotism, acting as a reminder that capitalism was, in fact, superior to the fascist and communist systems against which the country was fighting. The role teenagers were expected to play in American life had yet to be fully determined by the time the Second World War arrived; by the time it ended, the nation needed them more than ever. Like so many new wartime inventions, the teenager was a marriage between desperation and inspiration, a marvel of the modern world. Unlike all the other new weapons forged in 1940s America, though, the teenager could not be locked away once the war ended. Once invented and welcomed into American life, the teenager would prove to have a mind of its own.
By 1965, teenagers had taken over the country. They numbered 24 million strong, one-eighth of the American population (“On the Fringe” 56). None other than Andy Warhol was commissioned to photograph seven teenagers for the cover of a January issue of *Time*, the images of their faces tiled down the page in photobooth style, each photo offering a slightly different insight into its young subject. In the upper-right corner, a banner crosses the page, and “Today’s Teen-Agers” is all it says—and, in truth, all it needs to say. The cover makes no attempts to sensationalize or editorialize; all readers are promised is that they will find the teenager of the mid-sixties inside. For today’s reader, used to click-bait headlines full of breathless, over-the-top rhetoric, *Time*’s restraint might seem a relic of a bygone era. But the headline may just tell us more about its subject than the journalistic standards of its day. If such a simple, scandal-free phrase could be counted on to sell magazines, perhaps it is because the teenager itself has never been anything less than inflammatory.

The story that accompanies the cover offers a surprisingly even-handed take on the state of the sixties teen, however. The article appears in the “Education” section, a subtle indication that the teenager and high school remain intimately linked. The unnamed author furthers this connection by dedicating most of the piece to the state of high school education. “In no society of all history have more teen-agers gone to school and stayed there through such advanced ages,” *Time* proudly declares, before quickly assuring its readers that the “burden of added numbers, rather than forcing down academic standards, has raised them” (56). The teenager of the 1960s, the story suggests, is the recipient of an educational movement that will ensure that students
graduate from more rigorous programs and thus offer their country a far greater benefit as they move into the work force. Twenty years earlier, *Time* was reporting on the fight to keep teenagers in school long enough for them to reap the benefits of their education; by 1965, the concern wasn’t about keeping students in school, but making sure that they learned as much as they could while they were there. The Cold War wouldn’t be fought on the battlefield, but in the classroom.

Even in a piece that foregrounds the teenager’s education, though, it remains impossible to escape the importance of the social and consumeristic parts of their lives. “Fashions in Fashions,” “Dancing the Jerk,” and “Sex at 16” all merit ranking as subsections of the larger article, once again reiterating that a teenager’s education is social as well as intellectual. *Time* even quotes James Coleman’s 1961 book *The Adolescent Society* to reiterate an already familiar claim: “Adolescents today are cut off, probably more than ever before, from the adult society. They are dumped into a society of their peers, whose habitats are the halls and classrooms of their schools, the teen-age canteens, the corner drugstore, the automobile” (qtd. in “On the Fringe” 57).

Chapter 2 showed us the impact of the burgeoning high school culture, as the educational space transformed into a holding pen that allowed teens the chance to set their own societal standards. By the publication of this 1965 article in *Time*, this separation from the adult world was not new, but it was still notable. “That is where teen-agers get their tastes and values,” the article continues. “‘They’re in cahoots now,’ says Columbia Psychologist Arthur Jersild” (57).

“Cahoots” is, delightfully enough, the key word in this conversation. Teenagers being separated from adult society and thereby finding their own “tastes and values” is
concerning enough if it is an unconscious or natural act, but Jersild’s phrasing implies it is anything but. To suggest that teenagers are in cahoots with one another is to suggest that they are making a concerted effort to exclude the adults in their lives. That the introduction of said cahoots comes from a psychologist at Columbia University only furthers the significance of the claim, as it positions the teenage mindset as potentially being outside of the norm—or, at least, as an object in need of study. Jersild’s quip also indicates that the teenage conspiracy is new, a problem unique to the moment in which he is speaking. After all, he does not say that teenagers have always been in cahoots, but that they are now. At the time, the word ‘teenager’ was but a little over two decades old, and still hyphenated. The history of the teenager was still short, still easily identified as having a “before” and “after.” And yet, as the Time article reveals, the tide had already begun to shift for the nation’s view of the teenager. By the 1960s, the sense of patriotism and hope that the teenager had been imbued with upon its invention had begun to tarnish, giving way to something rather less idealistic: suspicion.

In Chapter 3, we will make this transition from hope through the teenager to fear of the teenager our primary point of discussion. Little about the teenager’s condition actually changed in the time that passed between the 1942 publication of Maureen Daly’s Seventeenth Summer and the 1965 appearance of the Time article quoted above: the vast majority of teenagers still attended high school, they continued to place a high priority on their social lives, and they remained intimately connected to popular consumer culture. Despite this relative stability, the national perception of the teenager became more volatile throughout the fifties and into the sixties as the specter of juvenile delinquency increasingly made its presence known. Chapter 3 will examine the rhetoric
surrounding the juvenile delinquent through two novels from the late 1960s: S.E. Hinton’s landmark work *The Outsiders* (1967), and the lesser-known *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* by Kristin Hunter (1968). As I will argue throughout Chapter 3, the teenager presented to readers in each of these books is one that both inherits and subverts the image of youth cultivated by the popular media of the 1940s and 1950s. Both books seek to expand the bounds of the teenager and young adult literature by using familiar delinquency tropes to ground stories about characters that never would have appeared in a world like that of *Seventeenth Summer*. *The Outsiders* follows a working-class boy being raised by his older brother, for instance, while *Soul Brothers* tells the story of a young black girl searching for a modicum of peace in her daily life. The two novels suggest that the national panic over juvenile delinquency was derived, in part, from an anxiety over the expanding boundaries of teenage culture. The books differ, however, in their understandings of how issues of race and class inform what it means to be a teenager—and more importantly, who gets to be a teenager. Together, the novels mark a turning point for young adult literature, as the category begins to establish whose stories and lives would be represented within its pages. In the sixties, after all, the world was changing and teenagers were in cahoots. As Chapter 3 will show, the fears that accompanied these changes didn’t just appear in young adult literature. Instead, they defined it.

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1 *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* is currently reprinted under multiple versions of the author’s name, including Kristin Hunter and Kristin Lattany. I have chosen to use Kristin Hunter, because it is the name used when the novel was originally published.
Juvenile Delinquency and a New YA

If teenagers were going to bear the weight of suspicion over idealism in the 1960s, then young adult literature was going to have to adapt in response. The quiet romances of stories like *Seventeenth Summer* and its descendants were all well and good, but they could only hope to hold the attention of increasingly media-savvy youth for so long. While there was nowhere near the level of public hand-wringing over the publishing category’s future as that which we will see in Chapter 5 with the looming turn of the century, the sixties would nonetheless prove to be a key moment of transition for YA literature. Those scholars who consider Daly’s novel to be a predecessor to the modern YA novel rather than the first YA novel usually cite the 1960s as the category’s point of origin, not least because of how the field blossomed across the decade. Rather than continuing to perpetuate an image of the teenager as focused on the future and the adult life to come, books like S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Kristin Hunter’s *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* let their teenage characters be concerned about surviving a day-to-day teenage life that was fraught with danger and confusion.

Before we cruise into the 1960s and the worlds of *The Outsiders* and *Soul Brothers*, however, we should take a brief detour through the media landscape of the 1950s, home to the peak of the juvenile delinquency panic and the most famous “JD” of all: James Dean. Although YA literature wouldn’t tackle the subject of delinquency head-on until the sixties, it was one of the more popular subjects of film and television throughout the previous decade. Certainly there were non-delinquent images of youth made available; Wally, the eldest son in the wholesome *Leave It to Beaver* family, was situated right alongside the surf-loving youth that populated the era’s beach movies, a juxtaposition that suggested an array of teenage lives could be portrayed through film.
and television. But the delinquent was easily the most notorious of the on-screen teens of the fifties, and parents, politicians, and the general public were all quick to condemn the actions taking place on film and television. 1955’s *Blackboard Jungle*, for instance, was roundly denounced for depicting, and therefore endorsing, out-of-control teenage behaviors such as dancing to rock’n’roll music. Many critics argued that films like *Blackboard Jungle* actively promoted violent and criminal behaviors, at least in those already inclined toward delinquency (Gilbert 159, 179). Television came under similar scrutiny, with suggestions that young people would “imitate television violence” prompting the country to view television with a more suspicious eye (Spigel 52).

Suspicion alone would not be enough to undermine the appeal of these kinds of stories, though, not least among the teens who were eager to be seen as cool by their peers. And if there was one person in Hollywood who could make juvenile delinquency appear not merely cool but absolutely iconic, it was James Dean.

The story of James Dean is the story of an icon who died too young. That is, in fact, the language that much of the scholarship surrounding Dean uses; in *The Fifties*, David Halberstam speaks for many scholars when he notes that Dean has remained such an iconic figure precisely because he died so young (481). Dean met his untimely demise in a fiery car crash just weeks before the release of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), a film that features one of its teenage characters meeting a similar fate, and as such his cause of death only served to galvanize the perception of Dean as a grand talent lost before his time. Moreover, it marked his acting with a particular kind of

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2 The 1950s beach films have maintained just enough relevance to be both lovingly spoofed and replicated in Disney Channel’s *Teen Beach Movie* (2013) and *Teen Beach 2* (2015). Both TV movies have been massive hits for the channel, drawing in millions of viewers for their debuts.
authenticity that could not have been earned otherwise. He might have been older than the teenage character he played in Rebel, but he certainly appeared to understand the trouble and angst that such a character might feel. Thomas Doherty eloquently explains the situation: “An image frozen by death, it made sense that leaving a beautiful corpse enhanced [Dean’s] popularity with fans, the obsessive ‘Dean-agers.’ Through him Rebel did more than depict that style and autonomy of teenage life in the 1950s: attractive in his alienation, self-assured even in his confusion, Dean validated it” (86). Dean has come to be associated with a great many things—coolness, toughness, deathiness—but he remains perhaps the single most iconic image of teenage rebellion in American culture.

Although Dean’s filmography includes far more television credits than film roles, he is remembered primarily for his turn in Rebel Without a Cause. And with good reason, too, as his numerous television appearances are largely forgettable, with the exception of his 1954 guest appearance on General Electric Theater opposite Ronald Reagan and Claudette Colbert. Even that role, though, feels like a small-scale dress rehearsal for Rebel, which is anything but small in scope. The film begins with each of its three central teenage characters having been brought in by the police: Jim Stark (Dean) for public intoxication, Judy (Natalie Wood) for being out on the streets alone late at night, and Plato (Sal Mineo) for the far more serious offense of shooting

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3 Dean’s television roles are also largely forgotten, I would argue, due to lack of access and availability. Until YouTube emerged as an easy archive for poorly recorded copies of the shows, it would have been near-impossible to watch any of his television appearances.

4 On the show, Dean plays a young juvenile delinquent whose friend has been shot in a robbery gone wrong; the pair shows up late at night on the doorstep of a local doctor, gun in hand and in search of help. Throughout the night, the doctor struggles to maintain control of a volatile situation, and the story ends with the doctor wrestling a gun away from Dean’s character after the injured boy dies.
As the film progresses, we learn that all three are estranged from or poorly served by their parents, and the three of them begin to form their own surrogate version of a nuclear family in between knife fights and deadly Chickie Runs. The movie’s climax comes when Plato is fatally shot during a confrontation with the police, despite Jim’s best attempts to keep the younger boy safe. Shot in the then-new CinemaScope aspect ratio, the film’s cinematography is, like its depiction of teenage angst, epic in scale. Watching *Rebel Without a Cause* was an experience meant for the biggest possible screen—a screen that could only be found away from home, at the movie theater.

That the story of *Rebel* needed to be viewed outside of the home, as opposed to surrounded by family as would be the case with television stories of delinquency, allowed the film to more directly critique the family itself. The film regularly criticizes the adults in Jim, Judy, and Plato’s lives; Jim’s famous cry of “You’re tearing me apart!” places the blame for his angst squarely on the parents who are failing him. Jack Warner, of the Warner Brothers production company that funded the film, went so far as to describe it as being about the “juvenile delinquency of parents” when asked to defend the film to the Senate (qtd. in Gilbert 157).

In truth, though, it didn’t matter if Dean’s roles were critiquing or promoting juvenile delinquency, or blaming wayward youth or their parents for the challenges faced by America’s youth. With his death, Dean became all things to all people: hero, martyr, icon, cautionary tale. *Rebel Without a Cause* and its gone-too-soon star, along with numerous other films and shows throughout the

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5 One of the film’s more interesting quirks is that it does not necessarily seem to view Plato’s actions as significantly more troubling than either Judy or Jim’s. Plato is presented as the most extremely disaffected of their trio, but not by much.

6 The Senate subcommittee hearings on juvenile delinquency came a year after President Eisenhower requested $3 million from Congress in 1954 to explore the subject of juvenile delinquency (Abate 156). See James Gilbert and Michelle Ann Abate for more on the subcommittee hearings.
It was not only the screens silver and small that laid the groundwork for YA literature to transform in the sixties, however, as book culture had changed, too. Beginning in 1939, the "paperback revolution" saw sales of mass-market paperback novels skyrocket, as cheap production costs made it possible for publishers to reach more readers than ever before (Abate 151). Eventually, paperback novels became overrun with the kind of "trashy" pulp fiction that was assumed to be read for entertainment rather than enrichment, which meant the more salacious the plot, the better. The juvenile delinquent in particular was one of the leading figures in fifties pulp fiction, and books on the subject were not only common but "among the era’s most popular titles" (Abate 157). While these books had an undeniable crossover appeal, with both adult and young people tearing their way through the pages, they were not precisely young adult literature. Like the series fiction produced by the Stratemeyer Syndicate in the 1930s, the books had teen appeal, but often reflected adult anxieties rather than teenage concerns. This distinction meant there was a gap in the publishing market, just as there had been in the 1940s when Daly wrote Seventeenth Summer. And it was a gap that would be filled in precisely the same way: through authenticity.

Much like Daly’s Seventeenth Summer, Hinton’s The Outsiders trades on its authentic teenage voice—in this instance, a voice that could be readily verified as originating from the high school culture it was meant to represent. Hinton famously began writing the book while she was still a high school student herself, a fact that both echoes and builds upon Daly’s youth in writing Summer (Michaud). If Daly was the
closest thing we had to a teenager when she started writing, Hinton was the real deal. Not only was Hinton a high school student writing about the high school experience—thus offering what seemed like the best possible insight into what teenagers were thinking and feeling—but she was also responding to what she felt to be a failing of the existing young adult literature. As Hinton recalls: “There was only a handful of books having teen-age protagonists: Mary Jane wants to go to the prom with the football hero and ends up with the boy next door and has a good time anyway. That didn’t ring true to my life. I was surrounded by teens and I couldn’t see anything going on in those books that had anything to do with real life” (qtd. in Michaud). In short, the model YA novel created by Daly was not representative of the lives Hinton and her friends were leading. In writing *The Outsiders*, then, Hinton worked to push back against the too-simplistic image of teenage life that YA had to offer by sharing her own experiences.

The story Hinton offers in *The Outsiders* both reflects and challenges the image of the juvenile delinquent in works like *Rebel Without a Cause*. The novel’s narrator, Ponyboy, is part of a gang, the Greasers, that regularly gets into major and minor skirmishes with their rival gang counterparts, the Socs. Just as in *Rebel*, knives are drawn during confrontations, and the high-risk lifestyle the boys lead results in multiple untimely deaths. When he’s not caught up in the violence that surrounds him, however, Ponyboy’s life looks drastically different from that of Jim Stark. For as much as he chafes under its weight, Jim has an indisputably stable family situation, a secure nuclear family that is supported by a middle-class lifestyle. Ponyboy, emphatically, does not. He is raised by his older brother and leads a strictly working-class life, with no signs of any real safety net or support system outside the Greasers. *The Outsiders* has often been
lauded for its “gritty” and “realistic” view of teenage life, but I would argue that much of its supposed realism comes not simply from Hinton being inspired by the boys she grew up with but by her willingness to acknowledge the existence of teenagers outside of the middle-class. Jim Stark is a rebel, sure, but he is the trustworthy kind of rebel. His middle-class background promises that he can and will be redeemed. *The Outsiders* goes a step further, offering up a story about a group of boys who were often denied entrance into teenagerhood by virtue of a position beyond their control.

*The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, which would be released a year later, performs similar work to *The Outsiders*, but from a rather different position. Kristin Hunter’s story of writing her first young adult novel does not have quite the same fairy tale quality to it as do Daly’s and Hinton’s, not least because she waited until two decades into her writing career to turn her attentions to young readers. Which is not to say she did not write as a teenager, because, as *Christian Science Monitor* reports, she had a “weekly column in a Negro newspaper that launched her career at age 14” (Gehret 14). But despite beginning to write professionally at a young age, she would go on to write poems, television scripts, and adult novels before writing her first young adult novel. This is among the key differences between her and Hinton: where Hinton was inarguably a teenager, Hunter was adamantly an adult. Nevertheless, Hunter would have her own authentic teenage experience to draw upon: born in 1930, she came of age during a time in which the teenager thrived. As a black woman, however, that experience would have been a far cry different from that of Hinton, and of Daly before her.
The specific perspective Hunter brings fills the pages of Soul Brothers. In broad strokes, the novel’s plot shares certain hallmarks with The Outsiders. Much like Hinton’s text, Soul Brothers follows a group of what might be termed as “at-risk” youth: teens whose insufficient home lives result in free time spent on the street, who form a gang as a means of protecting themselves and taking out their anger and frustration on the world. Throughout the story, Louretta works to find a safe place for herself and her friends to pass their time, despite the racism—institutional and otherwise—that they face on a daily basis. In particular, she strives to keep the boys she spends time with, who have formed a gang called the Hawks, from feeling the need to resort to violence. Ultimately, this mission proves futile, because violence finds them when one of their friends is shot by a police officer despite being unarmed. Just as Rebel and The Outsiders follow their characters as they grapple with the death of some of their peers, Soul Brothers uses death to expose the perilous position Louretta and her friends are in as young people outside of the teenage norm. As we will see in the sections that follow, both The Outsiders and The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou are notable for their efforts to redraw the boundary around YA literature and the teenagers it represented. The difference is, though, that where The Outsiders offers a story of youth who were rarely considered “teenagers,” Soul Brothers tells the story of a group of teens who were often denied their very humanity.

What each novel asked, then, was if the media surrounding teenagers could be forced to change. As we saw above, Hinton wrote The Outsiders because she felt underserved by the young adult novels that ostensibly represented her and her peers. But the key part of this discussion, and one that is often left out in discussing how
revolutionary the novel was at the time of its publication, is that there were enough YA novels about white teens that Hinton had something to challenge in the first place. Hunter, on the other hand, was working with a near-complete lack of books about black teenagers. When *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* won an award from the Council on Interracial Books, Hunter explained why she believed books representing minority youth could be so significant: “[It is] Not only minority children [that] are penalized by their status as Missing Persons in literature and in the mass media. No, I insist that the affluent majority in the sequestered suburbs are equally deprived when they never encounter anything in their reading or experience to suggest that the rest of the world is not exactly like their neighborhood” (qtd. in Gehret 14). In this moment, Hunter articulates another side effect of the nuclear family’s flight to the suburbs: it encouraged an increasingly homogenous view of the world, and one that was not being subverted by nearly any media for young people. In an interview after the novel’s release, Hunter comments further: “I felt that such a book was needed now, to help minority children build positive images of themselves and to help all children grow in their awareness of the world as it really is” (qtd. in Gehret 14).

**Fractures in the Family**

“The world as it really is”: this is the place where both Hinton and Hunter most significantly align. For both authors, the stated intent of their work was to reflect an image of the teenager they believed to be missing from existing young adult literature by crafting an authentic depiction of growing up outside the oft-represented white, middle-class, nuclear family. One of the key ways in which the two texts expand the boundaries available to teenage youth is by changing the image of the family within their pages. As Elaine Tyler May argues in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era,*
the iconic American nuclear family we now associate with the 1950s was a new creation in the wake of the Second World War. Men who had gone off to war returned to civilian life with little to no care for their mental health; women who had entered the workforce to fill the spots those same men had vacated were forced to retreat back into the domestic sphere. The country was in need of a solution to this tense new reality, which the nuclear family seemed ready to provide: “Rootless Americans struggled against what they perceived as internal decay. The family seemed to offer a psychological fortress that would protect them against themselves” (May 11). Without the external galvanizing force of the war to hold everyone together, the nation risked breaking apart. The carefully packaged nuclear family became the next best solution, as it offered a façade of stability and security in an increasingly fractured world.

What *The Outsiders* and *Soul Brothers* each suggest, though, is that the image of the happy, suburban nuclear family—complete with white picket fence—was never completely accurate or representative. Although the nuclear family was intended to fully satisfy the needs of every family member, parents and children alike, the family actually sat at odds with teenage culture. The community teenagers forged with each other away from home threatened to destabilize the family’s cohesion, as it provided young people with a non-familial support system. The Greasers—and, to a lesser extent, the Socs—stand as a logical extension of this premise, even if Ponyboy turns toward his peers less by choice than necessity. Ponyboy’s parents died in a car crash, leaving his oldest brother, Darry, in charge of raising Ponyboy and Sodapop. Dally has been on his own for years; Johnny has both mother and father, but they are abusive, unfit parents. For the boys who populate the Greaser gang, the so-called traditional family unit has
failed them in a significant way, leaving them to find a workable alternative. The boys reforge familial connections with one another, substituting the gang for their failed nuclear families. The intense connection these boys share is not an active rejection of a more socially acceptable family structure, but is instead a signal that the nuclear family had been flawed all along.

The boys’ lack of the “traditional” nuclear family has additional consequences, too, as it directly informs their class status. The specter of class is threaded throughout the novel, as Ponyboy knows from the start that it plays a role in how he and his friends view the world. In his description of Dally, whom Ponyboy calls the “real character of the gang,” Ponyboy notes that Dally has “no specific thing to hate” (10, 11). The exception? Socs. Ponyboy’s guess as to the reason why Dally harbors hatred for the Socs is telling: “You can’t win against them no matter how hard you try, because they’ve got all the breaks and even whipping them isn’t going to change that fact” (11). The violence of the world these boys inhabit is thus constructed as futile from the very beginning. They are up against a system that favors those like the Socs—those who are well-off, who have stability and privilege to spare—over those like the Greasers. That this commentary comes so early in the novel once again helps to position The Outsiders as different from the YA literature that had come before. Prior to Hinton’s novel, YA fiction had mostly given voice to those who best represented the kinds of teenagers adults would be likely to appreciate. For all of Angie’s social uncertainties in Seventeenth Summer, there is no doubt she would be a Soc if she and Ponyboy shared a high school “Maybe that’s why Dallas was so bitter,” Ponyboy muses, and it’s not hard to imagine that this same futility might be why The Outsiders is a little bitter, too. No matter how hard the Greasers fight,
no matter how well Hinton articulates their struggle, the power dynamics refuse to shift in their favor. The best they can hope for is to be a little better understood.

Family and class also play important roles in Louretta’s life, given that her home life and financial situation are as complicated as Ponyboy’s. Louretta’s father walked out on her family four years prior to the start of the novel, leaving her mother to care for her eight children and one grandchild. Even with the help of Louretta’s oldest brother, William, her family is left to struggle to feed ten mouths on roughly one income.

“Louretta didn’t know what Momma would do without William,” the narrative explains. “She didn’t know what any of them would do without him” (19). In yet another parallel between the texts, Louretta and Ponyboy are both utterly reliant upon the support and guidance of their respective eldest sibling; for Louretta, though, the fracture in her nuclear family comes through her father’s choice rather than death. Her family shares a small space while they struggle to keep themselves afloat after her father’s disappearance, which sours Louretta on the concept of marriage and family altogether: “Marriage meant a whole house full of babies to feed and take care of, and noise and yelling and fights, and no place to sit down, and no place to have your friends in and no place to even hear yourself think” (20-21). The financial struggles faced by Louretta’s family manifest themselves most strongly for her through a lack of space, which drives many of her choices throughout the novel. She wants time to herself and a safe space to pass her leisure time with friends, neither of which her family dynamic is able to provide for her at the start of the novel. By revealing these failures, Soul Brothers, like The Outsiders before it, demonstrates the flaws inherent to the nuclear family model.

The teenager of earlier young adult literature, including Seventeenth Summer’s Angie,
had been able to rely upon the family as a safety net. Ponyboy and Louretta have no such luxury, but their respective novels argue that they are teenagers nonetheless.

**Paul Newman and a Record Deal**

For the protagonists of *The Outsiders* and *Soul Brothers* to be fully considered teenagers (delinquent or otherwise), however, their relationship to popular culture and mass media would be just as important as their family dynamics. Because the image of the juvenile delinquent had been so heavily mediated throughout the previous decade, any depiction of unruly youth would have to grapple with the standards set by earlier texts. In some ways, this would prove to be a beneficial reality. As we have already seen, *The Outsiders* likely benefited from the spate of delinquency novels that preceded it, as it was able to more readily enter into a market primed for its arrival (Abate 150). But the extensive array of delinquent-focused popular culture would also offer its own set of challenges, because to subvert or challenge the tropes set forth in texts like *Rebel Without a Cause*, both authors would have to find space to create a new, previously unseen vision of the teenager. In the previous section, we saw that one of the ways *The Outsiders* and *Soul Brothers* approached this challenge was by presenting a story about those outside the “traditional” bounds of teenagehood.\(^7\) If the teenager Hunter and Hinton represent within their pages eschews certain identifying criteria—like being white, or middle-class—then the writers are forced to turn to other means of supporting their claim that the characters in their respective novels are, in fact, teenagers. It is unsurprising, then, that both novels rely upon the use of pop culture to help establish the teenage identity of their protagonists.

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\(^7\) It is worth noting, of course, that these two books were certainly not the first to do so. As just one example, *West Side Story* explored the lives of children of immigrants a few years earlier.
*The Outsiders* famously begins and ends at the movies. As Ponyboy leaves the movie theater and steps back out into the real world, in a moment depicted in both the first and last lines of the book, he informs us that he has “only two things on [his] mind: Paul Newman and a ride home” (1). In this single sentence, Hinton puts two of the major themes of the text into immediate conversation with one another. Ponyboy’s experience of the real world, made up of gangs and violence and social divides, is one that is mediated in no small part by the works of popular culture he encounters on a daily basis. He might have two things on his mind, but they each speak to the same anxiety. He wants a ride home because being on the street by himself is like asking to get jumped by the Socs; he wishes he looked tough—tough like Paul Newman—because it might keep him from being jumped in the first place. Right from the start, then, we see that for Ponyboy, pop culture is not merely a source of entertainment but also a tool he uses to understand his own position in the world.

