THE YA PHENOMENON IN AMERICA
BOOKS THAT MATCH TEENAGE EXPERIENCE AND INSPIRE DISCOVERY

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Young adult publishing in America is a paradox. Its history is short and well known, yet opinions vary greatly on what it is. It overlaps with every other genre of literature, from books clearly for children to those entirely aimed at adults, and yet it has some identity of its own. It is easy to find sections in libraries, shelves in bookstores, listings in publishers’ catalogs including the words ‘Young Adults’, yet each of these seemingly identical labels has a different meaning. It is the area of books for young people that is closest to adult books, but it is the genre least visible to adult eyes. These mixed definitions, assumptions and conceptions are like a geological record—they hold the traces of different adolescent experiences, beliefs and buying patterns. Today, as the largest boom in teenagers in thirty years is hitting the schools, YA is a fractured field.

It seems to apply to people in their twenties who are just leaving college, beginning careers and starting families. That is the sense it had when people first used the term to describe the Bohemians in Paris of the 1820s to ‘40s. Those artistic and lifestyle rebels define much of what we associate with not only the experience but the art of adolescence: they were outrageous individualists with their long hair, Byronic affinity for love affairs, drinking out of skulls and dressing in ways designed to provoke the bourgeoisie. And yet they were cliquish in the extreme, constantly forming ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups, factions with codes, favorite hangouts and manifestos. Their art either reported on their own lives or went off into wild imaginative realms. The death of Mimi in Puccini’s La Bohème symbolized the passing of the Bohemian life which she represented.
How did that period shift in time and space to America? By the 1960s, the children of the World War II generation, that baby boom born in the hope of new life and new opportunity after so much economic pain in the Depression, and human suffering in the Holocaust and the War, had reached adolescence. They had grown up in a strange combination of security and insecurity. Their parents had done well, buying series of cars and homes in the suburbs and providing their children with TVs, radios, cowboy costumes and Barbie dolls. But the shadow of the cold war and the atom bomb still lingered. The kids were confident enough to rebel without fearing the consequences and anxious enough to mistrust the world that had nurtured them.

They were the perfect product of America the stage set. They were old enough to see behind the props and billboards and to mistrust the patriotic slogans they heard at school and on TV. And yet they had no more solid alternative to present than to pull down the set and to erect another: the hippie playland of Woodstock Nation. This generation was caught between a protected childhood defined by children’s books and a wilder world seen in subversive comic; between the Mickey Mouse Club on TV and images of first the Civil Rights struggle and then Vietnam on the same sets. They did not recognize themselves in any of the books then available for teenagers—tame novels of dating at seventeen, or becoming a nurse, or about boys long ago and far away.

Librarians who had these teenagers in their schools faced a problem: more and more potential readers and nothing for them to read. Luckily for the librarians, America at the time was both rich and confident; it believed, for good or ill, that enough money, will and planning could solve the world’s problems. It could defeat the communists in Vietnam, end poverty and racism in America—or build as many young adult sections as any librarian could want. President Lyndon Johnson provided the money, and the librarians created a place for a literature that did not even exist yet.

At first, those young adult sections featured a mix of the adult titles teenagers might like: the trippy weirdness of a Carlos Castaneda, the black rage of an Eldridge Cleaver, the angst and sense of Jungian mystery of a Hermann Hesse, the fearless honesty of a J. D. Salinger. Side by side with these titles were books that could be seen as for real children or total adults, such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s ring trilogy, as well as some science fiction by masters such as Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury. Whatever age group books such as these were originally for, they would