The multiple ways Ponyboy engages with the mass media in his life are mirrored within the text itself. In discussing her influences and inspirations for writing *The Outsiders*, Hinton proudly declares that she read widely and eclectically as a teen (Michaud, Peck). Hinton’s literary and cultural influences run rampant throughout the novel, with explicit and subconscious references to a vast array of people and texts: from Will Rogers to Shirley Jackson’s *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, from the Beatles to *Gone With the Wind*. Dale Peck argues that these preponderance of these intertextual references makes up no small part of the book’s appeal: “They soften the challenging nature of the book’s subject matter by wrapping it in references, tropes and language familiar to its adolescent readers, even as they alleviate the fears of those
readers’ too-earnest parents.” Familiarity doesn’t only breed contempt, after all—it can also breed comfort. Peck goes on to note, as but one example, a moment in which *The Outsiders* appears to be quoting *The Sound of Music* (1965). As disparate as the two texts are, the quotation suggests that YA literature such as *The Outsiders* is part of a larger constellation. The novel’s intertextuality makes it accessible and also places it within a broader cultural context; it becomes both firmly rooted in its own time and directly connected to its predecessors.

As a result, these references also function to reposition our expected image of the juvenile delinquents at the center of the novel. While *The Outsiders* was published during the latter half of the sixties, it is a novel deeply rooted in the popular and political culture of the fifties. In many ways, Ponyboy and his friends embrace the stereotypes afforded them by the delinquency narratives of the fifties: they carry around switchblades, roam the streets in carefully defined gangs, and wear their hair slicked back. These markers are also filtered through Ponyboy’s relationship to popular culture, and the ways in which he chooses to acknowledge it. Ponyboy is astonishingly well read, especially if we assign him, as the novel’s narrator, credit for the book’s intertextuality. We might not expect the stereotypical juvenile delinquent to quote Robert Frost, but Ponyboy does. Moreover, the references he makes often position him as outside the “mainstream” teenage culture. Consider a small moment when Ponyboy is describing the Socs in which he references the Beatles: “They looked like they were all cut from the same piece of cloth: clean-shaven with semi-Beatle haircuts, wearing striped or checkered shirts with light-red or tan-colored jackets or madras ski jackets. They could just as easily have been going to the movies as to a rumble” (141). Here,
the idea of having a “semi-Beatle haircut” is presented as a critique of a culture foreign to Ponyboy. Even as one who has no desire to emulate the Beatles’ aesthetic, however, he can still easily identify the look. He might fashion himself outside the teenage norm, but he cannot entirely disentangle himself from teen media.

*The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou’s* Louretta has a rather different relationship with the pop culture in her life, although it runs no less rampant. Much like *The Outsiders*, *Soul Brothers* is populated with references to different media, most often in the sort of casual way that suggests Louretta’s day-to-day life is filled with popular culture. Her whole family dances one night to “the latest number by the Dacrons” (32), while her sister Arneatha casually reads “a *Screen Stars* magazine” (63) while lounging around the house. Louretta, like Ponyboy, also knows her way around a literary reference, having memorized the entirety of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life” “without even trying” when it was assigned in school, and her friends begin to write and print a community newspaper as a way to express themselves (35). It is in her description of a television show she watches with her family, though, that we get the clearest picture of how she engages with the media that surrounds her. After describing the show’s plot—in which a teenage girl is pursued by multiple boys, comes up with a convoluted scheme to avoid offending any of them, and ends up with the one she liked most once all the hijinks came to an end, as in all good teenage shows—Louretta laments the ease with which the resolution arrived: “Some people seemed to be so well off that even their problems would be blessings to other people. She seldom watched TV because it made her mad to see all those rich, safe, happy people and think about the difference between their lives and hers” (115). While Louretta’s siblings don’t seem
to mind the show—Arneatha because she wants to be like them, and the younger kids
because they don’t recognize the disparity—Louretta herself can’t stand it. All she sees
when she looks at the television is a world to which she has been firmly denied access.

The one place that Louretta feels truly connected to the popular culture that
surrounds her is in her discovery of blues music. One of the major plots throughout the
novel is about Louretta and her friends—the “Soul Brothers” of the book’s title—learning
how to sing and play the blues and soul music. The book is full of music: spirituals and
gospel songs, blues and soul music, and even original compositions that the teens
write. For Louretta, this music is important because it’s the one part of media and
culture where people like her are not just welcome but necessary. Upon being
introduced to the history of the blues by a man named Blind Eddie, Louretta asks him “a
terribly important question”: “Those musicians you mentioned. Are they all colored?”
(74). Blind Eddie’s response makes Louretta feel proud: “‘Why, sure,’ Blind Eddie said
with an easy laugh. ‘White people don’t write music like this. This is something the
colored people done all by themselves.’” (75). Louretta thrills to the idea that the music
she has already come to love was something that wasn’t dominated by white creators
and their stories; after being unable to name any black writers because they weren’t
taught in school, this moment changes Louretta’s perspective on the world. As a young
black woman, the realization that she, too, can write this kind of music allows her to
project herself into media in a way something like television had always made
impossible.

Indeed, perhaps the biggest difference between the treatment of popular culture
in *The Outsiders* and *Soul Brothers* is that, unlike Ponyboy, Louretta actually becomes
part of popular culture before the novel’s end. Late in the book, Louretta and her friends get discovered and signed to a record deal; the novel ends with a jump forward six months, after The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou have had a hit record. Although this ending, which affords the kids all some element of fame and Louretta and her family financial security, has been criticized for being “melodramatic” and “contrived” (Bostian 84), the text actually presents it with a rather restrained, cynical outlook. Suddenly, Louretta is rich and safe like the people she saw on television—but she certainly isn’t happy. The joy of making music has given way to the drudgery of work, and she regrets that her success as a songwriter had to be inspired by tragedy. Louretta, who always struggled to make friends, finds that fame can’t help there, either: her boyfriend seems jealous of her success, and she and the boys were now “objects of the awe and envy of their classmates” (247). Despite being more popular than ever, she feels intensely isolated.

As Grace Palladino points out in her discussion of the rise of Motown, the tension between the appearance and reality of success was not always enough to deter young people: “Industry spokesmen were quick to point out that appearances could be deceiving; only two out of every hundred teenage ‘stars’ ever recorded a second hit. But those odds seemed as good as any, especially to deprived but ambitious minority teenagers whose chances in life were already restricted” (138). *Soul Brothers* captures this delicate balance, juxtaposing Louretta’s success with her sister’s failures. Arneatha goes to Hollywood to become famous, but meets with no success; upon her return home, she becomes so depressed she attempts suicide and is subsequently

8 Which, as we will see later in Chapter 3, is ironic in and of itself, because if we look out-of-text, Ponyboy is far more of a cultural icon than Louretta.
institutionalized (246). The novel also aligns with Palladino’s many examples of how success did not so much lessen as it did change the experience of racism for minority youth, as Louretta and her family are forced to stay in their too-small house because landlords in the better neighborhoods with the larger houses refuse to rent to a black family. As such, although the sudden rise of The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou is certainly a dramatic moment within the text, it is far from a fairy tale ending. Louretta might be one of the voices on the radio now, but she remains subject to nearly all the same structures of oppression from back when she was just singing with friends in the clubhouse.

Although Louretta and Ponyboy end up in very different places by the end of their respective novels, then, there can be no denying the pervasive role of popular culture and mass media in their lives. In many respects, its presence is mundane, so commonplace as to barely be worth acknowledging. Even when it becomes more significant—as when Louretta begins a singing career—that only makes it more inescapable. For all that the teens of The Outsiders and Soul Brothers don’t fit within the boundaries of the teenager that previous young adult literature had put into place, the characters’ knowledge of and attention to popular culture reiterates that they aren’t that different, after all. Moreover, both books use their cultural references to help begin the turn away from the juvenile delinquent stereotype that had preceded them. Ponyboy loves literature and Paul Newman and is quick to judge other kids for styling their hair like the Beatles, while Louretta comes to realize that, despite the overwhelmingly white literature and media she has been presented with her whole life, there are musical and

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9 Rather than sympathizing with her sister, Louretta calls Arneatha’s suicide attempt “giving up,” (246) which is one of the few moments in the text that feels ungenerous.
cultural forms created and shaped by those who share her cultural heritage. Neither of them turns to mass media as a guideline for how to live their life; instead, they use it as a way to help define who they do and don’t want to be. In short, Louretta and Ponyboy both become the very kind of thoughtful and critical consumers of popular media that their English teachers desperately want them to be.

**Who Lives, Who Dies**

S.E. Hinton and Kristin Hunter, then, both took a similar approach in crafting the worlds in which their teenage characters would exist. Both wrote narratives that privileged the kinds of perspectives that young adult literature had previously deemed unnecessary or unwelcome, and both used the tenuous relationship between popular culture and teenage youth to prove that even those young people living on the outskirts of the idealized, middle-to-upper-class family life had the right to claim the teenage identity. And yet, only one of these books has been lauded for its realistic depiction of the teenage psyche, openly declared one of the first “real” YA novels, and made its way onto high school and college course text lists—and it’s not the book about the black teenagers. *The Outsiders* has maintained its status in the academy and public eye in the decades since its release; it has dozens of academic articles and book chapters at its disposal, as well as a film adaptation and innumerable parodies and satires that recast its weaknesses as quaint and lovable. *Soul Brothers*, by contrast, merits only a few scant references in the academic realm, and none that consider the text solely for its own merits. And while it was lauded upon its release for being an insightful look at the black experience (Gehret; P. G), it has since become more likely to be dismissed as melodramatic or lacking in some way (Stimpfle, Bostian). As Chapter 3 draws to a close, I want to offer a potential explanation of why the history of young adult literature
has chosen to elevate *The Outsiders* and dismiss *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, as well as to ask one question that Louretta might call “terribly important”: why does it matter which story gets heard?

Let’s begin by considering why it might be that *The Outsiders* proved more palatable to those authority figures who would help shape the field of YA literature in the wake of the novel’s publication. It is not, to be clear, a matter of simple quality. Although *Soul Brothers* is accused of being melodramatic, *The Outsiders* is nothing without its own love of melodrama. In fact, I would argue that *Soul Brothers* is a denser and more neatly constructed book than *The Outsiders*, so it is not the plot or prose alone that would have made the difference. Instead, I believe that a key part of each book’s reception comes from the distinct approach their respective authors took to conveying their book’s message about teenage youth. Unsurprisingly, these approaches were specifically informed by their positions and perspectives. The point of view offered by Hinton as a white teenage girl was nothing like that of Hunter, as an adult black woman. Hinton writes from the point of view of one who has seen her friends judged and disrespected by the adults in their lives and wishes to prove that those teenagers like her have value. Hunter, by contrast, writes her novel with hindsight, using the teenage perspective to help articulate the challenges faced by black youth when interacting with (usually white) authority figures.¹⁰ This difference comes not merely in the content of

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¹⁰ I want to acknowledge here that I have chosen not to read *Soul Brothers* through the lens of the Civil Rights Movement, although its influence is everywhere throughout the text and I do believe it would be a valuable exercise. I chose to leave that analysis for another time partly because it would be, as we academics like to say, outside the scope of this project, and partly because I wanted to place the text on equal footing with *The Outsiders* and read it as being primarily about family, delinquency, and popular culture.
their novels but in their rhetoric. To wit: Hinton offers an apologia, while Hunter presents a warning.

The full scope of Hinton’s defense of those teens accused of juvenile delinquency brush does not become clear until the novel’s final pages. It is only at the end of the book that we are shown the story’s framing device, which reveals that the story is an attempt to explain the lives that teenagers like Ponyboy led. Ponyboy is initially resistant when his English teacher asks him to write a “theme” that draws upon his own life and thoughts, but as he begins to process everything that has happened to him and his friends over the course of the book, he starts to reconsider. “Someone should tell their side of the story,” he thinks, “and maybe people would understand then and wouldn’t be so quick to judge a boy by the amount of hair oil he wore” (179). In this moment, Ponyboy seems to be speaking for Hinton, reflecting her own desire to speak for her fellow teenagers. Ponyboy seems to be speaking to multiple audiences at once within the text, as well: his English teacher, certainly, but also the kind of middle-class adult authority the English teacher represents. Telling the untold side of the story is exactly what brings so much attention to *The Outsiders* as a text, and within the book itself, it brings the story full circle. The first and last lines of the novel are the same, as Ponyboy begins his theme with the exact words that open the book. We as readers are not given quite enough context to know whether the book we just read is the theme Ponyboy writes or if he is simply choosing the same starting point, but no matter one’s preferred interpretation, the realization that Ponyboy is writing his story transforms the way we engage with the text. The sympathy we have felt for Ponyboy throughout the novel is not an accident.
While *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* would not turn away a sympathetic reader, Hunter is much less interested in making her book into a direct appeal to adults. Just as *The Outsiders* opens with Ponyboy having “Paul Newman and a ride home” on his mind, *Soul Brothers* begins with its main character on her way home: “Louretta Hawkins was walking home from school very slowly. Every day she did this, taking the long way home with very short steps, because she was in no hurry to get there” (1). Louretta and Ponyboy react to their time in this liminal public space—no longer in their original destination, not quite at home—rather differently. Whereas Ponyboy wanted nothing more than to get home quickly for fear of being jumped, Louretta enjoys her time alone on the walk because it is a rarity in her life. Which is not to suggest that desiring peace and quiet makes such a desire safe, as Louretta quickly learns. When she stops to listen to some of her friends who have gathered to sing songs in an alley, it is up to her to warn them of an approaching police officer named Lafferty. She announces that “The Man” is coming, and she and her friends all scatter. The warning works because “They knew who The Man was: someone in uniform, someone so big and brutal and powerful that he didn’t need a name” (7).

From its earliest pages, then, *Soul Brothers* has a different priority than *The Outsiders*. Hinton’s book certainly demonstrates an awareness of the way issues such as class play in the lives of the Greasers, but the novel fails to offer a complete indictment of the institution of adulthood itself. The books might ask adults to be more understanding of the reasons why those like Ponyboy might be driven to violence, but it does so mostly by offering an explanation for the boys’ shortcomings rather than suggesting that adult society’s standards are wrong in the first place. Or, as Eric L.
Tribunella puts it, *The Outsiders* offers a “palliative” to the problems faced by the boys, instead of “radically challenging, calling into question, or disrupting” the systems that cause these problems in the first place (95). Hunter, by contrast, foregrounds the issue of systemic racial inequality from the book’s earliest moments. When Louretta first sees Officer Lafferty, the narrator offers incisive context so that readers might understand the warning the girl is about to give her friends:

> In school they taught you that the policeman was your friend. Louretta and all the other Southside pupils smiled wisely whenever a teacher said this, because they knew better. They knew that all policemen were not their friends, even if they might be the friends of children on the other side of town, and that some policemen, like Officer Lafferty, were their worst enemies. (6)

Here, Hunter sets up an immediate distinction between the narrative perpetuated by the white teachers at their school and the lived reality that she and her friends have come to know. Perhaps there is truth to the notion that policemen can be kind, but only if you live on the right side of town and, as we see throughout the rest of the book, only if you have the right skin color.

Hunter is not merely content to hint at the tension between these teenagers and officers like Lafferty, though; rather, her narrator confronts it head on as the paragraph continues:

> Officer Lafferty’s favorite sport was to catch groups of Southside boys in out-of-the-way places like vacant buildings and alleys, where there would be no witnesses to what he did. He would call them names and accuse them of committing crimes, just to provoke them into saying something back or hitting him or running away. If they ran away he would shoot them. If they did anything else, he would beat them up with his club and take them to the police station and charge them with resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. (6)

What may be most unsettling about this explanation is not even the brutality of Lafferty’s tactics, though that is certainly overwhelming, but the matter-of-factness with which it is
described. There is a distinct lack of hyperbole and exaggeration in the phrasing, with the arguable exception of the notion that it is a “sport” to Lafferty. And even then, one gets the sense from the narrator’s descriptions of the cop throughout the text that there is truth to the idea that provoking, beating, arresting, and even killing these children is something that Lafferty actively seeks out, if not outright enjoys. Although they do manage to escape to safety temporarily, Louretta and all of her friends know better than to think it a victory. “You couldn’t win with a bully like Officer Lafferty,” the narrator says, just to drive the point home (6). The Socs have advantages over the Greasers, yes, but Officer Lafferty has more than mere advantage. He has the weight of civil authority behind him, and Hunter wants her readers to know it.

On one level, then, *The Outsiders* is an easier novel to swallow for those who have reason to be invested in the existing power dynamics surrounding the teenager. Not only does *The Outsiders* couch its darkness in softer, more welcoming cultural references, like those *Sound of Music* references Dale Peck describes in his discussion of the novel, but it also asks outright for adult approval. In discussing the ease with which *The Outsiders* has come to end up on so many required reading lists in American schools, Tribunella suggests it is partially because “*The Outsiders* is not a terribly threatening novel” (95). Rather than demanding sweeping systemic changes, the novel’s “authentic” teenage voice chooses to end with a request for acceptance and understanding from the adults who judge delinquent teens, if not outright forgiveness. Despite its supposedly dark content, the novel itself feels safe. Hunter, on the other hand, is already writing as an adult, and as such her work reflects less anxiety about adult reception. Instead, her focus is on ensuring that her readers—and especially her
readers of color—have a text that reflects the dangers they face while going about their day-to-day lives. The Greasers might get a bad rap, but they also regularly get into fistfights and knife fights and rumbles; for most of Soul Brothers, Louretta and her friends have done nothing worse than standing on the street, and they must fear for their lives anyway. Hunter’s book makes it clear that this is a regular occurrence, and a real one, and one that has an identifiable cause: the institutional racism inherent to systems created and run by adults. This, then, is one reason why Hunter’s book may have been less likely to work its way into school reading lists and other institutionally-approved settings. Just as the idea of blaming the family and adult institutions for juvenile delinquency proved distasteful, so too would a young adult novel that legitimized distrust of civil authority.

The distinction between warning and apologetics, and the need for one over the other in these two books, is largely informed by how each of the protagonists interacts with the assumptions placed upon them due to their race. Although there are a variety of ways we could come to understand this issue, let’s turn to the dynamic Robin Bernstein defines in her book, Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights (2011). Early in her text, Bernstein argues that the pervasive cultural notion that ties innocence to childhood is “historically located” (4). That is, she explains that innocence is not a trait that has an inherent connection to childhood but is, instead, a characteristic that has been assigned to childhood. Bernstein bluntly—and accurately—continues, “This innocence was raced white” (4). While innocence became an increasingly important part of our definitions of childhood, innocence was being afforded only to white children. Children of color, and especially black children, were
actively denied access to the kinds of representation of innocence that surrounded white youth. “White children became constructed as tender angels,” Bernstein writes, “while black children were libeled as unfeeling, noninnocent nonchildren” (33). In this moment, Bernstein is discussing the manifestation of racial innocence in the nineteenth century; even though The Outsiders and Soul Brothers would not be published until a century later, both of the YA novels are the inheritors of this distinction. As Bernstein shows throughout her book, the positioning of white children as innocent and black children as neither innocent nor children remains ingrained in America’s engagement with race. The longer this separation went on, after all, the simpler the math would become: if innocence is a necessary part of childhood, but black children are not innocent, then black children are effectively left out of childhood altogether. By the time the teenager emerged, this denial of humanity and childhood to black youth had such a long history that it seemed the teenager and its media could not have any hope of escape from its grasp. In the case of The Outsiders and Soul Brother, it would also play a role in defining both books’ legacy.

To see how this notion of racial innocence plays out across the texts, let’s consider how each protagonist engages with the issue of their outward appearance. Throughout The Outsiders, Ponyboy grows increasingly frustrated with the way he and his friends are so quickly judged and dismissed by those who do not even know them. The most common reason this judgment comes about is due to the Greasers’ outward appearance. On multiple occasions across the book, Ponyboy calls attention to the ways in which the Greasers’ chosen aesthetic creates a particular expectation for their character and behavior. In part, this emphasis comes from Ponyboy’s general focus on
looks—eyes and hair in particular. But his attention to such details seems driven, in no small part, by the reactions adults have to him and his friends based on a single glance alone. In the midst of deciding to write his theme on this subject, for instance, he hopes that he might be able to help effect change in a way that will prevent a boy from being judged “by the amount of hair oil he wore,” which is a clear and precise way of situating the problem faced by the boys. The issue the Greasers have with the world at large is not grounded in their looks so much as it is the way others respond to their looks.

Such responses do not occur in isolation, however, and we see this most clearly in the moment before the boys get into a “rumble.” After describing the outfits the Socs wear and dismissing them for being as appropriate for a movie as a fight, Ponyboy articulates why this bothers him:

That’s why people don’t ever think to blame the Socs and are always ready to jump on us. We look hoody and they look decent. It could be just the other way around — half the hoods I know are pretty decent guys underneath all that grease, and from what I’ve heard, a lot of Socs are just cold-blooded mean — but people usually go by looks. (141)

From a cynical perspective, this is simply a means for Ponyboy to further clarify the us-versus-them divide that runs throughout the book, and an example of him being as ungenerous in judging the Socs as he accuses adults of being to the Greasers. But the way in which Ponyboy constructs his argument belies something a little deeper. He does offer some room to allow that not all of the Socs are “cold-blooded mean,” but, in an even more telling moment, he only points to “half of the hoods” he knows as being

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11 This focus on the boys’ appearances—often attributed to Hinton’s romanticization of the characters—has been the fodder for light mockery in the years since the novel’s release. In Mallory Ortberg’s “Texts from The Outsiders,” for instance, nearly two-thirds of the conversations Ponyboy has are about eye color, including a joke about how he needs to “update [his] eye color journal.”
decent guys. At this relatively late moment in the novel, he has begun to recognize that the real enemy the Greasers face is not the Socs but the adults of the world.

Ponyboy’s perspective here—and indeed, even Hinton’s, as a young writer—reflects a rather nuanced understanding of the social structures that have been forced upon the teenagers. Ponyboy is focused on looks not simply because that is how the two gangs differentiate themselves, but because he knows the adults looking to cast judgments upon them are going to use those looks to determine more than just a high schooler’s social status. The look a teenager chooses in the world of *The Outsiders*, to the extent they can choose at all, speaks to one’s social and economic class, and by unfortunate extension, one’s assumed morality and innocence. “We look hoody and they look decent,” Ponyboy says, in a line that invokes notions of respectability politics, and with this comment he makes it known that he is well aware of the full cost of his appearance. “Decent” in particular is key here; the Socs make “decent” sartorial choices, yes, but the clothing they wear lends them a deeper legitimacy in the eyes of adults. The Socs’ clothing signifies that they understand how to fit into the dictates of polite society and are thus presumed to be decent people in a way that the Greasers never are.

When she’s not worrying about the cops, Louretta joins Ponyboy in worrying about looks—though once again, *Soul Brothers* suggests that Louretta’s concerns have a different source. Louretta doesn’t worry much about whether she’s wearing the right outfit, as Ponyboy does, or if her hair is properly maintained. Instead, she worries that her skin color might consign her to a fate far worse than mere distrust or distaste from adults. Louretta is keenly aware that she is not afforded any measure of innocence by
those like Officer Lafferty; she may not articulate this perception in the same way Bernstein does, but her actions suggest she recognizes the reality of it nonetheless. Midway through the novel, for instance, Louretta has another too-close encounter with Officer Lafferty. He busts into the clubhouse when he hears the kids singing inside and accuses them of disturbing the peace; when Louretta protests his violent handling of a pregnant woman, Lafferty professes to be unbothered by the prospect of having hurt the unborn child: “‘Well, fine. That’ll be one less to deal with when he grows up.’ Then he grinned, showing uneven, yellowish teeth. ‘But that’s not likely. You colored gals are tough. You’re no different from animals’” (95). In this moment, the dehumanization of the black body—and the black child—is made explicit. Bernstein argues that the ability to feel pain has historically been key to establishing notions of innocence, because if “colored girls are tough” and unable to feel pain, as Lafferty asserts here, then they are denied subjectivity (Bernstein 50, 233). Lafferty takes this notion to its undeniably racist end when he conflates black children with animals, thereby actively denying them their humanity. As the situation escalates, one of the boys steps in to protect Louretta, and Lafferty promptly takes him off to the police station. When the white music teacher arrives a few minutes later, he protests again and again that a cop wouldn’t take a kid to jail for no reason, and the kids are left simply to laugh at his ignorance (98-99). As well-meaning as the teacher is, he cannot understand. The divide between the white experience, in which the police are believed to serve and protect, and the experience of these black youth, who have only ever known fear and terror when faced with cops, is an insurmountable one.
Louretta does not face discrimination from the white community alone, however, as she also finds it difficult to find connection within the black community due to her lighter skin. Upon being accused of looking like a “toasty,” Louretta gets angry as the narrative explains, “Toasties were people who put on airs and thought they were better than everybody else. When you were light-skinned, like Louretta, darker people were always accusing you of being a toasty because that was what they expected you to be” (11). This passage invokes the notion of what Alice Walker would later deem as Colorism, as it demonstrates that Louretta, as a “light-skinned” girl, would often be the subject of judgment and suspicion by virtue of not just her race but also her skin tone (Walker 291). For Louretta, the performance of identity comes after she has been judged. Unlike Ponyboy, who has an active role in choosing clothing that he knows will result in being criticized, Louretta can only react to the world’s view of her skin color. “You had to go around constantly proving that you weren’t stuck up,” the text complains (11). Because her skin dictates how she is perceived by friends and strangers alike, Louretta is forced to constantly mitigate this judgment through her actions, in a cycle that never reaches an end.

In short, then, the difference between the way Ponyboy and Louretta each process their relationship to their looks is a question of choice. While Ponyboy certainly doesn’t have a broad array of choices in his life, being hindered as he is by financial instability and desperate need for connection with the other Greasers, the markers by which he is judged are, ultimately, chosen. Ponyboy and the Greasers choose to perform their identity via clothing and hair oil, opting for a look that sets them apart from their Soc counterparts even knowing it leads to outside judgment. When Ponyboy goes
on the run from the law, one of the first steps they take is to change his hair, thereby disassociating him from the gang and casting further presumptions of innocence upon him. But no matter how hard she might try, Louretta can never escape the racist judgments that accompany her skin color. She is not afforded any markers of innocence; as a black girl, she is constantly dismissed and dehumanized. As we’ve already seen, not even the respectability that comes with success in the entertainment industry can change that for her. She and her friends are always black first, teenagers second—if ever teenagers at all.

Perhaps the racialization of innocence in these texts can be best articulated, however, through one of the parallel moments across the texts: in the death of one of the gang members at the hands of the police. In Hinton’s novel, this moment comes late in the story, after the Greasers’ beloved Johnny dies in the hospital. Distraught at the loss, Dally takes a gun and robs a grocery story, ending up on the run from the cops. Ponyboy bears witness to Dally’s confrontation with the cops:

Doors slammed as the policemen leaped out. Dally had reached the circle of light under the street lamp, and skidding to a halt, he turned and jerked a black object from his waistband. I remembered his voice: *I been carryin’ a heater. It ain’t loaded, but it sure does help a bluff*…Dally raised the gun, and I thought: You blasted fool. They don’t know you’re only bluffing. And even as the policemen’s guns spit fire into the night I knew that was what Dally wanted. (153-4)

Consider how much intention plays into the moments before Dally’s death: Dally had committed a crime, led the cops on a chase, and openly brandished a weapon. Only when faced with all these facts—and the gun in particular—do the police open fire and kill the young man. Bear in mind, too, that this comes after readers begin to understand that Ponyboy won’t face any consequences for his role in the death of a Soc; despite the violence Ponyboy and the Greasers have enacted throughout the novel in their
encounters with the Socs, they are able to skate through the criminal justice system mostly unscathed. It takes Dally deliberately and intentionally threatening a police officer for any of the Greasers to find themselves finally burdened with an assumption of unimpeachable guilt.

Louretta and her friends have to do far less to achieve the same result. Halfway through *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, Louretta convinces the Hawks to throw a dance to earn money for new instruments, as an alternative to their idea to go rob stores and people until they had enough. At the dance, Officer Lafferty and five other cops show up, and commence a search for the weapons they believe the boys to have. The cops order the boys to line up along the wall, but one, Jethro, stays stuck in the middle of the floor, his fear having provoked an epileptic fit. A young officer finds himself with the task of getting Jethro to move while being chastised by Lafferty, and it proves disastrous:

Jethro’s legs still did not move forward, only up and down; but he responded. His arms, which had been above his head, came down to his sides. Lafferty called, “Watch it! He’s armed!” There was a short, deafening explosion, and Jethro yelped, bent double, and dropped to his knees, then rolled over on his back on the floor. The young cop stood over him, looking down with an astonished stare as if he could not believe his pistol had really harmed someone. (131)

In the moments before being shot, Jethro posed no tangible threat beyond that which could be read onto his mere existence as a young black man. Lafferty was not even in the room when he began yelling orders to the younger cop; despite his insistence that Jethro was armed, he had no proof the boy was carrying a weapon. Although Jethro would not die until a few days later, while in the hospital, *Soul Brothers* suggests his life was always on borrowed time. Unlike Dally, who got to choose the time and manner of his death, Jethro had no such choice. His life was taken on a whim of fear and power,
because to be a black teenager in America was then—and is now—to be at the mercy of those who will presume danger over innocence every time.

**Who Tells Your Story**

As I revisit Chapter 3 mere days after a grand jury declined to indict any of the officers involved in the 2014 shooting death of 12-year-old Tamir Rice at a recreation center in Cleveland, Ohio, I cannot escape the way that the fictional death of Jethro in this 1968 novel continues to feel achingly relevant to understanding the position of black teenagers in the United States. And while I know it is impossible and even foolish to attempt to answer a hypothetical such as this, I find myself stuck on a single question: what, if anything, might be different now had *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* been the book that made its way into every high school library? What if scholars pointed to Hunter’s novel as one of the most significant YA novels of all time, as the one that kicked off the trend of gritty realism that would develop throughout the next decade? What if, when YA literature presented the country with two new images of the teenager, we had decided to fully embrace the one that told the story of the challenges faced by black youth?

In asking these questions, I do not wish to diminish the value of the work Hinton does in *The Outsiders*. Hinton’s novel has been massively successful and massively important since its release; it captured and inverted the zeitgeist of the moment, making room in a homogenous young adult literature for something new and different. It understood the teenager’s relationship to family, to friends, and to popular culture in a way no YA novel prior its publication had managed, and its influence can be traced directly to much of the literary, realistic YA fiction hitting bookshelves today. Yet, when one reads *The Outsiders* today, it feels almost quaint, like a relic from another era. It is
undeniably important, but it is also a far easier story to process. *Soul Brothers*, by contrast, continues to feel relevant in a way that even few contemporary YA novels do. The book is certainly far from perfect—the narrative voice in particular would seem dated to today’s YA reader—but it still somehow manages to feel ripped from today’s headlines. Louretta’s story could be the story of Tamir Rice’s friend, or Michael Brown’s, or the friend of any number of young black men whose lives ended too soon.

Naturally, I do not have any helpful answer to the questions I have posed here. It’s entirely possible that nothing of significance would have changed for either YA literature or the teenager had *Soul Brothers* been elevated to classic status, and I am not naive enough to assume it could have had a lasting impact on the United States’s relationship with racism. After all, despite its overwhelming success, even *The Outsiders* would eventually see its influence wane; as we will see in Chapter 4, by the time it became *Morning in America*, YA literature was all too eager to retreat from the realism Hinton had instilled in the category into something lighter and more easily contained. But if *The Outsiders* could take the specter of the juvenile delinquent that had so haunted the nation and soften it into an image that readers could not only understand but with which they could sympathize, then I can’t help but wonder what *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* could have done in its place—and what it could still do, if given the chance. In the last line of the novel, one of the boys offers a few final words of caution to Louretta: “Enjoy what you have now, Louretta. Nothing ever comes back” (249). Caleb’s words are true: the historical moment in which these two books were published is gone, and we can’t get it back. But the peculiar benefit of literature is that does, sometimes, come back. Perhaps it’s not yet too late for us to return to *The Soul
*Brothers and Sister Lou*, and ensure that it stands right alongside *The Outsiders* as one of the key texts in the history of young adult fiction.
CHAPTER 4
OUT OF THE WOODS: THE PROBLEM NOVEL, SWEET VALLEY HIGH, AND THE (UN)REAL TEENAGER

Never afraid to be the bearer of bad news, *Time* magazine again turned its attention to the state of America’s teenagers in 1981. “Declining Teens,” intones the headline, with the sub-header offering the doom-and-gloom truth: “They felt better in the 1960s” (84). Over the course of a few short paragraphs—situated in the “Behavior” section rather than “Education” this time—the writer elaborates upon some worrisome studies about the mental health of the nation’s teenagers. While 85% of teenagers report feeling fine about their place in the world, *Time* warns that number is not quite so reassuring as it might seem. “Things have been going downhill since the early 1960s” the article explains (84). While a group of teenagers surveyed in the 1960s “were more confident and trusting, felt greater affection for their families and mastered ‘their inner feelings and impulses better,’” the teens surveyed in the late 1970s and 1980 were not so promising (84). The article comes to a bittersweet conclusion: “Though the story has an upbeat ending—most teen-agers are in good shape psychologically—about 20% report feeling empty emotionally, are confused most of the time, and would rather die than go on living” (84).

This reference to suicidal tendencies in teenagers—or, at least, a disinterest in continuing to be alive—reads as almost flip, a near-literal afterthought. It comes at the end of the article, and merits no further elaboration. Perhaps this is because it is not the first time the difficulties of teenage life had graced the pages of *Time*—not even the first time that decade. Less than a year prior, in the September 1, 1980 issue, the magazine rang the alarm bells over the “Suicide Belt” (56). In the span of seventeen months in an affluent Chicago suburb, “28 teenagers took their own lives” (56). The article makes no
attempt to hide the fact that its concern stems largely from the fact that it is wealthy teenagers who make up the bulk of this trend; *Time* returns again and again to the idea that wealthier teens face unique challenges that lower-class youth do no share. Or, to put it more simply: the burden of being rich is simply *too much* for some young people to bear.

The above is not, unfortunately, an exaggeration of the rhetoric within the article itself. Although the piece notes that suicide rates are up for teens in general, it also immediately points out that the increase in rates is even higher for upper-class kids. While suicide is a national problem, then, the article keeps its attention solely on the well-off. The reasons named in the text for why wealthy kids might be more susceptible to suicide make up a litany of now-familiar cultural fears: the failures of the family, the influence of popular culture, and the perilous state of the nation's politics. The family continues to fall short of expectations, just as it did in the fifties and sixties, with one teen interviewee complaining that although kids in the area are given everything they could ever want, they lack the one thing they need: parental love and understanding (56). Television now stands as the prime example of how media does a disservice to its teenage viewers, as it “leads children to expect quick answers and undermines their ability to tolerate frustration,” according to one psychiatrist quoted within the article (56).

The effects of the nation’s relationship to war remain yet another point of concern for these wealthy teens, especially in the wake of Vietnam. Another psychiatrist identifies the war as a turning point for young people, arguing that they “became disillusioned with the magic of government, and this extended to all institutions, including the family” (56). The family—which already faced critique—is now positioned as but one more institution
the teenager has reason to distrust, which makes this disillusionment all the more difficult to overcome. Still, the article suggests teens crave community in the absence of Vietnam, even if they new distrust institutions: “The ’60s might have held down the teenage suicide rate by providing a sense of community, built around drugs and opposition to Viet Nam” (56). The problems of the sixties came with plenty of baggage, *Time* argues, but at least they were problems that brought well-to-do teenagers together.

The reason for the uptick in suicide rates for wealthy teens, then, is because *Time* positions this need for community as a burden carried only by the upper-class. The same psychiatrist who pegged Vietnam as one of the potential causes for the trend goes on to make this division explicit. “People on the lower end of the social scale,” he says, “expect less than these [wealthier] people. Whatever anger the poor experience is acted out in antisocial ways—vandalism, homicide, riots—and the sense of shared misery in the lower-income groups prevents people from feeling so isolated” (56).

Leaving aside the innumerable problems with this particular construction of those who are “on the lower end of the social scale,” the idea here is one that declares shared anger and pain as a lighter load to bear simply because it is shared. If we accept the baseline premise that suicide comes from isolation, then this particular bit of wonky logic makes it clear that the lower classes cannot suffer from the same kind of isolation—and that even if they do, their frustration and anger is taken out in ways that harm others, rather than in an act of violence against themselves. Or, as the psychiatrist puts it: “[The well-to-do teen is] more likely to take it out on himself, not society” (56).

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1 In a tidy piece of alignment, the advertisement on the page facing the article is one meant to persuade parents to encourage their children to enlist in the Army.
Certainly, *Time* is not the definitive account of the causes of teen suicide and depression, or even the nation’s particular outlook on the teenage experience. Some of the trends the articles reference, however, were far from unique to the teenage subject. The disillusionment with government after Vietnam, while often tied to young people due to the draft, was not limited to teens and twenty-somethings. As John Ehrman notes, the 1970s saw an extreme pessimism develop—particularly among liberal intellectuals—with regard to the nation’s institutions, predicting that “problems only would worsen during the 1980s” (41). Moreover, the “deep recession” of the first two years of Reagan’s presidency meant that conversations about taxes, the economy, and social class seemed all the more pressing (Ehrman 1). In talking about the challenges faced by the era’s teens, then, those quoted in the *Time* article are also speaking to some of the worries faced by the nation at large. When one resident of the area that housed the rash of suicides argues that a wealthy, smart teen might feel pressure more than anyone else, one senses that his words are not just about local teens. “I'm convinced that intelligent kids are most likely to commit suicide,” he says. “They carry around burdens beyond themselves and feel frustrated at the lack of solutions” (56). At the start of the decade, it wasn’t only teenagers who were frustrated at the lack of solutions—but teenagers made a darn good example of what was going wrong.

As such, these two articles function as a bellwether of sorts, one sign of many that the seedy underbelly of the teenage experience exposed by 1960s young adult literature was going to prove too uncomfortable to continue reading about into the 1980s. As we saw in Chapter 3, the YA fiction of the late 1960s made a compelling case for expanding the boundaries of just who would get to be a teenager. Although the black
teens represented in Kristin Hunter’s *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* were largely denied support by the institutions that ensure a novel’s ongoing success, the supposed authenticity of S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* was embraced with open arms. In some ways, the “gritty realism” description that so often gets attached to Hinton’s novel functions as code for the fact that it’s about poor and working-class characters; after decades of holding up the middle-class as the One True Teenager, *The Outsiders* proved that money was only one facet of a teenage experience that also included violence and death. But with the nation carrying a more pessimistic worldview out of the 1970s, the trend toward realism that had taken over YA fiction was not the kind of optimistic antidote that could alleviate the stress of disillusionment. Life was difficult, and realism was no way of changing the subject.

In Chapter 4, then, we will examine how the 1980s young adult fiction market turned to bright and frothy series romance novels to offer an alternative to the malaise that seemed to accompany realistic fiction throughout the previous decade. After the success of *The Outsiders* in the 1960s, the young adult literature of the 1970s turned its attention to producing more of the kind of dark and gritty stories Hinton’s novel had made possible. The result was the problem novel, an offshoot of the realistic fiction genre defined by its explorations of the seedy side of teenage life. This shift to a more cynical perspective brought YA literature in line with the aforementioned disillusionment with seventies institutions and their politics, effectively reflecting the anxieties of the moment rather than offering an escape from them. By the time the eighties arrived, however, the relentless cynicism and darkness of the problem novel—and American political life more generally—carried less and less appeal, and readers were eager for a
change. When Ronald Reagan—whom we last saw as James Dean’s scene partner in the 1950s—swept into office at the start of the decade on the promise that it would once again be “Morning in America,” YA literature found itself in a state of transition, too. The category needed a less cynical, more optimistic take on the teenager to match the renewal promised by Reagan’s political rhetoric, and *Sweet Valley High* was more than happy to oblige.

*Sweet Valley High* was no small phenomenon. The series, created by and credited to Francine Pascal, details the experiences of Jessica and Elizabeth, the Wakefield twins, as they navigate the social perils of life at Sweet Valley High School. In the years that followed its initial launch, the series would balloon into over 150 books, with a variety of spin-off series for older and younger readers, as well as a television series that managed a four-year run. Throughout Chapter 4, I will look to the series’ first entry, *Double Love*, as the primary example of the work done through the world of *Sweet Valley High*. As the first book in the series, *Double Love* not only establishes the structure of the series but offers the cleanest point of entry to understand what, precisely, makes *Sweet Valley* different than its YA predecessors. As we will soon see, not least among the series’ allures was the way it put the upper-middle-class teen back at the center of the YA narrative, thus affording the teenager a far less perilous existence than *The Outsiders* had suggested might be becoming the norm. The transformation would come none too late, either, because, as *Time* warns us, the state of the teenage nation was bleak at the dawn of the 1980s. “There is nothing to distract a teen-ager today,” the “Suicide Belt” article bemoans as it draws to a close, but that was soon to change (56). Although *Time* could not have known, it would be but a few short
years before the Wakefield twins would drive up in their little red Fiat and provide all the
distraction a teenager—and a nation—could ask for.

**The Problem Novel**

*Sweet Valley High* is, first and foremost, a fantasy. Which is not to say the series
itself is fantastical, although Jessica Wakefield on a good day is perhaps more
intimidating than any fictional dragon, but rather that the books offer an idealistic
representation of what the nation might aspire to be throughout the 1980s. As we will
soon see, *Double Love* marked the starting point for a franchise that, while often
maligned as disposable, romantic fluff, can be incredibly revealing about the political
and cultural context in which it was produced. Of course, the world of *Sweet Valley High*
was also a product of its predecessors, emerging as an active—if perhaps
unconscious—response to the realistic literature of the previous decade. While Chapter
4 will mostly concern itself with the developments in YA literature during the 1980s, it is
worth taking a few moments first to understand the significance and ongoing influence
of the most important genre in YA fiction throughout the decade prior: the problem
novel.

In Chapter 3, we saw that the 1960s was when YA literature found its voice.
Although Maureen Daly had taken up the mantle for the authentic teenage voice in the
early 1940s, the intimate and unyielding portrait of the teen found in S. E. Hinton’s *The
Outsiders* sparked an interest in the dark and twisty problems plaguing the teenage
psyche. Although *The Outsiders* captured only a small swath of the teenage
experience—as demonstrated by the radically different presentation of teenage
rebellion and oppression in the pages of Kristin Hunter’s *The Soul Brothers and Sister
Lou*—it nonetheless drew back the curtain on the teenager in a way that had, until then,
been impossible within the sweet, innocent romance novels that populated the YA category. What *The Outsiders* inspired—darker, more honest depictions of the problems and challenges facing teens at any given time—eventually became known as the “problem novel.” Problem novels were meant to offer insightful glimpses into the unspoken and unseen realities of young people’s lives. After all, the seventies were not without their tensions, from Kent State to Watergate to, yes, Vietnam. As Michael Cart notes, the problem novel did not just address readers the problems plaguing both teenagers and the nation, it “exhausted” them (35). Due to the bleak realities that pervaded the decade, the books published at the time took on a variety of subjects that adults might wish teenagers had no exposure to: sex and sexually transmitted diseases, drugs, emotional turmoil, and even the occasional bit of rock’n’roll thrown in for good measure. As the market for these books exploded, though, it didn't take long for the problem novel subgenre to include both those stories based on “true life” and those that devolved into melodramatic tales with little-to-no basis in reality (Cart 34).

Two of the most recognizable books to emerge during this era of YA literature were *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous (1971) and Judy Blume’s *Forever…* (1975), each of which approached the notion of the problem novel from a very specific direction. *Go Ask Alice* is presented as the found diary of an anonymous teenage girl who, after being exposed to drugs and the “hippie” lifestyle, goes through a downward spiral that ultimately ends in her death. The book includes a short prefatory page from the “editors” of the text, explaining that the “names, dates, places and certain events have been changed in accordance with the wishes of those concerned,” thereby heightening the verisimilitude of the story by assuring readers everything within its pages did, in fact,
happen (n.p.). The actual truth about the book’s origins, however, is much more interesting and much more telling about the placement of the problem novel on YA shelves. The book is, in reality, a piece of fiction created by the so-called editor, Beatrice Sparks, that is meant to act as a warning against the anti-establishment lifestyle that the “deceased” young girl encounters throughout the book. Everything that happens happens in the worst possible way, making it clear to the reader that stepping off the straight and narrow is a perilous experience.

By contrast, Forever… has no interest in being a deterrent. According to the well-worn story, Blume wrote Forever… in response to a plea from her daughter for her to write “a story about two nice kids who have sex without either of them having to die” (“Forever”). Admittedly, this purpose can seem to run somewhat counter to the tradition of the problem novel, in which the main character is expected to face some sort of intense struggle—problem is in the name, after all. Often, these struggles consist of a teenager suffering a series of consequences for a (presumably poor) choice they made; in the case of girls who choose to have sex, consequences can include pregnancy and disease, for a start. In Go Ask Alice, for instance, the sexual activity the unnamed main character engages in is but one of the many steps on the path to her inevitable death. By writing a book in which this is explicitly not the case—in which a teenage girl is not only allowed to have sex but also to enjoy it, and to do so without suffering as a result—Blume pushed back against the standards set by many of her problem novel predecessors.

An interesting side effect of Blume’s goal with the novel, however, is that Forever… develops a secondary role as an instruction manual. In the book, the main
character, Katherine, enters into a relationship with a boy named Michael; they decide to have sex, which they think means their relationship will last. Eventually, though, Katherine becomes attracted to someone else, and she and Michael break up. The plot of the book is rather pedestrian, and not unlike that of Daly’s *Seventeenth Summer* when broken down to its component parts. What makes *Forever…* stand out, then, is the way in which the narrative treats sex. Before she sleeps with Michael, Katherine goes to Planned Parenthood to learn about her contraceptive options, in a section of the book that reads as much like an educational pamphlet as it does a novel. Indeed, the text takes its educational responsibility so seriously that it has since been updated to include a brief “Note to the Reader” at the novel’s start in which readers are given more current information on contraception, as well as a number to call for more information (n.p.). Although Katherine does not suffer any significant fallout from her choice to have sex—in no small part due to her efforts to educate herself first—the book’s emphasis on health and safety makes it abundantly clear that dangers exist. The problem might be avoided, but it’s always lurking.

Taken together, then, these novels become two sides of the same coin. *Go Ask Alice* encourages readers to find a path away from drugs and sex, presenting the most dire scenario that could result if teens go down the wrong road. *Forever…* shows readers a brighter path, demonstrating what could be if they make their choices in the “right” way. Each book thus has its own didactic impulse, offering instruction for how teenagers should live their lives. What is most notable here, especially as we begin to turn our attention back to the 1980s, is the lack of an “authentic” teenage voice driving these problem novels. Whereas the 1940s and 1960s had seen the teenage voice
acting as arbiter of what was “real,” the seventies saw the mantle pass to the adult writing for the teenager. Both Sparks and Blume are adult women with very specific end goals for their work; even if those goals might be high-minded and well-intentioned, especially in the case of Blume, the actual teenager is no longer needed to capture the teenage audience. The question of authenticity does not fully fade away in the 1970s—Go Ask Alice is presented as a “true” diary for a reason, and Blume’s story of her daughter requesting the novel suggests she is in tune with younger perspectives—but with the rise of the problem novel comes the rise of the adult YA author. Maureen Daly and S. E. Hinton had demonstrated what the teenager sounded like so clearly that their voices were no longer necessary.

**Constructing the Teenage Voice**

As the seventies faded into the early eighties, then, YA publishers had printed their fair share of the dark and grim plots that filled problem novels. The disillusionment that marked so much of the post-Vietnam era filtered into the pages of YA fiction, suggesting that the teenager, too, was an institution the nation had come to distrust. After all, Seventeenth Summer’s Angie and Jack would never be caught in anything quite so extreme as the situations suggested by Go Ask Alice, and even Ponyboy manages to escape his rough-and-tumble adolescence with his life intact. But if the juvenile delinquency scare and its associated media had proven anything, it was that teenagers could not be trusted to always know what was best—and the problem novel made it abundantly clear that the consequences could be worse than anyone ever imagined. By the time Double Love was published in 1983, the YA shelves were in desperate need of a genre that would wipe away the grit the problem novel wore as a badge of honor and replace it with a shinier—though no less dramatic—alternative.
Sweet Valley High would prove to be the YA literature equivalent of Reagan’s “Morning in America” campaign: a fresh new coat of paint that helped obscure genuine structural concerns. The teenagers of the eighties had problems, too—but they were hard to remember in the face of The Wakefield twins and their glossy blond hair.

So what could teenagers hope to find when they picked up the brightly designed paperback emblazoned with *Sweet Valley High* across the cover? First and foremost, they could expect consistency. Unlike *The Outsiders* or *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, the *Sweet Valley High* books were not meant to stand alone as a single entity. From the start, *Sweet Valley* was intended to be an ongoing series that teens could read over the course of years, knowing exactly what kind of soapy goodness they would be getting with each book. Indeed, Francine Pascal initially envisioned a television series akin to the primetime soaps such as *Dallas* that were popular at the time, but, as Carolyn Carpan notes, she was encouraged to write a YA version instead (120). We’ll return to the role of the soap opera in the *Sweet Valley* world shortly, but for now, it will suffice to say that the high drama to realism ratio common to the daytime soap seemed to be an easy fit for the burgeoning paperback market. The books would be as light and disposable as the stories within the pages.

Indeed, that the series was published first in paperback proved to be among the novels’ primary appeals—along with the fact that it could be bought anywhere, including the mall. In the 1980s, the mall was the place where the teenager and the YA publishing industry came together, and thus the place that series such as *Sweet Valley High* often relied upon. The rise of the shopping mall was, much like the teenager, a product of the mid-century. Although many predecessors and earlier variations exist, the “suburban”
shopping mall that most Americans now associate with the term emerged in the 1950s, as the Victor Gruen-designed Southdale Mall opened in Edina, Minnesota in 1956 (Geiling). By the time the 1980s rolled around, the mall had become one of the ways in which communities were built and expanded. The enclosed shopping mall, in which stores are clustered together around a set of central interior hallways, made particular use of its construction to encourage visitors to stay and shop for as long as possible; Gruen envisioned the mall as a “community centre” (Marshall). Because of the variety of stores available at any given mall, the usual existence of a food courts, and the fact that many malls could only be reached by car, the mall did more than allow the suburbs to grow and prosper. Although the buildings certainly did that, too, the mall was also important because it offered teenagers a central gathering place. They could spend a day eating, shopping, and killing time in a contained, safe space outside the direct supervision of their parents.²

For the publishing industry, the shopping mall offered a new way of reaching potential readers. Although a full discussion of the paperback revolution and its relationship to YA literature would be too ambitious for this space, it is worth noting that the shift to printing more paperback books played a key role in the developing popularity of texts such as *Sweet Valley High*. Certainly, the paperback market had a history in publishing—we saw it as recently as Chapter 3, when we discussed the dime novel market—but the increase in YA paperbacks signaled a transition for the category. As Amy Pattee explains, “Young adult paperback novels were comparatively less

² A 2014 PBS Newshour piece on the decline of the mall in America cites, in part, the fact that teens are less likely to hang out at the mall in the 21st-century as part of the reason malls are finding less success today (Solman).
expensive to produce and much easier to sell to the growing chain bookstores and their
teen consumers than hardback novels were to the youth-serving institutions
experiencing late 1970s and early 1980s budget cuts” (16). In the early decades of YA
literature, much of the access teenage readers had to books was mediated by an adult
third party in some form, whether teacher or librarian. As the industry began its first
forays into printing paperback books, however, publishers quickly came to recognize the
potential for profit that lurked within the format.

Paperback books, as noted above, featured a smaller production cost, which
meant printing them in large quantities was less of a concern for publishers. Moreover,
the fact that they were smaller, lighter, and thus both easier to carry and more
expendable made them a more appealing product for the teenage set. Paperback books
could be entertainment, not investment. And this was, ultimately, the primary advantage
to pushing the YA paperback: it allowed publishers to market books to teenagers
directly rather than go through layers of discerning adult gatekeepers. Printing first-run
YA books in paperback rather than hardback thus became the de facto trend in the
1980s, and thanks to the growing number of chain bookstores—stand alone stores, yes,
but more importantly the bookstores in the ever-popular shopping malls—teenagers
suddenly had the ability to buy YA literature without any supervision or guidance from
the adults in their lives. As Pattee notes, this development was not without its critics,
because adults “were convinced that the paperback original market would be a faddish
one that would focus on the heavy promotion of ephemeral novels” (17). In many
respects, this ephemerality would prove to be the very point of the paperback, and
thereby perfect for a series like *Sweet Valley* that would release book after book.
Ephemeral is not the same thing as easy, however, and creating a blockbuster hit of the kind that *Sweet Valley High* would come to be required a fair amount of forethought and attention to detail. When Pascal created the series, she did so with an eye toward building a contiguous universe within which the books could take place. Under the umbrella of Cloverdale Press, a company that specialized in book packaging, she wrote a “thirty-page Sweet Valley Bible,” which would come to be the foundational text for the development of the series (Carpan 120). The Sweet Valley Bible contained the most important information that would need to be maintained and remembered across the series, and is significant because it points directly to the fact that Pascal and Cloverdale were well aware of the constructed nature of the series itself. While *Seventeenth Summer*, *The Outsiders*, and *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* all gained their power, to varying degrees, from the fact that the books were speaking to real, lived experiences, *Sweet Valley High* was created from the start as a glossy, high-concept series that was aspirational rather than realistic.

A glimpse at the process of writing each entry in the series can help clarify how that manifested in Pascal’s work. Once the Sweet Valley Bible was in place, Pascal’s main job was not actually to write the books. Instead, Pascal created an outline for each of the stories, with an eye toward making sure each entry in the series would “be a complete story in itself” that would thus be satisfying on its own, but that would also have “a hook ending” to encourage readers to want to keep going into the next book (Carpan 120). The actual task of writing the books was mostly left to ghostwriters, whom Cloverdale Press would hire to complete the stories based on the outlines provided by Pascal. Given the need for the series to present a cohesive picture to its potential
readers, though, Pascal’s name was always the one that would appear on the cover. When set alongside the intense push for authentic stories from the authentically young that had dominated so much of the early development of YA literature, the creation and presentation of *Sweet Valley* ring comparatively false. Cloverdale and Pascal were selling a product, not championing the “authentic” teenager, and wound up doing the former quite effectively.

If elements of this particular book-packaging approach to creating YA fiction ring a bell, that’s because they are not new. Unlike earlier, more traditionally “foundational” YA texts, which could at least pretend to be creating something new out of the groundwork laid by their predecessors, *Sweet Valley High* and its eighties series fiction sisters were walking in well-worn footsteps. If we recall from Chapter 2, Edward Stratemeyer and his publishing syndicate mastered the art of packaging, publishing, and promoting series fiction for young people back when the twentieth century was still young. *Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys*, and dozens of other series were conceived and carried out in much the same way that *Sweet Valley* was, from ghostwriters having their contributions kept quiet to the cliffhanger endings. *Sweet Valley* would become so wildly popular in the 1980s that book packaging would see a resurgence in the years that followed, but aside from some of the small details, all of this had happened before.

The key difference between *Sweet Valley High* and, say, *Nancy Drew*, at least from a publishing standpoint, is that the latter had none of the baggage of YA literature to carry around in her little blue car because the publishing category did not exist at the

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3 While no YA series reached quite the same heights as *Sweet Valley High*, Pascal’s creation was joined by a number of other successful series, including but by no means not limited to *The Girls of Canby Hall* (1984-1989), *Couples* (1985-1988), *The Step-Sisters* (1987-1988), and *All That Glitters* (1987-1988). Many such series used a similar process for publication to that which we find in *Sweet Valley High*. 
time Stratemeyer and his team brought her into the world. As Chapter 2 discussed, despite Nancy’s immense popularity and enduring influence as a teenage literary character, she does not represent the image of the teenager that would develop during and after the Second World War. More precisely, the books themselves do not contain the voice of the teenager that Maureen Daly and her successors established. Because the Nancy Drew books are written in the voice of a third-person adult narrator that clearly prioritizes the adult voice over the teenager’s, Nancy was seen as an aspirational figure because she stood as what adults might want their children to become. The mysteries she solved and adventures she went on had plenty of teen appeal, certainly, but the character herself was an adult dream, and thus not the ideal representative of what YA literature would come to be.

Sweet Valley High is no less of an aspirational text. Jessica and Elizabeth Wakefield are beautiful, popular, and wealthy, and Elizabeth in particular is a girl that any parent could easily love. Given that the series emerged a solid four decades into the life of YA literature, however, Pascal, her ghostwriters, and her editors had to grapple with a number of factors to ensure that their little serial narrative would feel at home in the category as it stood at the time of the series’ publication. The most significant hurdle—and the one that allows Sweet Valley to function more genuinely as YA than its spiritual predecessors published by Stratemeyer earlier in the century—is this question of the narrative voice. On a surface level, the narrators of Nancy Drew and Sweet Valley High have quite a lot in common. They are both third-person, omniscient voices, able to generally follow the main character(s) but also to dart off to spy on supporting ones, when necessary. Moreover, both narrators give the impression of
being somewhat older than their main characters, bringing at least the specter of an adult perspective to the story.

Where they differ, though, is in the weight that each series allows that adult point of view. As we have already seen, the narrator of *Nancy Drew* is the final arbiter of what is and is not good and worth lauding precisely because the narrator is the adult in charge of the story. In *Sweet Valley High*, the narrator spends most of the time sublimating any element of adulthood in favor of the teenage voice and interests. To better understand how this distinction functions throughout the text, let’s look at the series’ first entry, *Double Love*. In the novel, Jessica and Elizabeth each vie for the attentions of the same boy, Todd Wilkins. Todd is interested in Elizabeth, but Jessica continually turns his attentions toward herself through both intentionally and unintentionally manipulative means. Mixed in with this A-plot are a selection of smaller threads, including a case of mistaken identity (this is a story starring identical twins, after all!), a fight to keep the high school’s football stadium from being taken away, and the looming worry that the Wakefield family might be about to fall apart. For a slim volume, the first-ever *Sweet Valley High* book packs in an abundance of drama—as well as much of the DNA for the rest of the series that would follow.

The drama—and the narrative acrobatics—starts from the novel’s very first line. The books begins: “‘Oh, Lizzie, do you believe how absolutely horrendous I look today!’ Jessica Wakefield groaned as she stepped in front of her sister, Elizabeth, and stared at herself in the bedroom mirror. ‘I’m so gross! Just look at me’” (1). *Double Love* thus begins not with narration but with dialogue, which immediately sets it as distinct from its *Nancy Drew* predecessor. The teenage voice is put front and center for the book’s first
line, indicating that it belongs to its young characters and their immediate experiences rather than the more removed narrator. Even the brief interjection of narration that we do get here is hidden between bursts of dialogue and grounded primarily in the actions of the characters. The narrator does not immediately interject with a separate opinion, but merely sets the scene. As such, the very first moments of the series allow readers to engage with the teenage characters rather than feel as if the story is being mediated by an adult. Although the narrative voice comes from outside the two teenage protagonists, it works in service to them.

The narrator does manage to get a word or two in edgewise, however, briefly taking up a more active role in constructing our perception of the characters as the scene goes on. “Jessica stared at herself in the full-length mirror and saw a picture of utter heartbreak and despair,” the narrator informs us. “But what was actually reflected in the glass was about the most adorable, most dazzling sixteen-year-old girl imaginable” (1). The particular phrasing here, especially in the description of Jessica as “about the most adorable, most dazzling sixteen-year-old girl imaginable,” serves two major functions within these opening pages. First, it establishes that Jessica’s complaints about her looks are without merit, at least from an outside perspective. Second, it separates the book’s narrator from Jessica’s own internal narration, and in so doing establishes the narrator as both admiring and at least slightly patronizing, suggesting a maturity foreign to Jessica herself. This interjection is one of the few times in the book that the narrator speaks from outside the perspective of a character on the page, but it does so primarily to reinforce our view of the Wakefield twin’s looks—a subject about which she is obviously concerned—rather than her character.
In fact, the choice to allow *Jessica* to be the first voice we hear in the series goes even further in establishing the prioritization of the teenage perspective. As Pascal often explained, she considered the twins to be two halves of the same person: Elizabeth the “good” half, Jessica the “bad” half. Giving (kind, non-borderline-sociopathic) Elizabeth the first words of the series would have been an easy choice, as would making Elizabeth the sole protagonist. In so doing, however, the series would have been setting an “ideal” image of the teenager as the baseline for behavior, and thus elevating the adult point of view. Instead, the series puts Elizabeth in a position where her role in this first scene is to react to her “bad” sister, and allows Jessica the spotlight first. As a result, the novel effectively establishes the value of Jessica’s voice. Jessica might not be quite as “bad” as Ponyboy, but she’s not perfect, either. And if YA literature had learned anything by the time the 80s arrived, it was that even the “imperfect” teen deserved to have their voices heard.

### Stealing from the Soap Opera

If the voice of *Sweet Valley High* was carefully constructed to reflect its more “authentic” young adult predecessors, its plot and structure took their cues from a rather different form: the primetime soap opera. In her study of 1980s television, Jane Feuer explains that one of the decade’s most significant changes to the television landscape was the rise in popularity of the primetime soap opera, which had previously only been the purview of daytime TV. Feuer adds that the primetime soap, with its usual focus on familial drama, has historically gained ground during specific political moments. “It would not be controversial,” she writes, “to note that domestic melodrama has thrived as a popular media form for adult women precisely during the two political periods in postwar America characterized as ideologically stable and virulently pro-family: the
Eisenhower and Reagan presidencies” (114). The soap opera offered a chance to probe the struggles and strife of the domestic space through a somewhat heightened reality, thereby drawing much of its appeal from the tension between the intimacy of the relationships between the characters and the ongoing, dramatic situations in which they found themselves.

Much the same could be said of *Sweet Valley High*, in which the scrapes the Wakefield twins find themselves in are both entirely teenage and completely over-the-top. As noted in the previous section, *Sweet Valley* has many layers of construction between its reader and the image of the teenager that fills its pages. Yet even Pascal pays homage to the idea that a true YA novel must be grounded in a genuine teenage experience, as she claims to have drawn inspiration from her own high school time and that of her daughters (Carpan 121). Such attention to the “true” teenager, if only given in passing, forms the support for the soap opera scaffolding that holds up the rest of the series. If we recall, Pascal initially conceived of the series as a television soap before adapting it for the YA market. Perhaps due in part to this origin story, the books were never quite meant to be defined by realism—she refers to them as being “out of MGM,” making the connection to Hollywood, if not television, explicit (Carpan 121). Nonetheless, this turn away from realism did not mean that the desires and passions of her teenage characters could get away with being disingenuous. Adult women were watching primetime soaps in part because they could see their own lives being transformed into something dramatic and over-the-top; their teenage daughters likely turned to *Sweet Valley High* for similar reasons. The setting and lifestyle could be given
that Hollywood glow, but the longing and discomfort at the center of the story required at least a kernel of genuine emotion.

However much the soap opera might attempt to root itself in elements of realism, it rarely achieves much critical acclaim—or even critical attention at all. Such a disinterest in seriously engaging with the form does not mean, though, that it lacks for generic and structural hallmarks. While Feuer acknowledges that stars of so-called prestige shows like thirtysomething were reluctant to embrace the soap opera label as a result of its negative connotations, such shows often still carried two specific markers that tied them to the genre: melodramatic stories and serial narrative structure (113). Because Sweet Valley High was marketed directly to high schoolers, bypassing the traditional gatekeepers that might have reacted poorly to the supposed lack of quality in the soap opera format the series modeled, there was somewhat less of a need for Pascal and those involved with the series to separate themselves from the label in the way actors and producers of TV shows were often wont to do. Indeed, the stories were all-too-eager to embrace the qualities of the “serial melodrama” that Feuer describes in order to ensure that the teenage audience the books courted would stick around for the long haul.

Feuer situates the literary and filmic definitions of melodrama as revolving around “excess,” sometimes aesthetic and sometimes ideological, in which the narrative and its surroundings do not always align but instead rupture to create space for expression (115). The notion of melodrama also comes with a more pedestrian set of expectations as laid out by Peter Brooks, including “the indulgence of strong emotionalism,” “extreme states of being, situations, actions,” and “overt villainy, persecution of the good, and
final reward of virtue,” among others (qtd. in Feuer 114). All of these qualities can be found in the pages of *Double Love* and its successors; if the series doesn't do something to excess, it generally doesn't do it at all. Love interests die fiery or languishing deaths, drug addicts struggle to stay sober, and even nature can be counted on to amp up the drama—the series ends with a set of “Super Editions” in which an earthquake claims lives and destroys much of the town. *Double Love* starts small, but makes its dedication to melodrama clear from the opening scene, as it begins with Jessica in a state of extreme displeasure over her appearance. She complains that she looks “absolutely horrendous” and calls herself “gross,” just to start (1). As the scene goes on, the list of her complaints includes, but is not limited to, the amount of weight she must have gained, the color of her eyes, and even the fact that she must have “the bumpiest knees” in the country (1). Certainly many teenage girls find reasons to criticize their appearance, but because the narrator quickly tells us how dazzling and adorable Jessica (and by extension, Elizabeth) truly is, we as readers are immediately exposed to the way that Jessica’s emotions can—and will—overflow throughout the series.

In fact, it is often Jessica who sees to it that the novels fulfill their melodramatic potential. As the “better” half of the Wakefield twins, Elizabeth’s reactions to events tend to be calmer and more restrained; even when she does begin to grow concerned, she tends to do so internally. Jessica’s distress over her appearance momentarily causes Elizabeth, too, to worry, and she decides “to take a good look in the mirror. If Jessica were such a hopeless case, she might be in trouble, too. But the image she saw reflected in the mirror was hardly cause for alarm” (2). Elizabeth’s reaction here aligns
with the narrator’s description of her identical twin, and thus quickly positions her as the more mature of the pair, and the one least given to melodramatic-style excess. Elizabeth does have her moments—at the end of *Double Love*, she takes out her frustration over her sister’s behavior throughout the book by allowing Jessica to get thrown in a pool in her place—but she is generally the realistic baseline against which Jessica’s melodrama is measured.

As such, Jessica becomes the novel’s—and often, though not always, the series’—de facto villain, the one whose persecution Elizabeth must suffer before receiving her just reward. Which is not quite the same as suggesting Jessica is villainous; there is no outright evil to Jessica, nor even intentional antagonism most of the time. Her ability to act as the novels’ pseudo-antagonist comes, instead, from her intense self-centeredness, which is presented as a recognizably teenage trait. Because Jessica sees only her own desires, she ends up wreaking havoc on Elizabeth’s life, as we see throughout *Double Love*. Although Todd likes Elizabeth, Jessica pursues him; when Jessica goes with a disreputable boy to a bar in a rough part of town, she doesn’t initially correct the widespread misconception that it was Elizabeth instead. While these seem like small-scale transgressions, they have a bigger impact on Elizabeth’s life, as Todd begins to doubt that he likes Elizabeth, and Elizabeth bears the brunt of suspicion from their peers for “her” behavior. Ultimately, though, the ship is righted and Elizabeth receives her just reward: Jessica admits it was she who went to the bar, Todd and Elizabeth start dating, and Jessica even suffers some slight humiliation in the pool incident. The good twin is rewarded for her quiet endurance, the bad twin is faced with...
her faults, and together they satisfy the desire for balancing excess and realism that the soap opera does so well.

Until the next book arrives, at least. Part of the appeal of *Sweet Valley High*—and the primetime soaps it sat alongside—was that it had what Feuer describes as a serial narrative. For Feuer, the serial melodrama is marked by a distinct lack of closure: “The moral universe of the prime-time serials is one in which the good can never ultimately receive their just rewards, yet evil can never wholly triumph. Any ultimate resolution—for good or for ill—goes against the only moral imperative of the continuing serial form; the plot must go on” (122). In short, the lack of a finite end point means that melodrama is never fully allowed to resolve. There may be moments of satisfaction, but because the form operates as an “indefinitely expandable middle,” the final resolution is perpetually delayed (qtd. in Feuer 122). On television, this cycle develops in part because soaps may be renewed for years on end; for *Sweet Valley*, it manifests in the ongoing publication of books in the series which are meant to build on each other in a narratively satisfying way without requiring much commitment or prior knowledge to enjoy. The original *Sweet Valley High* series ran until the late nineties and numbered nearly 150 books, not even accounting for special editions—certainly few readers could have been expected to read all of the novels, in order.

What *Sweet Valley* needed, then, was to exist in that permanent middle space. In order to maintain this balance, the series offers a structure that is both episodic and serial. Each novel—including *Double Love* to some extent—begins with a storyline in progress, and ends with a cliffhanger or pseudo-cliffhanger to set up the next novel. In *Double Love*, the novel does not waste time with set up, or with having characters meet
for the first time, but instead simply picks up on a day in the already-underway life of the Wakefield twins, as we have seen. The book ends, meanwhile, with a dramatic hint at what would be to come in *Secrets*, the second entry in the series: Enid shows up in tears at Elizabeth’s door, dramatically declaring that something terrible has happened (158). While the primary plot in *Double Love* is resolved, another shows up to take its place before the novel even ends. As the series progressed, this trend would continue, with some plot arcs even stretching across multiple novels—as when the series later plays with horror in a “werewolf” story arc, or when Elizabeth is arrested for drunk driving. Nonetheless, the series promises in every entry that the story of the Wakefield twins is an ongoing one; readers are always already in the middle of their story.

Combined, these two factors meant that *Sweet Valley High*—like the soap operas populating primetime television throughout the eighties—was ideally poised to respond to a shared impulse among much of the decade’s media: a desire to hide behind a layer of unreality. In her discussion of eighties television as being instrumental in the nation’s perception of the politics and ideology of the Reagan era, Feuer offers the following observation:

> It was also said of the 1960s that television was crucial to politics, but the metaphors used to describe the influence of TV involved bringing reality *in*, as with Michael J. Arlen’s “living-room war” (1969) and Todd Gitlin’s “the whole world is watching” (1980). What is interesting about descriptions of TV and politics in the 1980s is their focus on the way we used TV to keep reality *out*, as in Haynes Johnson’s “sleepwalking through history” (1991). (12)

I would argue that we see precisely the same trend in young adult fiction as in television. In the 1960s, we turned to novels like *The Outsiders* to show us what teenagers were “really” like: suddenly willing, if not eager, to confront the heretofore untold truth about their existence. By the 1980s, however, the desire to turn away from
the unrelenting bleakness of realism and the problem novel meant that the heightened reality of a place like Sweet Valley and the identifiably teenage but notably unreal Wakefield twins were far too appealing to turn away.

**Reaganomics and the Wakefields**

If the *Sweet Valley High* novels were working to help protect readers from reality, though, it is worth exploring precisely what reality readers were hiding from. The 1980s marked a significant momentum shift in the American political landscape; Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections helped lead a surge of popularity for the Republican party, bringing a renewed and invigorated conservative movement to the fore. Reagan’s famous campaign slogan that promised it would be “Morning in America” once again signaled a symbolic shift way from the gloom of the 1970s, offering a carefully constructed narrative that pledged renewal for all parts of the American landscape—including the economy, culture, defense, and beyond. Gil Troy argues that part of the appeal of Reagan’s arguments was not so different from that which made soaps popular across the decade, writing, “Like the B-movies he starred in, like the TV soap operas that would prove so popular during his tenure, Ronald Reagan was a man of standard formats, reassuring Americans by following scripts they loved” (52). Reagan offered assurances that things in America could be *better*, and that proved a seductive notion for those who had grown tired of being faced with the grim reality of life in the seventies.

Throughout the rest of Chapter 4, then, we will look to *Sweet Valley High* to see the various ways the Reagan era attempted to transform the tenor of life in the United States—and what that meant for the decade’s teens. Let’s begin with one of the key ways in which the Wakefield twins are marked as different from the protagonists from
our two sixties novels: socioeconomics. Much of Reagan’s election campaigns rested on the premise that he could help to rescue a struggling economy; the movement he spearheaded throughout his term became known as “Reaganomics.” The actual policies therein have different names depending upon one’s preferred political interpretations—supply-side economics, trickle-down economics, free market economics—but regardless of the name, the stated intention of Reagan’s policies was to stem the increases in unemployment and inflation that had been a marker of the seventies (Gil 70). By August of his first year in office, Reagan had implemented a variety of new economic policies, including “a sweeping package of tax cuts” (Gil 53). These tax cuts, combined with budget reform, offered a new approach to economic recovery by ostensibly decreasing the reach of the government so that the average family would have more money to spend.

In truth, it may seem a bit presumptuous to think that the average eighties teenager was overly concerned with the ins and outs of tax reform and economic theory, but even a brief glance as Sweet Valley High would suggest that teenagers were not expected to be entirely blind to this reality, either. In Chapter 3, we looked at the way not being part of the middle-class affected characters like Ponyboy and Louretta; nearly every piece of their lives were defined, at least in part, by the fact that they lacked money and the social mobility to rise up beyond poverty. Even when Louretta has a hit song and has a more significant income, her race consigns her to stagnancy. These situations marked a stark separation from that faced by Angie in Seventeenth Summer; although her middle-class status is key to determining many of her opportunities and choices throughout the book, she rarely seems aware of it. In Double
Love, we see these two perspectives combine together in a new way: Jessica and Elizabeth are well-off, and they know it.

As befits two twins with such different approaches to life, Jessica and Elizabeth each interpret their class status in distinct ways. Elizabeth believes them to be lucky, because they have “a new in-ground pool in the backyard” and because she likes the town of Sweet Valley in general (13). Elizabeth frames her perspective in a way that neatly fits within the conservative narrative of success being a reward for effort, as she notes that their father “does all right” and “certainly works hard enough” (13). She is satisfied with the Wakefield family’s relative position in the world, and offers little critique toward their lifestyle. Jessica, by contrast, cannot help but wonder what life would be like if they lived up on the hill where the town’s millionaires have their mansions. This divide between the twins is to be expected, given that Jessica is the one more inclined to flights of fancy, but even she recognizes there is value in the life they are already leading. “Anyway, I’m not saying I don’t like our house, Liz,” she says during a conversation as they drive through town. “But having a lot of money, like Bruce Patman and Lila Fowler, can’t be all bad” (14). What is notable here is not that Jessica wants the “cars and the servants” that come with being wealthy, although she certainly would not mind having some employees to boss around, but that she specifically orients her desire in terms of her peers (14). Jessica thinks of wealth as at least partially belonging to her classmates Bruce and Lila, rather than to their parents or families exclusively. Elizabeth is quick to point out that the wealthy families are always feuding about how to best spend their money, but for Jessica, the larger context does not matter. She sees
the ways in which money can drive popularity in their school, and considers that to be an end in and of itself.

*Double Love* also puts money at the center of the novel’s main subplot, in which the two aforementioned rich families—the Fowlers and the Patmans—battle over the rights to buy the Sweet Valley High football stadium. Because the school allowed their lease to lapse, ownership of the property ends up being called into question, and leaves room for the two families to enter as outside bidders. In part, this subplot is notable for the way it allies the allegedly middle-class Wakefield family with the public high school, as the twins’ father is the school’s lawyer in the case. Although both Lila Fowler and Bruce Patman attend the public school as well, their families threaten to upset the applecart, such as it is. The rich families view the land as an investment, rather than a necessary part of the community. Gil notes that, even as Reagan turned toward supply-side economics and tried to rehabilitate the image of larger businesses, he worked to reassure the nation that the most important parts of the social safety net would be preserved (70). While far from an indictment of the perils of destroying Social Security, the football stadium subplot nonetheless reflects this tension. Although the “right” side ends up winning, with the school board able to renew their lease and continue to use the stadium, the threat of having the public space taken away remains. Perhaps the middle class could envy the wealthy, and even admire them, but the rich could still not be entirely trusted to do what was in the best interest for the country—or for its football-loving youth.

*Just Say No*

The depiction of economic conversations in *Sweet Valley High*, then, often revolves around exploring moments of tension between being content with what one
has and aspiring to more. Hard work should be rewarded, but the rich should still be viewed with some suspicion. Still, it would be the cultural developments throughout the decade rather than the economic ones that would most directly impact the lives of teenagers—or, at least, that’s what YA literature would most directly address. The economy mattered, but only insofar as it dictated what American youth could do and buy; the Wakefield twins might be aware of their place in the larger class structure, but that awareness didn’t go much deeper than wondering if they should be disappointed not to live in a mansion. Far more pressing to the teens’ daily lives were those social policies that had the potential to dictate their social circles and behavior. Although there were many such conversations and programs at work throughout the eighties, among the most famous and influential was the Reagan administration’s continuation of the War on Drugs.

The War on Drugs was a legacy of the Nixon administration. Announced at the start of the 1970s, the campaign—never formally titled the War on Drugs by the administration, although the title was lifted from one of Nixon’s speeches—was meant to fight rising rates of illegal drug use through prevention, enforcement, and rehabilitation. Drugs were deemed “public enemy number one” by Nixon in 1971, and they were thereby positioned as a threat to the country on all fronts: social, economic, political, and criminal (“Thirty Years”). Published in 1971, and therefore a relic of the same era, Go Ask Alice is a useful text to help understand the way the rhetoric of the War on Drugs interacted with the teenager when it first began. If we recall, the novel begins with a prefatory page which constructs the book as “based on the actual diary of a fifteen-year-old drug user” (n.p.). It supplements this premise with the following admission: “It is
not a definitive statement on the middle-class, teenage drug world. It does not offer any solutions” (n.p.). The invocation of “middle-class” here is, unsurprisingly, significant. It helps position the dangers revealed by the novel—and the drug wars—as all the more relevant because they affect those who are supposed to be immune: the middle-class.

Much of the scandal of the novel comes from the unnamed main character’s descent into the drug scene despite her seemingly ideal family life. The girl does have to deal with some upheaval, as her father’s acceptance of a position at a new university means they have to move away from her hometown, but there is no indication that her family life is anything but stable otherwise. As such, her drug use takes on an extra layer of peril: it’s one thing to do drugs, it’s another to be a good girl who does drugs. Perhaps this is why her entry into using is unintentional on her part; by having her be the victim of a drink spiked with LSD, the book can both sidestep the issue of why she would decide to take drugs in the first place and threaten that such a thing could happen to anyone—even the reader. Moreover, her seemingly traditional upbringing means that she is often guilt-ridden and conflicted about her use of drugs. In the diary entry that follows her first experience with drugs—that non-consensual LSD trip—she cannot decide if she should be “ashamed or elated,” and she continues to doubt and berate herself throughout the text when faced with the cold light of day (30). What Go Ask Alice offers, then, is a portrait of a girl who knows better than to get involved with drugs, but who ends up pulled into that world anyway. It warns that it is not enough to know drugs are bad—one must stay hyper-vigilant, lest drugs destroy your life.

The book’s ending drives this point home even further. In the final diary entry, dated the day after her birthday, the girl has seemingly made a choice to leave drugs
behind. She declares writing in the diary to be a relic of her youth, and signs off with a casual “see ya” (213). The last entry is followed, however, with an epilogue that brings any hope for her future crashing right back down: “The subject of this book died three weeks after her decision not to keep another diary” (n.p.). The girl’s death is meant to shock the reader, with the flat, factual delivery of the news at direct odds with the chatty, hopeful tone of the diary entry that preceded it. It is also, however, meant to be seen as inevitable. The “editors” continue on to present their final words: “Was it an accidental overdose? A premeditated overdose? No one knows, and in some ways that question isn’t important. What must be of concern is that she died, and that she was only one of thousands of drug deaths that year” (n.p.). The prefatory text warned that the book would offer no solutions, but as these final comments show, it does offer a conclusion: drugs are, as Nixon argued, public enemy number one. Whether or not the girl intended to kill herself is beside the point only because it doesn’t matter what one intends upon getting involved with drugs. Either way, you end up dead.

In this way, the problem novel complimented the War on Drugs nicely, offering a warning that drugs could be a danger even if you never chose them. As with so many other conversations, though, the rhetoric of the War on Drugs began to change with Reagan in office. The fight to push back against increases in drug use remained, but became positioned in part as a response to the generation’s so-called “moral permissiveness” (Gil 287). As Gil explains, Reagan found campaigning against drugs to be an easily supported platform among his base, especially because drug usage was an area in which individual behavior could be offered over governmental involvement as the ideal solution (287). Out of this effort emerged one of the more lasting elements of
the Reagan administration’s relationship to the teenager and American youth more broadly: Nancy Reagan’s advice to “Just Say No” to drugs. The “Just Say No” message proved remarkably effective in rebranding the fight against drug culture; although teens still used drugs, an ever-increasing number of them began to believe doing so was harmful and immoral (Gil 288). Moreover, the “Just Say No” advice offered a more hopeful vision of drug encounters than had been propagated with books like *Go Ask Alice*. In the eighties, saying no was enough.

Given how quickly Nancy Reagan’s message disseminated into popular culture, it is no real surprise that *Sweet Valley High* recognizes drug use as part of high school life. Although “harder” drugs are held off until later books, *Double Love* includes a couple notable encounters with alcohol. The first comes when Jessica accompanies high school dropout Rick Andover to a bar, and his drunken behavior ends with her being escorted home by the cops. The second comes later in the book, when a drunk Rick forcibly takes over driving the girls’ car, leaving them scared and at his mercy. In both situations, the novel situates alcohol as a substance that leads to poor judgment and violence. The focus on alcohol seems almost quaint in comparison to *Go Ask Alice*’s depiction of LSD trips, but the latter novel was also simply more disinterested in the perils of alcohol—it is dismissed in the text as being “their parents’ thing,” and thus of less appeal to teenagers (56). By the time *Double Love* is published, however, the fight against alcohol had gained steam with the establishment of Mothers Against Drunk Driving in 1980 (Gil 289). As such, the novel’s depiction of alcohol becomes part of this larger conversation about drugs and personal responsibility. Neither of the girls drinks in
this book, but they nearly wind up in trouble anyway because Jessica was willing to associate with someone with less laudable judgment.

As the series progresses, so, too, does its willingness to engage with drugs and drug use. The second novel, *Secrets*, reveals that Elizabeth's best friend, Enid, has a secret past as a drug addict. Although Enid is on the straight and narrow by the time the series starts, her drug use culminated in a terrible accident, which convinced her to leave that life behind. Despite the accident, Enid's story in this novel is rather more hopeful than that of *Go Ask Alice*, in part because the series' baseline for melodrama was still closer to realism than not. Deeper into the series, however, the treatment of drug use aligns more neatly with the seventies novel. The fortieth book in the series, the dramatically titled *On the Edge*, sees a somewhat more peripheral character, Regina Morrow, die after snorting cocaine for the first time. The novel suggests it was an aberration, as the doctor explains that “Regina took a lethal amount of cocaine tonight and experienced an extremely rare reaction—rapid acceleration of the heartbeat, which brought on sudden cardiac failure” (148). Although this book also ends with a drug-induced death, there is a difference between Regina’s ending and that faced by the diary writer in *Go Ask Alice*, and it is ultimately one of choice. Regina was clearly and directly presented with the option to just say no, and instead she gave into peer pressure and tried the cocaine. Her body betrayed her, but only after she betrayed it first.

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4 One does wonder what difference the cardiac failure makes if the amount of cocaine Regina took was "lethal" anyway, but I am sure the doctors of Sweet Valley have nothing but the highest medical training via ghostwriter possible.
Throughout *Sweet Valley High*—and throughout the political rhetoric of the eighties as a whole—the theme of personal responsibility becomes paramount. The series depicts drugs and drug use because it feeds into the melodrama that the books rely upon, and in some ways those depictions are inherently scandalous. The presumed innocence of the mostly white, middle-class youth that populate the town of Sweet Valley means that any engagement with drugs is going to appear a betrayal of their position. The series often situates the choice to drink alcohol or take drugs, however, as just that: a choice. While the books’ didactic impulses are more subtle than the *Go Ask Alice* epilogue that directly states the message readers are supposed to take home with them, the impulses still exist. In a world suffused with the encouragement to “Just Say No,” *Sweet Valley High* allows certain characters to make the wrong choice, and to promptly suffer the appropriate consequences. In so doing, Pascal and her ghostwriters are able to have their metaphorical weed and smoke it, too. Drugs are bad, drugs are wrong, but drugs make for good drama.

**D-I-V-O-R-C-E**

Not every social concern facing eighties teenagers was quite as riddled with danger as the fight against drugs, though. Indeed, sometimes the biggest concerns could be found a little closer to home, situated within the family itself. The family has remained a consistent source of worry in young adult literature since the publishing category began to establish itself with *Seventeenth Summer*, when Angie wonders about her relationships with her sisters and parents; *The Outsiders* and *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* each provide a measure of insight into what happens if the nuclear family proves absent or insufficient. *Sweet Valley High* is no different, and the series again brings both threads together in an interesting way. The Wakefield family is
stable and secure—but the girls worry that it might not always be so. Amy Pattee points to the tension surrounding the Wakefield family as indicative of the series' larger investment in supporting the "traditional" family model. She writes,

> Like the romance novels, the "Sweet Valley High" series presented its heroines' traditional family as an ideal, and, by comparing these central figures to secondary characters whose conflicts seemed to emerge from familial disruption or were considered an attendant result of familial deviation from tradition, underscored the 'desirability' of the traditional status quo. (35)

For Pattee, much of the power of the early entries in the series comes in their ability to reinforce the existing status quo when it comes to the family and household.

In *Double Love*, this is demonstrated most prominently in the fears that the twins and their older brother develop regarding the stability of their parents' marriage. When their father begins to spend long nights at work with an attractive, recently divorced, female co-worker, each of the siblings manages to end up with their own suspicions. For Steven, the twins' brother, most of his initial reaction is contained to a thoughtful, "Dad and a divorcée? Hmmm" (28). Although he has his reservations, they are not given much development within the novel itself, as Steven remains a relatively minor character throughout the first book. Nonetheless, the fact that he has any reaction at all, as the older and presumably wiser Wakefield sibling, indicates that perhaps this is not a concern that is entirely without merit. Even a hard worker like their father is not meant to be trusted when he spends long hours in close quarters with one of those infamous divorcées.

In an interesting twist on the book's usual formula, Jessica and Elizabeth's reactions to the prospect of their father's attentions straying from their mother are not overly dissimilar. As is usually the case, Jessica expresses her concerns for her family's
future primarily as they relate to her and her social life. When her mother rants about the reckless driving of Rick Andover, the “bad boy” Jessica landed a date with mere moments before, Jessica begins to wonder why her typically calm mother is being so vehement in her disapproval. The possibility that her mother might simply have reason to dislike Rick is so foreign to Jessica that she never considers it as an option, and instead she begins to wonder if her mother’s tense behavior might “have something to do with the fact that both she and Dad had been working so hard lately—and spending so little time [together]” (48). On its own, this might not have proven bothersome to Jessica, but she knows things were more complicated than that, because “Dad had Marianna West to keep him company during those late nights at the office. Marianna West was beautiful, divorced, and, most of all, available” (48). Not much has the power to truly shake Jessica Wakefield’s confidence, but this thought leaves her in a state of “panicked confusion” (48).

On the surface, Elizabeth seems to come at this situation from a slightly different place. Unlike Jessica, who is quick to indulge her fear throughout the book, Elizabeth spends her time talking each of her siblings down from their fear, usually in the form of a dismissive joke of one kind or another. Even as she laughs off their concerns, though, the narrator gives us readers enough insight to know that she is only doing so in order to hide her own personal fear. In one instance, she was “trying to sound more unconcerned than she really was,” because “she had wondered about her father and Marianna, too” (14). By virtue of her sincerity and good-temper, Elizabeth does not want to believe anything might be amiss within her family, and she does not want her siblings
to believe it, either. But the fear inspired by the long nights her father is spending on the job is enough for her doubt to overcome even her own instinct toward trust.\footnote{The experience Elizabeth has watching her parents throughout the book is not unlike her experience watching Todd and Jessica. In both cases, the male character’s interest never truly strays away from the “right” person, but appearances make it seem otherwise.}

Of course, the siblings never had any real need to worry, as the storyline resolves with the announcement that their father had simply been helping to ensure that Marianna would receive a promotion at their law firm. Although all of them—including Elizabeth, eventually—wind up convinced that their father was in love with another woman and would end up divorcing their mother, they never have to actually confront the reality of the changes that situation might have caused in their lives. Even in their deepest moment of panic, the teens are not fretting over, say, potential custody arrangements or even the prospect of having to move out of their house with that fancy new in-ground pool. Instead, they are mostly concerned by how the announcement of the divorce would reflect on them. Steven, for instance, is panicked not because his parents are divorcing, but because he thinks they are going to announce it at a dinner to which he had invited his new girlfriend.\footnote{The logic of this assumption is questionable, at best. But so is the logic of most of their conversations.}

But in a moment of heightened family values and a call for the restoration of the nuclear family on a national level, the reputation of divorce feels more damaging to these characters than the actual, practical experience of it. It’s one thing for their family to break apart; it’s another for the rest of the world to know they aren’t perfect.

**Into the Sunset**

What we see with *Sweet Valley High*, then, is a series that thrives on falsity. The authentic teenage voice is no longer needed to sustain an interest in young adult
literature, so the series is allowed to retreat back to a tried-and-true publication formula that relies less on authenticity and more on a reasonable facsimile thereof. As a paperback series published on a regular schedule, teen readers could buy, consume, and forget about each entry just in time for the next one to come along. By existing in the perpetual middle, readers were regularly denied the satisfaction of an ending; even when the main series did come to an end, in the late nineties, the next spin-off series was there to pick up the slack. The series’ success required investment, and a long-term investment at that, but it didn’t require identification. The Wakefield twins were not Ponyboy, created to represent an underserved reading community on the page. They were, instead, a vision of who the readers could imagine themselves being, if they, too, had an in-ground pool and an identical twin.

Moreover, the gritty realism that had supposedly marked most of YA literature throughout the previous decade, in the trend sparked by *The Outsiders*, is nowhere to be found in the pages of *Sweet Valley High*. There is *drama*, to be sure. The series’ relationship to melodrama only intensifies as more books are published in the series, offering a heightened reality in which the political and social fears that permeated the eighties could be confronted and denied all at once. The social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s is cast aside for a set of shiny, beautiful, All-American characters that promise excitement and drama without any of that unfortunate darkness of the previous decades’ young adult novels. The wealthy may try to take the football stadium away, but they would be defeated. Drugs could destroy—and even end—lives, but only if you make the choice to get involved with them in the first place. Divorce and the dissolution of the nuclear family are always a lingering threat, but only for the wrong kind of family.
Although Jessica and Elizabeth make a few bad choices of their own along the way, permanent consequences never land at their feet. The stories are inherently conservative and constantly reassuring, an imprecise but undeniable reflection of the national political conversation at the time of their publication.

Even if *Sweet Valley High* was never destined to receive critical acclaim, then, there can be no denying that it did precisely what the experts quoted in *Time* at the start of the decade were begging for all along: the series provided a distraction from the supposedly dreary, oppressive realities of upper-class teenage life. If the teenager was happier in the 1960s, then that was because they had been faced with far too much reality in the 1970s. In order for the modern-day teenager to stand a chance of reclaiming any piece of that contentment, then books like *Sweet Valley High* were going to be key. Francine Pascal and her series could be trusted to reliably churn out light and fun books that would capture the teenager as they might be, rather than as they truly were. *Sweet Valley High* wasn't the true voice of the eighties teen, but it was close enough—at least for now. As we will come to learn in Chapter 5, *Sweet Valley High* might have begun when it was Morning in America, but at the end of the twentieth century, the nation would be left to ask if all of young adult fiction—and the teenager it represented—was not about to ride off into the sunset, one last time.
CHAPTER 5

Less than two months after the turn of the year 2000, our old friend Time once again spun a new tale about the American teenager. Unlike the panic of the early 1980s over what a terrible burden wealthy teens had to bear or the grudging admiration of the 1960s profile of teenagers as a force in American society, however, the Time of the early twenty-first century is less concerned with what is than with what might be. In an opinion piece by novelist Walter Kirn, whose 1999 novel Thumbsucker attempted to find something original to say about the lines between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, the magazine presents a single question that, depending upon one’s opinion of the teenager, can be read as either ominous hypothetical or optimistic daydream: “Will teenagers disappear?”

The timing of this question could not have been more perfect. With the fear over Y2K a rapidly fading memory and the new decade—and century—a diary full of pages yet to be written, it makes sense that the nation began to ask questions about just what would be possible in the newly arrived millenium. As we have seen, the culture of the late twentieth century was defined in no small part by the arrival of the teenager; at the start of the twenty-first century, then, imagining a version of the future in which the demographic no longer exists seems a fairly reasonable thought experiment. How might the nation be different if one of the driving forces behind the country’s cultural trends and consumer preferences up and disappeared? And, more importantly, who would the teenagers become? These kinds of questions would have been well worth asking at any time, but they seemed especially poignant at a time when the prospect of the future
permeated the air like smog. If Walter Kirn hadn’t stepped up to take a crack at figuring out the answer, someone else would have been more than happy to do so.

Though perhaps that would have been for the best, because Kirn’s analysis offers little in the way of substance. Hidden in between the panicked slippery-slope projections and the anecdotal evidence writ large, however, we can find a few useful insights into the status of the teenager at the time of the essay’s publication. Kirn begins with a simple claim that should ring a familiar bell for readers of this project: “Of all the greatest postwar inventions—television, rock ‘n’ roll, the Internet—the greatest and most influential is, perhaps, the American teenager” (60). The positioning of the teenager as an “invention” here is no accident, and it is a point he reiterates two paragraphs later by declaring the teenager to be “a modern luxury good” (60). Declaring the teenager to be an “invention” and a “luxury good” is, in essence, a way of reiterating the foreignness of the demographic within American society. It is an act of dehumanization that transforms the idea of the teenager from something lived by flesh and blood humans to a tool for use by the adults who populate the country. Kirn is not necessarily breaking new ground with this rhetoric; the potential productivity and civic value of high school students was, as we saw in Chapter 1, built into the very first print appearance of the word “teenager.”

Even the use of “the teenager” as a collective phrase—singular, and thus universal—throughout so many academic projects, including my own, works to eliminate the potential for variety and individuality. When Kirn refers to the American teenager as a product, then, he is merely acknowledging the fact that the demographic has, since its inception, been perceived as an interloper and an invader rather than a “natural” part of American life.
Of course, if the teenager is to disappear—which Kirn declares will happen within “twenty years, tops”—there must be something that will chase it away (60). If we consider the teenager as an invention that transformed the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the nation, then perhaps we should expect that it would take another invention with similarly seismic ramifications to supplant the teenager’s reign: the Internet. While Kirn is never explicit in stating that the reason why teenagers will disappear is because the Internet has arrived, it is hard to come away with any other conclusion after reading through the piece. One of Kirn’s many reasons for suggesting that young people are maturing faster than ever comes when he notes that “63% of teens reported using a computer in the 30 days previous to being polled” while the number was but 20% for “adults fifty and over” (60). Kirn does not pause to engage with this statistic, or to explain why this is a marker of maturity rather than, say, free time and access. Instead, he is content to assume that the numbers speak for themselves. Moments later, he mentions that he once had to pay a teenager $50 an hour to help fix his Internet access, which he contrasts against his own part-time job at a gas station as a teen (1). Further references to the Internet within the piece include the need for people to get into the “cyberharness” as soon as possible and the prospect of teens growing depressed when their “Internet start-up” decreases in value (61). Although Kirn brings in other factors to act as proof of the end of the teenager, including increased use of medication for mental health, the emergence of the Internet is the most consistent and loudest refrain across the essay.

1 In fairness to Kirn, those twenty years he names have not yet expired. The next five years might yet prove him correct, although that seems increasingly less likely.
At the time of Kirn’s writing in early 2000, the Internet was in many ways still in its infancy. Many of the major players that make up the Internet as we know it today, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, were still years away from launch; Apple wouldn’t put iTunes on the market for another year yet. But even with the dot-com bubble in the process of bursting, the writing was on the wall. The Internet demanded change, and no one—not even the teenager—would be exempt. As we will see later in Chapter 5, Kirn was far from alone in voicing the belief that the teenager would meet its end in this moment of change in the early twenty-first century. Young adult literature, too, found itself the subject of a number of doomsday prophecies, because while the teenager had been enough to launch the publishing market decades prior, the Internet and its multimedia brethren were now threatening to make it extinct. Throughout the 90s, doom and gloom marked the conversations surrounding the teenager and YA literature. Video might have killed the radio star, but the Internet was poised with an array of weapons, ready to kill everything else.

And yet, if both the teenager and the books published for them survived this moment of transformation, then this is in no small part due to the publication and success of Walter Dean Myers’s astonishing *Monster* (1999). Awarded the first-ever Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, *Monster* challenged the long-standing cultural notions of who the teenager is and what the teenager’s books could look like. On the one hand, the book is a searing indictment of racism in the criminal justice system and the exclusion of black youth from the teenage identity. On the other, it is a savvy manipulation of form that embraces rather than fears the influence of film and multimedia imagery. Taken as a whole, *Monster* suggests that the
answer to the looming threat of the rise of the Internet was to embrace the ever-evolving nature that had already come to define teens and YA literature. If the teenager—and their books—is always already in a state of transformation, then hope yet remains, even at its seemingly darkest hour. *Time* may have had reason to ask if the teenager would disappear, but that was never quite the right question to ask. The twenty-first century teenager would prove to be quite different from its predecessors, yes, but as Chapter 5 will show, *different* is a wide world away from *disappeared*.

**The Disappearance of the Teenager**

By the 1990s, the nation was well-practiced at talking about the teenager. Previous decades had prepared adults for the various worries and controversies that the end of the century would bring, different perhaps in specifics but not in theme. Old concerns over the influence of new forms of media—YA literature, television, music videos—now turned their attentions to the rising popularity of videogames, as adults wondered if games like *Street Fighter II* or *The Legend of Zelda* had the potential to corrupt impressionable youth. The specter of the juvenile delinquent, once softened and even idealized in *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Outsiders*, took on a new shape with the increased occurrence of and attention to school shootings, culminating with the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. These fears were real, and all the more significant because they ultimately weren’t new at all. The media might be new, the violence more intense, but the teenager was the same as it always was.

The same, that is, except for one major factor: there were soon to be more teenagers than ever before. Writing in 1996, Grace Palladino notes that “after a fifteen-year population decline from 1977 to 1992,” the number of teenagers was on the rise (1). She cites the teenage population as being 25 million and rising, with the tally
projected to hit a historic high of nearly 31 million by the mid-2000s (2). Such an increase in teenagers seemed as if it could herald an increase in the teenager's economic and cultural influence; the teenage consumer market certainly seemed poised to explode along with the population of those it served. Indeed, this is much of Palladino's own argument, as she uses these numbers to frame the introduction to her book, *Teenagers: An American History*. The ever-increasing power of the teenage population, she suggests, means that the 1990s are an ideal time to try to better understand their history. Unlike Walter Kirn in his essay for *Time*, Palladino sees a future for the teenager as the next century prepared to arrive. Even if her view is not quite as extreme as Kirn's would prove to be a few years later, however, Palladino remains all-too-aware of the fact that the adults of the nineties were suddenly drawn to questions of how, or if, the teenager as they knew it was going to survive much longer. “Whether the current impulse [to adjust the teenage transition to adult life] comes from the sense that too many teenagers are at loose ends,” she writes, “or the fact that the teenage population is once again on the rise and will not be ignored, there is a new concern with restructuring teenage life” (259). With more teenagers, there was ever more cause for concern.

Palladino’s outlook is rather more optimistic than that of Thomas Hine, whose own history of the teenager, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, would be published a mere three years later. Hine opens his book with a question that seems like nothing quite so much as a predecessor of that which Kirn asked shortly after in *Time*. “Are teenagers necessary?” asks the introduction of his book, and one has to look no further than the invocation of the “fall” of the teenager in the text’s title to guess at what
Hine’s answer will be. Indeed, Hine is quick to suggest that time has remedied the teenager obsolete. “The teenager was an invention of the Machine Age,” he argues, offering another appeal to the teenager-as-invention. “We live in a different world now, and we must reconsider how we think about the lives of the young” (4). Although he does not phrase it as such, Hine’s plea suggests that the Machine-Age teenager must be replaced by something better fit for the Internet Age. The teenager’s original purpose had faded in relevance by the nineties, and if the country’s imaginations of the teenager did not adapt in response, the teenager would no longer be necessary, to borrow Hine’s own language.

Where Hine and Palladino align, however, is in the way in which they discuss this need to “reconsider” or “restructure” the teenager. Each of them couch their examples in language that suggests it would ultimately be for the teenager’s own good to pursue this option—that is, that the teenager is being failed by its current political and cultural situation. Hine continually argues that the way in which we have flattened the teenage experience does them a disservice as they prepare to enter the adult world, writing, “By providing so few alternatives for young lives, we increase the chances that young people will fail in big ways—by becoming teenage mothers or dropouts with few economic prospects...There are many different ways of living your life. Why should we pretend that there is only one way to be young?” (302). At its core, this interpretation implies that in promoting a single, high-school oriented vision of the teenager, we have lost sight of the fact that teenagers are, well, people. For Hine, the reason teenagers are no longer necessary is that the teenage population deserves nuance.
Based on her investment throughout her book in determining precisely who falls under the purview of “teenager,” Palladino might be inclined to agree with this way of prioritizing the needs of the teenager. But, as we saw in the aforementioned quote, many of the voices advocating for change were doing so out of fear of the teenager rather than for the teenager. These fears included, as she notes, the impression “that too many teenagers are at loose ends” and that the impending largest-ever teenage generation “would not be ignored,” among others. Unlike Hine, who thinks that young people need more options to reach their fullest potential, those voicing the kinds of concerns Palladino cites are operating, in no small part, from a position that privileges adult authority. The nod to those “at loose ends” invokes the long-standing threat of delinquency; that they refuse to be “ignored” indicates that there is a danger in teens making themselves heard. If adults respond to the changing culture in a way that more effectively contains young people, they will make the world safer for themselves, too.

It is this impulse—which argues that the priority in determining the future of the teenager should, in fact, be adults—that also drives the *Time* essay that opened Chapter 5. Kirn is quick to draw upon, but not examine, a nostalgic view of the teenager in asking whether teenagers will disappear, as he declares, “The question for the new century is how much longer will the teenager exist, at least in the form that James Dean made famous?” (60). The reference to James Dean here is key to understanding the facile nature of Kirn’s take on the teenager’s future. He declares James Dean-style youth to be the “classically defined” version of the teen, but makes no move to actually unpack that particular definition. This is an especially curious choice because, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, the “James Dean Teenager” is far from the only kind that
existed prior to the 90s, and there was even more than one single, iconic version of Dean himself. Undoubtedly, Kirn refers here to the Dean of Rebel Without a Cause, who has become nigh-interchangeable in the cultural memory with his character, Jim Stark, but Kirn does not actually declare that to be the case. The one time he pauses to draw a picture of the teenager as he understands it, only a fraction of the images he uses reflect the teenager “James Dean made famous.” He references a “teenage culture of pop songs, cars and acne ointments, of proms, allowances and slumber party” (60). Cars fit, certainly, but little else does. In fact, the teenage culture Kirn describes fits more neatly within the world of Sweet Valley High than it does Rebel Without a Cause, which suggests that the iconic teenager Kirn thinks represents teens as a whole had already been supplanted by an entirely different version.

In point of fact, little of Kirn’s evidence for the idea that teenagers are disappearing is developed enough to actually be convincing. His one major statistical claim—that girls began menstruation at an older age in the nineteenth century than at the start of the twenty-first—does not underline the larger claim he is trying to make. A difference in age first menstruation between girls of the 1940s and girls of 2000 would, perhaps, be a useful statistic. In drawing a line as far back as the nineteenth century when he openly admits the teenager emerged post-war, however, only muddles his claim. His attempt to present teenagers as an economic threat suffers a similar failure. He begins with a masterclass in anecdotal evidence, referencing one, single sixteen-year-old who successfully trades stocks online in his spare time, and follows it up with a reference to Yahoo’s Jerry Yang, then 31, as an example of billionaire youth. 31 is, indeed, a young age at which to have amassed a fortune that large, but it remains a far
cry from the sixteen-year-olds that Kirn seems to want readers to think are swimming in a vault filled with gold à la Scrooge McDuck. An article that relies so heavily on hyperbole—“Soon they’ll be retiring before driving age,” Kirn declares—requires a not-insignificant grounding in verifiable truth. Aside from his (unsourced) discussion of the average age of menstruation, Kirn’s argument is built upon hearsay and anecdote, offering readers little reason to trust his evaluation of the situation.

Still, there is something oddly compelling about Kirn’s essay, no matter what it lacks in substantiation. Perhaps it is because, unlike Hine and Palladino’s relatively measured approaches to this conversation, Kirn does away with any pretense that we, as his readers and as a nation, owe anything to the teenager. He does not, as Hine does, profess to worry over the harm being done to the teenager at this moment of change. Nor does he follow Palladino in presenting an obligation to mitigate the damage that might be done by the teenager. Instead, he offers the op-ed version of a “Kids These Days” rant, as he marvels at the ways in which the lives kids of the twenty-first century appear different from his own time as an adolescent. Behind each claim is the assumption that such differences are automatically bad, automatically threatening, automatically not teenage. The teenager, Kirn says, is disappearing because they became adults when no one was looking.

Taken individually, any of these three projections of what the twenty-first century teenager would be—if it would even exist at all—would be little more than a blip on the radar. Taken together, though, they speak to a cultural anxiety affecting the nation’s relationship with its youth. These writers, who wrote in different years and different forms but always with an eye toward understanding the future of the teenager, each
proclaim independently from one another that the demographic as we know it was nearing its end. More significantly, they make this argument out of a sense that the world has changed, and will continue to do so. They each have different ideas of why this might be, of course. Hine directs us to a change in culture, as he writes, “This new wave of teens is growing up in a very different world than the boomers did…The common experiences of network television is replaced by the atomization of the Internet” (297). Palladino digs in on adult hypocrisy in viewing teens through such a negative lens, opining, “No matter what kind of spin adults now put on the good old days, the ‘rules’ they now long for were rules of inequality and social conformity…If teenagers in the past had less trouble making decisions, it was because they had fewer, not better, choices to make” (258). And as for Kirn, well, he remains eager to suggest that teenagers will be more adult than they have ever been, as he projects, “Adolescents will feel the same pressures as their parents do: to succeed financially, to maintain their health, to stay on society’s good side” (61). No matter whose prognostication we find most convincing, though, the rhetoric of at the turn of the twenty-first century coalesced to make one thing abundantly clear: the brave new world ahead had no room for the teenager.

The Death of YA

One did not have to be an expert in the teenager to recognize that the cultural perception of America’s youth had begun to shift in the 90s, however. Librarian Michael Cart joined in the chorus in his 1996 book, From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature, firmly declaring that “it is no overstatement to say that [90s youth] are the most at-risk generation in our nation’s history” (164). He goes on to detail how he arrived at this conclusion after finding a large
number of news clippings about some variation of at-risk youth, then continues, “Even when you acknowledge that many of these reports are culled from the media and so a certain latitude must be allowed for—well, exaggeration in the interest of a good story, the world depicted is still one of almost unimaginable risk and terrible, stultifying fear—fear of poverty, fear of parental divorce or being homeless, fear of guns, drugs, and even death” (164). And then, lest the reader come away with any doubt, he drives the point home: “Such fears are well-founded” (165). Unlike Kirn, Hine, and Palladino, however, Cart does not present his evidence as conjecture about a hypothetical future crisis of teenage life in America. Instead, he uses this information to highlight what he and other experts believed to be an already present and all-too-real crisis in YA literature.

By the mid-1990s, young adult literature was at death’s door. At least, that was the common sentiment among those working in the industry, primarily because of a decline in the sales of what had previously been the bread and butter of YA: realistic fiction. The paperback boom of the 1980s, in which teenagers increasingly made their own purchasing decisions when it came to literature rather than waiting to see what teachers and librarians would deem “appropriate,” did not necessarily accommodate for the problem novel that had been so integral to building the marketing category decades prior. As Cart notes, the realistic fiction novel had traditionally been published and produced as hardcover books, and as such were still primarily sold to schools and other institutions (142). By the early nineties, realistic fiction was no longer being bought by either teenagers (because of cost) or libraries (because of lack of interest), which meant this segment of YA literature was no longer as financially viable as it once had been.
For many, including the multiple industry personnel that Cart cites, the downfall of realistic fiction was enough to declare YA literature’s time to be at an end.

Not all of the seemingly certain death of YA literature was about the waning days of the problem novel, however. The other issue YA faced in the early part of the decade was that the wrong kinds of books were succeeding. As we saw in Chapter 4, the sudden and significant rise in the popularity of romantic series fiction carried more than its share of negative connotations with it. The romance genre is—and long has been—easily dismissed and marginalized; romance written for teenagers especially suffers this fate. Consider the way in which Cart acknowledges the continued strong sales of *Sweet Valley High* in the early part of the decade: “Sweet Valley books command first printings of 200,000 copies, and in 1993 six of them sold more than 100,000 copies (sic) copies (one is tempted to call them ‘units,’ instead of copies, since they are virtually interchangeable in their mass-produced content and format)” (148-149). While Cart is not precisely wrong in his description of the series and its production, he is not precisely generous, either. Romance series continued to sell, but no one was rushing to declare that a good sign.

Similarly troubling to those who valued the supposed literary realism of realistic fiction was the rise of genre fiction. The horror genre, led by Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine, became massively popular in the nineties; Pike and Stine each had well over 7 million copies of their books in print by 1996 (Cart 1996). Speculative fiction, including fantasy, also began to gain steam, with the help of writers like Tamora Pierce. For readers, the formulaic nature of this particular brand of YA fiction was much of its

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2 Stine’s sales were so important to his publisher, Scholastic, than when, in 1997, the company revealed a report indicating that sales of the *Goosebumps* series were starting to flag, investors panicked. Scholastic stock dropped in value by 40% in a single day (Gabriel).
appeal; for writers, it could be both a blessing and a curse. Stine, for example, undoubtedly benefited from the restrictions on length and content inherent to his genre, as the original run of *Goosebumps* totaled 62 books in a five year period. Pierce, on the other hand, had to restructure her fiction to fit industry standard, as common knowledge said that young people would not read novels longer than 200 pages. Her first series, *Song of the Lioness*, was a quartet not because Pierce wrote it that way but because the story had to be split into 200-page chunks in order to be published. The prevalence of series fiction, and the various rules in place to ensure its market success, meant that there was little room for innovation or variation in the popular YA fiction of the nineties. For those, such as Michael Cart, who were eager to establish YA fiction as being of literary value, even the highest of sales could not redeem the simplicity of series fiction.

As we have seen throughout this project—and as recently as the previous section—the desire to apply a narrative to a set of changes in order to better understand it is often hard to resist. Even if Palladino, Hine, and Kirn each focused on different nuances of their subject matter, all three decided that the changes in teenage life at the end of the twentieth century meant that the teenager was on the verge of obsolescence. YA literature professionals faced the transitions happening in the reading habits of their buying audience with a similarly impressive lack of aplomb, coming together to declare the publishing category dead, or nearly so. The presumption of death, though, meant that people were eager to find that which had performed the killing. And just as our trio of experts on the teenager each pointed with increasing confidence to the expansion of

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3 In her later novel, *Trickster’s Queen*, Pierce begins her acknowledgments with the following bit of snark: “Aly’s story is a pair of books instead of a quartet thanks to J.K. Rowling (I haven’t met her!), who taught adults that American kids will read thicker books, which means I don’t need four books to tell a complete story.”
the Internet as the supplanter to the teenage throne, YA critics, librarians, and publishers were eager to lay the blame square at the feet of multimedia. Cart, while writing a couple years too early to isolate the Internet as a potential threat, cites everything from soap operas and daytime soaps (including Oprah) to violence in news broadcasts to music videos as reasons why realistic fiction began to fail among teen readers. The end was nigh, and the image was to blame.

Not everyone was prepared to write the category off entirely, though, despite its seemingly tenuous status. In and amongst reports of doom, Cart does quote a number of industry professionals who saw reason for hope about the category’s future, indicating that the pessimism was far from universal. Another voice that was eager to join in the dissent was critic and author Marc Aronson, who began pushing back against the perspective that YA literature was at its end as early as 1995, in an essay originally published in School Library Journal called “‘The YA Novel Is Dead’ and Other Fairly Stupid Tales.” At the start of his essay, Aronson puts claims like “Teenagers just don’t read anymore” and “You can’t publish anything but junk” on the same level as “The sky is falling,” arguing anyone who makes such claims is expanding the tiniest glimpse of the truth into a sweeping pronouncement of imminent failure (7). Aronson’s Chicken Little analogy seems especially apt for an argument in which he tries to suggest that doomsayers will find themselves sheepish when proven wrong; the existence of a single nail, he implies, does not mean it is automatically the last nail in the coffin.

Aronson, too, is aware of the general consensus that YA literature could not stand against the onslaught of multimedia. He writes, “One favorite argument of these prophets of doom is that multimedia products set a standard of color, sound, and
interactive fun that no book can match” (8). Aronson does not seem inclined to agree with this sentiment, but he recognizes that YA is due for a change nonetheless. “We are due for a paradigm shift,” he admits, “but in entirely the opposite direction: not from books to images but from fuzzy nostalgia about the past to clear-sighted recognition of the present” (8). Cart offers a similar prescription for the future of YA in his book; both scholars advocate for a renewed focus on real stories about the lives of real teens—for a revival of the problem novel, in short. Aronson suggests that the potential for YA literature to grow instead of shrink exists in no small part due to the good, thoughtful work being done by authors at the time. And yet, there’s something peculiar about the fact that he titles the essay not after one of these YA novels he believes are so indicative of the category’s potential but after a picture book with crossover appeal, Jon Scieszka’s *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992). For all that he claims in his piece that YA literature would not have to give way to images and multimedia, he still winds up tying his argument to a book that relies as much upon pictures as it does words for its appeal. Consciously or otherwise, even an optimist like Aronson recognized that the category’s boundaries would have to be redrawn if it wished to survive.

**The Printz Arrives**

At the start of the twenty-first century, then, the teenager and YA literature had both reached a breaking point. Neither of them, at least in the popular perception, were quite prepared to tackle the challenges presented by recent changes in American life—not without a significant transformation. And yet, conversations about the two were, as has so often been the case, largely kept separate. Only Michael Cart made any move to connect the two moments of crisis, when he rattled off his dramatic list of the dangers
and fears surrounding the youth of the nineties, but he does so without acknowledging the correlations at work. The survival of YA literature, he suggests, is crucial to helping teens to survive the complicated world around them, but he does not go quite so far as to recognize that the at-risk literature he champions was plagued by variations on the same problems as the at-risk teenager. No matter the theoretical distance between the two conversations, however, the reality was that they were, in so many ways, the same argument. As such, it is unsurprising that one of the most significant steps in rehabilitating young adult literature would ripple out and help save the teenager from extinction, too.

As the previous section demonstrated, the problem faced by YA literature as the 1990s came to a close was an increasingly distressing imbalance between the interest in literary realistic fiction and mass-produced genre series fiction. For those invested in maintaining—or simply creating—the image of YA fiction as a valid and interesting literary genre, the fact that series fiction had become the face of the category was far from promising. Faced with the challenge of pushing back against the notion that YA was little more than flimsy stories to be read and forgotten in the span of an hour or two, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) chose a commonly trodden path towards legitimacy: the establishment of an award for excellence in the field. Under the stewardship of a number of vocal advocates, including the aforementioned Michael Cart and Marc Aronson, YALSA established the Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in

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4 There is a subtle gesture to this idea at work in the chapter, as the chapter’s subtitle “A Literature at Risk?” parallels his claim about the “most at-risk generation” of teenager at the chapter’s end. He does not, however, make the connection explicit.
Young Adult Literature, which was to be the YA equivalent of the Newbery Medal for children’s fiction.

In his article on the role of prizing in children’s literature, Kenneth Kidd describes the road to the 1922 establishment of the Newbery Medal to be, in part, a response to the continued devaluation of children’s literature by critics, academics, and other arbiters of taste and importance. He writes, “Even as space for adult literature was being carved out, anxiety about ostensibly lowbrow forms such as the dime novel and the series book led to arguments for more respectable or legitimate writing for children. Better books were sorely needed, it was thought, along with better venues for their display and distribution” (170). By now, this particular conversation should sound familiar. Children’s literature might have had its identity crisis a century earlier, but the same concerns over form and respectability that helped to usher in the Newbery Medal would come to serve as the foundation for the Printz Award. If the status quo isn’t respectable enough, the routine went, then create an award to change it.

What most differentiated the creations of the Newbery Medal and the Printz Award, aside from the time lapse and age of the reading audience, was the expectation for what cultural work the award would do. The Medal, Kidd explains, was initially built in the hope that it could help establish works written for a child audience as part of the literary elite. This worked for a time—in the 1920s, “Newbery literature seemed destined for literary or proto-highbrow status” (173)—but the reality of the award quickly began to drift away from its initial goals. Instead of raising works of children’s literature up to stand alongside the best works of adult literature, the Medal only served to further stratify children’s and adult literature. Kidd cites a variety of reasons for this
development, including the gendered nature of children’s literature and the “edubrow” status of the field; no matter the reason, though, the prize’s value was quick to transform. Although the award might have been designed to designate “the most distinguished contribution for American literature for children,” it soon began to effectively function as an award for the best contribution to children’s literature—a small, but instructive, difference (“Welcome to the Newbery”).

By the time the Printz Award emerged decades later, then, the (in)ability of the Newbery Medal to establish classics of literature versus classics of children’s literature was well established. It is notable, then, that YALSA’s description of the Printz Award suggests a slight difference in priority from the start: it “annually honors the best book written for teens, based entirely on its literary merit, each year” (“The Michael L. Printz Award”). Unlike the Newbery Medal’s description, which positions the prize as ostensibly being more about greatness in American literature than greatness in children’s literature, the Printz is first and foremost about literature for teens. Literary excellence is still key—and is, in fact, stated as the sole determining factor for the winning selection—but the Printz makes no move to claim a spot for its winners alongside the best of American literature more broadly defined. Perhaps this is because those creating the newer award were more interested in matching the Medal’s actual purpose rather than its intended one, or because the notion of any text created explicitly for teenagers being “proper” literature would have been too hard of a sell, even amongst the field’s advocates. Whatever the case, the description of the Printz Award makes a

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5 Kidd defines “‘edubrow’ culture” as “the middlebrow culture of public schools and libraries” (169). Often, these are texts that would qualify as being appropriate for educational purposes.
very specific claim: literature written for teens might be capable of literary merit, but that
does not mean the category aspires to be literary.

While the Printz Award distinguishes itself from the Newbery Medal by having
rather more measured expectations for cultural performance, however, it remains
aspirational in many of its aims. According to the YALSA website, the full purpose of the
Printz Award is as follows: “The award will: Recognize the best in the field of materials
for young adults, Promote the growing number of books published for young adults,
Inspire wider readership in the genre, Give recognition to the importance of the genre,
[and] Position YALSA as an authority in the field of evaluating and selecting materials
for teen library collections.” The award is not content, then, to merely highlight literary
excellence within the category. The majority of its goals speak, directly or otherwise, to
the “death of YA” crisis that made the award seem so necessary. By recognizing the
best material, promoting the field, increasing readership, and positioning the genre as
important, the Printz Award would have the potential to challenge the image of YA
literature as a disposable product rather than thoughtful literature. But the award is also
meant to do other cultural work, as the final bullet point makes clear. Awards are, in no
small part, about the governing body giving out the awards; YALSA simply makes its
desire to build value for the organization’s brand explicit. Still, even this goal furthers the
image of YA as more complex than its reputation might suggest. If the category requires
such expertise, then perhaps it runs deeper than it seems.

To achieve these lofty aims, though, the award would need to follow through on
its promise to reward YA books of literary merit—which means, of course, that the
organization must define its understanding of such merit. Shortly after describing the
purpose of the award, the YALSA website offers a brief discussion of the criteria for choosing the winner of the Printz Award:

What is quality? We know what it is not. We hope the award will have a wide AUDIENCE among readers from 12 to 18 but POPULARITY is not the criterion for the award. Nor is MESSAGE. In accordance with the Library Bill of Rights, CONTROVERSY is not something to avoid. In fact, we want a book that readers will talk about.

What is most fascinating about this paragraph is the series of characteristics that YALSA positions as being outside the bounds of “quality.” The notion of a book’s ‘message’ being important to determining the award is dismissed so quickly that it is impossible to know whether they are referring to the content of a book’s message or to if the book has a message at all. It is easy to understand why the award is not contingent on a book adhering to a particular morality, as children’s and YA literature has long grappled with the prospect of being restrained to didacticism, but even so it is surprising that the potential message of a book is so quickly labeled irrelevant to its chances for a Printz.6

The brief discussion of a book’s potential for controversy is similarly intriguing. The acknowledgement that controversy could surround a young adult novel is an important one, as books aimed at teenagers are regularly among the most frequently banned and challenged books in the American Library Association’s annual reports on the subject. Moreover, it makes sense that the committee would be encouraged not to allow themselves to be swayed away from a particular book based solely upon the idea that the book—or even the choice of book—might be controversial. But what is

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6 This exclusion is especially interesting given that so many advocates of YA literature, including Michael Cart, argue for the power of YA to change the lives of its teen readers — an effect that would be nearly impossible without some form of message.
fascinating and a bit incongruous is the implicit equation between controversy and conversation, when YALSA notes that they “want a book that readers will talk about.” While conversation does often follow controversy, there is no guarantee that the conversation will be one that generates new insights or interpretations. This notion also seems to ignore the fact that conversation can, and often does, follow books that are ultimately not controversial at all. Most significantly, the phrasing does not allow room for indicating whether the committee recognizes that controversy outside of a text is not always a marker of “quality” within it, even with a definition as nebulous as that offered by YALSA. Perhaps this is an ungenerous reading of what is surely meant to be an assurance that the potential for criticism will not be enough to dissuade the awards committee from making a selection, but given the award’s stated purpose of drawing attention to the field and to YALSA, this openness to controversy is worth recognizing nonetheless.

The most deceptively complex portion of the way YALSA defines what quality “is not,” and arguably the most important piece in understanding the Printz Award as a response to the state of nineties YA literature, comes with the early dismissal of popularity as a factor worth considering. The language of the award suggests that “audience” is to be favored—among teenage readers in particular—but that “popularity” is suspect in comparison to the “literary excellence” that is meant to define the award. Consider that the dismissal of popularity comes immediately after the announcement that the awards body knows what quality “is not,” which helps to mark a sharp dividing line between the two. Quality, we might paraphrase, is not popularity. The distinction between literary quality and popularity is, of course, one that has been fraught with
tension in many corners of the field of literary studies (and the world of art more generally). A prescribed idea of “literary excellence” can easily be used to prop up an existing power dynamic that favors those who already reap the benefits of assumed excellence; the conversation is often tinged with notions of intellectualism, classism, and racism. What is most interesting about the division as put forth by the Printz Award, however, is that the way it invokes a power dynamic specific to the production and reception of children’s and young adult literature: that of the child and the adult.

To more fully understand the implications of taking popularity out of the narrative of the Printz award, let’s turn once more to Marc Aronson. In a 1999 speech to the Michigan State Library Association in which he discussed the establishment of the Printz Award, he states, “…In trying to determine what literary distinction is for teenagers, we run right into the biggest split in the YA world, the tension between popularity, or teen approval, and quality, which might also be called adult approval” (112). Throughout the speech, Aronson works out of the (accurate) assumption that quality and popularity have long been positioned as at odds with one another. What is most interesting for our purposes, however, is the way in which he takes that division one step further, aligning popularity with teen tastes and quality with adult tastes. In some ways, Aronson’s framing aligns with Jacqueline Rose’s landmark argument in The Case of Peter Pan, making transparent the means through which the child—or in this case, the teenager—is displaced from their own literature.7 Here, the teen voice is not merely erased but belittled, as Aronson suggests that quality is not a marker that teens

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7 In short, Rose argues that children’s literature is less concerned with the child than it is with the adult’s conception of what the child should be: “Children’s fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between” (1-2).
are able to identify when they bestow approval. The Printz Award aims to recognize the best that YA literature has to offer, and, according to Aronson, that implicitly means leaving the teenager’s opinion out of the conversation.

Aronson does go on to qualify this distinction he has made, as he attempts to unpack some of the reasons why popularity carries such a negative connotation in the context of literary excellence. He presents his argument in part by suggesting that relying on popularity actually does a disservice to the teenager, arguing that any attempt by librarians, scholars, or awards bodies to blindly follow the whims of the popular risks presuming that teens are a monolith. He correctly points out that teenage interests are as varied as teenagers are, a reality that the huge reach of the popular can sometimes obscure. Of course, he only makes this point after making his own blanket claim that teens value popularity over quality, a contradiction he does not address directly at any point. He also presents the notion that favoring popularity might in turn mean favoring passivity, in that there is less work to be done in finding and accessing the latest craze than there is a more obscure book. Each of these points is, to varying degrees, valid and useful in building an effective case for why the Printz committee is better off ignoring popularity when making their decisions.

More complicated, however, is Aronson’s invocation of “potential popularity” as another means of understanding the role popularity should play in the determination of literary excellence. He describes potential popularity as the belief that a book, or a given aspect of a book, has the “potential” to connect with readers. That is, potential popularity suggests that, given the right circumstances, a book might be more broadly
appealing than it currently is. Eventually, Aronson dismisses the idea of potential popularity having any true usefulness:

> The problem is, who determines which books have this potential, and how does he or she make that judgment? Since the evaluation of worth—quality—is still hedged in terms of acceptance—popularity—the reviewer has free reign to act on all of her own tastes and biases without having to defend them directly...It is most often a way to smuggle in prejudice, limited experience that has become enshrined as wisdom, and adult bias under the false banner of concern with teenagers. (114)

On the surface, this seems a mostly reasonable critique of the value—or lack thereof—in projecting popularity onto a text. Certainly, valuing a book because it might become popular is a tricky tactic to support. The problem, though, is that the very concerns Aronson raises in regard to this approach to evaluating literature can easily be applied to the process of evaluating any piece of literature for “quality.” If anything, traditional evaluations of “literary excellence” may have even more room for prejudice, for faux-wisdom, and adult bias than those that would aim to speak to possible popularity. Indeed, Aronson presumes this to be a positive thing—after all, quality is, he says, marked by adult approval. Yet Aronson offers no critique of or engagement with this possibility during his speech, leaving an unspoken presumption that popularity is a false idol that must be interrogated, but that literary excellence is obvious, defensible, and inherently valuable.

Aronson was not, of course, the only voice speaking to the development of the Printz Award, but he was certainly among its most vocal proponents. While his speech may offer but one perspective on the award, it is an illuminating one. Placed alongside the award’s stated intent, we can see that the Printz Award aims, in no small part, to rescue young adult literature from itself. Or, more accurately, it aims to rescue young adult literature from the young adults to which it caters. By the late 1990s, teenagers
had proven they could not be trusted to dictate the future of YA literature. The market power they had been afforded by the paperback boom of the eighties led to bookstores flooded with ostensibly disposable series fiction, leaving the “quality” fiction that critics preferred to languish on the shelves. What the Printz Award offered was an alternative to a teen-dominated market, one in which adults partially reclaimed a position of power in the field and reestablished the idea that quality had a place in the conversation about YA literature. The Printz would place librarians back at the vanguard of the fight for quality, and position YALSA as the leading authority on the subject. The institution of the prize was a statement in and of itself, a declaration that, no matter how dire the outlook for YA literature might be, the librarians at YALSA saw some life left in it yet.

If You Can’t Beat ‘Em...

An award is only as good as its winners, however, which meant the first Printz Award committee had a heady task ahead of them as they moved into the new century. The committee’s job was to do more than simply identify the best young adult novel of the year as dictated by the prize’s guidelines—they were to pick the first-ever winner of the Michael L. Printz Award. The first winner would carry a unique status rivaled only, perhaps, by which ever book ends up being the final Michael L. Printz Award winner. At the very least, the selected prize-winner would set a standard to which ensuing prize committees would be forced to aspire. If YALSA wanted to prove that young adult literature remained a site of literary quality, then its first selection would have to be unimpeachable. The book the committee chose not only needed to be an outstanding

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8 It is worth noting that the decline in sales of series fiction throughout the mid-to-late nineties may speak to the fact that teens had grown fatigued by their “popular” fiction, which may in turn suggest that Aronson sells short teens and their ability to recognize quality.
work of that year, but also needed to be a book that would stand through time as an example of the best YA literature has to offer.

In selecting Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*, the Printz committee managed this feat nicely. Myers’s novel is a tour-de-force of perspective and nuance, telling the story of a boy named Steve Harmon, who is on trial for a murder he may or may not have helped commit. Throughout the novel, readers are shown the consequences of Steve’s particular legal situation: his life in jail is isolating and terrifying, his time on trial is relentlessly dehumanizing, and his memories of life prior to his arrest are left to become hazy and intangible. Although readers are never provided with a clear and full account of the night of the crime—in which Steve allegedly acted as a scout in a robbery-gone-wrong—flashbacks suggest that Steve may, indeed, have been connected to the event in some form. Steve is found Not Guilty at the conclusion of the trial, but the novel suggests that the verdict itself is insufficient to clear Steve from suspicion in the eyes of those around him. The prosecution had labeled him a “monster” in constructing its case, and the final pages of the novel see Steve continuing to grapple with the ramifications of this accusation; even though he has been acquitted of the crime, he cannot help but wonder if the prosecution might have been right nonetheless. *Monster* tackles questions of racism and racial inequality, guilt and innocence, and truth and falsehood, all wrapped up in an utterly compelling story structure, written as it is in a combination of journal entries and screenplay format. Published in 1999, *Monster* was awarded the inaugural Michael L. Printz Award in 2000—right around the time that Kirn was musing in *Time* about the teenager’s future. In the press release announcing the award, Selection Committee Chair Frances B. Bradburn notes, “The detached style of the
screenplay, juxtaposed with the anguished journal entries, reveals the struggle within Steve’s conscience. Distinctive format creates narrative and moral suspense that will leave readers with questions that have no real answers.” 9 In Monster, the selection committee named a text that would come to serve as a response to all the fears and concerns that had plagued YA literature in the previous decade. As the following sections will show, however, Monster did more than serve as a beacon of quality for young adult fiction—it also offered a complex, new version of the teenager that would carry on into the twenty-first century. 10

From the very first page, Monster is different. That is, it looks different than the young adult novels we have come to know in this project. The font resembles a hand-written scrawl, and it changes sizes not quite at random, emphasizing various words and phrases. If one does not attempt to read the words in order, but rather to take in the page as a whole, words like “crying” and “screaming” stand out, taking up more space than they should, more space than the rest of the words are allowed. They tell readers before they have even begun that this is a book that will not be dealing in quaint tales of romance like Seventeenth Summer or shiny fantasies of suburban life like Sweet Valley High. Even The Outsiders and The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou, Monster’s closest relatives of the books we have encountered thus far, could contain their stories within a standardized font, with a set number of words per page, all of them falling in line just so. Not so with Monster. Monster demands attention.

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9 The references to “moral suspense” and “questions that have no real answers” do seem to tread perilously close to valuing the book for its “MESSAGE” in addition to its literary quality, I must say.

10 Michelle Ann Abate describes Monster as “one of the most critically-acclaimed young adult novels of all time” (177). The Printz Committee was not the only group to take note of the text upon its release.
To understate the importance of *Monster*'s structure is to understate the importance of the novel itself. As Time Engles and Fern Kory explain, the book makes its commentary “through two distinct modes of narration: Steve’s journal, which seems to offer direct access to an emotional truth, and his film script, which offers an overtly crafted telling of his story” (52). That the text is different from a “traditional” YA novel is immediately apparent upon opening the book, and this difference is regularly cited as key to the novel’s success. Consider, as one example, how often the text’s format is invoked in the two sentences quoted above from Bradburn’s description of why the novel has been chosen for the Printz award: she highlights the screenplay and journal sections and their differing tones, and then follows that with a note that the “distinctive format” is the cause of suspense in the book. Much has been made of *Monster* as a postmodern piece of literature and its ability to engage with themes of fractured identity as a result; the structure of the text is key in making such explorations possible, by incorporating multiple distinct yet interdependent perspectives into the construction of a single narrative.¹¹ The journal is intensely personal, while the script uses the implied camera lens to invoke a sense of distance; they combine to form a cohesive whole. Engles and Kory describe the text as “a metanarrative mode that challenges normative reading practices,” and argue that it requires readers to “attend more” to the act of reading as a result (52). As such, the format of the novel is, as we will discuss in the next section, immensely valuable in understanding the thematic arguments Myer’s book

¹¹ For more on the novel’s postmodernity, see Tim Engles and Fern Kory’s “What Did She See?: The White Gaze and Postmodern Triple Consciousness in Walter Dean Myers’s Monster” and Susan Lee Groenke and Michelle Youngquist’s “Are We Postmodern Yet? Reading Monster with 21-st Century Ninth Graders.”
makes. I would argue, however, that it is also valuable in understanding why the novel mattered to turn-of-the-century YA literature.

As the rhetoric surrounding the fate of YA literature in the late nineties suggests, the role that other forms of media, especially image-based kinds such as movies, television, and online entertainment, played in transforming teenagers’ experiences of media was much-discussed. The notion that young people’s literacy was changing due to the influx of screen time in an Internet age—a notion that continues to be debated and discussed today—came to the foreground during the mid-nineties, with “multimodal” as one of the buzzwords: “The New London Group (1996) suggested that 21st-century communication is increasingly multimodal, such that the linguistic modes of meaning interface with visual, audio, gestural, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Groenke and Younquist 505). For young people coming of age with the Internet, their increasingly diverse intake of media forms would make them conversant in a wider range of discourses. Because they were supposedly switching between the visual, textual, and audial from moment to moment, it was expected that teenagers would not only be capable of engaging with multimodal content, but that they would be dissatisfied with anything less.

One of the ways the conversation about literacy in a visually-saturated media age manifested itself was in fear for the future of young adult literature, as Michael Cart and Marc Aronson demonstrated earlier in Chapter 5. The media landscape had changed, and looked as if it would only continue to do so, and as such the prognosis for YA fiction’s survival was bleak. Without the visual appeal that movies, magazines, music videos, and the Internet could provide, how could plain, old YA literature stand a
chance? The answer, as suggested by the Printz Award Selection Committee’s choice of *Monster*, was simple: if you can't beat ‘em, join ‘em. Rather than selecting a book that would reaffirm the power of a traditional prose novel, the committee opted for one that incorporates the very multimodality that appeared to threaten the existence of YA literature. The screenplay may not have the same visual impact as a produced film would, but it leaves the pages filled with white space, opening gaps into which readers can project their own interpretations. The scattered black and white photographs may not have the color and flash of a rapid-fire paced music video, but they are captivating nonetheless. Even the prose sections of the novel—the journal entries—appear on the page in a facsimile of a messy, handwritten scrawl. At a time when YA literature was battling to stay in the game against a changing media landscape, no part of *Monster* is without some element of visual interest.

In a 2005 article for *The English Journal*, Walter Dean Myers describes his effort to reach those he refers to as “uninspired readers,” a term he prefers to what he describes as the more pessimistic “reluctant readers” (36). Among other barriers to young people’s desire to read, Myers includes “the growing social and informational divide that is happening in our society” (37). In short, he suggests that much of the ambivalence some children and teens have towards reading comes not from a misunderstanding of individual words, but from a *difference* in understanding of how those words combine to make meaning. Myers does not, however, believe this to be an insurmountable hurdle. “To engage this audience [of reluctant readers],” he writes, “I seek to use their language, their phrases, and their cultural contexts in a way that will make the stories as user-friendly as possible” (37). Although Myers never mentions
Monster by name in this article, the novel is a clear example of this effort. Each element of the text meets teenage readers where they live. Even if they haven’t read a screenplay, they’ve seen a movie; even if they haven’t kept a journal, they’re familiar with the process. In drawing upon teenagers’ “cultural contexts,” Myers affirms two separate ideas: first, that the multimedia texts nineties teens know have value, and second, that literature can build upon that value in a manner that leads to the recognition and incorporation of new audiences.

By awarding Monster the first Printz Award, YALSA and its selection committee ultimately performed a similar task. It is impossible to say for sure, of course, whether this was a conscious part of the decision-making process or merely a coincidental side-effect. The organization’s stance against popularity as a factor for the award suggests that the prospect of forging a connection with “uninspired” readers that is so important to Myers is less relevant to the awards body. Aronson, after all, saw little use in making judgments based off “potential popularity.” Even if it was entirely unintentional, however, it is of no small importance that the novel chosen for the award—an award that was to help realign the public’s perspective of YA literature and establish YALSA as an authority in the field—speaks a visual language. In raising Monster up to the level of award-winning novel, in recognizing this specific novel as being the highest example of literary merit in the field, YALSA offered a way forward for a publishing category that was bordering on stagnant. If multimodal literacies were to be the future, then YA literature would get on board.

**The Monstrosity of Race**

Monster helped resuscitate the dying category of young adult literature, then, which was a significant enough accomplishment all on its own. But that solved only one
of the two issues presented by the state of young people and their literature at the time of its publication: there was still the matter of the disappearing teenager at hand. As our friends Kirn, Hine, and Palladino showed us earlier, the existence of the teenager in the twenty-first century was not considered to be a guarantee. Much of the uncertainty around the teenager’s future came from a similar source as the anxiety over young adult literature, because the Internet was making its presence felt in every aspect of life. As we have seen, Monster helped to close some of the supposed gap between “traditional” literature and its more multimodal brethren; in its own way, the work the text does in that area doubles as a form of reassurance about the teenager more broadly. Myers’s novel requires a complex understanding of multiple discourses, and the book’s success suggests that the teenager would thus be capable of thoughtfully engaging with their world even as it changes.

What the book does not do, however, is argue against the fact that our understanding of teenagers was—and needed to be—in a state of transition once more. Although the novel harkens back in many ways to the realistic fiction that gave YA literature its foundation, it is clear from the earliest moments in the novel that Monster is giving us a different teenage experience than much of YA fiction has shown so far. In the book’s first journal entry, Steve explains that the best time to cry in jail is “at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help” (1). The darkness and the sounds, he tells us, provides a cover for any perceived weakness; if you must cry, he seems to be pleading with himself, do it when it won’t get you hurt. Jail is not a safe place to show your feelings. In this moment, we learn of Steve’s circumstance: a boy merely sixteen years of age, trapped in the middle of a
system created for adults. As a teenager, he is out of place. The point is driven home later in the entry, when he writes, “They say you get used to being in jail, but I don’t see how” (2). The source of this advice is left unidentified, but it is implied that Steve heard this claim from those who have been involved in the penal system far longer than he has—other inmates, or perhaps even the guards. More than anything else in these early pages, the discomfort, fear, and isolation that he feels at being in jail connect Steve to his youth, to his existence as a teenager. He is not hardened to his surroundings, like those who have “gotten used” to being in jail. But neither we nor Steve can forget, even for a moment, that he is in jail in the first place. Immediately, then, Myers forces the reader to confront the fact that Steve is in a different situation than most YA protagonists they may have come to know. Steve’s is not a situation to be envied or admired. It is, instead, one to be survived.

The pages of this first journal entry tell us many things: that Steve is scared, that he is surrounded by violence, that he barely recognizes himself anymore. What they very notably do not tell us, however, is the reason Steve is in jail in the first place. Absent from this first chunk of the story is any plea of innocence, any explanation or justification. Those come later, as the story develops in complexity and further details of the plot are revealed. But at this early point in the novel, all we are offered are two conflicting tales of Steve’s character. There is the one he is telling us, the one of a young boy who wishes he “could make sense of [being in jail and on trial]” (4). It is a story that engenders sympathy, that connects the reader to the humanity at Steve’s core; it is also a story that is undercut by the final words of the entry, as Steve decides
to write a screenplay to work through the events of his time in jail. "I'll call it what the lady who is the prosecutor called me," he informs us. "MONSTER" (5).

This final word is splashed across the lower two-thirds of the page, in all-capital letters. It is, by far, the biggest variation in font size and placement up until this point in the novel, forcing the word into the reader’s eye well before the moment of reading it appears. The entire entry—and especially the final two pages—build to the arrival of this word, and as such, its connotations begin to seep into the reader’s understanding of Steve from well before the time he himself addresses it. The fact that the word doubles as the novel’s title, and the title of the screenplay within, only further cements its importance, and, if anything, taints the reader’s perspective before the book has even begun. The source of the word is also of importance in establishing its relationship to Steve and the text at large. As mentioned above, “monster” is not a descriptor Steve chose freely, that he decided to apply to himself all on his own. Instead, it is a word chosen by the prosecutor trying Steve’s case, which means it is a word selected to craft a very particular, very unfavorable image of Steve in the minds of the supposedly impartial jury—and, by extension, the supposedly impartial readers. As Tim Engles and Fern Kory write, “Steve comes to understand that he is being read through a classed, gendered, and age-related lens, which inserts him into the role of dehumanized ‘monster,’ a character who bears little relation to the person he understood himself to be” (50). In taking up this word, Steve confronts and is confronted by his subordinate position during his time on trial.

12 The anticipation of this word would, of course, work differently in an electronic version of the text, without the framework of physical pages.
Almost immediately, then, the novel shows readers two different, possibly irreconcilable, versions of Steve. On the one hand, he is a scared teenage boy put into a cruel system that may only serve to destroy his humanity, a perspective supported by Steve’s hand-written account of his experiences being on trial to his life. On the other, there is no humanity left to destroy because even before we meet him, he has been labeled a monster—by his movie script, by the prosecutor, and even by the novel’s title. Now, Steve is certainly not the first YA protagonist to have encountered trouble with the law, even among the books discussed within this project. Angie may have steered clear of any legal transgressions in Seventeenth Summer, but violence certainly marked the lives of Ponyboy and his friends in The Outsiders. Even the glossy lives of the Wakefield twins in the Sweet Valley High series would come with various run-ins with the law as the books delved further into their soap-operatic adventures. Where Myers differs from his predecessors, however, is in his book’s reluctance to provide any sort of resolution to the question of Steve’s relative innocence. No simple answers are given; the full truth of what Steve did or did not do on the day of the robbery-turned-murder is never revealed. The Outsiders ends with Ponyboy beginning to write his story, a hopeful process that will position him and his friends as lost but ultimately good-hearted boys who simply need to be understood. By contrast, the entirety of Monster is, we are given to understand, written by Steve’s own hand—both literally, as in the journal entries, and figuratively, as in the screenplay—and yet even he is left wondering about his identity at the end of the book.

Of course, Monster does not leave its readers entirely without context for understanding Steve’s complicity (or lack thereof) in the crime. There are enough hints
scattered across the text that it is possible to construct a possible scenario or three, but the text makes it plain that the facts of the case should be of less importance to its readers than the protagonist’s emotional experience of its aftermath. The end of the novel makes this especially explicit as a verdict of Not Guilty comes in from the jury, freeing Steve from having to spend any more time in the place he hates so much. He steps over to hug his defense attorney, Miss O’Brien, but she “stiffens…and moves away” (276). Despite working to ensure that he would achieve this precise verdict, Steve’s attorney cannot bring herself to trust him enough to accept a hug from him. This moment, which marks the end of the screenplay Steve had been writing about the experience, lingers with our narrator even after the trial. The last journal entry, dated five months later, shows he is still wounded by that moment. He writes about how he desires to film documentaries in part because he “want[s] to look at [himself] a thousand times to look for one true image” (281). Even after his time in jail, even after the trial, Steve still does not fully know or understand who he is. Moreover, in searching for “one true image,” he presumes that there is, in fact, a single, unified version of himself to be found—a version that may or may not be a monster. The question of his potential monstrosity lingers in the air, even though he returns to his regular life.

The thread of ambiguity throughout the novel means that there’s really only one way for the book to end: with a question. On the final page, Steve recalls the way O’Brien backed away from him, and wonders, “When Miss O’Brien looked at me, after we had won the case, what did she see that caused her to turn away?” (281). The last line of the book once again fills up the remaining space on the page, not quite as big as the word “monster” was at the start, but large enough to create an echo on the page
and in the reader’s mind to match the refrain in Steve’s own head. The book ends with four short words: “What did she see?” (281). The final question of the book is not one nearly so simple as guilt or innocence; instead, it is a far more complex exploration of what it is to be a young, black male caught up in the American legal system. Steve may never know why O’Brien turned away, but by ending on this question, Myers asks readers to ask what we see when we look at a boy like Steve. Do we see the teenager or the monster? Or, in the case of a black teenager like Steve, do we believe them to be one and the same?

This question carries extra weight when we ask it in the broader context of racial constructions of childhood in the United States. As I demonstrated in Chapter 3, the dichotomy at the heart of the question being asked by Myers’s novel—the relative innocence of youth positioned against the monstrosity of being complicit in such a violent crime—is one that derives itself from a long history of policing just who gets to experience childhood. Robin Bernstein uses children’s dolls as one of her primary case studies in locating the connections between race and innocence throughout American history, but said connections are evident even within the young adult texts we have looked at throughout this project so far. The numbers alone are significant; nearly any pre-Monster text cited as being foundational to YA literature is written by white writers and about white characters. Myers, Jacqueline Woodson, and a select few other black writers were able to make a place for themselves in the category, but the field of YA publishing (and publishing in general) has historically been overwhelmingly dominated by white writers and editors.¹³ Maureen Daly, S.E. Hinton, and Francine Pascal all stand

¹³ Per a 2015 survey of the publishing industry by Lee & Low Books, 79% of those currently working in the field are white.
as the usual representation of who has a voice in YA literature; Kristin Hunter, by contrast, was quickly consigned to relative obscurity, despite the complexity of her work. Our cultural memory favors *The Outsiders* over *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, and in turn favors the story of white teenagers over the story of black teenagers.

The kinds of representation available to black teens in comparison to their white counterparts is also worth noting in this conversation. The lives of Ponyboy and his friends in *The Outsiders* are, of course, far from perfect: parental support is all but non-existent, they have to watch their backs for fear of attack by rival gangs, and adult authority figures can’t seem to understand the boys’ perspectives. But the challenges they face are notably different from those Louretta and her comrades encounter, in part because the power dynamic is so much more dramatically tipped against the latter group. The kids from *The Outsiders* run into trouble with the police because they have been fighting with their peers; the young, black characters of *Soul Brothers* know they could be shot by white policemen at any moment simply for existing. As isolated from the adult world as Ponyboy might believe himself to be, he still receives a presumption of innocence by dint of his white skin that is consistently denied to Louretta. The text of *Soul Brothers* supports Louretta by recognizing her humanity, but it knows that the world may not.

Thus far in this project, I have made the case that YA literature has been one of the most important tools in shaping our cultural definition of the teenager. If we accept this to be the case, then the ways in which the category handles racial representation gain extra significance. The dismal number of YA books about young people of color, combined with the extra latitude for behavior and exploration afforded to white
characters, creates a sharp dividing line with white youth on one side and teens of color on the other. If YA literature helps create an image of the teenager in America, then the fact that YA fiction is predominantly given over to white writers and characters is going to have an impact. Like innocence, YA literature has been raced white—and so too has the teenager. That the conversation about race resurfaced at the precise moment scholars and critics began to publicly announce their belief that both the teenager and young adult literature were in danger is telling; perhaps another, unspoken threat to the status quo lurks behind the more obvious fears of the impending Internet age. The Internet heralded, in part, an increasingly globalized society, which meant more youth than ever could claim some piece of the teenage identity. For Kirn and his ilk, such a change would make it harder than ever to maintain the ingrained image of the “James Dean teenager” that they had come to know. If the teenager could no longer be defined by its whiteness—or its wealth, or its nationality, or its heterosexuality—then would the teenager really exist at all?

Returning to the question Steve asks at the end of Monster, then, it becomes clear why he has yet to find an answer. “What did she see?” he asks. Does she see a monster, the book asks, or a teenager? The reason Steve cannot reconcile the various images of himself is because they are irreconcilable. Steve does not believe himself to be a monster, and by the time the novel ends, even the most cynical reader would have difficulty applying such a label to the book’s narrator. As Michelle Ann Abate notes, the novel itself does not uphold the image of Steve as a monster (178). And yet, Steve is also denied access to the label of teenager. He is accused of an adult crime, caught up in an adult system, and faced with adult consequences. Whatever changes would still
be ahead for the teenager, Steve cannot hope to escape the ingrained realities of his present. To be a black teenager in the United States, and especially a black, male teenager, is to be cut off from associations of innocence and youth. Louretta and her real-life counterparts knew it in 1968; Steve and the boys whose stories inspired Myers to write *Monster* reiterated it in 1999; every day’s news drives it home in 2015. To be white and teenage is to be ultimately harmless, even in bloody violence. To be black and teenage is to be monstrous, even in innocence. *Monster* forces us to confront this hypocrisy as it stands in young adult literature, in our cultural imaginings, and in ourselves. It is not enough to ask what O’Brien sees when she looks at Steve, because we must also ask what we see—and what we will see, in the future.

**Neither Beginning Nor End**

It is this question of what we will see in the future that brings us back to YALSA and the Printz Award once more. The mission of the Printz Award was to be a heavy one, as it served many masters. It was to promote and identify the best quality work being done in young adult literature, provoke increased interest in and awareness of the category’s importance, and even establish YALSA as the leading authority in the field. Coming as it did after a decade defined in no small part by a rhetoric of fear for the state of the teenager and YA literature, however, the first year of the Printz Award had one important additional task to complete: it needed to provide hope that there would be a future for both young adult literature and its readers. The first Printz Award was given, after all, in the year 2000, not 1999. It would not be mired down by the weight of the past, but would instead offer a foundation upon which the coming years could build.

When viewed in that light, the selection of *Monster* for the Printz Award promises a world of change. Its format is clever and complex, and suggests that traditional print
publishers would not have to live in fear that multimodal texts would draw teens’ attention away from reading entirely. More significantly, the book’s nuanced and complex engagement with racial politics assures readers that there could be a place for characters of color in YA literature—and that maybe, someday, there could be a place for more than just white, middle-class youth in the full teenage experience. If *Monster* represents the best of YA fiction at the start of the twenty-first century, then it might also represent a new standard for what would come next. If literary quality—that nebulous idea that is so very important to the foundation of the Printz Award—is reflected in *Monster*, then quality YA fiction would be inclusive, experimental, and deeply thoughtful. Young adult literature, and by extension the teenager, would transform into something better than it had been before.

Even the freshest of starts can have difficulty in wiping the slate clean entirely, though. *Monster* was an infinitely deserving winner of the Printz Award, certainly, but it is a novel that exists in no small part because YA literature has historically been a field that ranged from indifferent at best to hostile at worst toward stories about teens of color. Assigning the novel such a prestigious award might be a sign of progress, but it does not change the category’s white-washed past. Nor has the Printz Award proven to be a bastion of diversity in the fifteen years that have passed since its establishment; the stories it chooses to recognize are a reflection of the field it represents. Even the novel’s much-lauded format would prove to be somewhat less revolutionary than it might have seemed at the time. It did help pave the way for some authors to play with style, but traditional prose still rules the YA shelves.
In truth, neither Monster nor the Printz Award were capable of creating something entirely new as the new century got underway. What they could do, however, was redefine the boundaries that had begun to prove untenable around the teenager and young adult literature. The twin questions that dominated the nineties—“Will the teenager disappear?” and “Is young adult literature dying?”—both proved to be pointing their fears in the wrong direction. When faced with the arrival of a sharp turning point such as the one that marked the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first, it becomes all too easy to speak in beginnings and endings instead of continuations. The arrival of the Internet and the explosion of multimedia would prove to have have seismic impacts on the nation’s youth and their books, yes, but that did not mean that either would have to die. Neither would end; neither would be replaced. They would simply change.

Just as they have always done.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: THE WORLD AHEAD: KAMALA KHAN AND THE FUTURE OF THE TEENAGER

The teenager may have begun its print life as an afterthought, but young adult soon changed that.

By the summer of 2015, the teenager was unavoidable. Young adult literature still rode the tidal wave of its seismic explosion in popularity after the 2005 publication of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*; Hollywood fought for the rights to adapt YA novels into film and television properties; teenagers of color stood at the center of a renewed cry for attention to the state of civil rights in America. Into the midst of this cultural fray entered—you guessed it—*Time* magazine yet again. The periodical turned its attentions to the ever-enigmatic teenager one more time, with an online piece by Victor Luckerson titled, “The American Teenager in 2015: On the Fringe of Something New.” The article is a direct response to the magazine’s 1965 cover story on the teenager, both in title (“On the Verge of Something New” versus 1965’s “On the Fringe of a Golden Era”) and in content. Throughout the piece, the teenagers of 2015 are asked to respond to the thoughts and feelings of their 1965 counterparts, all in an effort to understand what—if anything—makes current teens different from their predecessors.

The answer is, unsurprisingly, technology. The fundamental struggles teenagers faced in 1965 have not, the article suggests, disappeared fifty years later. Anxieties about college, identity, the economy, and race continue to be at the forefront of the teenage experience in the twenty-first century; it’s just the forms those anxieties take that have changed. Nonetheless, the piece notes that one thing is different: “It’s harder to be a teen now than it was in 1965—at least according to teenagers. That’s not in spite of the Internet and the iPhone. It’s because of all the technology that surrounds us”
The teens interviewed for the article are aware that the technology that fills their lives does bring plenty of opportunity, but they are also all-too-cognizant of the limits of those opportunities. One teenage girl notes that the technology comes with an implied responsibility; because teenagers are presumed to be always connected, they are also presumed to be always available (Luckerson). With the whole world at their fingertips, today’s youth believe themselves to be pressured in ways their parents and grandparents never were. It’s not just what their parents want, either—new twists on old vices have even invaded the realm of teenage rebellion, with the use of e-cigarettes slowly on the rise (Luckerson). If we are to believe the vision of the 2015 teenager presented to us in *Time*, then, it is one that sees technology threaded through nearly every aspect of teenage life.

The *Time* article further explains, however, that the modern teenager is also confronted by uncertainty at every turn. After all, whereas their 1965 counterparts were described as facing down a “Golden Era,” the 2015 teenager in America is merely faced with “Something New.” Whether that *new* is to be good or bad remains to be seen; changes in expectations for education, job performance, and the economy now appear to leave the teenager’s future up in the air. In some ways, this rhetoric seems to be left over from the “disappearance of the teenager” era of the late nineties we saw in Chapter 5. The key difference between Kirn’s assertion that the teenager would disappear and the anxiety depicted in Luckerson’s article is the position of the teenager itself. Kirn saw a future in which the teenager disappeared, while Luckerson’s account suggests that it’s the future itself in doubt, not the teenager. In a paragraph in which he asserts that today’s teens will find themselves in jobs that do not yet exist and face
social issues that are not even a part of the conversation, Luckerson sums up the plight of the teenager 15 years into the twenty-first century: “None of these kids know what will come ahead—but, as 50 years of history have shown, that’s part of being a teenager.”

In other words: to know the future of the teenager is to know the past. As this project draws to an end, then, it is this adage that will frame our conversation—and, indeed, it is this adage that has largely defined this entire discussion. Throughout this project, we have seen the ways in which the definition of the teenager has been challenged again and again. The simple exclusivity of the forties teenager as exemplified by Maureen Daly’s Seventeenth Summer soon gave way to the fear of juvenile delinquency and a call for a more inclusive understanding of the teenage experience. The gritty realism of S.E. Hinton’s 1960s depiction of teenage life in The Outsiders eventually proved too intense, paving the way for an overtly constructed and more easily digestible vision of America’s youth. The carefully designed eighties series fiction led by Sweet Valley High and the glossy teenager within its pages eventually left space for a crisis over the very reality and existence of the teenager, as the nation looked to the future and wondered if there would be space for the demographic moving forward.

Each of these moments reveals the tensions inherent to the nation’s engagement with the teenager, as well as the role that young adult literature has played in both representing and alleviating these tensions. Every new vision of the teenager—and of young adult literature—is grounded in the status quo of the previous iteration. The Outsiders might be a more complex vision of the teenage experience than is available in Seventeenth Summer, but unlike the largely forgotten The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou,
Hinton’s novel maintains the centrality of white youth to the teenage identity. *Sweet Valley High* acknowledges that “dark” subjects drugs and death are part of teenage life, as Hinton’s novel ostensibly first revealed, but the series keeps any lingering consequences well away from the middle-class twins whose adventures readers follow. *Monster*, like *Soul Brothers*, recognizes that teens of color can suffer very real consequences simply for existing within a political and institutional system built to oppress them, while also offering a return to the kind of realism that scholars and critics have long heralded as proof of the publishing category’s quality. By looking at these case studies as a collective whole, we can see that for as much controversy and conversation as has surrounded the teenager across its history, development toward a more nuanced understanding of the nation’s youth has less taken the form of a straight line than it has a spiral, constantly looping back on itself before undergoing any form of evolution. Young adult literature has historically been present to reflect every part of this process, acting as a means of revealing the need for change in our cultural conception of the teenager while also placating readers’ fears about how revolutionary those changes have to be.

All of which brings us, finally, to the teenager and young adult literature of early 2016. In these final pages, I will read the present state of the teenager and YA fiction through their pasts, in order to understand the issues and difficulties that remain relevant to both. First, we will take a brief look at the current state of young adult literature to better understand the transformation the category has undergone in the past decade. Then we will turn back to each of the previous chapters in order to trace the influence of each of this project’s primary texts forward to the present. In so doing,
we will not only better understand how the field has evolved since the days of *Seventeenth Summer*, but will also identify new lines of inquiry for future study. Finally, we will close with a short reading of one of the most popular and critically acclaimed works of YA fiction on the shelves today: the ongoing Marvel Comics series *Ms. Marvel*, by G. Willow Wilson, Jacob Wyatt, and Adrian Alphona. By looking to Kamala Khan, the girl under Ms. Marvel’s mask, we will see a three-fold vision of the teenager worthy of a superhero: the teenager of the past, the teenager of the present, and the teenager who might yet come to pass.

*Twilight, Twitter, and the Dawn of a New Era*

When we last encountered young adult literature, it was in the process of recovering from a perceived crisis. The increased competition from other forms of media combined with a decline in popularity of the kinds of YA literature that critics and librarians typically deemed “respectable” to create an image of a field at risk of disappearing entirely. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, the establishment of the Michael L. Printz award was, in part, a way of helping bolster the category’s flagging reputation; by awarding the first Printz honor to Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*, the awards committee proved that young adult fiction could remain relevant even in the face of change. Despite *Monster*’s critical success, however, the novel did not single-handedly turn the tide for sales within the publishing category. Instead, that honor would be reserved for a rather different kind of story from a rather different Meyer: Stephanie Meyer’s 2005 novel *Twilight*, and its subsequent sequels.

Meyer’s *Twilight*, a paranormal romance about human Bella falling in love with vampire Edward, did for sales of young adult literature what J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series had done for middle-grades fiction a few years prior. Although the series regularly
came under fire for what many argue are regressive, or even dangerous, depictions of gender roles and sexual relationships, it nonetheless helped move YA fiction into the mainstream (Fetters). Buoyed in part by their film adaptations, *Twilight* and its three sequels became the best-selling novels of 2008 and 2009—across all publishing categories, not just within YA literature (Debarros et al.). The success of Meyer’s series, even in the face of mockery and criticism, spurred on an explosion in the publication of YA paranormal romance novels, and helped vampire stories to once again become en vogue on film and in television.¹ When interest in *Twilight* began to fade, the cycle began again with Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010): high sales for the book series, a blockbuster film adaptation, and a glut of read-alike YA dystopian novels to exhaust the market. The third such success story, that of John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), a novel about two teens who meet at a cancer support group and subsequently fall in love, is currently in its down-slope, with no follow-up novel released and no future film adaptations on the schedule; it remains to be seen what will become the next major crossover text for YA fiction.

*Twilight* and its successors did not achieve their mass appeal through prose (or film adaptations) alone, however, as the rise in popularity of young adult literature neatly parallels the rise of social media. In 2005, YouTube posted its first video and Facebook opened admission to high school students; Twitter launched in 2006, with Tumblr close behind in 2007. By the time Meyer’s franchise hit the big screen in 2008, then, readers and filmgoers alike had their choice of ways to connect with one another, share their

¹ *Twilight* even helped, however indirectly, to “rescue” some older YA paranormal fiction and give it renewed relevance. The CW’s 2009 launch of *The Vampire Diaries*, a television adaptation of L. J. Smith’s 1991 novel of the same name, prompted reissues of the original novel series as well as a new spin-off series of books.
opinions, and create fan art and fan fiction online. Authors, too, became more accessible than ever before, often turning to social media as a means to promote their work and cultivate a sense of community with their readership. Certainly not all writers make use of social media; Meyer and Collins have limited-to-no presence in online spaces, for instance. Moreover, few writers are as deeply connected to social media platforms as Green, who, in conjunction with his brother, Hank Green, runs what amounts to an online video empire. Nonetheless, social media has become a key part of the YA publishing world, with platforms like Twitter housing contests for advance copies of upcoming books and live chats with authors. Readers can now have direct and immediate access to writers and to their fellow fans, which positions reading as a communal—shall we even say social?—experience, and ultimately increases the visibility of the publishing category as a whole.

The primary result of this new landscape for young adult literature, defined by widespread, mainstream appeal for many of the category’s novels and amplified connectivity between authors and readers, has been an increased market presence for the field and a renewed respect for the writing within it. At a time when most of publishing was taking a hit from the recession, sales of YA novels stayed steady—and, in some cases, even rose (Horn). The sheer variety of the texts being published has led to writers such as Michael Cart and David Levithan declaring the field to be in its

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2 The Green brothers’ primary projects include Vlogbrothers and Crash Course, and they own, produce, or star in no fewer than a dozen other education- and entertainment-based YouTube channels.

3 YA writers are certainly not alone in their use of social media—it is, after all, a massively widespread phenomenon.
“second golden age” (Strickland; Reno). As we will see across the sections that follow, however, young adult literature’s current “golden age” is not without its flaws and controversies. The category continues to lack truly diverse representation, both on the page and behind the scenes; although this conversation is not new within the field, as we have seen across this project, it has gained renewed energy of late. The most high-profile of the groups working to challenge the current representational status quo is We Need Diverse Books, an group launched in 2014 that describes itself as a “grassroots organization of children’s book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people.” Other, smaller campaigns exist as well, often in the form of Tumblr blogs dedicated to reviews of diverse books: Diversity in YA, Disability in YA, and Size Acceptance in YA are but a few examples. Wherever we find these conversations about the current state of YA literature, however, the field remains indebted to the books that paved the way for the field’s development. To that end, let’s return back to where we started: the deceptively simple romance of Seventeenth Summer.

Summer Lovin’

Maureen Daly’s Seventeenth Summer, in which narrator Angie grapples with what she wants for her future while dealing with the rush of first love, has arguably the clearest set of descendents of any primary text in this project. The contemporary realist romance remains one of the stalwarts of the young adult publishing industry; although the genre saw a downturn when faced with the popularity of paranormal romance and

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4 The first is generally identified as taking place during the late sixties and seventies, during the time writers like S. E. Hinton, Robert Cormier, and Judy Blume were publishing some of their most important books.
dystopian fiction in the wake of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, respectively, it never disappeared from shelves entirely. The popularity of Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* in more recent years, however, has opened the door to a resurgence of interest in the romance. Those novels that seek to connect themselves to Green’s success tend to be rather more high concept than *Seventeenth Summer* ever dreamed of being, with catchy, high-stakes premises about finding love in the face of death, but there remain quieter stories that have inherited the markers of Angie’s struggle to reconcile her identity with a budding relationship, too. Indeed, even the summer romance specifically still remains commonplace within YA literature, with texts like Jenny Han’s *The Summer I Turned Pretty* (2009) and Sarah Dessen’s *The Moon and More* (2013) keeping the spirit of Daly’s novel alive.5

The genre’s continued relevance to young adult literature makes it a prime source for further investigation, not least because it has been home to some of the more notable attempts at encouraging diverse representation. Certainly, the majority of romances—like the majority of YA fiction—remains centered on white, middle-class teenagers. Although the genre’s leading writers, including Miranda Kenneally, Susan Colasanti, and the aforementioned Sarah Dessen, are increasingly likely to include more diverse representations among their minor characters, the arrival of diverse primary characters in their work has been somewhat slower. Recent years have seen this lack of representation begin to shift, however, not least due to the attention brought to the subject by We Need Diverse Books. Compulsory heterosexuality is no longer

5 The Dessen text in particular can be read nearly as a revision or adaptation of *Seventeenth Summer*. It is one of the few novels in the genre of late that ends with the female protagonist having ended a relationship in order to preserve her own plans for the future.
always present, as Nina LaCour’s Hollywood fairytale about two girls falling in love, *Everything Leads to You* (2014), can attest. Characters of color are increasingly represented, as with the Korean-American narrator of Jenny Han’s *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* (2014) or the young woman from Trinidad and Tobago that is the central figure in Sarah Ockler’s *The Summer of Chasing Mermaids* (2015). Emery Lord’s forthcoming *When We Collided* (2016) directly confronts how mental illness affects the lives of the novel’s characters, while PTSD and disability challenge a recently discharged soldier in *I’ll Meet You There* (2015) by Heather Demetrios. Each of these novels—and the many others that seek to include more accurate representations of contemporary teens—offers a new way in to the well-worn tropes that have defined the YA romance since the publication of Daly’s debut novel. By exploring how these more diverse novels reshape an often conservative genre, and by reexamining assumptions about who performs the act of romance and who is allowed to love, we could better understand how YA literature may already be shaping our future understanding of the teenager.

Romance was not *Seventeenth Summer*’s only legacy, however, as the novel also prioritized the need for teenagers to recognize their role in developing the future of a United States that would soon be living with war and its aftermath. This theme remains pressingly relevant in YA literature of the post-September 11 era, although it has transformed in both substance and location. Because the context surrounding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is vastly different than that of World War II, so too are the kinds of stories YA literature has to offer about life in the face of war. The hope for the future of the teenager and the nation that is threaded through *Seventeenth Summer* has
faded in favor of a darker outlook, and the romance has ceded ground on the subject to the YA dystopia as a result. Although *The Hunger Games* was not the first YA dystopian novel, it was and is the most significant, with the overwhelming popularity of Suzanne Collins’s trilogy leading to a host of successors and imitators: Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011-2013), Patrick Ness’s *Chaos Walking* (2008-2010), James Dashner’s *The Maze Runner* (2009-2011), and Ally Condie’s *Matched* (2010-2012), among many others. As Rebekah Fitzsimmons and I argue in our ongoing work on the subject, the YA dystopian trilogy is the site of many anxieties over the potential of the teenager to save an American society that has been depleted and corrupted by war. Rather than the optimism that marked the futures available to Angie and Jack in the 1940s, pessimism and fear rule the futures characters like *The Hunger Games*’s Katniss can expect; the solution that nearly every YA dystopian trilogy from the past decade has to offer is destroying rather than rebuilding their fictional governments. The transition from romance to dystopia in considering the teenager’s role as a citizen is not insignificant, then, and ultimately suggests an altogether more cynical outlook on the world adults are going to make available to the current generation of American youth.

**The Whole Gang Is Here**

Of course, cynicism is not new to the YA world, as we saw in Chapter 3. The more “gritty” realism of *The Outsiders* and *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* marked a sea change in the kinds of stories that young adult fiction was willing to tell; the problem novel that this particular brand of storytelling spawned in the 1970s revealed a distrust of both the teenager and the adult world that remains present throughout much of YA fiction on the shelves at the moment. While the term “problem novel” has largely fallen out of style and few books stocked in the YA sections at popular retailers such as
Target feature teens falling into neatly delineated gangs, depictions of what writers believe to be the truth of teenage life remain ever-popular. Such depictions range widely in content and form, but often turn to the conventions of realism to reveal some previously untold part of the teenage experience. The free-verse novels of Ellen Hopkins, with their monosyllabic titles such as *Crank* (2004) and *Glass* (2007), delve into the supposed seedy underbelly of American teenage life, detailing issues of drug addiction and sexual violence in a way that might make *Go Ask Alice*'s faux-editor proud. Tess Sharpe’s *Far From You* (2014), by contrast, uses a murder mystery to frame the complex struggles faced by narrator Sophie, who is a bisexual, recovering prescription-drug addict living with chronic pain and grieving the death of her best friend.

Unfortunately, a frank and complex discussion of race—like that seen in *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*—remains one of the subjects rarely seen in young adult fiction. Which is not to say that this conversation has been entirely absent, but rather that it has been an exception rather than the rule. As I wrote at the end of Chapter 3, however, the ongoing reports of (often fatal) violence against teenagers of color in the United States indicate that exceptions, however exceptional they may be, will no longer suffice in the face of such a hostile racial environment. Books like Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely’s *All-American Boys* (2015), narrated in alternating sections by a black teenager, Rashad, and a white teenager, Quinn, in the wake of Rashad suffering a brutal beating by a police officer who mistook him for a shoplifter, seek to understand the complicated racial dynamics that define the lives of contemporary teens, and indicate that progress toward more honest depictions of race might yet be attainable. A further challenge comes, however, when we consider that what few conversations about
race exist with YA literature tend to default to the presumption of a black-and-white binary, contributing to the erasure of other racial and ethnic groups. This situation may be taking its first baby steps toward progress, though, with an increasingly diverse roster of authors populating the YA fiction shelves. Stacey Lee’s *Under a Painted Sky* (2015) depicts the experiences of a Chinese-American girl on the Oregon Trail, for instance, while Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy* (2008) uses Spanglish throughout the novel to foreground its protagonist’s biculturalism. Sara Farizan’s novels *If You Could Be Mine* (2013) and *Tell Me Again How a Crush Should Feel* (2014), meanwhile, explore the intersection of ethnicity and sexual identity, with the Iranian and Iranian-American protagonists, respectively, seeking to reconcile their cultural history with their same-sex attraction. Writers such as these are helping once again redefine the boundaries around who has been—and who is now—allowed to be considered a “teenager.”

I do not wish to paint an overly idealistic picture of the path to a more representative version of young adult literature, however, because there remain more than a few stumbling blocks to overcome along the way. The children’s and YA publishing industries often fail to produce diverse representations that do not rely upon hurtful stereotypes; the children’s book *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (2016), written by Ramin Ganeshram and illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton, received such intense criticism for perpetuating the “smiling slaves” stereotype that Scholastic ultimately pulled the book from production (Peralta). Young adult literature in particular also has a history of “whitewashing” the covers of novels featuring characters of color, with perhaps the most egregious example coming in 2009 with the publication of Justine
Larbalestier’s *Liar*. Although *Liar* is narrated by a young black girl, the book’s publisher initially intended to use the image of a white cover model; it was only after an intense outcry that the publisher ordered a new photo shoot to create a more accurate cover (Larbalestier “The New Cover”). The dictates of commerce often win out over the aims of good intentions when it comes to who and what gets published, which can make it difficult for the field to achieve any lasting form of progress.

Moreover, the increased connectivity among the literary community as a result of social media has been a key reason why publishers’ and writers’ missteps are often quick to come under criticism: more people learn about the problems, and they do so faster than ever. What social media also offers, however, is an opportunity for scholars to offer public critiques of and interventions in the field. Debbie Reese, for instance, states that she founded her blog “American Indians in Children’s Literature” because “as a Native parent and former schoolteacher, [she] knew that those academic journals [she publishes in as a scholar] are not easily accessible or available to people who work with children on a daily basis.” Reese has used her platform in part to make her research more readily available to those outside the academic system; she also has been a leading voice in conversations like the one about *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* mentioned above. Marilisa Jimenez Garcia, meanwhile, recently acted as a “guest blogger” for YA author Meg Medina’s website, where she uses anecdotes about her personal experience as a reader growing up as part of an argument for recognizing figures such as Pura Belpré, the first Latina librarian in New York City, as being important not only to Latino/a children’s literature but to the field of children’s literature more broadly. The work of these and other scholars, in both the academic and public
spheres, could prove invaluable in providing a framework to understand how YA literature has and has not accounted for minority teenagers throughout its history, as well as what that might mean for those pursuing a more “realistic” picture of the twenty-first century teenager.

**Shiny Pretty Things**

As we saw when we moved into Chapter 4, however, sometimes too much realism can prove exhausting. In the 1980s, YA literature wasted no time in shying away from the darker side of the teenager when their lives got too serious for comfort. Buoyed by a political climate defined by a renewed conservative movement that favored a gloss of hope and renewal over hard truths, the carefully constructed world of *Sweet Valley High* put a rosy spin on any troubles that might have threatened the stability of teenage lives. The latest resurgence of the book packaging industry hit its peak in the late 2000s, with Alloy Entertainment leading the way with a new twist on an old favorite by selling series like *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars* in bookstores and on television simultaneously, due to an increased expectation for cross-platform marketing. Although this publishing model still exists—Kass Morgan’s novel *The 100* sold to The CW as a television series even before being published in 2013, and the television series has gone on to become arguably the network’s most critically acclaimed show—it has seen a decline in popularity of late. Or, perhaps more accurately, a decline in visibility. While book packagers continue to play a significant role in the publication of young adult literature, the series fiction model that informed the likes of *Sweet Valley High* and *Gossip Girl*, with its overtly branded and constructed nature, has largely fallen by the wayside. Instead, the book packaging companies are more likely to sell stand-alone novels that can be attributed to the writer hired to pen them. Wendy Wunder’s *Museum*
of Intangible Things (2014), for instance, is a book packaged and sold by Alloy; the only way readers would find this information, however, is by studying the book’s copyright page. This shift away from ghostwriting and into something closer to work-for-hire comes, I would argue, as a result of the perceived decrease in distance between authors and readers due to social media. Readers are accustomed now to connecting with authors, which makes the ghostwriting model somewhat less sustainable. A continued focus on the evolution of book packaging in YA literature may well offer insight into the ongoing tension between YA fiction as literature and as commodity.

Sweet Valley High also marked, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, a desire for a space in YA literature that could help to obscure the grim reality of teenage life. This desire continues to populate much of young adult fiction today, albeit in a way that is more likely to feature sparkly vampires or world-weary privateers than the suburbanite Wakefield twins. The paranormal romance boom sparked by Twilight in 2005 performed precisely the same task as Sweet Valley High: it hid anxieties about teenage life behind a brooding-but-safe exterior. No matter how much of a threat vampire Edward might theoretically pose to human Bella in Twilight, for instance, Edward’s top priority is keeping Bella safe; their relationship offers the threat of otherworldly danger, but it never quite follows through. By involving supernatural creatures in this way, the paranormal romance took the element of fantasy implied by Sweet Valley’s vision of the teenager and made it explicit. Although paranormal romance often engages with serious subjects such as female sexual agency—like that of Bella’s insistence that she wants to have sex with Edward, even though he could hurt her in the process—the trappings of the genre help to obscure their reality. Just as the intense melodrama of Sweet Valley
helps to mitigate the fact that the characters are, in fact, dealing with complicated issues like drug use, the paranormal romance genre uses its supernatural elements to seemingly displace the concerns of the contemporary moment.\textsuperscript{6}

**Never Grow Up**

As Chapter 5 showed, however, the fears of the present moment are often wrapped up in anxieties about what is still to come. In the late 1990s, the impending arrival of the new millennium brought to the forefront latent fears over the future—or lack thereof—of both the teenager and young adult literature. Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster* became the response to such anxieties, promising that young adult literature could and would remain relevant despite the changes presaged by increased dependence on the Internet. As effective of an answer as *Monster* proved to be, however, the fears never truly faded. In fact, the explosion of YA into the mainstream popular culture landscape that began with *Twilight* only made the field come under more intense scrutiny. The critiques aimed at the publishing category generally occupy two major categories: that of its appropriateness for teenagers, and that of its appropriateness for adults. In 2011, Meghan Cox Gurdon spoke to the first category when she infamously asked in the *Wall Street Journal* if young adult literature had become “too dark” for its teenage readership, arguing that the “kidnapping and pederasty and incest and brutal beatings” she found to be common in current young adult literature might hinder a young person’s moral development. Three years later, Ruth Graham took up for the second category when she suggested in *Slate* that the growing numbers of adults who read YA fiction should be “embarrassed” for reading

\textsuperscript{6} Although I use the paranormal romance as my primary example here, I would argue that the more recent trend toward historical fiction and alternate histories performs similar work.
books aimed at young people. Each successive variation of this kind of commentary—which appears with in some corner of the Internet every few months with some regularity—sparks an intense feedback loop of criticism and support. As a result of the mainstream success YA literature has achieved in the past decade, the category is no longer perceived as being the domain of teens alone but instead now belongs to American culture more broadly, which gives these conversations an increased weight in the public eye.

Conversations about the current plight of the American teenager have also continued to perpetuate in the media, even after the teenager stubbornly refused to disappear in the twenty-first century. While many of these discussions in the popular press are focused on the realities of contemporary teenage life—with the aforementioned *Time* article on the 2015 American teenager being a prime example—they are also regularly framed through the question of what the teenager means to modern adulthood. For example, A. O. Scott’s 2014 *New York Times* piece on the decline of adulthood in American culture points to the popularity of teen-oriented media among ostensible adults as a sign that “traditional adulthood” has become “conceptually untenable.” Scott cites “tales of adolescent heroism” as one of the primary threats to maturity; if the teenager can be a hero, this argument goes, then why would anyone bother becoming an adult? Scott’s argument marks an interesting reversal from the one we saw Walter Kirn make in *Time* fourteen years earlier: where Kirn believed early

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adulthood would force the teenager to disappear, Scott believes extended adolescence will see the end of adulthood.

However (un)founded such accusations may be, they tend to be incomplete without someone or something to blame. As the rhetoric surrounding both juvenile delinquency in the 1960s and the publication of *Monster* in the 1990s demonstrated, mass media culture has long been an easy scapegoat for any and all problems related to teenage youth. A. O. Scott adds the influx of superhero films at the box office as a further signal of adulthood’s decline, while the Internet and all its attendant problems and possibilities remain one of the primary areas of suspicion for those concerned with the present state of youth in America. Massive YA franchises like the kind spun out of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*—which may encompass the books, films, video games, music, clothing, cosmetics, and much more—make easy homes for ongoing conversations about what, if anything, it means for media to no longer be contained to a single platform. Moreover, this kind of cross-platform communication and media consumption does appear to be encouraging the continuation of the experimentation in form that we find in *Monster*. While few books are written in script format, today’s YA novels are increasingly conscious of how best to incorporate realistic depictions of the kind of media and communication tools many teens use on a day-to-day basis. Text messaging, music playlists, and Internet chats now appear in YA novels with some regularity, signaling a change in the structure and design of how YA fiction represents communication that could be well worth exploring on its own terms.8

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8 See Katie Finn’s *Revenge, Ice Cream, and Other Things Best Served Cold* (2015), Morgan Matson’s *Amy and Roger’s Epic Detour* (2010), and Gwenda Bond’s *Lois Lane: Fallout* (2015), for examples of how text messaging, music playlists, and Internet chats respectively are incorporated into recent YA fiction.
Another notable development in the kind of experiments with structure heralded by Monster has been the rise of the graphic novel’s influence upon young adult literature in recent years. Certainly, the histories of young adult literature and comics in America have overlapped at many significant moments, but the expansion of the YA publishing market has seen this connection develop in a sustained way once more. YA publishers, for their part, have turned to graphic adaptations of some of their more popular novels as a means of piquing further interest in a text that already has an established readership; Myers’s Monster, ever at the forefront of interesting manipulations of form, received the graphic novel treatment in 2015. Comics publishers, in turn, have come to recognize the renewed audience potential for younger-skewing texts, and have begun to slowly shift back once again toward stories not solely aimed at adult readers. Today, Marvel’s The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl (2015-present) and Spider-Gwen (2015-present) sit in competition with D.C.’s Bombshells (2015-present) and Boom’s Lumberjanes (2014-present) as typical comic-book stories with a decidedly YA bent.

Arguably the most important of these YA comics, and the one we will turn to as this project draws to a close, is the newest iteration of Ms. Marvel, which follows the adventures of Kamala Khan as the titular hero. Kamala is a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American girl who finds herself with superpowers after getting caught in some green fog one night; she uses her size-shifting abilities to defend her hometown of Jersey City.

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9 An alternate version of this project could consider how comics and young adult literature have co-evolved since the 1940s; unfortunately, that would have been one ball too many to juggle within this particular framework.
from threats big and small. Written by G. Willow Wilson and illustrated by Adrian Alphona and Jacob Wyatt, the current *Ms. Marvel* series launched in February 2014; praised for its clever storytelling and diverse main character, the series ranks among Marvel's best-selling titles (Magnett). Notably, the character marks Marvel's first headlining Muslim superhero, a fact that the series actively acknowledges. Kamala’s Muslim identity regularly informs her character: she laments her inability to eat bacon and visits her family’s mosque to receive guidance and advice (Issue 1, Issue 6). The series gives equal weight to Kamala’s teenage identity as it does her religious one, however, as she has to balance her super-heroics with making sure her parents don’t get mad at her and deciding if she likes her best friend as more than a friend. Her adventures live in a comic-book world, but they rely upon her status as a teenager. Sure, her high school dance features an appearance from Loki—but then, what high school dance doesn’t involve a trickster or two?

The series is aware that *teenager* and *Muslim* is a combination readers might not be overly used to seeing, though, and thus it works to directly address the question of who can and can’t be a teenage super hero right from the start. When Kamala first gains her powers, she finds that the only way she is comfortable fighting crime is by transforming her entire body to look like someone else. Specifically, she transforms herself to look like her hero Carol Danvers, the blond-haired, blue-eyed woman who previously held the title of Ms. Marvel. Throughout the first five issues of the series, Kamala struggles with her instinct to transform into the fair-skinned Danvers. She notes early on that even though she suddenly looks like someone “cool,” it leaves her feeling “small” (Issue 2). Later in the same issue, she admits, “Being someone else isn’t
liberating. It’s exhausting.” The identity crisis Kamala has throughout the first few issues thus becomes a way of allowing readers to work through the seemingly atypical image of the teenager (and super hero) we are given in the series. We are used to seeing stories about teens who will grow up to look like Carol Danvers, but that is not the story *Ms. Marvel* is going to tell. Instead, Kamala and the series promise something different: that she’s “here to be the best version of Kamala” (Issue 5, emphasis in original).

Throughout *Ms. Marvel*, then, we see the traditional experiences of teenagers past (first love, high school, parental strife) juxtaposed with the diverse representations that readers increasingly demand when encountering depictions of teenagers present. It is, however, the series’ vision of teenagers future that I want to consider here as we approach the end of this conversation. The series’ second arc, which was collected together under the title “Generation Why,” sees Kamala confronting an enemy called the Inventor, who, in grand comic book tradition, is a clone of Thomas Edison whose DNA has been mixed with that of a cockatoo, a mix-up that resulted in an arrogant, human-sized bird out for blood.\(^\text{10}\) Kamala eventually learns that the Inventor is connected to a string of missing teenagers; he has successfully brainwashed them into believing that it is their duty to sacrifice themselves and become the energy that fuels his machines. Kamala ultimately defeats the Inventor by convincing her fellow teens that their lives are not useless and that they should use their skills for good: a simple solution to a complex problem.

\(^{10}\) “Generation Why” is, of course, a nod to “Generation Y,” the title given to the generation loosely defined as including those born from the 1980s to the early 2000s, although “Generation Y” has since largely ceded ground to “Millennial” as the preferred terminology.
In some ways, the series offers a new example of a familiar rhetorical move. If we recall from all the way back in Chapter 1, the teenager has been connected to technology from its very inception. Edith M. Stern’s *Popular Science* article that first used “teen-ager” in print did so in a way that implied the teenager’s inner potential would have to be drawn out of a frivolous exterior. Using filmmaking equipment was but one way teens could be encouraged to get involved in making a better future for themselves and for the nation; indeed, if teenagers were handled properly, they could themselves become a tool that helped support the future of the American democracy. As time passed, the implied rhetoric of Stern’s article would become explicit, with writers like Thomas Hine declaring the teenager itself an “invention” (4). As we have seen throughout this project, it is more often than not a new form of technology or media that help raise the alarm about the future of the teenager, because the conflation of teens and technology has existed from the very start.

*Ms. Marvel* recognizes this connection, and is unafraid to acknowledge that Kamala and her peers do, indeed, love technology. Kamala does, after all, write Avengers fan fiction and take a selfie with Wolverine. (Issue 6, Issue 7). Moreover, the series acknowledges that teenagers are often criticized for their intimate relationship with technology. One day, when Kamala runs into class late, she joins a conversation about a fictional article about teenagers published in “The Pedantic Monthly,” a publication that in another world might have been called *Time*. Kamala’s friend declares the article insulting, because “the writer said teenagers are just parasites addicted to their smart phones who don’t give back to society” (Issue 8). The idea that teenagers are parasites becomes central to the rest of the story arc; the teens who volunteered to
fuel the Inventor’s technology do so because they have been convinced that they do not deserve a place in the world. Their existence, they have been told, is that of an “extra generation” that “shouldn’t even be here” (Issue 10). As such they believe that literally becoming technology is their best option, as doing so will ostensibly help make the world better not for future generations, but for the ones that already exist. They are prepared, in short, to take the rhetoric of teenager-as-invention to its illogical end.

*Ms. Marvel* utterly rejects the notion that teenagers are anything less than human, however. Kamala refuses to believe that her fellow teenagers are “worth more as cheap electricity than as people,” and dedicates herself to helping convince the brainwashed kids around her that they have worth. The way she does so is significant: she uses their skills and hobbies as proof that they *already* have value to society, even if they have yet to fulfill it. A teen good enough with computers to bypass security locks is told she could go into cyber security; the kid who does the jobs nobody else wants to do because they’re “stupid” is promised the presidency (Issue 10). As Kamala puts it, their skills mean one important thing: “[They’re] not just mobile blobs of potential energy” (Issue 10). What matters here is the way the series refuses to allow teenagers to resign themselves to being tools for use when they could actively use tools themselves. When Kamala is asked if adults should just go ahead and write off her generation, she answers the question with a question: “Well…giving up on the next generation is like giving up on the *future,* right?” (Issue 8, emphasis in original).

It is this question of the teenager’s role in facing the future that has been asked of every generation of teenagers since the 1940s. The teenager has been a hope for and a threat to the American democracy, a dangerous menace and a nostalgic memory,
a disappearing future and an eternal present. In its every iteration, the teenager has been forced to stand on the precipice of the future, carrying the weight of expectation and suspicion on its shoulders. In *Time*, Luckerson declares this the permanent role of the teenager. “They’re going to figure out the future,” he writes, “because they have no other choice.” This determination to help teenagers navigate an unknown future is at the heart of young adult literature, with each young character—from Angie to Ponyboy to Steve to Kamala—stumbling ever forward into a world full of changes they cannot predict. But *Ms. Marvel* argues that believing that teenagers might end up okay once they become adults is no longer enough. Upon finally beating the Inventor, Kamala offers a possible new way to discuss the teenage generation: “Nobody has the right to give up on a whole generation before it’s even had a chance to prove itself. We’re all in this together, and we gotta remember that” (Issue 11). In this moment, Kamala argues that the teenager is not merely a tenuous and suspicious future, not only a technology meant to prove how great America can be when used properly. Most importantly, *Ms. Marvel* declares that the teenager is not a “they,” that can be viewed as separate from the “us” of the adult world. The teenager must be allowed its full humanity, its full diversity, its full agency.

To have a future, the teenager cannot remain an afterthought.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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